

Reflection on the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 5:1 to 7:29) is familiar to many Christians. The writer of the Gospel has carefully crafted the teachings of Jesus Christ into this passage. It should be noted that the world has changed since the time the Gospel was written, so there needs to be careful consideration given to the teaching in its 21st century application.

The introduction sets the scene for the teaching. Matthew depicts Jesus going up the mountain like Moses, but the difference is that God (seen through Jesus) is speaking directly to his people to explain the law. The passage is not a transcript of the Sermon, but an exposition by Matthew for the benefit of his readers. This creates some ambiguity, when people contextualise or try to interpret the meaning of the passage.

The passage provides teaching to prepare the Disciples for what lay ahead; some of the difficulties Jesus was preparing them for would have been known to Matthew. Jesus gives his interpretation of how the Disciples ought to apply the Old Testament Law with his own radical ethical teaching. He uses phrases which act as his own signature to the teaching. He says "Truly I say to you", when affirming Old Testament Law; "you have heard that it was said," referring to the Old Testament; and "but I say to you" when applying his own teaching. His teaching affirms the ethical teaching of the Decalogue (The Ten Commandments; Exodus 20:1.17) as well as those set out in Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

The Beatitudes

The first section is the group of verses known as The Beatitudes 5.3-12; they start by highlighting the importance of being meek and humble before God with disciples acknowledging they are poor in spirit. The beatitudes outline the attitude of the true disciple contrasting them with the attitude of the people of the world.

The theme which underlies all the Beatitudes is humility starting with blessed are the poor in spirit. They are God's people who because they are poor in spirit have realised their own utter helplessness without God and have learned to trust and obey. Those who mourn are not necessarily the bereaved; they can also be those who are suffering, particularly those who suffer in the service of God.

Blessed are the meek echoes the same idea as the poor in spirit. This meekness was characterised by Jesus own ministry being stressed by Mathew in his Gospel. In the modern world it is often confused with an idea of spinelessness and subservience, but this is not the case as Jesus illustrated.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, have a desire for social justice and also seek to have a relationship of obedience and trust in God. This is closely link to those who are merciful. This is reflected in the Lord's Prayer which appears later in the passage. In the Lord's Prayer; there is a request for the forgiveness of our transgression, plus a willingness to forgive others for what they have done wrong to us. It is the consistent teaching in the New Testament that only the merciful shall receive mercy.

The Pure in Heart are firstly those who love and serve God, with an undivided loyalty and whose inward nature corresponds with His. The beatitude challenges people to stop and examine their motivation for doing God's work. For example; is the work we do in Church and the World done for Christ or for own prestige? Do we go to Church to get closer to God or is it out of habit and a conventional respectability? Our actions in response to God's love for us should be a genuine heart felt response which does not seek personal reward or public adulation.

In the modern world there is so much suffering caused by wars and conflicts, which has resulted in thousands of people fleeing from their countries to seek refuge in other countries. We need even more those who are willing to work for peace. In many parts of the world, keepers of the peace are rare, a peacemaker still rarer. God is the supreme peacemaker and this quality marks out his disciples.

There are many Christians around the world who are persecuted because of their faith. People often face persecution when standing up to oppressive governments and politicians who have prevented freedom of expression. In other parts of the world, people have the blessing of liberty because of the sacrifices of their forbears who stood up for human rights. The Sermon says that those who are persecuted in the service of God will receive great reward in heaven.

What is required of a disciple?

Jesus says disciples ought to be like the salt of the earth and light in the world, so they have to be visibly while preserving the ways of the Kingdom. This will make them distinctive to other people. Salt is a preservative as well as a flavouring. Christians are by preserving the work of the Kingdom, bringing a different flavour to life. Light enables people to see in the dark. Christians through their work and witness should bring light and hope into the lives of others. They are to uphold the law as set out in the Old Testament with the help of Jesus' additional teaching.

The Sermon sets out a number of principles to enable disciples to understand how they ought to behave towards other people these being based on the Old Testament commandments.

You should not kill. The murder of anyone is strictly forbidden but Jesus goes further to say that anger and hatred which often lead to murder are also forbidden. While the human courts have the responsibility for judging and punishing criminal acts, ultimately everyone will be judged by God. Even if we have not committed a criminal act, God knows our thoughts and the motivation behind all our actions.

Do not commit adultery like you shall not kill was modified by Jesus. He includes lust, the desire of an illicit relationship. Jesus' intention appears to condemn the deliberate harbouring of desire for forbidden relationships. At the time of Jesus family life was collapsing due to a moral decline. His teaching on divorce does accept that divorce could be acceptable when there had been unfaithfulness, but that people should not divorce for any other reason. In my view his teaching sought to protect women who had very few rights at the time of Jesus and he would probably in today's world, acknowledge a person cannot remain in a marriage if they are being abused.

