

GOD WITH US

Part 8: JESUS

Message 7 – Sermon on the Mount: A Higher Law Matthew 5-7

Introduction

The message of the Sermon on the Mount is remarkable, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the predominant religious views and practices of the Pharisees. This sermon defined and set the stage for Jesus' radical message and ministry. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus appears as a new Moses, giving a new, higher "Law" for the new people of God. Thus, at the very beginning of Jesus public ministry in Matthew, Jesus goes up on a mountain and gives people a picture of what it truly means to be (and live like) a citizen of the kingdom of heaven – a picture radically different from the one painted by the scribes and Pharisees (who would become Jesus' greatest opponents). This is the first of 5 major sermon blocks in the Gospel of Matthew (subtly paralleling the 5 books of Moses in the Pentateuch).

The theme of the Sermon is *true righteousness*. The Pharisees were all about external conformity to the letter of the O.T. Law; but Jesus stressed the *heart attitudes and values* behind the letter of the Law. He called for a kind of righteousness that surpassed that of the Pharisees:

"I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

How could the average person attain a level of righteousness that surpassed that of the "religious pros?" Only through the enabling grace of God's Spirit living within. Thus, Jesus gave this great Sermon not only as *the standard*; but also as *the mirror* to show us our desperate need for the grace, mercy and power of God in our hearts. No wonder the Sermon begins with: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit" (those who recognize their spiritual poverty and their desperate need for God)*. It is only as we see our need for God that we will *ever* begin to live like citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

The Beatitudes: 5:1-12

The beatitudes have been called the BE-attitudes, as they focus on the heart attitudes that should characterize a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. The first 4 beatitudes describe our heart and disposition toward God. The second 4 describe the way this kind of heart expresses itself in relationship with other people.

Jesus begins by arguing *against spiritual pride*. “*Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .*”. The true believer must be poor in spirit, not proud in spirit. Instead of gloating in our religiosity, we must *mourn our sin and lack of righteousness*. We must *hunger and thirst for a kind of righteousness* that we do not naturally possess, a kind of righteousness that only God can produce within us. In short, we must live in a state of humility and brokenness before God, knowing how far we fall short of His standard of righteousness. (See the parable of the tax-collector and the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14 for an example of spiritual pride vs. humility.)

If we are poor in spirit toward God, we will be merciful in spirit toward other people. People who recognize their own spiritual poverty aren’t prone to judging and condemning others. They will be mercy-givers and peace-makers.

How has your relationship with God (standing in grace as a forgiven sinner) changed the way you relate with other people? Has the mercy of God in your own life caused you to be more merciful to others? Has reconciliation with God caused you to more quickly reconcile with people? The point is that our relationship with God should play out in our relationship with people. How is this happening for you?

Influence in the world: 5:13-16

Once we possess this God-given righteousness (while living in a constant state of humility and brokenness), we should let the light of God’s grace and power shine forth brightly before men so that they may glorify our heavenly Father, not us, as people realize that our goodness comes from Him, not from ourselves. And we should let it shine no matter what the cost – even if we are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, as were the prophets before us. Salt was used in that day for many purposes: to flavor, to preserve, to heal. God’s children must remain “salty” in the

world, otherwise they are not living out God's purpose for their lives. They will be trampled underfoot by the world; rather than exerting a godly influence upon it.

What kind of influence are you exerting on those around you? Would people say that you are salt and light in a way that shows them what God is really like? Do they see Jesus through you? How might you exert a more Christ-like influence this coming week? Pray and ask God how He wants to shine through you.

A deeper kind of righteousness: 5:17-48

The core message of the Sermon is that the *righteousness* of a citizen of *God's kingdom* must be entirely different (deeper, beyond) than that of the scribes and Pharisees. The repeated phrase here is: ***"You have heard that the ancients were told . . . but I say to you ..."***. Jesus was not nullifying the O.T. Laws (note His comments to this effect at 5:17-19). He was taking the O.T. Laws to their deeper level – the level of the heart. External conformity to *the letter of the law* is not enough (don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't make false oaths, love your neighbor, etc.). Instead, this deeper kind of righteousness goes to the *heart attitudes* behind our actions (don't harbor hate, don't look with lust, don't have untrustworthy motives behind carefully crafted promises, love your enemies, go the extra mile). Men look on the outside and see religious performance. God looks at the heart and sees *if* a true desire for His kind of righteousness (and a true mourning over sinfulness) dwells there.

How high is the standard that Jesus set forth?

"You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (5:48).

Only the grace and power of God can help us live as (and look like) the true children of God!

