

The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 7:24-29

Jesus concludes His great Sermon with an illustration that is likely familiar to anyone who grew up in church/Sunday School. As familiar as we might be with the illustration itself, if we're not careful we can miss the fact that it's not a stand-alone story but the fine point to hammer home the Sermon.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise person who built their house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does NOT put them into practice is like a foolish person who built their house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Matthew 7:24-27, emphasis added)

As illustrations go, it's pretty simple and straightforward. But as our friend James Bryan Smith says, *“Jesus is not giving a lecture on good home-building practices. He is ending his sermon with a very striking illustration about being or not being His apprentice. Jesus is saying, ‘There are two ways to live—either as My disciple or not. Being My disciple will mean developing an ongoing, daily relationship with Me. Those who follow the principles of the Kingdom will be strong and invulnerable.’”*

As was emphasized last week, please take note of what Jesus is saying about Himself, the position He is putting Himself in (and please keep in mind the previous passage we looked at last week, *“People will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord’...”*). Essentially, Jesus is saying, *“The difference between wisdom and foolishness is whether you follow My teaching or not.”* That's a bold statement.

As we've been saying throughout this series, Jesus is the key to the Good Life, and following Him is how we become a Good Person. Additionally, Jesus EXPECTS His followers to DO AS HE SAID. Sadly, we moderns have watered down what it means to be a “Christian” to very selectively obeying Jesus...you know, if we want to...if it feels right. This, my friends, according to Jesus is foolishness.

Jesus wasn't inviting people to join a club, or some new religion, but into a way of life centered on Him and His teaching. He was inviting people to be His disciples. That's an “all in” kind of thing...not something we just dabble in. If you'd like to know a bit more about the rabbi/disciple relationship, here's a link to a video that explains it well. (I believe I've shared this at some point in an earlier series...but it's good and relevant to our understanding here.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkOZEt-KwZw>

Jesus says to His disciples, then and now, “Follow Me.” This is an invitation to a complete reordering of life around a rabbi, with the goal of becoming like our rabbi. As has been shared before: BE with Jesus; BECOME like Jesus; DO as Jesus did.

Now, there are a couple of popular misconceptions regarding the Sermon on the Mount I'd like to address, and hopefully correct. The first is that the instructions and standards Jesus lays out in the Sermon are too high, too lofty, simply impossible and thereby the Sermon is really just meant to show us how much we need the grace and mercy Jesus offers. While I would never want to minimize our need for grace and mercy, that's NOT what Jesus is doing with the Sermon. Again, notice how Jesus ends the Sermon...He EXPECTS His disciples to put His words into practice! That's the whole reason why He's giving the teaching.

This common misconception, that it's just too unrealistic and wasn't meant to actually be heeded, is a particularly Protestant error. Our Catholic and Orthodox brothers and sisters don't fall for this as much. The Protestant Reformation made such a big deal about Grace over Works that Protestants tend to run away from anything that sounds too "works-y". But as Dallas Willard is known for saying, "*Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.*" (Did you really think I wouldn't quote Dallas Willard one last time in our final lesson? Actually, I'll likely quote him some more below 😊)

When Jesus says do something, we do it. We don't respond with, "*Sorry Jesus, that would be 'works' and I'm all about grace.*" Obedience is NOT the same as Works. Obedience is expected. Grace is experienced both in the impulse to obey and the empowerment through the Spirit to obey.

The second misconception is to think that the Sermon on the Mount was only for the original 12 disciples/apostles, and that it wasn't meant for future generations of Christians. (Insert face palm.) This misunderstanding is nonsensical, but thankfully easily corrected when we take into account what Jesus says at the end of Matthew's Gospel (the same Gospel the Sermon on the Mount is found in)...

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20, emphasis added)

The Sermon can't be only for the original disciples/apostles, because Jesus intends them to teach future disciples what He commanded them...so the loophole (if you can call it that) is closed.

What both of these misconceptions have in common is that they are both attempts to weasel out of the high demands of the Sermon, the lofty expectations Jesus places upon His followers. But we must remember what Jesus is up to. He's developing a new way of being human. Well, perhaps not so much "new" but a return to God's original intent for humans. This requires a wholesale transformation. Jesus will help us, but we need to cooperate with Him, trust Him, and lean into what He tells us to do.

The emphasis I really want to impress upon us as we wrap up our series on the Sermon on the Mount, or perhaps the question I have for us to consider upon reflection of this Sermon is: Do

you want what Jesus is offering? Do you think it's possible and are you willing to do whatever it takes to get it?

Later in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says, *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."* (Matthew 13:44-46) The obvious question is, do we view and value the Kingdom in a similar manner? Is the Kingdom worth more to us than anything else? Again, do we really want the life Jesus is offering us? Do we really believe it's the best life we could have?

Friends, the life Jesus is offering is one that takes intentional effort and practice to living into. Practice is an important word here. Jesus emphasizes this at the beginning and end of the Sermon. *"...but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 5:19, emphasis added) and *"But everyone who hears these words of Mine and puts them into practice..."* (Matthew 7:24) This implies a long, regular, consistent, habitual pattern of doing that forms us over time. Or, in other words, it's a process of BECOMING. Eugene Peterson calls it, "A long obedience in the same direction."

John Mark Comer has this to say...

