



## The Sermon on the Mount: An Introduction

St. Matthew 5-7

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We've now had flyers around the church for a few weeks noting that today we're starting a new series of sermons on Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." So what is the Sermon on the Mount and why is it so important that we need to devote a whole series of sermons to it? The Sermon on the Mount is recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel, in chapters five through seven, coming right at the start of Jesus' public ministry. It's probably the best-known part of his teachings. I would imagine that most, if not all of you have heard Jesus' words, "Judge not, lest ye be judged" – they're now the most often quoted words of Jesus in our current culture. It's a favourite quote of the Postmodernist and it comes from the Sermon on the Mount. But more than just being the best-known and most familiar part of Jesus' teaching, I think the Sermon is arguably the most important part of his teaching. And so that's why it's tragic that this most important sermon of Christ is also probably the most misunderstood and misinterpreted. If we want to truly understand what Jesus was all about – and what we're supposed to be all about as Christians – it's critical that we not only *know* the Sermon on the Mount, but that we also *understand* it.

When he preached on the Sermon on the Mount back in 1629, John Donne described it saying, "All the articles of our religion, all the canons of our church, all the injunctions of our princes, all the homilies of our fathers, all the body of divinity, is in these three chapters, in this one Sermon on the Mount." That's an overstatement, but I think Donne was right in a very real sense. You can have everything else right, but if you don't get this one thing, everything else is pretty much pointless.

If you've got your Bible out, open them to Matthew 16:13. This is another familiar passage.

**Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others**

**Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:13-18)**

"On this rock I will build my church." Jesus was telling Peter that it was this confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and the Son of God that is the rock, the foundation stone, on which the Church is built. Peter picks this up again in his own epistle later, where he writes:

**Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame." (1 Peter 2:4-6)**

Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith and he as the "living stone," calls us to be "like living stones" ourselves. His Sermon is the core of his teaching on the new life that he gives – in it he tells us how to be living stones – how to be like him. St. Augustine made the natural connection between Christ the Rock who is the foundation of our faith and the Sermon on the Mount as Christ's description of what the life of one with that faith should look like. I don't think it's insignificant that Jesus ends his Sermon this way (again, another familiar passage):

**Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. (Matthew 7:24-25)**

And so as I said a bit ago, if Jesus' Sermon on the Mount describes what the life of his followers is supposed to be like, it's critical that we *know* it, and that we *understand* it. But the reason that we have to *know* and *understand* it is because we're also called to *do* it – to *live* it. Jesus' Sermon tells how to be a Christian and how to live as a Christian in a world that isn't Christian. It shows us the difference between Kingdom people and everyone else. But it doesn't show us how to be different for the sake of being different –

it tells us how to be different so that we can be the "city on a hill." If there's a "Christian Manifesto," this is it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us the "constitution" of the Kingdom.

Jesus probably preached this Sermon a lot of times. Biblical critics argue that since St. Luke records a similar sermon, but puts it in a different location, then neither account is really reliable. I'd point out the obvious: if you've ever known a travelling preacher, you know that he has one sermon or one presentation that he takes with him everywhere. My preaching professor, who was from the South, used to say that every preacher has his "candy stick" – his on finely polished sermon on his favourite subject that he can preach better and with more passion than anything else. This was Jesus' "candy stick," if you will. If this was his manifesto, it only makes sense that he would have preached it a lot of times in a lot of different places. This would also account for the differences in content and length between Matthew's and Luke's accounts.

Matthew strategically records Jesus' preaching of his Sermon just after the beginning of his ministry and the calling of his disciples. Matthew says that "he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people" (Matthew 4:23). Matthew says, "from that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17).

He attracted a lot of attention, and so people naturally began to follow him around, waiting to see what he would say next, waiting to see what new miracle he would perform, and, I'm sure, many of them believing his message, just wanted to soak up every little bit of wisdom that he taught and wanted to bask in the glory of the Messiah. And so Matthew records Jesus' Sermon here, as the crowds gathered and Jesus went up a mountain or hill to address them. Look at Matthew 5:1-2:

**Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them..."**

The mountain wasn't *just* a convenient place from which to be heard – there's something symbolic in it. Remember that Moses went up to Mt. Sinai where he was met by God and given the Law, while the people were forbidden from even approaching the holy mountain. Here God goes up the mountain and gathers the people to him while he

teaches them a “New Law.” I don't like describing the Sermon on the Mount as “Law,” but we need to see the connection with Moses that Matthew makes here. This is the fulfilment of the Law that was given to Moses, and, in fact, in Jesus' Sermon we find not Law, but grace. God had spent close to a millennium-and-a-half preparing his people by means of the Law, to hear what Jesus would teach in fulfilment of it. And so here Jesus goes up the mountain, and as the crowd gathers in front of him, he sits down, taking the teaching stance of a rabbi, and begins to teach by opening his mouth – again Matthew uses a description that was used in Jewish culture to describe the deliberateness and seriousness of what Jesus was doing here. Jesus has been travelling all over Galilee, telling people to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Now he tells them what it mean to repent and to be a part of that kingdom.”

