

Change of Heart 3

(Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 p1212; Luke 14:1, 7-14 p1047)

How do you feel when faced with a list of dos and don'ts?

Essentially that's what the writer of this letter to the Hebrews gives us. So how should we understand it, how should we respond to it? These are the questions I'd like to wrestle with this morning.

I think it all comes down to purpose and motivation; and in particular a willingness to change our purpose and motivation – to rethink the way we live and why.

My maths master at school used to say “There are four ways to tackle a problem: the right way, the wrong way, the books way, and my way. And if you don't do it my way you get no marks.”

So whose way should we follow?

Hebrews was written to a group of Christians from a Jewish background. This means two things: firstly they were brought up in the culture of Jewish legalism, where following rules (and there are hundreds of them) mattered profoundly; secondly they had accepted that Jesus was the Messiah, which kind of turned this understanding on its head, made them have to rethink! How now should they live?

The Jewish people had discovered that it was impossible to keep all God's laws perfectly – so they had made compromises – and even codified the loopholes into a whole body of teaching. Jesus came because we are utterly incapable of earning our way into heaven. Their laws condemned them to a guilty death. Jesus came to take all that guilt on his own shoulders and die that death for them. He came to set us free from the consequences of all the mess we make of our lives.

Ever since Jesus came, people have been called to 'repent and be baptised'. What does that mean?

Today we're celebrating the baptism of Hugo and Edward. Through that baptism we trust God to enfold Hugo and Edward into his family – to make them his children.

Baptism says we don't want to do life “the right way, the wrong way, the books way or my way”. We want to do life God's way. We want to rethink the way we do life – that word 'repent' simply means 'rethink'. We want to get our purpose and motivation aligned with God's purpose and motivation; to be His children.

So what's the difference? What do our way and God's way look like.

I think we could sum up 'our way' by looking at the trajectory of our culture. Two words spring to mind Exploit and Acquire. Our western world is consumerist, we seek to acquire and measure ourselves by wealth, success, status (for example likes and friends on social media) and increasingly by experiences. We sustain this through a supply chain that began in the exploitation of foreign peoples, in the slave trade (which is still massive today), and in degradation of our environment – mostly trying to do the dirtiest stuff in someone else's country. Oh yes, and taking a handsome profit in the process.

That culture seeps down to a personal level with an increasing disregard for life (there was another mass shooting in Texas yesterday), relationships and property – what matters instead is 'my rights'. Slowly we're waking up to the immorality and unsustainability of this way of life. But it's hard to change: for example we condemn Brazil for its slash and burn policies in the Amazon, but still eat loads of beef which drives deforestation.

So what does God's way look like? It's the way of blessing. The story begins in Eden, where God provided a beautiful and abundant environment, asked us to help him look after it, walked with us in friendship, and gave us one simple rule – "don't mess up by trying to be like God – that way leads to pain, misery and death" (or don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). We messed up, but God took the initiative to help us out.

He rescued the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and resettled them in a good place – a land flowing with milk and honey; and he set up his tent among them so that he could be their friend. He also gave them some more rules (life had got complicated). But these rules were intended to help community life flourish – if you really want good, healthy, safe, thriving communities – here's how to do it! Again we messed up – the Hebrews increasingly wanted "to be like other nations" which is ironic, because God's purpose was that they should be the example for other nations to follow. We messed up, but God took the initiative to help us out.

Jesus came with the promise of reconciling all things, and to achieve this: Firstly through his death, He took our judgement on himself; Secondly through his resurrection, He showed death is not the last word; Thirdly through sending God's own Holy Spirit to live among us, and within us, He could be our constant friend, companion and helper. He also gave us some rules – vastly simplified. Love God and love your neighbour. That's the way to build a health society and a healthy world, a world that reflects God's heart, God's values, God's purposes. A world that begins to build what Jesus called "The Kingdom of God."

So do you want to buy into God's world of 'life in all its fullness'; or stick with destroying our world through exploitation and acquisition? Which world do we want to build? What is our purpose? What is our motivation? What does it mean to repent – to think again?

The writer of Hebrews tells us more explicitly some of the things we can actually do to help build God's kingdom. These aren't rules to keep us down, but attitudes of the heart that will build us and our community up!

What does Hebrews advise?

1. You're family – God's own children – love each other like family – like brothers and sisters. In other words choose to put the other person first even if it costs you. Don't exploit, rather empower and encourage.

2. You're fortunate – others are struggling – especially prisoners (here I would add those trapped by poverty, illness, loneliness and addiction). Be compassionate, treat them how you would want to be treated if you were in their shoes!

3. You're loved – relationships matter, they hold people and communities together. So honour each other's relationships. Don't be the cause of tearing people apart. That way we would not need divorce courts, we would not need safeguarding or child abuse enquiries or women's refuges. There would be no dark web or internet trolls. Imagine being able to re-invest all that time and energy in say creating a healthy youth culture.

4. You're God's people – honour God, tell Him how much you appreciate all he has done for us. Love him for who he is.

God's way is the way of blessing. This is what it is to be the people of God. This is who we are.

Welcome to His family!

Amen