"Christlikeness is possible, but it's not natural.

In fact, the gravity and inertia of life will likely take you in the opposite direction. 'Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it,' as Jesus said.

Put another way, there are no accidental saints.

Nobody wakes up one morning around age fifty and thinks, 'Wow, would you look at that? I became a saint. Weird.' Or, 'Hmm, it seems I've been living the Sermon on the Mount. I'm increasingly free of all worry, care, judgmentalism, lust, and anger; money no longer has a hold on my heart; I'm no longer run by fear and the need to look good to other people; I feel free; I've been pervaded by love, even love for my enemies. What a nice coincidence.'

As great as this sounds, it isn't going to just magically happen."

The process of being formed into Christlikeness is a long, slow, intentional process. It's learning to continually surrender ourselves to Jesus, continually putting His will above our own, and allowing His transforming grace to change us to BECOME more and more like Him.

But, again, the question must be asked: Do you want this? Do you trust that it's possible, it's good, it's the best possible thing for you?

It is interesting and important to note the reaction that the original hearers of this Sermon had. Matthew comments, *"...the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."* (Matthew 7:28-29, emphasis added) Throughout Matthew's Gospel we see a juxtaposition between Jesus and the religious leaders. "Authority" (as in who has it and who doesn't) is something Matthew consistently highlights. Recall that the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel begins with, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me..."* (Matthew 28:28, emphasis added)

Allow me to wrap up our series with some thoughts from (no surprise) Dallas Willard...

“...one of the things that has most obstructed the path of discipleship in our Christian culture today is this idea that it will be a terribly difficult thing that will certainly ruin your life...as long as one thinks anything may really be more valuable than fellowship with Jesus in His kingdom, one cannot learn from Him.

Non-discipleship is the elephant in the church. It is not the much discussed moral failures, financial abuses, or the amazing general similarity between Christians and non-Christians. These are only effects of the underlying problem. The fundamental negative reality among Christian believers now is their failure to be constantly learning how to live their lives in The Kingdom Among Us...The division of professing Christians into those for whom it is a matter of whole-life devotion to God and those who maintain a consumer, or client, relationship to the church has now been an accepted reality for fifteen hundred years...It is now understood to be a part of the ‘good news’ that one does not have to be a life student of Jesus in order to be a Christian and receive forgiveness of sins. This gives a precise meaning to the phrase ‘cheap grace,’ though it would be better described as ‘costly unfaithfulness.’”

It is our hope that as we’ve journeyed through the Sermon on the Mount you have found the vision of life with Jesus, life in the Kingdom, to be clarifying, compelling, and ravishing. Or, at the very least, your curiosity about what Jesus offers has piqued your interest and has you intrigued. Though our study of the Sermon has come to an end, our living the Sermon, together, continues...

Possible Discussion Questions

- As we’ve spent the past 3 months in the Sermon on the Mount, how would you describe your general/overall posture towards Jesus’ message?
- Over the course of our time in the Sermon on the Mount, what have you felt invited toward, and what have you noticed yourself resisting?
- Do you think of yourself, or would you describe yourself, as an apprentice of Jesus—someone who is spending time with Jesus, in order to become like Jesus, in order to do as Jesus did? Explain/describe?
- What (or who) would you describe as the orienting center of your life?
- After spending the summer in the Sermon on the Mount, what lingering questions do you have (either old, longstanding questions, or new questions that the Sermon unearthed)?
- How have your thoughts and feelings about Jesus changed, or been affected by, our study of the Sermon on the Mount?

- Jesus makes following Him, or not following Him, a rather pivotal, crucial, vital issue. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
- As you consider the process of BE with Jesus; BECOME like Jesus; DO as Jesus did, what thoughts and feelings do you experience? Does that attract you or do you notice resistance or hesitation? Elaborate.
- What misconceptions do you think people have about Jesus and/or this Sermon?
- How are you more like Jesus today than you were a year ago...5 years ago...10 years ago? What have been the contributing factors of that change?
- In your experience of being part of a church, how has the expectation that people are to become more like Jesus been emphasized (or not)? In what ways have people been taught HOW to become more like Jesus?
- For you, what is the best/greatest thing about following Jesus? What's the most challenging thing about following Jesus?
- Who has authority in your life? What does that look like? How do you generally feel about people in authority over you?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Asking Questions to Jesus

If you could sit face-to-face with Jesus, what would you ask Him? Well, here's the beautiful thing, you can! Well, OK, it's not "face-to-face" in a physical sense. But, He is real, and present, and hears, and cares...so, ask away...about anything (about Him, about life, about yourself...seriously anything...whatever is on your heart and mind).

Now, to set expectations properly, you may not get an immediate or verbal/audible answer. And, honestly, this exercise is less about getting answers and more about learning to sit with Jesus, to get comfortable being with Him, to learn to seek Him first, to learn to enjoy being with Him.

Practically, find a time and place where you can be alone (solitude), settle in (stillness), and just be quiet and breathe (silence). Don't be in a rush (slowness). Ask your questions as they come to you (perhaps write them in a journal).

Again, you may not arrive at any answers, and that's OK. The bigger point/goal is the ordering of our life with Jesus and around Jesus...and making times like this with Jesus a regular pattern is an important step in our discipleship process (BE With Jesus).