

The Sermon on the Mount

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[0 : 00] both of you, and musicians, stewards, and everyone who's Daniel at the back and so on. Now before I begin, I have to make a very grovelling apology, because, as most of you know, I was supposed to be here on Wednesday night to open up the church, and I didn't, I wasn't even here. Now, no excuses, kind of, but the thing was, I was due to speak at the church in Kelsa this morning, which I did, and here tonight, and also in the care home on Wednesday, and then at the start of the week, I got this text from John Lowry. His daughter was meant to be having, giving birth in a couple of weeks' time, but it was going to be this week instead.

She was getting induced, and he was desperate to get her flat finished, laying laminate flooring in the living room and the hall. So he asked for help. I went out on Tuesday night, and we started, Tuesday evening, started and worked till 10 o'clock. Then on Wednesday, I was out after I was at the care home with Paul, and I did say to Paul, I probably won't make it on Wednesday night, but for some strange reason, I completely forgot I was supposed to open up, and I could have said to him then, could you please open up the church? But I didn't. But thankfully, Karen eventually turned up and let you all in, so I'm sorry for your cold.

Now, I know I deserve this. But I hope that you will do what the Lord says and forgive me. Okay. We're going to pray before we begin. Heavenly Father, we do confess that we must drive you mad sometimes because we make all these mistakes. We do things that we shouldn't do. But Lord, we know that you're a loving Father. You forgive and you forget. And Lord, we're just so thankful that we belong to you. And so tonight, as we come and consider the Word of God, we pray that the Holy Spirit will move amongst us. We pray that Jesus will speak through his own Word to our hearts, that for some there will be a challenge, for some there will be comfort, for some there will be just an encouragement. But we do pray, Lord, you speak to each one of us in your own way. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

It's been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. This is undoubtedly true in many cases. A photograph or portrait of someone that we've never met certainly conveys to us what that person looks like better than any verbal or written description ever could. Likewise, an architect's plan lets us see what a house will look like better than a written description of its size and layout. But pictures have their limitations too. And sometimes words are better. Imagine having to produce a shopping list in Egyptian hieroglyphics. Words are just so much quicker and easier to write.

[3 : 36] Like the shopping list, words can be simple and practical, but they can also be immensely powerful. Words have the capacity to convey an image in a way that nothing else can. Julius Caesar, for instance, summed up his swift and decisive victory over the king of Pontus at the Battle of Zila with just three Latin words.

Veni, vidi, vici. I came, I saw, I conquered. Brilliant, isn't it? Words can move strong men to tears or cut like a knife.

Lift us up or dash us to the ground. Inspire or demoralize us. Be a force for good or a spur to evil. It was the words of Adolf Hitler.

Poured forth in arrogance and pride that inspired an entire nation to war and to the commission of unspeakable acts of evil. On the other hand, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address eventually helped to heal a nation ravaged by civil war.

Whilst that American civil war still raised on, Lincoln attended the dedication ceremony of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg. After the main address, an eloquent two-hour speech by Edward Everett, the best-known orator of the time, President Lincoln gave a short speech, a mere 272 words long.

[5 : 11] Everett's speech is largely forgotten, but Lincoln's has gone down in history as one of the greatest speeches of all times. His speech begins, Four score and seven years ago, our fathers

brought forth on this continent a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war.

We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who gave their lives that that nation might live. And he talks on for a few more words.

And then he finishes off. We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

A very familiar phrase there. If only our present government shared such high ideals and chose to govern for the benefit of its people.

[6 : 39] But sadly instead, the removal of the winter fuel payment to all but the poorest pensioners and the decision to impose inheritance tax on our hard-working farmers is causing great distress and not a little anger.

Not to mention the Prime Minister's decision to release criminals early from prison to make room for grannies who published intemperate opinions on Facebook.

Well, that's my political rant for the night. However, as Christmas approaches and we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we can take hope and comfort from the words found in the Magnificat.

Words that the Virgin Mary, pregnant with the Son of God, offered in praise to God. That will be read out along with other Bible passages relating to the nativity in churches up and down the land at this season of the year.

