

The Sermon on the Mount Introduction

Today we start a new study in what is doubtless the best known teaching of Jesus.

When I was a student at SDSU, my professor for “Introduction to Philosophy” assigned us a number of readings from various sources. One was the Sermon on the Mount. Interestingly, the professor said he was an agnostic, but thought that these words of Jesus were “good philosophy.” He was aware of Christ’s ethic, but not willing to acknowledge or receive the new life that Christ offers.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is describing not just a legalistic system of morality, but rather a need for a new life and the resulting new way of looking at things. This is not just what Jesus wanted His followers to do, but also what they were to be.

As a prelude to the Sermon on the Mount, **read Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25**

- ☞ In verse 17, what do you think Jesus was saying about the relationship between repentance and the kingdom of heaven?
- ☞ Why is this the crucial first step?

Perhaps you have heard the phrase, “Now for something completely different.” That is what the Sermon on the Mount is: Jesus’ followers are not to take their cue from those around them, but from Him in order to be genuine children of the heavenly Father. (John 1:12)

This “differentness” is a frequent theme in Scripture: Matthew 6:8a... “*Do not be like them...*”; Leviticus 18:3... “*You must not do as they do.*” The contrast is with both the secular world and the “pseudo-religious” world, demonstrated by many of the Jewish leaders at the time.

The Sermon on the Mount deals with a wide variety of subjects, each area describing a very different approach than was commonly thought or accepted. Here, Jesus is talking about a new life in the Kingdom of God.

When He was asked by a Pharisee, “*Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*” Jesus replied: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*” (Matthew 22:36-40, NIV) The entirety of the Sermon on the Mount also “hangs” on these two commandments. If we really love God, and love our neighbor, we will, as a matter of course, follow these teachings of Jesus. (Remember that the definition of neighbor from the Parable of the Good Samaritan is not just those who are “like us.”)

The Sermon on the Mount should not be read with foolish optimism or hopeless despair. It is not intended to be “nice philosophy” for the masses, but for those who are disciples (cf. John 3.) As British pastor and author, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones pointed out, “We are not told in the Sermon on the Mount, ‘Live like this and you will become Christian’; rather we are told, ‘Because you are Christian, live like this.’ ... this is how Christians are meant to live.”

Read the last verse in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:28.

☞ What was the evaluation of the people about the teachings of Jesus?

Six times in chapter 5, Jesus says “You have heard that it was said..... but I tell you....” showing that He had a greater and independent authority.

There have been those through the centuries that have rejected the Sermon on the Mount to some degree, feeling that the standards set down are impossible and are, therefore, not to be taken seriously by Christians. But that is found throughout Scripture, namely that we aspire to very high standards, and that apart from the power of the Holy Spirit could never attain them.

Another error that sometimes accompanies the Sermon on the Mount is that we might accept one part while rejecting another. This is problematic on two levels. First from what the Bible says about itself: “**All** Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...” (2 Timothy 3:16, emphasis added). Jesus also told His disciples immediately before His ascension, “...therefore go and make disciples of all nations.... teaching them to obey **everything** I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20, emphasis added). Secondly, from the world of the secular court room, we know that a witness that perjures him or herself in one area of their testimony invalidates the whole of their testimony.

There have also been those who have said that the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are for the time of Christ’s Messianic kingdom, which is yet to come. Again, this is not supported by the whole of Scripture, or even by the Sermon itself, which is filled with imperatives in the present tense such as “rejoice,” “swear not,” “go,” “give,” and “take heed.”

These words of Jesus are not for some idealized world or for those who are living a monastic existence. James Montgomery Boice, for many years pastor of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia wrote, “The world of the Sermon on the Mount is a real and sinful world – a world of tax collectors, unjust officials, hypocrites, thieves, or those who are weak or poor, and false prophets. It is a statement of how those who are born again by faith in Christ are to live in spite of it.”

The difficult parts of the Sermon on the Mount should all the more cause us to see our need for new life which is found only in Christ. **(Read 2 Corinthians 5:17 and 21.)** We also know that “...the [Holy] Spirit helps us in our weakness...” (Romans 8:26).

Take some time now to read through the entire Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5 through 7. Try to envision yourself sitting on the hillside listening to these words of Jesus. (If you prefer, you can read this over a period of three days.)