

KNOW AND FOLLOW

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 7:28–29
Final Message
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Matthew 7:28–29

Beginning two weeks ago, I've read through the Sermon on the Mount multiple times. With each section, I found myself saying, "Yes! Yes, I want to live this way!" Because the kingdom has drawn near, first with the coming of Christ and second with the coming of the Spirit, I *can* live this way. We *can* live this way.

What way?

Well, let's look at the last two verses of the Sermon on the Mount, which will give us a vantage point from which to look back over the entire sermon.

Crowds astonished

Matthew 7:28-29:

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

With the words "these sayings" (literally "these words"), Matthew is referring to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7. The crowds that followed him up the mountain and listened to the sermon are astonished.

Many these days, believers and unbelievers alike, are astonished by what they read in the Sermon on the Mount. Many unbelievers have become believers based on the sermon. Alas, many unbelievers simply admire the words and maybe even try to put some of them into practice but refuse to submit to Jesus.

Today, we are finished with the Sermon on the Mount—at least for now. Oh, we must come back to it of course, but we'll be moving on to our next sermon series. What is our response to "these words"?

Two responses

I know someone who, in the process of walking away from Jesus, quoted the Sermon on the Mount as one of

her reasons for doing so. Jesus said, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). She said, "I'm not that, so I'm out." She responded to the words by distancing herself from them and from Jesus.

Well, "perfect" here, in context, means to love everyone, even enemies. Also, does Jesus expect this necessarily to happen instantly, for people who have just come to know him? Of course not. Literally, Jesus says, "You therefore will be perfect . . ." Of course, if you believe in Jesus and follow him, you will be perfect—complete, whole, all you're supposed to be—when you see him face to face.

On the other hand, consider Mosab Hassan Yousef's response to the Sermon on the Mount. The son of Hassan Yousef, a Hamas leader, he was arrested and jailed by Israel on numerous occasions. Along the way, he came upon these words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . ." (Matthew 5:43-44).

Yousef writes in his autobiography, *Son of Hamas*:

There was too much blood. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I didn't see it just through the eyes of a Muslim or a Palestinian or even as the son of Hassan Yousef anymore. Now I saw it through Israeli eyes too. And even more importantly, I watched the mindless killing through the eyes of Jesus, who agonized for those who were lost. The more I read the Bible, the more clearly I saw this single truth: Loving and forgiving one's enemies is the only real way to stop the bloodshed

I had money, power, and position in my former life, but what I really wanted was freedom. And that meant, among other things, leaving behind hate, prejudice, and a desire for revenge.

The message of Jesus—love your enemies—is what finally set me free. It no longer mattered who my friends were or who my enemies were; I was supposed to love them all. And I could have a loving relationship with a God who would help me love others.

Having that kind of relationship with God is not only the source of my freedom but also the key to my new life.¹

Two responses to the Sermon on the Mount: this is impossible, so I'm out; this is liberating, so I'm in.

Authoritative presence

Literally, the crowds are astonished by Jesus' teaching because "he was teaching them as one who had authority . . ." Something about Jesus' presence, not just his teaching, conveys authority and contributes to their astonishment.

The primary question to ask ourselves in response to the Sermon on the Mount is not what we make of Jesus' teaching but what, in listening to his teaching, we make of Jesus.

As we have noted throughout, both John the Baptist and Jesus, prior to the Sermon on the Mount, proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"—literally, the kingdom of heaven "has drawn near." The kingdom of heaven has drawn near because the king has come—that is, Jesus the Messiah. The king of the kingdom of the heavens has made himself available to all who live on the earth.

As we have poured over the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, he has been here with us through his Holy Spirit. He is here with us even now. Have you sensed him? Can you sense him? Can you sense his authoritative presence?

Authoritative teaching

First, the crowds are astonished by Jesus' authoritative presence. Second, they are astonished by Jesus' authoritative teaching. Matthew doesn't say here why they understood Jesus' teaching as authoritative; his point here is simply to present Jesus as one whose teaching was recognized as authoritative.

Nevertheless, it is possible to understand, simply by reading the words of Jesus in the sermon, why his teaching struck them as authoritative:

—Jesus, even after quoting the Scriptures, says, "But I say to you . . ." (Matthew 5:21-47). He takes the biblical story to the next chapter.

—Jesus predicates entrance into the kingdom of heaven on one's response to him: "Not everyone who says

to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21-23).

—Jesus equates his words with the will of the Father (Matthew 7:21-23).

Listen to the teaching of Jesus. Hear him speak to you. See if his presence and his teaching don't strike you as authoritative. See if his words don't burn in your heart the way they burned in the hearts of the disciples who walked with him on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:32).

Non-authoritative presence and teaching

Jesus' presence and teaching strikes the crowds as different from the presence and the teaching of their scribes, experts in the law of the Hebrew Scriptures and the oral tradition that was loosely based on the law.

Matthew doesn't say here how the scribes came off as different from Jesus. However, later in the Gospel, Jesus accuses the scribes of multiple kinds of hypocrisy (Matthew 23). Certainly, whatever authority one might claim for oneself is undermined by hypocrisy. Jesus said of the scribes, "For they preach, but do not practice" (Matthew 23:3). Whatever one wants to say against Jesus, you can't accuse him of being a hypocrite. You can't accuse him of not practicing what he preaches.

Scribes are everywhere today, passing judgment on this issue and that. They're politicians and pundits and experts in every field imaginable. You see their talking heads and read their blogs hear their tweets.