Do you ask the Holy Spirit to empower you for daily living? This is what it means to "be filled with the Spirit" (to be living under His control/influence – Ephesians 5:18). Read Luke 11:13. Ask the Father to grant you the Spirit's power to help you live beyond yourself? That is the "normal" Christian life – a life lived under the prevailing influence of the Holy Spirit. But we must ask for it and yield to Him so that He can empower us.

Living for God's eyes only: 6:1-18

The pursuit and performance of this kind of righteousness must be for an *audience of ONE*. There must be *no religious posturing* to be seen and rewarded by men for our righteous behavior. Jesus would later say of the Pharisees: *“They do all their deeds to be noticed by men”* (Matt.23:5). He gave three examples of religious activity. Our charitable giving, praying and fasting should be done *in secret* for the Father's eyes only. While many want to be noticed (and rewarded) by men, the true children of God need only to be noticed *by their Father in heaven*, Who will reward in His way and in His time. In particular, our prayers should be marked by simplicity, not wordiness; thus the origin of the famous “Lord's Prayer” (Matthew 6:9-13), which Jesus gave to His followers as a model of simple, sincere prayer.

Treasures in heaven: 6:19-24

A true citizen of the kingdom of heaven will show where his/her heart lies by storing up treasures in heaven, not upon earth. Treasures lead – hearts follow. Thus, the child of God will guard carefully the condition of his/her eye (*“if the eye is bad, the whole body will be full of darkness”*). The Jews believed that the “evil eye” was the source of all coveting. Jesus seems to have affirmed that idea here. Ultimately, treasures are a reflection of our god(s). *It is impossible to be devoted to two masters at once*. We must choose: Will we serve God or money? The Pharisees were, in spite of their religious façade, *“lovers of money”* (Luke 16:14).

Think about the saying: Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Where are your treasures? What do you treasure most? Do you see how your heart tends to follow your treasures? What if you began to place more of your treasures in the things that matter to God? Do you believe that your heart would move in those directions? Give it a try. Put Jesus' words to the test. Make a significant investment in the work of God. And watch how your heart for God grows.

Trusting the Father to meet our needs: 6:25-34

As for earthly needs, concerns and pursuits – these should be guided by simple trust in our Father's love and care for us. Why should we strive anxiously to meet our own needs when we have a heavenly Father Who knows what we *really* need (not our “wants”

but our “needs”) and will provide enough for us? If He can care for the birds of the air and clothe the lilies of the field, then He will see to our needs, since we are so much more valuable to Him. Worry about tomorrow will get us nowhere. Each day has enough trouble of its own! We should “*seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and trust that all these other things will be added to us*” (6:33).

Worry and stress are killers. What’s the difference between “worry” and “conscientiousness?” Worry involves fear, or anxiety – a nagging and unshakable concern over possible future outcomes and their impact on your life. The antidote to anxiety is “casting all our anxiety upon Him, because He cares for us” (1Peter 5:7 and Philippians 4:6,7). Once you have cast your cares upon the Lord, you can get up in the morning and work hard at what you need to do; but you will notice that the load seems lighter. This is because you have left the outcome in the Father’s hands. You can work with less worry. You can strive with less stress.

Being merciful toward others/self-aware: 7:1-5

Returning to the theme of spiritual humility – the true child of God will be less concerned to judge others and more concerned to judge himself/herself. It is hypocrisy to always be removing specks of dust from the eyes of others while failing to deal with the huge logs in our own eyes. The self-aware person, who is merciful toward others, will receive similar mercies in return.

Practicing self-awareness is one of the skills we teach in our Emotionally Healthy Spirituality courses. When we feel an emotion such as anger or sadness, we need to look within and try to determine the source or trigger behind our emotion. Often what we do is to attack the people that we blame for causing this emotion in us (although it is not really them “causing” our emotions). Jesus said: Look inside yourself first, to determine what is going on in your own tangled heart. Then, once you have become self-aware, you will have the ability to lovingly help the other person to also become self-aware. Check out our Living Well Course for more on these great life/relational skills.

Being discerning to people’s receptivity: 7:6

While we are not to be judgmental or critical of others, this does not mean that we abandon all discernment. In particular, followers

of Jesus need to exercise discernment as to people's openness (receptivity) toward the things of God.

“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.”

A pig has no appreciation for a string of pearls. A dog does not care if the meal is a prime cut filet or ground up meat. So be careful with the “things of God” as you seek to give these out to people in your sphere of influence. Some people will be receptive and ready to hear. Others will not. Do not force the things of God on those who are not receptive.

