

# The Sermon On The Mount

From Chapter Six, *The Incredible Christ*

By Bill Counts

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## **THEY NEVER HEARD IT LIKE THIS BEFORE**

A distinguished Princeton psychologist used to tell his students that the Sermon on the Mount was "the most effective propaganda in history." He defined propaganda as information that influences and controls opinion for good or for bad, and then demonstrated that the Sermon on the Mount probably contained the most compelling and powerful words ever uttered.

No words of Jesus are more famous. No words spoken by anyone have attracted such universal admiration. Yet the Sermon on the Mount, in the form we have it, is but fifteen minutes long and only a sample of many such talks Jesus gave. Matthew and Luke both record the sermon, but their reports differ from each other at some points because they translated Jesus' remarks from spoken Aramaic into written Greek, and they condensed differently for their particular readers.

Jesus spoke from a level spot on a grassy hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Grouped closely around him were his twelve apostles, while some of the curious populace sat attentively behind the disciples. On the edge of the crowd, no doubt, were the scribes and Pharisees who had committed themselves to keeping their prey under surveillance.

## **TRUE HAPPINESS**

Jesus began with what are called the Beatitudes:

"Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Happy are the mourners, for they shall be comforted. Happy are the self-controlled, for they shall inherit the earth. Happy are those hungering and thirsting after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Happy are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Happy are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Happy are the peacemakers, for they shall be called God's Sons. Happy are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Happy are you when they insult you, and persecute you, and speak all kinds of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because your reward is great in heaven, for this is how they persecuted the prophets before you" (Matthew 5:3-12).

The "poor in spirit" are those who recognize they suffer spiritual poverty. The mourners are those who, like King David, deeply regret their own sins and the sins of their nation. The "self-controlled" (usually translated "meek") are those who control their anger and submit to God and the circumstances he allots them. The word was used of an animal who submitted to its master. Jesus exercised such self-control when he submitted to the cross.

The "pure in heart" possess inward purity, in contrast to those who seek purity through observing external rituals. The "peacemakers" do more than live peacefully; they promote peace among others and restore harmony between former enemies. The "persecuted" are those who suffer rejection because of their devotion to Jesus. They should feel privileged, Jesus said, to follow in the great tradition of their spiritual ancestors like Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah who were also persecuted.

To speak of happy mourners and rejoicing sufferers must have startled Jesus' audience! His words grated on self-satisfied success types who trampled on others to attain status. How many of the rich, famous, and powerful in his audience were sensitive, submissive, and merciful?

Jesus' words reverse the world's values. The arrogant, cold blooded successes become eternal failures, and the truly meek inherit the earth.

## **SALT AND LIGHT**

Looking directly at his disciples, Jesus informed them:

"You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its flavor, how can it become salty again? It is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it

under a basket, but on a lamp stand so it lights the whole house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they see your good works and honor your Father in heaven" (vv. 13-16).

Jesus' pungent and earthly illustrations drew from the daily life of his audience. The Israelis used salt to preserve and flavor food, but the salt they gathered from Dead Sea marshes was often contaminated by other substances which rendered it tasteless. Such salt was commonly tossed into the street.

Israeli cities were built on hills for defensive purposes and their lights were visible for miles through the clear night air. Most houses had a single light, centrally located on a high lamp stand, which lit up the entire dwelling. Like salt and light, Jesus' disciples were to purify and enlighten a corrupt world by living in its midst, instead of retreating to Dead Sea caves to pursue sainthood, like the Qumran community.

### **WHO ARE THE ORTHODOX?**

The positive encouragement to his followers then shifted to a stinging denunciation of the twisted teachings and practices of the scribes and Pharisees.

"Don't suppose that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I didn't come to abolish but to fulfill," he thundered. "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches this to others will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness more than surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you absolutely can't enter heaven" (vv 17-20).

Once again Jesus turned the tables on his foes, who labeled him as a rebel against Moses' law. Jesus claimed to uphold Moses' law to the letter and fulfill its Messianic prophecies, while he charged them with being the rebels! He represented true orthodoxy, while they were the apostates. How shocking for this unschooled rabbi to charge Israel's religious leaders with heresy, when they labored to observe every detail of the law!

