

Going Deeper: Blessed Are You
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
January 3, 2021-Morning Worship
Reverend Peter Jonker
Matthew 4:23-5:12

During the season after Epiphany, it is our custom to spend time in the gospels. After celebrating Jesus' birth at Christmas, we spend the next couple of months listening to his teaching and watching him as he works. This year is no different. This year we'll spend the next 7 weeks studying the sermon on the mount. We will join the crowd on the mountainside and we will listen to that famous sermon found in Matthew 5-7. Let's begin this morning by picturing the context of the sermon and listening to the introduction.

So there we are in Galilee with the crowds around Jesus. Jesus has just spent the morning healing people by the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and now he's done healing and he's climbing up one of the surrounding hills. Some of the crowd walks away. Some of the crowd was more into the miracles than the message. They head home. But some of the crowd wants more, so they climb up the side of the hill with Jesus and we join them. About three quarters of the way up Jesus stops and takes a seat on flat, rocky outcropping. He motions for us to sit down and we settle ourselves on the green grass. The disciples are closest to him. The rest of us a little further away. Below us the Sea of Galilee sparkles in the afternoon sun. The day is temperate and beautiful and Jesus begins to speak.

In the sermon that we are privileged to hear, Jesus will share some of the most famous and most formative of all his teachings. These words will shape the minds and hearts of countless generations. Sayings from this sermon will enter into common currency. They will become part of our lingo. They will be so much a part of our culture that people will quote Jesus' mountainside words without even knowing that they come from Jesus. Salt of the earth. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Store up your treasure in heaven. Wolf in sheep's clothing. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. In our culture, these phrases have entered our language; they have entered into our imagination, they are woven into the fabric of our lives. In the English translation, the Sermon on the Mount has 2497 words. Based on the word counts of my own sermons, that's about 25 minutes worth of material. I think I can safely say this sermon is the most impactful 25-minute discourse in human history. This Epiphany we will let these 2497 words impact us. And what will the impact be, I wonder? How will these words shape us?

Well, if we are like most readers of the sermon, perhaps these words will intimidate us. Jesus says some really strong things in this sermon. Jesus holds up an incredibly high standard for his followers. Jesus says things that make regular people sit up and say "Wait. Are you serious?! You want us to do that?!"

Some examples from this sermon: 'If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away! If your right hand causes you to sin, cut that off and throw it away.' Really Lord. Do you mean this? Because I'm pretty sure we would all be blind and handless.

'Don't resist an evil person! If someone steals your shirt, give him your cloak as well!' Really Lord. If someone steals my car out of my driveway, I should drive my truck over to his house and hand him the keys?

'Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees...you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven!!' But Jesus, the Pharisees are crazy rule followers. They are uber-observant.

You want me to surpass them!? I don't think I can. Besides, I thought we were saved by grace, not works?!

And last, but definitely not least, in this sermon Jesus will offer his standard of behavior: "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect!" Lord, I'm waving the white flag here. Because you and I both know, I cannot meet this standard. As we sit there on the mountainside listening to this sermon, Jesus is going to say some things that will make us turn to our neighbor and say, "Wait, What?! Is he serious about that?"

So before we get to that point, this sermon will offer a general word on Jesus' purposes in the sermon on the mount. Before we look at the individual trees of the sermon, we will look at the forest. Let me start by saying, although Jesus will give us many instructions in the sermon and even though he will tell us what to do and what not to do, don't think of the sermon on the mount as a set of rules. It is not a new set of laws for us to follow. Nothing wrong with rules, of course. The Bible is full of great rules. We read ten of them this morning, the ten commandments. Rules are important. We need to know God's rules and laws. But when it comes to the sermon on the mount, you'll get closer to Jesus' intention if you treat these words less as a set of rules, and more as a description of the heart.

Let me explain. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great British preacher of the 60's, has written an entire book on the sermon on the mount. Here's his approach to Jesus' more severe sayings. He notes that people who dismiss the Sermon on the Mount as foolishness sometimes say things like this. "If anyone sues for your coat offer him your cloak as well...that's ridiculous. If I actually did that I would soon find myself without a wardrobe. If every time a man stole my bike and I offered him my car as well, soon everyone would be stealing from me and I would have no stuff left!" People make these observations and they dismiss the sermon as silliness. "That is the kind of approach that must not be made," says Jones, "what is indicated is that I should be in such a Spirit that under certain circumstances I must do just that ...this is not a mechanical rule to be applied...it is a particular illustration of a general principle or attitude." Jesus is not making mechanical rules, he's using examples and illustrations which show the passions and instincts of a person who has a Kingdom heart. Let me say that again. The Sermon on the Mount is not a legal code or a set of mechanical rules. If you treat it that way, you're missing the point. Jesus' sermon is a picture of the passions and the instincts and the loves in the heart of a person who belongs to Jesus. They are a picture of the passions, instincts and love that Jesus is growing in our hearts.