My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

[7 : 40] From now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is his name. And then he continues. She continues.

His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. And this is for you, Dorothy.

Yet of all the speeches of all the great men or women over all the centuries, it is universally accepted that the greatest speech ever uttered is the one that Jesus of Nazareth, Mary's son, gave on a hill in Galilee 2,000 years ago that Matthew records in chapter 5 through 7 of his gospel, and which has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount.

I chose a deliberate short reading because this is how Matthew introduces us to the Sermon on the Mount. And that's what I'd like to talk about tonight.

[9 : 10] It could be said that the Sermon on the Mount is the manifesto of the kingdom of God that Christ came to proclaim. In it, Jesus discourses, amongst other things, on moral conduct, religious observances, true priorities, faith, divorce, and judging others.

He speaks of the blessedness of right living and warns against false prophets, false hope, and concludes by telling his hearers that whoever obeys his commands is like a man who built his house upon the rock.

For the one who disobeys them is like a man who built his house upon sand. For when the storm comes, and he definitely will, only one will remain standing.

It's a very familiar passage of scripture, but one that we should read often. So although I cannot do justice to it in such a short time, nor will we be able to cover every aspect of it, nevertheless, I thought it would be good at least to remind ourselves of some of Jesus' teachings found in it.

Although there is much encouragement in it, the Sermon on the Mount is often not an easy read.

Those who think that the character of Christ can be summed up in the words of the children's hymn that portrays him as gentle Jesus, meek and mild, have never read the Sermon on the Mount.

[10 : 42] For there is much in it that challenges us to the very core of our being. For instance, speaking to his disciples, who were very much aware of the demands placed on them by the law of Moses, Jesus affirms, do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.

Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

But not content with affirming the demands of the law, he actually raises the bar for all who will follow him, saying, for example, you have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. You have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

[12:07] But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. You have heard that it was said, eye for eye and tooth for tooth.

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. Some time ago I was thinking about this business of turning the other cheek and wondering why this advice.

Then I realized that a situation is less likely to escalate if one party refuses to retaliate. Try arguing with someone who doesn't answer back.

Jesus says all these things to his disciples because he wants them to be an example to the world. In fact, he calls them to be salt of the earth and light of the world.

You are the salt of the earth, he says. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

[13:18] You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand.

And it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

About charitable giving, he says, be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do this, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets. That's such a great turn of phrase, isn't it? Do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the street to be honoured by others.

Truly, I tell you, they have received the reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.

[14:22] Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. I remember as a young Christian thinking of these words as I walked down the corridor of the old Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh to visit someone in hospital.

For there lining the walls were large black painted boards framed in gold and bearing in large white copperplate script the names of donors and the amounts that he had contributed towards the cost of constructing the then new Victorian hospital in 1879.

James Matthews, five pounds, two shillings and sixpence. Mary Thompson, two pound ten shillings. David Smith, nine shillings and thruppence.

And so on. Not quite secret, is it? Concerning religious observance, Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of those who make a show of their religion to impress others and shows us what true religion looks like.

He says, Notice that Jesus says, When you pray, he takes it for granted that his followers, and that includes us, are in the habit of praying.

[16:06] And he gives us an example of how to pray. This then, he says, is how you should pray. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

But he gives us this warning, and we need to take him seriously when he says this. For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Concerning material possessions, he says, Do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourself treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

Someone has said, You can't take it with you, but you can send it on ahead. I'm always saddened when I read that some movie star or rich banker has died, and has left behind millions in the bank

that could have been used to do so much good.

[17 : 30] And suppose that person leaves it all to charity, I don't believe that it counts with God. Because he knows that you know that you can't take it with you anyway. Only what is given in life counts.

In Dickens' Christmas Carol, and I'm a big fan of that book, that little book, the ghost of Jacob Marley appears to Ebenezer Scrooge to warn him of the path he is on.

