

# “Lenten Moments in Matthew’s Gospel: 2) The Sermon on the Mount”

a sermon by

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**Text: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him (Matthew 5:1).**

**This past week the *New York Times* featured an editorial entitled “They Came for the Chicken Farmer,” in which the editorial writer noted that in the names released this week of the prisoners held in Guantanamo Bay there was a Pakistani man, Abdur Sayed Rahman, who has been held prisoner for four years and whose name is very similar to the Taliban leader in the town in which he lived. After September 11, 2001, this man was arrested and taken to Cuba where he has remained. But, when reporters checked his name, they discovered what he had claimed all along. He was not the leader of the Taliban, and he was a chicken farmer.**

**Now, most of us, I suspect, understand the terrorist threat against our country is very real and that because of that the government often has to take extraordinary measures to ensure the safety of our people. But over against that, we must also be very careful that the values of our nation not be eroded in the name of national security.**

## I.

One of the great tensions in our faith is the tension between the “ideals” of Jesus and practical aspects of living “realistically” in the world in which we find ourselves today. Nowhere is that tension more keenly felt than in the “Sermon on the Mount.”

Over the weeks of Lent I have asked that we focus our attention on the Gospel of Matthew. It is the one gospel that is closest to the Old Testament. Jesus is presented as the “new Moses.” He brings about a new law and a new righteousness.

But living by the Sermon on the Mount isn't a very issue thing to do: “Turning the other cheek,” “being “meek,” “becoming as a child,” “going the second mile,” “loving one's enemies,” “feeling blessed when men revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you,” “believing that the greatest among us must be the servant of all.” Who of us is capable of living in such fashion?

The German philosopher Fredrich Nietzsche once said of Christianity that he regarded it as the “the most fatal and seductive lie that has ever existed.” Many have shared Nietzsche's claim of Christianity.

But strangely enough, others have found in it a profound realism. Reinhold Niebuhr once described the ethic of Jesus as an “impossible possibility.” Jesus demanded the absolute: “Resist not evil.” “Be ye perfect.” For Niebuhr the demand of Jesus is so great that no one can fulfill it completely. But, on the other hand, there is no situation in which we cannot come closer to fulfillment than we have yet done. Thus it is an ethic that always challenges our complacency and calls us to a higher righteousness.

## II.

Consider, if you will, the beatitude of Jesus, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” Now on the surface, nothing could be more preposterous. Since when have the meek inherited the earth?

So, what did Jesus mean? If by “meek” we mean the Uriah Heeps of the world, then, of course, Jesus was wrong. He certainly was not that way. If by “meek” we mean passive, submissive, compliant, and lacking spirit, then, of course, these do not inherit the earth. Let us not be mistaken! The “meek” of the earth do not get crucified. But, if Jesus meant by “meek” those who have humility, who are teachable, those with minds open to truth, then the saying takes on a different character. Blessed are those who escape proud self-centeredness, who give themselves humbly to something greater than themselves. In that sense no one except the meek has the slightest chance of inheriting the earth. Vanity, pomposity, and pride in the long run never succeed.

One of the greatest speeches ever made in the British Parliament was delivered by Samuel Wilberforce. He spoke for three and a half hours to a fascinated audience on the

evils of the slavery trade. Edmund Burke said afterward, "It equaled anything I have ever heard in modern times and it is not perhaps to be surpassed by anything in ancient Greece.

But listen to what Wilberforce had to say about his speech. In his diary that evening he wrote: "Came to town sadly unfit for work, but by divine grace was enabled to make my motion to give satisfaction--three hours and a half. I had not prepared my language, or even gone over all my matter, but being well acquainted with the whole subject I got on."

That is humility and it is powerful.

### III.

Or take another saying of Jesus, which seems particularly onerous to us. Jesus said, "He that is greatest among you shall be your servant." Can you imagine trying to live by that in the world of banking, the practice of law, or any business in which we are engaged?

