

“THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT - INTRODUCTION”

Matthew 5:1-16

One of the great classics of ancient and military history and an ever-present set book in Latin departments down through the years is Julius Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, the story of his conquest of what is now France. I can remember sitting through what seemed to be interminable lessons on it when I was at school and on one occasion our classics teacher began the class with, “If I had been Julius Caesar’s Latin master, I would have put a red line through most of this.” It was an acknowledged masterpiece in its field but dear old Cooksey had decided that it was stylistically and grammatically below par.

I now read books on preaching (“You should read a few more,” I hear you say) rather than on imperialistic expansion and judging by what I come across about style, impact, construction and rhetorical devices, Jesus’ *Sermon On The Mount* is not a particularly good sermon. It could be picked apart for all sorts of reasons – but certainly not because of its content. It might not be brilliant oratory, but it is undoubtedly the most influential sermon ever preached and contains some of the greatest insights into the way we should live that have ever been observed. *The Sermon On The Mount* is an earth-shattering sermon and one which has shaped the way the followers of Jesus have lived – or tried to live – for two millennia.

Of course, it may be that Matthew has gathered together in one place a number of bits of Jesus’ teaching that he delivered at different times and in different places during his ministry. Chunks of it appear in a very slightly different form in Luke’s Gospel, where it is clearly *The Sermon On The Plain*. Whether Jesus preached it once, all in one go, in different places, in smaller sections or whatever, what we find in these three chapters of Matthew’s Gospel is the very core of Jesus’ teaching. John Stott writes that “*The Sermon on the Mount has a unique fascination. It seems to present the quintessence of the teaching of Jesus. It makes goodness attractive. It shames our shabby performance. It engenders dreams of a better world.*” And 350 years before that, in a Lenten sermon at St Paul’s Cathedral, the poet and priest John Donne said, “*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.*”

In other words, this is pretty important stuff. So we’re going to spend the next few Sunday mornings looking at this great sermon. And there will be material for those of you who want to use it in your home groups as well. As usual, several people will be preaching on it, so we’ll have a number of perspectives on these words of Jesus as they take the various sections of it and, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, share with us their insights. This morning we’re going to have a brief overview of *The Sermon On The Mount* and reflect on why it might still be so important to us today, two thousand years after Jesus first preached it.

This is a sermon for the followers of Jesus and its purpose is to help us live Christian lives that are fully rounded. We are not called to live our lives for Jesus in two dimensions – in some kind of flat, religion-by-numbers kind of way. We are to be Christians in 3-D – complete, coherent, consistent – making it obvious to those amongst whom we live and work that Jesus has changed our lives and is continuing to change us. And for the Christian who lives life in 3-D there are three “D”s that are at the heart of Jesus’ sermon – **Discipleship, Distinctiveness** and **Depth**. Let me explain what I mean.

1. DISCIPLESHIP

The Sermon On The Mount is a well-known part of Jesus’ teaching. Even if people don’t know all of it, they will have picked up odd phrases or ideas from it, or will know some of the things contained in it, such as The Lord’s Prayer or The Parable of the Housebuilders. And you come across people who say that they don’t really believe in Jesus – or, at least, all the religious stuff about him – but they do try to

keep to the teaching of *The Sermon On The Mount*. Gandhi was one of those who held up this teaching as a universal pattern for all humanity.

Sadly, that it completely unsustainable. *The Sermon On The Mount* is most certainly not a universal ethical code. It is not something that can be detached from the rest of one's beliefs about Jesus and God's plan for humanity. It is not a pattern for good community life that you can divorce from the rest of the teaching in the Bible. Dick France, a great New Testament scholar, wrote that *The Sermon On The Mount* has "no claim to present an ethic for all men; indeed, much of it makes no sense as a universal code. It is concerned not with ethics in general, but with discipleship, with man in his obedience for God, not with a pattern for society." Of course, if everyone was a good disciple of Jesus, that would have clear implications for the ordering of society, but it's not a general ethical or moral tract.

This sermon is for the disciples of Jesus, for those who want to take seriously all that he says, does and is. Matthew makes it clear here that Jesus was talking to his disciples (5:1), not to the public at large. These are men he has recently called (4:18-22) and he is giving them what is pretty well their first instruction in his ways. He is telling them how they should now be living.