The law on Oaths reflects the Old Testament while the swearing oaths and making vows were not simply permitted, in certain circumstances commended. When people take an oath or make a vow it is important that they should honour them. This is particularly true when people marry. The previous teaching on adultery reminds us that not everyone keeps the marriage vows and this often leads to unhappiness and suffering. In a court of law when a person takes an oath to tell the truth they should do precisely that. However if a person is forced to swear an oath for example to a criminal gang then they have the moral right to break it as they were forced to make take the oath or if they do not want to be part of the gang's criminal activity. When people agree to a business contract or agree to do something for something they should keep their word and honour their agreement.

Jesus' teaching makes a radical change to the principle of proportionate retribution which was older than the Old Testament and widely recognised. The examples eye for eye, and tooth for tooth, etc, had led to blood-feuds and cycles of retaliation, by teaching that the wrong doing should be dealt with by legal punishment which must not exceed the crime, Jesus sought to bring an end to the blood feuds which did and still do cause a great deal of suffering to innocent people. However Jesus went

further by saying “Do not resist” this is wider than do not retaliate, it involves acceptance of ill-treatment. This was clearly teaching for the Disciples who faced persecution which they faced with non-violent resistance.

Love is at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. He reminded people of the commandment to love your neighbour, he also says that you should not hate your enemy, but show them an indiscriminating love. It was a radical teaching by Jesus. His emphasis on this indiscriminating love sets his disciple apart from others. Jesus observes that even the tax collector loves his friends and family, but God’s love is for all people. In a world where there is war and conflict showing love to our enemies instead of taking up arms would create a world of peace not one of war.

Religious observance

Jesus was critical of those who put on a great public show of their religious observance; he presented a new attitude to the way a person demonstrated their faith. Jesus expected his disciples to give alms without calling attention to themselves. The first century help to the poor came through almsgiving which was well organised. He did not want his disciple to be like some people in the religious life of the time who made a great show of their giving to gain a reputation for piety. Jesus expected his disciple to give generously but not conspicuously.

Prayer is at the centre of religious observance. Jesus made the same point with prayer as he did with almsgiving, that these should be sincere and not just for public exhibition. The passage contains the Lord’s Prayer which is still used in most church services. It provides an important framework for our prayers and also reflects the teaching within the Sermon on forgiveness, avoidance of temptation and an acknowledgement of our dependence on God for our daily needs.

The passage also provides advance on fasting, which should not be a public act, but a private devotions which is design to bring us closer to God.

Christian life

The Sermon on the Mount provides teaching on a disciple’s attitudes to material possessions and services. In the modern world where there is a great deal of emphasis on materialism the teaching reminds people that there is a conflict between material possessions and loyalty to God. The real treasure is stored in heaven for those obedient to God in all areas of life. The treasure on earth gives no permanent security or satisfaction and can be destroyed by moths and other vermin. Jesus calls for and undivided loyalty to God. Disciples have to be like a lamp reflecting God’s light into the world in all they do. No one can serve two masters. You may work for two different employers to earn an income but they do not own you. You can only serve one person in your spiritual life that is God. Jesus tells his disciple not to be anxious over food, drink and clothing for they are less important than the life and the body, for we should put our trust in God to provide for our true needs. Jesus tells his disciple that they are to trust in God, because he knows all our needs.

Jesus reminded us that people are often blind to their own faults, being quick to criticise others yet unwilling to acknowledge their own failings. Too often people find it difficult to accept that there are two sides in a dispute and frequently both sides are at fault. Having being taught that we should be willing to forgive others, as well as asking others to forgive us for the things we may have do. In a conflict both sides need to be willing to accept that the problems are not caused by one or the other but often both. Only when all parties accept their faults can peace develop in to mutual understanding and cooperation.

Our attitude to one another is very much dependant on our attitude to God. We need to be willing to humble ourselves before God and be confident to ask for his help and guidance. The passage tells us to be bold and confident in our prayers; ask, search, knock, and praying confidently knowing that

God will respond. People should treat others as they would wish to be treated; this is an important piece of guidance as we wish to work in harmony with our fellow human beings.

The path to becoming a true disciple is a difficult one. The Sermon tells people that the road to destruction is wide, but the gateway to God's kingdom is narrow and there is not much room for mistakes. People are warning to be careful and look out for false teachers who give the impression they are true disciple but their motives are selfish and superficial.

Jesus concludes his address by contrasting the differences between earthly and heavenly rewards. He is concerned with the Disciple's attitude to wealth and loyalty; material affluence will breed materialism which is contradictory to the ways of the true disciple.

The passage conclude with the observance that the crowds who were a secondary audience to Jesus' teaching to his disciples were astonished not so much at the content of his teaching but his authority.

End

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