Of course, we have to ask, what does Jesus mean when he talks about the Kingdom? By definition a “kingdom” is the territory over which a king reigns and has authority. And so when the New Testament talks about the Kingdom of God it's talking about the sovereign and gracious will of God. The Kingdom is present wherever God's will reigns. (And, I should note, St. Matthew always refers to it as the Kingdom of Heaven. He was the evangelist who wrote as a Jew for a Jewish audience, and so he tended to avoid naming God – something the Jews were afraid to do.) At the same time, the Kingdom exists wherever the king is – and in the New Testament we see Jesus as the King.

And so we can know that wherever Jesus is present, the Kingdom of God is also present, and that whoever makes Jesus their Lord and prays, “Thy will be done,” and means exactly that when they pray, is a part of the Kingdom. We have a tendency to get stuck on the idea of a Kingdom being something physical or something geographic. The Jews had the same problem. For a thousand years they had heard the prophecies of the Messiah who would come and usher in God's Kingdom. A lot of those people who cheered Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and waved palm branches to honour him, were waiting for a revolution that week that would overthrow the Romans and restore the glorious days of David and Solomon to Israel. Jesus did bring a revolution, but it was one that happened when he died on the cross and the veil that closed off the Holy of Holies in the Temple was torn in two. But most of the people never realised it and today the Jewish people are still waiting for their Messiah to usher in

an earthly kingdom. (We also need to be careful. There are a lot of Christians who are waiting for the same thing, all the while missing the point that the Kingdom of God is here and now in his Church!) Jesus was telling people that the Kingdom of God had come, because he himself had come; he was here in fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies.

This is the emphasis of St. Matthew's Gospel: the person of Jesus Christ. Remember that Matthew was telling the Gospel story for the Jews. He quotes Old Testament prophecy more than any of the other Evangelists and he does so in order to show how those prophecies were fulfilled in Christ – to show that he was the promised Messiah. Matthew tells us who Jesus is, he tells us what Jesus says, and he tells us what Jesus does. If we read the Sermon on the Mount in this context – that Matthew's Gospel is all about telling us about Jesus himself – the Sermon should tell us more about Jesus.

And here's where I think this all comes together. The fact that the Sermon puts a spotlight on Jesus – who he is, what he says, what he does – is important, because the Sermon on the Mount is something we can never separate from a right relationship with Jesus. This isn't just another sermon about being a do-gooder. It's not just another sermon that teaches us doctrine or Bible. I like to read old sermons by the great preachers of the past. I've never met John Chrysostom or Nicholas Ridley. I've never met Charles Spurgeon or George Whitfield. I don't know them. But I can read their sermons and I can understand them – I can even put their applications into practice. But Jesus' Sermon doesn't work that way. I can't do it – I can't even understand it – unless I know him. *We can only live out what he teaches in the Sermon on the Mount when we have first been given the Gospel message and in response submitted ourselves to Jesus' sovereign and gracious reign as Saviour and Lord.*

This is the problem with all the wrong applications of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon is the foundation of the Social Gospel, but the problem with the Social Gospel is that it applies the Sermon to everyone and assumes – wrongly! – that all we have to do to make the world a better place and to bring the Kingdom of God is for everyone to live out what Jesus teaches here. But it doesn't work that way. You can't live righteously without first having Christ as your righteousness. The Sermon on the Mount isn't so much an ethical system as it is a description of character.

Mechanistically living it out doesn't bring the Kingdom any more than the Pharisees mechanistically living out the letter of the Mosaic Law brought the Kingdom. The Law was meant to show our inability to live righteously on our own. The Pharisees failed to understand what the Law was all about and thought that they were actually living up to it. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus does show us what truly righteous living is and blows the Pharisees out of the water. He sets an even higher standard. If the Pharisees couldn't live up to it – the most “religious” and “upstanding” people of their day – how can we expect the entire world to live up to Jesus' even higher standard if they don't first know him?

The Law is a schoolmaster that pointed to the Messiah through externals: don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, don't covet, don't blaspheme God's name. And yet still people thought they'd achieved righteousness on their own. People thought that because they'd never murdered anyone they had fulfilled the Law, all the while never realising that holding that grudge against their neighbour and wishing he were dead was just as much a violation of the Law as if they had killed him. They may never have blasphemed God's name in a vulgar way in their speech, but they blasphemed him every day as they announced themselves to the world as a “Believer,” while always showing an ungracious spirit toward others. And then Jesus came and preached his great Sermon and shows us that even more important than externals is whether or not our heart is in the right place. Since the fall the heart of every man and every woman has been in the wrong place. The Sermon on the Mount calls for a pure righteousness that flows out of a regenerate heart, and only in Christ can we find that regeneration.

