



How to live in the impossible kingdom

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. "
(Matthew 5:48)



When we hear Jesus' teaching on how we are to live as his disciples and followers, we can't help but groan inwardly, knowing our inability to live up to such a high standard of holiness.

But Jesus never says, Oh it's OK, I know you're only human, just do your best and it will be fine!" Rather, he allows us to realise the impossibility of living in God's holy kingdom, and then tells us how it is possible.

When we wake up each morning, let us speak to ourselves saying "Listen up! Today I make a commitment to be filled with God's Spirit, and live totally dependent on His empowerment.



I once watched a TV series called *The Good Place*. It told the fictitious story of a woman who died and found herself in 'The Good Place', the name for heaven coined by the producers. The problem was, however, that she knew inwardly she should never have been sent there. She felt totally out of place. It was only when she found that she was sent to The Good Place due to an administrative error, that the plot started to develop.

When we hear the standard that God expects of us in both our Old Testament and Gospel readings, many of us can feel the same way.

That's exactly how many people feel when they walk into church – 'how is it even possible to live like this?' they ask. 'I mean, they don't tell dirty jokes, they don't get drunk, they don't criticise the other people who sit beside them?' It's like, they're perfect', they exclaim.

'If they only knew', we are all saying inwardly! But, even while we're admitting that we all fail to live perfect lives, we know in our hearts that perfection is the standard to which we've all be called.

Point 1 | The decision to follow Jesus and become his disciple is a calling to live an impossibly holy life.

Now in this TV series, after realising that she was in the wrong place, and deserved to be in the other place, called The Bad Place, she tried her hardest to be good. She copied all the good people around her, but found that she couldn't stop doing her old forbidden habits.

That's what many people think we do here in church – 'you know, those are good people, who always try their hardest to be the best version of themselves they can be'.

So, when we read in our Old Testament reading, that God requires we act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8), our hearts cry ... 'Yes, but ... I just can't always do that.

Or when we read what the person who is able to enter into God's presence is like: those who are blameless, who act righteously, who only say words of truth without any slander, and those who never do anything wrong to their neighbour, nor do they ever criticise them (see Psalm 15:2-3) ... we begin to wonder if anyone could ever enter God's holy sanctuary.

Then, we read how Jesus described those in the Kingdom of God: people who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and those who are pure in heart ... and we become certain we would never qualify for such a place.

Then ... as if we needed any more convincing, Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48)".

No wonder, the disciples exclaimed, "Who then can be saved?" (Luke 18:26).

Jesus agreed that entry into the Kingdom of God was indeed an impossible feat for us (Luke 18:26).

Point 2 | Our calling is not just to live an excellent moral life, but to be the hands and feet of Jesus, believing God for the sick to be healed and the tormented set free.

Now, some of you are thinking, 'Hang on, Rev. Surely God knows that we can't be perfect. Doesn't he desire that we just try our best?'

Actually no! Rather than lowering his expectations of what his followers would do, whenever we read what Jesus expected from us ... its always doing what is totally impossible for humans to do.

Remember what Jesus commissioned the 72 to do: "He told them to heal the sick and cast out demons" (Luke 10:8, 17) – all are humanly impossible.

And later Jesus told us,

"These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." (Mark 16:15-17)

– all of these are totally impossible for us.

Now before we cast these words aside saying, 'but that was the disciples. That's not for us now.' We must remember Jesus' conversation with Philip when he said, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12)

Is the bar high enough yet?

Not only are we expected to be excellent in moral conduct, but Jesus also expected his followers to work miracles in his name which are completely impossible for us to do on our own (see John 14:13).

Point 3 | With a humanly impossible standard God sets for us, the only proper response is to cry out to God for his empowerment and strength.

So, what are we to do? Are we doomed to a life of striving to meet an unattainable goal?

Well, thankfully, the disciples had the same question raging in their heart.

Shortly after Jesus' resurrection he told them,

"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. ... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:4b-5, 8)

Those of us who have responded to Jesus' invitation to follow him, to be his student, have received God's own spiritual power and strength, the person of the Holy Spirit.

That's why Paul wrote in his opening words to the believers at Corinth,

"For in him *you have been* enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge – God confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore, *you do not lack any* spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:5-9)

Paul revealed where the power and wisdom for the Christian life can be found.

That's why he said, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Application | Every day when we awake in the morning, remind yourself: "Without you, Jesus, I cannot survive the day. So, Holy Spirit I depend upon you today."

Last week I talked about how a decision to follow Jesus meant believing God for the impossible.

That's what a life of faith is – a life that knows without God's power and strength we won't bear any spiritual fruit.

But as, Jesus told us, if we remain connected with Him – or in fellowship with him as Paul just told us, we will bear much fruit which glorifies God

The only way we are able to live this impossible life of holiness is by being constantly empowered by the Spirit of God – for the Spirit of God is who bears the fruit of faith (2 Corinthians 4:13).

It is only by yielding to the power of God's indwelling Spirit that we can be the people God called us to be. And this is not a once off event. Rather, Paul writes,

"... be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Ephesians 5:18b-20)

So, every day when we awake in the morning, say to yourself: "Without you, Jesus, I cannot survive the day. So, Holy Spirit I depend upon you. I choose to listen to your voice and obey whatever you tell me to do."

Then we step out of bed, "fully confident that he who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6)