

## The Sermon on the Mount

Last week, we left off at chapter 4:11. Jesus, after his baptism and anointing with the Holy Spirit, is driven off into the Judean desert to be tempted by the devil. The devil in the New Testament books is the personification of evil, and evil—like a parasite—derives its being and existence through the destruction of God's good creation. Like a shadow, it casts darkness wherever it is at work in its attempts to return that which is good back into nothingness. Jesus, as the very presence of him through whom all things came into being (John 1:1-2), and also him through whom God will redeem all things from evil, sin, and death, is the target of this personified evil force. However, Jesus overcomes the temptations of the devil through his strong bond of love with his Father, signaling that we—in the midst of our temptations—can rely on his presence for strength so as to avoid succumbing to darkness and self-destruction.

Following his ordeal in the wilderness, which also provides a contrast between Jesus and the children of Israel who, when they passed through the desert on their way to the promised land, were not able to overcome temptation (Exodus), Jesus returns to Galilee and calls his four disciples. He calls four fishermen who made a living by casting nets into the Sea of Galilee and selling the fish in the marketplace. These include Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They don't first come to Jesus; he comes to them.

Discipleship is not a decision we make independently of God's grace as if we were in control of our relationship with Jesus Christ. Rather, he comes to us, and he calls us into fellowship with himself. For us, this happens as we are taught and as we hear God's word. The Holy Spirit, working through the word, grants us the gift of faith and thereby enables us to respond in a positive way to God's call. The calling of the first disciples illustrates the fact that we can become disciples only insofar as we receive a call from Jesus himself. For the disciples from Galilee, Jesus was there in the flesh. For us, he is present through the Spirit who comes to us in and through the word of God, written and proclaimed.

This also illustrates something else that is important to understand about discipleship. Jesus, as the Son of God, is not someone we can find or seek out using our own reason and effort. The Divine Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are hidden from us. The Triune God is eternal and everywhere, beyond all creation, and therefore not an object in our field of vision. We, who exist in time as creatures who were created by God, have no access to the eternal and transcendent. If we are ever to have fellowship with God through Jesus Christ, now the risen and exalted Son of God, he will have to condescend to us. This he does through the apostolic witness as we have it in the New Testament.

Chapter 4 ends with the brief description of Jesus' ministry. As the One who brings the power of God's Kingdom to us, his ministry is marked by the signs of God's redemptive power. The "good news of the kingdom" is made visible as Jesus cures "every disease and sickness among the people."

Chapter 5 opens with Jesus on top of a mountain. As his disciples come to him, he begins to teach them the true meaning of the law. This scene is clearly meant to mirror Moses receiving the law from God at the top of Mt. Sinai.

As indicated earlier, Matthew wrote his gospel during a time of conflict between Messianic and normative Judaism. (80 – 95 AD) Jews who believed in Jesus were being excluded from the synagogues. Matthew wants to show how Jesus fulfills the Torah and the prophets, which both groups accept as having come from God. In order to do that, Matthew will have to demonstrate how Jesus' teachings capture the meaning of the law. Moreover, since the synagogue communities argued and debated the meaning of the law by referring to authorities who were capable of such interpretation, Jesus would have to demonstrate that he taught with authority.

This he does by saying, "you have heard...but I say to you..." He teaches with the authority of God by overriding all other interpretations. He also affirms the fact that he came, not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. None of the laws are set aside, he says. However, this means the law as he interprets it, not as others have handed down their understanding through years of rabbinic commentary.

In order to properly understand the law as he expresses it, we need to take into account the fact that he is not saying, "If you do these things, then God will accept you." This is not a new form of "works righteousness." Rather, what he describes is the behavior and the hearts of those who have been transformed by the grace of God. These things are the fruits of those who have become righteous by faith in God's grace. They describe a life lived in union with God.

We can express this by utilizing the terminology and concepts used by Matthew. God's kingdom has come near in Jesus Christ. He is God's kingdom in the flesh because he came as our redeemer from sin and alienation from God's rule of love in our lives. As such, when through faith, we receive him into our lives, he breaks down the walls of separation and transforms our hearts through the power of divine love. God's kingdom becomes present for us in Jesus Christ. This, in turn, enables us to reflect God's love in our lives by what we say and do. As John put it, we don't first love God. Rather, he first loves us, and we in turn become gifted people in whose lives divine love shines for others to see.