LISTENING is a great way to discern someone's interest level in things. By listening and asking follow-up questions you can hear what is really going on in a person's heart. This is why it is good to be “quick to hear and slow to speak” (James 1:19). The longer you listen, the more likely you will know if, when and what to speak into another person's heart. OPC's Listening Well course is designed to help you become a better listener. If you master the Listening Well skills, there's a good chance you won't waste so many of your pearls of wisdom on people who aren't interested!

Praying to our Father: 7:7-11

Our Father in heaven is a *good Father*. He will hear our prayers and meet our needs, giving *good gifts* to those who ask for them. Thus, we should keep on talking to Him about our needs and desires in every area of life. He will sort through our prayers, desires, motives and needs and answer us according to His good intentions for us. (Note that in Luke's version of this same passage, he cites Jesus as saying that the Father will give the good gift of “*the Holy Spirit*” to those who ask Him. The enabling power of the Spirit is critical to living out the ideals of the Sermon on the Mount.)

The golden rule: 7:12

“Do unto other what you would have them do unto you.”

A similar saying was found in many cultures before Jesus; but it was always stated in the negative: “*Don't do to others what you*

don't want them to do to you." That's a defensive posture. If you don't want to be kicked, then don't kick. If you don't want to be cheated, then don't cheat.

Jesus turned it into a positive: DO to others was you would have them DO to you. Take the initiative. Be kind (and you will likely get kindness back). Speak affirming words (and that's what people will speak to you). Jesus was saying: Create a culture of good around you by taking the first step in doing good to others. And watch that culture of goodness come back to bless you.

In our culture, the Golden Rule has been replaced by the Rule of Gold! It's all about money, profits, advancement and winning, even at the expense of trampling upon people on the way to our goals. Where could you practice Jesus' version of the Golden Rule this week? First, you will have to determine which of your spheres of influence needs a dose of "goodness." Then, you will need to take the initiative. "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." Try putting people ahead of profits and progress, and see what happens. It only takes one person to shift the culture of an organization. Maybe God will use you to do just that!

True and false teachers: 7:13-23

The world is filled with false prophets who come dressed in sheep's clothing but are really ravenous wolves in disguise. We will know the difference between true and false teachers as we examine the fruit of their lives. Over time, good trees will produce good fruit, while bad trees will produce bad fruit. It is impossible for the opposite to be true. Watch, over time, and you will know them by their fruits. (Of course, Jesus had in mind the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, who controlled the religious system at the time. They were more about taking advantage of people in order to advance their own agendas, rather than truly caring for people. (See Ezekiel 34 where God denounces the false "shepherds" who devour the flock.)

Wise and foolish builders: 7:24-27

The final admonition of the Sermon on the Mount comes by way of a short parable (the first of many such parables in Jesus' public ministry). The wise man not only *hears* Jesus' words, but also *acts on them*. Such a man is building the kind of house that will withstand the storms (tests and trials) of life. The foolish man, on

the other hand, merely *hears* Jesus' words, but fails to *act on them*. While he/she may appear to be quite devoted (to hearing), the weakness of his/her devotion will be shown when the tests of life pound against his/her life. His "house" will collapse, and *great will be its fall!*

At OPC, one of our core marks of a disciple is that he/she "listens to God's Word" (hears and acts upon it). This value is grounded in Jesus' parable concerning the wise and foolish builders. So, our question is: How am I living out God's Word today? How about you? How is God speaking to you, and how are you seeking to apply His Word to your life? Are you building your life wisely???

The reaction to Jesus' teaching: 7:28,29

"When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."

His teaching was different for one simple reason: Jesus did not quote other authorities and attempt to explain their words. He was the authoritative *voice of God*. Jesus spoke as if His words *were the words of God*. They had *never* heard a man speak like this. In John's gospel, we read of some soldiers who were sent by the religious leaders to arrest Jesus. Instead, they were arrested by His words. They returned and said: ***"Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks" (John 7:46).***

Discussion Questions

Read through the Sermon on the Mount, if you haven't done so.

1. What part of the Sermon on the Mount has spoken to you the loudest? Why?
2. Did you know that there were so many "famous sayings" that come from the Sermon on the Mount? Try to find them all. (The sermon will focus on several of these.)
3. The Sermon on the Mount is NOT describing the kind of good deeds that are required for a person to *become* a child of God. (We become children of God through faith/belief in Jesus – John 1:12,13). It IS describing the kind of fruit that comes out of the child of God as he/she is transformed by the Spirit over time. Faith is the root – works are the fruit. Are you clear on this idea?