You see, this is not some kind of rule book that you can keep and thereby become a Christian, some kind of rules of initiation or blueprint for getting into God's good books. This is an ethic for Christians to follow. Jesus isn't saying, "Live like this and you'll become a Christian". He's saying, "Because you are a Christian, live like this." Because, really, you haven't got a hope in hell (literally) of living like this if you're not already a Christian, if you don't already have the help of the Holy Spirit in keeping to this pattern of life. To live as Jesus proposes in *The Sermon On The Mount* is impossible without having the relationship with Jesus that enables the Holy Spirit to work within you. It is about discipleship. The problem for most of us is that we fail to see that. Either we try to live it out without that transforming relationship with Jesus, and thus flounder on the rocks of our own human fallibility and sin. Or – more likely for most of us – we commit ourselves to Jesus but fail to see that there is a need to follow his teaching as it is set out here and end up living lives that are completely unremarkable as authentically Christian. The great preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his lengthy series of sermons on this passage, says, "*The Church doesn't need evangelistic missions – it needs Christians who live out their faith like this.*"

To be able to have any chance at all of living out the standards and values of *The Sermon On The Mount* you need to have committed yourself to be a disciple of Jesus. And to live as a true disciple of Jesus, you need to commit yourself to follow the teaching that he sets out here. Which leads us neatly into our second point.

2. DISTINCTIVENESS

The Sermon On The Mount is not for everyone. Adherence to what it teaches is a marker, if you like, of commitment to Jesus. Living according to the teachings contained in these words means turning the values of the world on their head. Like many of you, I'm sure, I was brought up reading the Bible, but reading it in small chunks – a few verses each day with the help of Scripture Union notes or some such aid. But when you read something like *The Sermon On The Mount* through in one go (it really doesn't take long), you notice certain things that recur. If you have your Bibles open look at 5:20,47; 6:2,5,16,32; 7:20. Jesus keeps saying, "Don't be like the others – be different, be distinctive." You could maybe sum up the thrust of this whole sermon in the words at the beginning of 6:8, "*Do not be like them.*"

The men and women who follow Jesus are to be distinctive. They are to stand out from the crowd. And this is nothing to do with having a fish badge on your car or wearing a crucifix to work. This is, as we shall see in a moment, about a lifestyle, a set of values, an attitude. What we have here is a counter-cultural manifesto. No doubt you have been reading about the aims of the various parties competing for our votes on May 6th. You may have purchased – some of you may have helped to write – the

manifestoes of the main parties. You may have watched the so-called television “debate”. In terms of what they’re trying to do, all three main parties are in agreement. They are all trying to make us more prosperous. They are all appealing to our self-interest. Follow their policies back and they’re all saying basically the same thing – they just have different ideas of how to go about it. Jesus’ teaching here runs counter to all that self-interest stuff, all that “we just want to be more prosperous” attitude. If you don’t believe me, look at 6:19-34. John Stott puts it like this in his book on *The Sermon On The Mount*:

“The followers of Jesus are to be different – different from both the nominal church and the secular world, different from both the religious and the irreligious ... Here is a Christian value system, ethical standard, religious devotion, attitude to money, ambition, life-style and network of relationships – all of which are totally at variance with those of the non-Christian world.”

Unfortunately, as we’ve already hinted, that’s not usually the case. Most of us have sold out to the world’s values and there’s not a great deal to distinguish us from the non-believers and followers of other faiths amongst whom we live and work – other than the way we spend Sunday mornings. Jesus says, again and again, don’t be like them. You should not follow them in their constant pre-occupation with money and possessions. You should not be like them in your attempts at ostentatious religiosity. You should not be like them in your relationships with people who are just like you. You should not be like them in your anxieties about the future. Don’t hide your light under a bucket. Don’t try to blend in with everyone else and wander through “*the broad gate that leads to destruction*” (7:13) just because you don’t want to be spotted in the little group making its way along “*the narrow road that leads to life*”.

Jesus is very hard on those who profess one thing and do another – he calls them (several times in this sermon) “*hypocrites*”. These are the people who try to make their behaviour conform to the group they’re with, without really changing at all inside. And that’s where our third point comes in.

3. DEPTH

The word “hypocrite” which Jesus uses so often, not just here but throughout his teaching, comes from a Greek word to do with putting on a mask for a theatrical performance. It’s about play-acting and disguising one’s true self. Hypocrites are those who try to make their behaviour and speech conform to the context they find themselves in, but swap it all for something else in a different context. It’s to do, as we’ve said many times before, with behaviour modification. And we all try and do it. We don’t swear over the coffee after church, but we do in the coffee break at work. We promise our prayers to those in need after the service, but don’t actually pray at all – let alone for them – between one service and the next. We try to make it look as if we are all a happy family when we meet other church members out shopping, but our homes are really battlegrounds and our family conversations are just slanging matches. Of course, we can all do it – and most of us do, to a greater or lesser extent.