At the same time it is also important to keep in mind that faith is an ongoing and life-long task that involves struggle with our own desires and inclinations. We never reach perfection in this life. The journey of faith is never over and done with. Because of that, many of the things Jesus says can seem out of our reach and ability. They may come across as accusatory because we are not capable of conforming to them in a

perfect way. But this is the function of law. It is meant to show us our sin, not to exclude us from God, but to drive us to ask for God's forgiveness, grace, and love.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with what is called the "beatitudes." This is a reference to the word "blessed" in each one. However, the Greek word can also mean "happy." "Happy" are those who..." But they are reversals in what is normally perceived as that which brings happiness. That is a function of God's grace and love. Each of these reflects the transformed life of one whose existence has been changed by God's love. God's word creates what it declares. It grants Spirit to the poor in spirit. It comforts those who mourn their separation from God. It destroys false pride. It makes us merciful since we received mercy. "Pure in heart" is to will fellowship with God above all things. It grants peace and makes "peacemakers." And, even though we might be excluded and derided by others, having God is of far more value, and so we are blessed.

Blessedness according to the world is something altogether different. Blessed are the wealthy. Blessed are the powerful. Blessed are those who succeed. Usually, these things we attained by the good fortune of circumstance and the place of birth. But many people are born into poverty, want, marginalization, and even persecution. God wants us to know that he comes to raise up those who are left out. There is a deeper and eternal joy from God's rule, and this often goes to the rejected, as Jesus demonstrated in his ministry by accepting sinners, tax collectors, and other excluded people.

Salt and light are symbols for God's rule of love in our lives. Because God's commandments come in and through God's love and grace, they will never pass away. Those who have God's love become "salt" and "light."

Jesus then interprets the law using a series of antitheses. Here, he rejects the common and usual interpretation of the law, and replaces it with an interpretation that includes the heart. Previous interpretations focused on external behavior only. He internalizes the meaning of the law such that we can see how God's commandments are meant to address, not only behavior but the internal motives that lead to that behavior. In other words, the law that forbids murder also forbids the anger and resentment that leads people to commit murder. The law that forbids adultery also forbids the lust that leads to adultery. Moreover, the violent behavior of others must not lead to violent retaliation. Rather, God desires a "pure" heart in all things so that his children never resort to violence. "Turn the other cheek." The commandment to love extends not only to friends and family. The pure of heart also love their enemies—and pray for them. We are to reflect the presence of God in all things. Therefore, since God is perfect, we too are commanded to be perfect.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount reflects how all-embracing God's commandments are. They require a complete transformation in our lives. They extend not only to what we do but also to what's in our hearts. For this reason, we require God's overwhelming love to embrace and change us from the inside out. In all honesty, we

can't control what arises in our hearts. Anger, lust, greed, covetousness--these things are the fruits of a godless life, a life that has no room for the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. Apart from the Spirit of God, who pours the love of Christ into our hearts, we are helpless in the face of these commands. These laws are meant to drive us to the Gospel so that God's forgiveness, mercy and love can conform us into the image of Christ.

Virtually every major theologian from St. Augustine to Luther to Barth has said that these verses reflect what Jesus taught. Even unbelieving ethical philosophers have admired these ethical precepts as among the highest anyone in human history has taught. Enlightenment thinkers who could not accept Jesus' divinity or his miracles nevertheless included these teachings in their ethical ideas.

Many questions arise from these verses. For example, one wondered if these verses would exclude Christians from serving in the military, or as police officers. Some thought they did. Many of the so-called "Anabaptists" from the radical reformation took Jesus at his word and therefore separated themselves from the rest of society. However, Luther and Calvin thought differently. They believed God ordained civil authority to keep order and provide security, especially to the weak and vulnerable such as children. This means that anyone who is in a position of being responsible for the safety of others, whether that be a head of household, a police officer, or the military, are called to provide security and therefore may need to use force. However, if a person is not responsible for another person's safety, their violent responses are excluded. Jesus calls us to love as God loves, and this means even those who may persecute and hate us.

*This ends part I of the Sermon on the Mount*