If we treat this as a legal code, you know what we humans will do with the sermon on the mount? We'll hear Jesus say, 'if someone steals your shirt, give him your cloak as well,' and we'll say, "Well, that guy didn't steal my shirt, he stole my pants, so lock him up and throw away the key!" If we treat the Sermon on the Mount as a legal code, we will hear Jesus say, 'If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn to him the other also, and we'll say, "well he didn't strike me on the cheek, it was a punch in the nose, so I'm coming back with a baseball bat." The Sermon on the Mount is not a legal code, it is a picture of the impulses that stir in the center of a sanctified heart. In moments of stress and crisis, Jesus is pushing us to become people who respond with radical acts of generosity, forgiveness, compassion and righteousness.

If you pay close attention to the sermon, you will see that Jesus is constantly pushing his followers to go deeper, to go beyond rules and laws and down to the heart. 'You've heard it said do not commit adultery but if you even look at another person lustfully, you've committed adultery in your heart.' This isn't just about following rules, it's about your heart. 'You've heard it said do not murder, but I tell you if you call your brother or sister a fool, you are in danger of

the fires of hell.' It's not just about following the rules, it's about the inclinations of your heart! If it's just rules, it all stays on the surface. If it's just rules, we play these legal games. Jesus isn't just giving rules; he's showing us the shape of a Kingdom heart.

That's where the title of the sermon series comes from. We called the sermon series 'going deeper' because we know that throughout this series, Jesus will be pushing us beneath the surface of things. Throughout this series Jesus will push us to examine our hearts and sometimes he will push hard, all the way down to our heart.

That deeper, heart emphasis is clear in the beginning of the sermon. The very first words out of Jesus mouth address our depths. Blessed are those who are poor in Spirit. He's speaking to spirit, to heart, to soul. And that continues throughout the beatitudes. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are those who mourn. All these are conditions of the heart. So all the beatitudes point to the kind of sermon this will be. All of the beatitudes signal that Jesus will be speaking to and challenging our hearts.

But he doesn't start with challenge. Before Jesus starts speaking, let's look around at the people who have come up the mountain with us. It's a motely bunch. Remember Jesus spent the morning healing people. Matthew says Jesus helped those who were in severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, the paralyzed-it was a crowd full of broken people who'd been with Jesus at the seashore. And those are the people who sit down to hear the sermon. This congregation didn't sprint up the hill with long strides, they limped, they shuffled, they huffed and puffed. These are people for whom life is a struggle, people who are trying to do life and finding it really, really hard.

When Jesus looks out over the crowd of people, when he gets up on that rock and looks over the crowd of upturned faces, what does he see? A mess. A group of people with battered bodies and tangled hearts. A group of people who want to be whole in body and soul but who know that they haven't figured it out, and as they lift their faces, Jesus can see that they are also lifting their hearts. So when he sees their mess, he doesn't start by telling them the rules, laying down the law or telling them they need to work harder on being perfect, instead he says, 'Blessed are you. Blessed are you mourners. Blessed are you tired and poor in heart. Blessed are you meek and downtrodden. Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are you who are trying to be merciful and you who are trying to keep peace. Blessed are you doing the right thing but find yourselves harassed. Blessed are you. I love you. Yours is the kingdom of heaven, you shall be filled, you will be shown mercy, you will see God!' Yes, Jesus will later challenge these people with strong words. Yes, Jesus will hold us all to the highest of high standards. Yes, Jesus will speak words that push us in the deepest places. But he starts with grace upon grace upon grace. And if that's what Jesus' reaction was to the needy faces he sees on the mountain, what do you think Jesus does when he sees you with your upturned face? As you sit in this sanctuary or as you sit at home lifting up your tired head and your tangled heart? He says blessed are you! Blessed are you and blessed are you and blessed are you! Grace, mercy and peace to all of you. Yours is the kingdom of heaven. You shall be shown mercy. You shall see God. That's what's so great about The Sermon on the Mount. It calls for radical obedience, but it also offers radical grace. But the grace comes first and the grace is stronger.

Actually, the grace isn't just first, it's also at the end. Notice it's not just where he starts with us, it's also where he promises to end. Before he hits them with the challenging words about transforming their heart, Jesus not only blesses them, he promises that he will finish his work with them. 'Yours is the kingdom of heaven. You shall be shown mercy. You shall see God. Yes, the I am calling you down a narrow path, yes, I will challenge you down to the deepest parts of

your hearts, but I will go in front of you, I will lead the way, I will lay down my life for you if that's what it takes, and you will make it.' So before we begin this 7-week journey with Jesus, lift up your tired head and lift up your tangled heart, and hear him say to you: Blessed are you.

© Rev. Peter Jonker