Once Scrooge gets over the shock of seeing the spectre, he inquires of him why a great heavy chain is fastened to him, to which Marley replies, I wear the chain I forged in life.

I made it link by link and yard by yard. I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. He admits regretfully, My spirit never walked beyond our counting house.

And when Scrooge protests, But you were always a good man of business, Jacob, wringing his hands he cries, Business? Mankind was my business.

[18 : 37] The common welfare was my business. Charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.

Sometimes when I share the gospel with someone and say that as a sinner, we are in need of a saviour, the reply comes back. But I don't do anyone any harm. As if to say, If there is a God, that should be enough to get me into heaven.

But we need to understand what Jesus means when in the Sermon of the Mount he says, Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

This saying is commonly called the golden rule, and it is not exclusive to the Christian faith, but appears in other religions too. 500 years before Christ, Confucius said, Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.

There is, however, a subtle but very important difference between the way that Jesus and Confucius express the golden rule. Confucius expresses it in the negative form, Do not do unto others, etc.

[19 : 55] Well, Jesus expresses it in its positive form, Do unto others. So let me explain why this matters. In chapter 25 of Matthew, Jesus tells us that when he comes again, he will judge the nations, saying to some, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me in, naked, and you clothed me.

But to others he will say, Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire, prepare for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat.

I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger, and you did not invite me in. I was naked, and you did not clothe me. You see, no one will be condemned for not doing any harm.

They will be condemned for not doing any good. Not for nothing does Jesus say, Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide, and the way is easy, that leads to destruction.

[21 : 15] And those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard, that leads to life. And those who find it are few. The easy way is certainly attractive, but it leads to destruction.

I did say, that the Sermon on the Mount is not an easy read. And you may find that out.

But there is much comfort to be had from it too. Notably so, are Jesus' words with which he begins the Sermon on the Mount, and which I have deliberately left to last.

Known as the Beatitudes, it's not an exaggeration to say, that they are quite simply sublime.

Incidentally, I highly recommend to you to look at William Barclay's very in-depth, informative commentary on the Beatitudes.

It's easily accessible online. William Barclay being the Church of Scotland theologian who died in the late 70s. But he's a very, very good commentator.

[22 : 22] There is a saying, it's an ill-divided world. And it's true. All too often, we see bad people prospering and good people suffering.

But there is a day of reckoning coming when God will redress the balance, when the wicked will receive their just desserts. And as Jesus promised on another occasion, the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father.

Until that day, take heart from these words of the Beatitudes with which we will finish. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

[23 : 35] Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Amen. And our final hymn, which I forgot again. There is a higher throne. So let's rise and sing. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. zoom in through the Chair Jones playing stages There is the higher throne that all this world has known for faithful ones from every time Will one become Before the throne we stand Made faultless through the Lamb Believing hearts by promise grace Salvation comes Hear heaven's voices sing Let hundreds and the rings

Through emerald doors and sand for skies Their praises rise Of glory, strength, thanks and honor To God our King Who reigns alive forevermore There we'll find our home Our light before the throne We'll honor Him and praise His song Where we belong He'll wipe each tears tonight As thirst and hunger die The Lamb becomes our shepherd King We'll reign with fear

[26 : 21] Hear heaven's voices sing Hear heaven's voices sing Their thunderous anthem rings Through emerald doors and sand for skies Their praise That praises rise Of glory, wisdom, and fire Strength, thanks and honor To God our King Who reigns alive forevermore Heavenly Father We scarce can believe when we sing these words That one day we will stand perfect before you Made perfect through the blood of the Lamb And yet Lord we believe that with all our hearts You have shown us through your word and by your spirit That that's going to happen to us And Lord we just pray that

As we live our lives down here You will help us to live As Christ taught us in the Beatitudes And that we Our lights will shine To those round about Not for our glory But for your glory Because Lord all the good That we can ever do All the good that we've done All comes from you And through you And by you And without you We can do nothing And so now we thank you For this time spent together Part us now with your blessing The blessing Which makes rich And with it adds no sorrow The blessing of Father, Son And Holy Spirit Amen