The story with which Jesus closes this sermon is all about that – about how shallow some people’s lives are because they are interested only in the appearance, not the foundation of their lives. Living as a disciple of Jesus, living distinctively for him day by day is not about modifying your behaviour, it’s about as radical a change of your attitudes as you could get. It’s about the stuff that’s going on in your head and your heart, not just the stuff that comes out of your mouth. And that is a heck of a lot more difficult to change, because it will mean a very distinctive approach to life.

Jesus knows that his listeners – and the people whom he targets with his comments about hypocrisy – are well-versed in keeping to the Law of Moses. He knows that they are the kind of people who have not murdered, philandered or pursued revenge. But he also knows that they have harboured attitudes in their hearts which could easily lead to such things. So much of the second part of chapter 5 is about that. It’s not about murder, but hatred and resentment – the stuff that lurks below the surface but affects the way we relate to and talk about others. It’s not about adultery and illicit sex, but about fantasies and lust – the kind of stuff much of our entertainment industry and newspaper reporting is built on. It’s not about

swearing falsely and the use of particular words, but about integrity, keeping to your word, sticking to the agreement, following the contract. It's not about getting revenge and exacting what might appear to be justice by getting your own back, but about selfishness and pride. It's about letting the Holy Spirit mould your thinking before you start asking him to change your behaviour. Don't get me wrong, behaving in the right way is vital – but you'll never stick to it until your attitudes and values are transformed. Harry Blamires – a much under-rated and often overlooked writer and thinker – wrote two books which every Christian ought to look at at some point: *The Christian Mind* and, more recently, *The Post-Christian Mind*, in which he argues that most Christians just don't **think** as Christians; they think as worldly people but try to overlay their unreformed attitudes with superficial (or, as Jesus would call it, hypocritical) behaviour.

Now this isn't easy stuff, is it? But it's vital stuff. Jesus is actually being very confrontational here, but he is confronting things that need to change if his disciples are going to become distinctive people, people with a real depth about them. Rob Warner, in his book on *The Sermon On The Mount*, writes this:

“Jesus makes no attempt to pander to his audience, offering them some kind of easy-believism with a religious feel-good factor. His is not the wimpish pseudo-spirituality of the late twentieth century that blandly affirms the best in people without making any ethical demands. Instead, Jesus' call to repentance urges his followers not to minor adjustments in their trajectory through life, but to a comprehensive, rigorous and continuing life re-appraisal. According to Jesus, we cannot even begin to discover the life of heaven without recognising the absolute necessity of personal repentance.”

This is the real *Manifesto for Change*. This is all about personal transformation from the inside out. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones (again) puts it, we are talking here not about a code of ethics but a description of character. As we look at the various sections of this in more detail over the next few weeks, let us pray that God will, through his Holy Spirit, show us the things that we need to change in our lives, help us re-appraise the way we think, grant us the grace to acknowledge that we have a long way to go before we truly begin to live as the disciples Jesus wants us to be.

The disciples who first heard *The Sermon On The Mount* were completely new to all this. They'd been with Jesus a matter of days and suddenly they were confronted with this. They were ordinary people like you and me, with all the failures and flaws that are common to our fallen humanity. But their lives were transformed as they started – slowly and with some hesitation – to put into practice these words of Jesus. In the end, they turned the world upside down. And so can we – so can you – if you are prepared to identify yourself as a disciple of Jesus, live as a distinctive citizen of the Kingdom of God, and ensure that your commitment to Jesus has real depth. Then, maybe, as a bunch of 3-D Christians, we won't need the Outreach Group here at Wade Street Church, because our own lives will constantly be pointing others towards Jesus.

Discussion questions on the next page.

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Questions for discussion

1. What do you think of when *The Sermon On The Mount* is mentioned?
2. Do you think this could be a blueprint for all humanity, or is it just a code of practice for disciples? Why?
3. *The Sermon On The Mount* is generally agreed to be very difficult to put into practice. Why do you think that is?
4. One of the most hurtful accusations that can be levelled against us is that we are hypocrites? Why is that so?
5. Why is it more difficult to change attitudes than change behaviour?
6. In what ways could we be more distinctive as Christians? Are we actually afraid of standing out from the crowd?