At first, this seems absurd. How in the world can anyone make a difference in a world where brazen greed and ruthless ambition are so common? And yet, remarkably enough, those who are great are those who served their fellow men and women. As I think back over the past half century at those I would call great, it would include people like Martin Luther King, Jr., who led an entire nation to face the evil of segregation and the need for equality for all of our citizens. I would include people like Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned for nineteen years, who said he would gladly give his life for the cause of ending "apartheid" in South Africa, who when he was released from prison, was not bitter but led his people with dignity and respect. When I think of greatness, I think of Mother Theresa, living her life among the poor in India.

Jesus was right. "The son of Man came not to be served, but to serve." Therein and therein alone lies real greatness.

Reinhold Niebuhr once observed that there are three types of vocations that Christians serve. Some are perfectionists. They remind us that the call of Christ is to be perfect. Pacifism is a form of Christian perfection. It is a reminder to all of us of the evils of war. The perfectionists are valuable because they call us to repentance.

A second vocation is the prophet. These are individuals who hold the absolute demands of Christ before us and condemn the compromises that societies inevitably make. The function of the prophet is to make us aware of the guilt that is in us, guilt not unlike that in our enemies as well.

The third vocation is that of a statesman. The statesman knows that perfection is not a possibility. He knows that if he does not compromise and work for the lesser evil, that a worse evil will triumph. Abraham Lincoln was a statesman. He did not want war, but he knew war was necessary. It was the lesser of two evils. But Lincoln understood it was evil.

Therefore, he asked God for forgiveness for himself and he reached out to a defeated nation.

#### IV.

Then, too, consider the injunction of Jesus that we love our enemies. That is a hard word for all of us to hear. How do we love people who do us intentional harm? That is certainly true in our national life, but in our personal lives as well. The Greek word that Jesus uses is the word “agape,” which means a selfless concern for over people. Is this impractical? Look at the alternatives--anger, ill will, resentment, violence, revenge, and hatred--and see what they are doing to the world.

For one thing, we ought to understand what hatred does not only to the one who is hated, but also to the one who does the hating. Every pastor knows the power that hatred can do to people. It can make people bitter and resentful. It erodes real joy and happiness.

Everyone knows that Charles Darwin was the discoverer of the theory of evolution, but that alone does not tell us much about the person. Listen, however, to what his biographer said about him, “The friendliness of his character was most apparent in his attitude toward his enemies. In spite of all their vituperations, he never uttered a harsh word against them.” That tells us a lot about the kind of person Darwin was. It speaks of health, wholeness, and a sound mind. Well, that is what Jesus said two millennia ago.

Now, please don’t misunderstand me. No one is saying that this is easy. It is hard to maintain goodwill toward those who have harmed us. Nor does Jesus make this love of enemies any easier in the way he describes it: turning the other cheek, going the second mile. But, at the heart of the matter, the sayings of Jesus are not that difficult to summarize: in dealing with ourselves, absolute integrity within, so that we will not only refrain from murder, but hatred as well. We will not only refrain from adultery, but we also reverence the sanctity of marriage and the worth of individuals. We will not require an oath, for our word is as good as our bond.

#### V.

Then, finally, the Sermon on the Mount is at the heart of Christian discipleship. Whenever in the history of the church there has been a vital reformation that even for a short time has lifted the church to be a transforming agency, at the heart of this has been a rediscovery of Jesus. In the thirteenth century St. Francis of Assisi demonstrated a remarkable humility in serving the lowly and the lost. Everyone who knew this saint knew that St. Francis had rediscovered Jesus and his way of life.

When John Wesley turned his back on the dry as dust formalism of the English church and moved out of the sedate edifices of the church to preach to thousands of lost souls, everyone who knew him knew that what had happened was a rediscovery of Jesus.

**When Walter Rauschenbusch went into “Hell’s Kitchen” in the heart of New York City, establishing what he called “the Social Gospel,” at the center of it was a rediscovery of Jesus.**

**The conclusion of the matter is this: Christ is the heart of Christianity, and unless we return to Christ, our Christianity will not make much of a difference. To know him, to be his disciples, to take him seriously, to practice his way of life, that is the hope of the church and of civilization itself.**

**When we are willing to follow Christ and his way, our lives will change and the world around us will change as well.**

**Amen!**