I listen to one scribe's opinion and say, "That sounds good." A second scribe's opinion contradicts the first scribe and I say, "That sounds good, too." A third scribe says, "God told me this," and I say, "Well, maybe." A fourth scribe speaks and I say, "You're just telling people what they want to hear." A fifth scribe says, "There's really no such thing as truth," and I say, "Enough!"

Sometimes you just want to scream, "Enough of the talking heads and babbling bloggers and tweeting tweeters! Give me Jesus! Give me the Sermon on the Mount!"

We're blessed

Jesus begins the sermon with the beatitudes, which proclaim that even those who are seemingly in a bad

place are in fact in a good place. Nine times Jesus says, “Blessed are . . .” (Not a bad title for a sermon series, eh?)

The beatitudes are not prescriptions for superior ethics. They are not conditions for being blessed. They are not good advice. The beatitudes are good news! They are royal proclamations. Jesus singles out cases of people who are in seemingly bad places to demonstrate that the healing loving rule of God is available to everyone. You’re blessed! The beatitudes set the stage for the rest of the sermon.

In this light, every commandment that Jesus gives us in the sermon can be prefaced with the words, “You’re blessed.” You’re blessed; therefore, live this way. In this light, the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are words of blessing. Every Sunday that we have devoted to the Sermon on the Mount, we’ve been blessed. Jesus blesses us with these words, telling us how to live the good life.

How we’re blessed

In so many words, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount says, “Look how the Father blesses those of you who follow me”:

- Yours is the kingdom of heaven (5:3,10).
- You shall be comforted (5:4).
- You shall inherit the earth (5:5).
- You shall be satisfied (5:6).
- You shall receive mercy (5:7).
- You shall see God (5:8).
- You shall be called sons of God (5:9).
- Your reward in heaven is great (5:10).

Anything more? Yes:

- Your Father who sees in secret will reward you (6:4, 6, 18).
- Your Father knows what you need before you ask him (6:8).
- Everything you need will be added to you (6:33).
- It will be given to you, you will find, it will be opened to you (7:7-8).
- Your Father gives you good things (7:11).

Seek to know Christ

My goodness! What should we do? Jesus tells us: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).

To seek the kingdom of God is to seek the king of the kingdom, who is Christ. If the crowds are astonished by the presence of Christ, we seek to know Christ. To seek the righteousness of God is to seek to follow the teaching of Christ. If the crowds are astonished by the teaching of Christ, we seek to follow his teaching. Seek to know Christ, and seek to follow his teaching.

Jesus offers us not just his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount; he also offers us his himself. The teaching compels us to submit to him. In fact, if we are to incorporate the teaching of the sermon into our lives, we first have to incorporate the teacher of the sermon, who is the king of the kingdom, into our lives. To those who do great things apart from Jesus, even the great things outlined for us in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will say, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matthew 7:23).

Jesus wants first of all for us to know him.

Seek to follow Christ

The king of the kingdom has made himself available to all who live on the earth; he also makes the power of the kingdom available to all who submit to him. Therefore, Jesus makes it possible for us to live in the words of the Sermon on the Mount.

The teaching of Christ has to do not least with how we relate to others. If the Father blesses us in such exorbitant ways, and if we seek to know Christ, then we can relate to others without demanding that they relate to us in a certain way. If the Father knows our needs and meets our needs, not least by giving us his Son and his Spirit, then we don’t need others to meet our needs. We can even, for example, turn the other cheek, love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and forgive others their trespasses. Finally, we can do to others whatever we wish they would do to us.

Zatopek’s shadow

Emil Zatopek was a Czech long-distance runner who won an astounding three gold medals at the 1952 Summer Olympics in Helsinki. Alain Mimoun was

a French runner who often finished second, behind Zatopek. He was known as “Zatopek’s shadow.” Then, in the 1956 Summer Olympics in Melbourne, Mimoun finally emerged from Zatopek’s shadow and won the marathon, ahead of his rival.

After Zatopek crossed the finish line, Mimoun rushed over to him and said, “Emil, congratulate me. Now, I am an Olympic champion. I am no longer your shadow. I am the sun.” Zatopek stood up, took off his little cap, which protected him from the sun, snapped to attention, and saluted his rival. Zatopek embraced Mimoun and said, “I am glad for you my friend.” Mimoun says Zatopek “was as proud as if he had won himself.”

Mimoun, tearing up, says, “To me, this is worth all the gold in the world.” He calls the moment with Zatopek after the race “better than a medal,” adding, “If Zatopek had not existed, even Olympic champion would have meant nothing to me. But with Zatopek, it is the destiny written for me Fantastic!”²

Let’s live that way.

Beautiful

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not establishing standards that must be met; he’s presenting a way of being. A disciple is a learner. We’re seekers: we’re seeking to know Christ and follow Christ. We are learning to know Jesus and to follow his teaching. We will never stop learning. We will never stop seeking. How exciting!

Some say that what Jesus asks of us in the Sermon on the Mount is out of reach. I say, “No way, dude!” How can it be out of reach when the kingdom of heaven has drawn near? Christ is here. The Spirit is here. Learning is never out of reach. Seeking is never out of reach.

Seek to know Christ. Seek to follow the teaching of Christ. What a way to live! Why would you want to live any other way? It’s possible. It’s also beautiful.

Endnotes

- 1 Mosab Hassan Yousef, *Son of Hamas* (Carol Stream, ILL: Tyndale, 2010), 148, 24
- 2 Bud Greenspan, *One Hundred Years of Olympic Glory* (1996).