### **SIX TELLTALE EXAMPLES**

To illustrate his point, Jesus cited six examples of the scribes' inadequate or erroneous teachings. "You have heard that it was said by the ancients, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders deserves judgment.' But I tell you that everyone who is bitter with his brother shall be punished, whoever says to his brother 'Raca' shall be guilty before the supreme court, and whoever says 'You fool' shall be cast into the hell of fire" (vv. 21,22).

Jesus accused the scribes of warning against acts of murder while allowing attitudes of murder. He says that continued anger (as the Greek original implies), or calling another "Raca," which meant "idiot," or "you fool," will also bring judgment, because God judges attitudes and words as well as actions. The judgment Jesus warns of, "the hell of fire," described the valley of Hinnom, the city dump outside Jerusalem's walls where maggots continually crawled over garbage and fires incessantly burned, a graphic picture of eternal judgment.

Next he attacked their view of immorality. "You shall not commit adultery," they said, again with emphasis only on the outward act. He taught, "Anyone who looks at a woman in order to lust after her has already committed adultery in his heart" (v. 28). His words distinguish between a passing glance which arouses temporary sexual fantasy and the indulgent gaze aimed for the express purpose of lust.

Whatever ensnares us into sin, Jesus went on to say, should be cut out of our lives. It may seem as precious as an eye or a hand, but we should be willing to sacrifice it because suffering for a brief time now is better than suffering forever in hell (vv. 29, 30).

The Jews were accustomed to exaggerated figures of speech, and even spoke figuratively of cutting off their arms or plucking out their eyes, so the audience did not interpret Jesus' words as recommending literal mutilation.

### ***A FIRST CENTURY DIVORCE MILL***

The scribes went back on the hot seat as Jesus took up the subject of divorce. They maintained that "anyone who divorces his wife should grant her a divorce certificate," basing their decree on Moses' teaching (v. 31).

Moses was actually attempting to discourage divorce by regulating it, but many of the scribes insisted the divorce certificate was intended to facilitate marriage dissolution instead. They said, "Moses intended for us to divorce our wives or he never would have commanded a divorce certificate."

They taught that God gave the Jews the privilege of divorce but denied it to the Gentiles. They said a husband could divorce his wife if she spoiled his dinner. One scribe even taught divorce was permissible if the husband simply met someone more attractive. Another scribe, when he visited a strange town, would advertise for a wife while he visited there, then divorce her when he left. As long as the certificate was in order, divorce was fine!

But Jesus condemned this: "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for unfaithfulness exposes her to adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (v. 32). He teaches that divorce is tragic. It puts the rejected wife in desperate need for support and companionship which can only be relieved by remarriage. But in such cases the remarriage is really adultery, Jesus said. So while these scribes condemned adultery their twisted teachings on divorce actually promoted it.

### ***BROKEN PROMISES***

Solemn oaths have always been used by society to reinforce honesty. Today we hear them mostly used in courtrooms and swearing-in ceremonies. Ancient societies used them in everyday transactions to guarantee fulfillment of promises.

The scribes taught that oaths sworn in God's name were binding because God was part of the transaction. But they ingeniously added that oaths not sworn in his name were not binding, since God was not involved in the transaction. Jews could solemnly swear by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or even their own head, and break their promises with the scribes' approval. It reminds us of the little children who make promises to each other but cross their fingers behind their backs so they don't have to keep them.

Jesus said that God was part of every oath, even though his name was not used-for heaven and earth were parts of his kingdom, Jerusalem was his city, and he alone could determine even the color of the hair on our head (vv. 33-35). Furthermore, Jesus taught, we should not need oaths in daily life to prove we are truthful. Our "yes" should mean "yes" and our "no" should mean "no" (v. 37). It's easy to see who *really* valued truthfulness.

### ***EVEN-STEPHEN SYNDROME***

The Law of Moses commanded "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" as the basic principle of public justice. This figurative expression taught that major crimes merit serious punishment ("eye for eye"), while minor crimes merit light punishment ("tooth for tooth").

But the scribes applied the public law to private revenge. Since tax collectors cheated you, you could cheat them; if others lied to you, you could lie to them without committing sin.

Jesus not only rejected this perversion, but replaced it with a revolutionary standard: "Don't resist the evil doer-to him who slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other also. And if anyone sues you for your tunic, give him your outer cloak also. And whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two" (vv. 39-42).

