

# The Sermon on the Mount

That Jesus is called the “Word” is surely no coincidence. He is the medium through which God discloses His mind to ours. Indeed, Jesus is the exact representation of God Himself. In His deeds He illustrates how God acts, and in His teachings He shows how God thinks. To hear Jesus preach is to listen to the Creator of the universe. Jesus’ sermons and sayings are full of the character of the Father — and nowhere in all the teachings of Jesus do we have a more concentrated revelation of the mind of God than in the Sermon on the Mount. Here is the very nectar of God’s truth about His kingdom. In timeless words uttered on a mountain in Galilee centuries ago, the Incarnate Word manifested the rule of heaven among men.

Our familiarity with the Sermon on the Mount makes it difficult to appreciate fully the magnificence and power of its wisdom. Ears accustomed to hearing it can hardly hear this great discourse as it would have been heard the first time by its first hearers. But in truth there is nothing else quite like the Sermon on the Mount. It is beautiful, of course. But more than that, it is profound. Its depths are more than a challenge for the wisest man. And yet at the same time, there is about it a simplicity within reach of the child. The message itself is radical. Never has a more revolutionary document come down to us, but social and political reform is not its aim. Its world-changing influence is directed at the inner character of the person who has been brought into fellowship with God.

This message delivered by Jesus on a Galilean hillside shows Him to be the Master Teacher. It is the very model of effective communication of spiritual truth. Arresting our attention with bold contradictions of worldly wisdom, the Sermon on the Mount is pungent and filled with paradox. It catches us by surprise, and forces us to question ideas and attitudes that have been taken for granted. It challenges our thinking to its roots, but it does so by the use of vivid metaphors drawn from everyday life. In every way, the Sermon on the Mount demonstrates the truth of Jesus’ claim to be speaking words given Him by His Heavenly Father. What a thrill it must have been to listen when the Sermon was originally preached!

Jesus’ discourse had to do with the kingdom of God. Indeed it represents the charter of that kingdom. The spiritual nature of God’s rule and the character of those who submit to it are the central themes of the Sermon on the Mount. Its emphasis throughout is that true righteousness and true religion proceed from the heart of man. The mind devoted to God is the wellspring of the spiritual life. In God’s reckoning, motives matter greatly. Legalistic self-righteousness and mechanical outward observances do not suffice to please God. Rather it is the humble seeker, full of the sense of his own emptiness before God, who will receive God’s gift of salvation. It is the sincerely obedient person, acting from the heart in unselfish love of God and neighbor, who will worship acceptably before Him.

Jesus teaches us that God regards who we are, as well as what we do. It is not enough physically to avoid actions like murder and adultery — our minds must be dedicated to the highest good of our fellow creatures, even to the extent of loving our enemies. Our acts of devotion to God must be more than rituals performed with a view to the pious reputation they will gain us. Self-centered pride must be destroyed if God is to be honored. We must truly love God and truly trust Him, even to the extent of giving Him priority over our temporal wants and needs. Greed and worry betray a mind not truly set on God. Worldliness is no better than idolatry, and it has no place in God’s kingdom. God can be found, and He can be served. But only by those possessed of a single heart set with simplicity upon the Father.

The values held before us in the Sermon on the Mount are the exact antithesis of the ideals of man in rebellion against his Creator. Outside of Jesus Christ, led by a self-willed mind, one will hardly be successful in implementing the principles of the Sermon. The precepts of Jesus' discourse are not suggestions that can be taken piecemeal by the worldling looking for self-help. We have here far more than the elevated advice, however wise, of a great moral teacher. Rather we have the declaration of God Himself of the character of those who have yielded heart and life to His sovereignty. Refusing to yield, one would find the Sermon to be of little use.

We are told that at the conclusion of Jesus' words "the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Mt. 7:28f). When the Word became flesh He was able to speak with an authority unattainable by any mortal teacher. His words had the serene and solid quality of eternal truth. There is perhaps no more eloquent testimony to the deity of Jesus than the words He was given to say by His Father. Those who, obeying the gospel, have had bestowed upon them citizenship in the kingdom of heaven will listen carefully to the Sermon on the Mount. And not just listen. They will do from the heart what they hear. For Jesus said, "Now everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand" (Mt. 7:26).

Having ears to hear, may we truly hear!

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