In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus says:

**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.**

Living the Sermon on the Mount means to bow to the authority of Jesus our King, to take his yoke on our shoulders, and to live for him. It doesn't mean that we make him King. It doesn't mean that we make him Lord. He's *already* King and Lord. It's his Kingdom that we're entering. Either we submit to his reign – to his lordship and his sovereignty – or we don't. The entrance to his Kingdom is in our submission to him. We can never enter it if we refuse to bow

before him. St. James gets at this in his epistle in the familiar passage about faith without works being dead. We can claim to be in his Kingdom, but if being in his Kingdom means submitting to his authority, we aren't really in it if we're still doing our own thing. The character described in the Sermon on the Mount is the character of a heart renewed by Christ and living it is the evidence of the faith we proclaim.

When God called the Israelites out of Egypt he gave them a charge that we read in Leviticus:

**And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel, I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall do my ordinances and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God.**

Notice that the call God gave to his people to be different – to be holy – begins and ends with his reminder that he is their God. Their covenant with him was the foundation of their difference. They were a holy people because they belonged to him. The Law was their rule, but, as I said, it applied to externals. The Sermon on the Mount fulfils God's command to be different. Finally, in Christ we have the changed heart that desires to please him. Where the Israelites served God out of fear of punishment, Christ calls us to serve him as a loving response to his own love for us. This isn't an impossible ideal as some people have said that it is. It's not a divine guilt trip that gives a sense of hopelessness. Jesus' Sermon is a glorious vision of what God wants us to be and what he has promised we will become.

The hard part of all this for us is the fact that we want the easy way out. On the one hand the Kingdom is here and it's now as much as we, the Body of Christ, find our life and regeneration in him. But it's also true that there's a “not yet” element that we're waiting for. We are not of the world, but we are still in the world. We're aliens living in a land that isn't our own. And that world constantly tempts us with its own ways. It tells us that submitting ourselves to the reign of Christ will get us nowhere. Even in the Church itself, people point us to other things and other places. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that, “The trouble with much holiness teaching is that it leaves out the Sermon on the Mount, and asks us to experience sanctification.” But Jesus' Sermon is what that sanctification is all about. The Sermon

on the Mount reminds us that our sanctification – our being made holy – begins and is rooted in finding our new life in him and only in him. New life isn't found in keeping the Law, it's not found in good works. New life is found when we give ourselves over to the lordship and sovereignty of Jesus.

And so we have to fight the influence of the world, the flesh, and the devil. If our King who was perfect was tested, how much more can we expect to be tested? I don't think the battle ever gets any easier. The more we rest on Christ the harder the world, the flesh, and the devil try to draw us away from him. But I do think that the more we rest on Christ the easier it becomes to rest on him even as the battle gets more intense. As we fight we should find encouragement in Jesus' message. He reminds us that this world is not our own. But that hope and that knowledge that our home is somewhere else can't take us out of the world. The monastics of the Middle Ages tried to live holy lives by withdrawing from the world and living in their own little isolated communities of faith, away from temptation. The Sermon on the Mount doesn't call us to move into a Christian ghetto. In fact, it does exactly the opposite. Jesus tells us:

**“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.**

**“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**

(Matthew 5:13-16)

Jesus has put us in the world for a reason. Just as the Israelites were meant to be a light to the gentiles around them, we're meant to be a light to the people around us. The Church has come up with all sorts of programmes to evangelise the world. We have plans, we have tracts – you name it and you can find all sorts of man-made ways to share the Gospel with people. And I'm not saying they're bad or wrong. But what if we actually lived the Sermon on the Mount? The Sermon is about *Christians being Christians*. That's the ultimate way to evangelise the world around us – by showing them what it means to be followers of Christ – by letting them see inside the Kingdom of God. We can shout the Gospel from the rooftops. We can legislate morality and tell people how they should be living. We can

share the message with words until we're blue in the face. We can be the loudest people on the planet, but if we aren't living it, no one's going to listen. Sometimes the best thing we can do is to shut up and *show* the Gospel to the world. It's amazing how many people will listen when we're not actually saying anything!

I think the problem is that we know the Kingdom will be fully and finally consummated when Jesus returns. We know that when he comes back the Kingdom will no longer be something in our hearts, because when he comes back he'll transform the entire creation into his Kingdom and put everything and everyone under his authority. And that can make it easy to justify not really living up to his standard while we wait. We know that we'll never be perfect this side of heaven, and so we don't really try. We try to be holy only insofar as being holy doesn't really inconvenience us. But if that's what we're doing, are we truly submitting ourselves to Our Lord? The Sermon on the Mount isn't really so much about the future. It's really all about here and now. Jesus isn't asking us if we'll live the Kingdom life in the New Jerusalem. He's asking us if we'll live it now in the hope of the New Jerusalem. Jesus' Sermon isn't about living an ideal life in an ideal world. It's about living the Kingdom life in a fallen world.

Let us pray: Almighty Father, you gave your only Son to die for our sins and to rise again for our justification. Give us the grace to follow his example that we may always serve you in purity and truth, always through the merits of your Son, Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.