To slap the cheek was a scathing insult. Lawsuits for clothing in lieu of debt payment were common. Soldiers could force citizens to carry burdens, mail, or messages against their will. Jesus used these vivid illustrations to teach a course of non-resistance instead of bitter revenge.

Jesus' sweeping ethical pronouncement raises the question of how literally he meant us to follow his words. Obviously, he intended us to use common sense, and not copy the fanatic literalism which the Pharisees displayed over the principle of Sabbath Day rest, as we saw in the last chapter. Jesus plainly condemns vengeful schemes in personal relationships, but his words do not oppose proper use of force by police, armies, courts, and other instruments of public justice.

### ***LOVE ON THE HIGHEST LEVEL***

Jesus' last attack on the scribes' teaching zeroes in on love. "Love your neighbors and hate your enemies" was their official version of God's word (v. 43). They rationalized that Moses command to "love your neighbor" logically implied "hate your enemy"!

Jesus corrected them by telling them to love their enemies and even pray for their persecutors (v. 44). He explained that God loves his enemies by sending rain and sunlight on all peoples—even those who reject and despise him (v. 45). Jesus pointed out that if the Pharisees only like their friends their love rises no higher than that of godless pagans.

Jesus utterly exposed the superficial and erroneous teachings of Israel's vaunted scribes. Then he replaced ,a their misconceptions with such challenging and profound commands that we still marvel at his words. "Turn the other cheek," "love your enemies," and "pray for those persecuting you," were given to the conscience of the world by the rabbi from Nazareth. His conclusion to this section:

"Be perfect therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect" is a fitting climax (v. 48).

### ***MADISON AVENUE RIGHTEOUSNESS***

As examples of what not to do, the Pharisaic practices now came under fire. "Be careful not to practice your righteousness before people only to be noticed by them, otherwise you'll have no reward from your Father in heaven," Jesus warned (Matthew 6:1). Many Pharisees ordered their behavior to gain human acclaim instead of divine approval.

"When you give to the poor, don't announce it with a trumpet blast, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that people will admire them. I tell you they've already got their reward in full" Jesus said (v. 2).

Religious Jews were often generous donors, but many made a Madison Avenue production out of giving. They advertised it all over. Jesus' description of them as blowing a trumpet probably sent gales of laughter through his audience. He said human acclaim was their only reward because God had none for them.

"Whenever you pray," Jesus continued, "don't be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they will be seen by people. I tell you they have their reward in full" (v. 5). The Pharisees had established set hours of prayer, and some of them would place themselves in public locations so everyone could see them piously reciting prayers. Again, their only reward was human recognition, not divine response.

Jesus further instructed, "when you pray, don't repeat empty words like the pagans, for they imagine they will be heard because of their volume of talk" (v. 8). Jesus condemns the pagan practice of chanting-repeating words and phrases over and over, often until a trance-like state occurs. This useless praying is unfortunately surfacing on American street corners today as Hindu devotees with shaved heads chant and dance.

### ***A MODEL PRAYER***

In contrast to this Jesus offered a simple, but profound example of prayer at its best: "Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored. Let your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today food for the coming day, forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And don't bring us into temptation, but rescue us from the evil one" (vv. 9-13).

Jesus did not intend this to be repeated in a rote, unthinking way as if the recitation had magic in itself. Rather he simply taught the majestic character of God and four basic requests his followers could make of him.

Jesus says to call God "Father." He is a person who lovingly cares for us, not a blind force, an impersonal principle, or a mystical "ground of our being." Jesus directs his followers to ask their heavenly Father to bring his kingdom to earth, so his will can be done all over this earth, just as it is done all over heaven.

Second, we are to ask God for physical needs, like daily food. God wants to supply these basic needs to people who trust him.

Third, Jesus says to request daily forgiveness, and be willing to forgive others as well. The word he uses for sins here is "debts" the moral obligations we owe God and cannot pay him.

Fourth, aware of our weakness and proneness to fail, we are to pray that God will keep us from temptations we feel we can't handle, and thus protect us from Satan, the evil one.

### ***FURTHER LIGHT***

Jesus gave this model prayer, of course, before his disciples understood that he would die on a cross and that the Messiah would come a second time. Today we read this prayer and realize that God's kingdom will come in its fullness at Jesus' return. We also understand that believers now possess final and eternal forgiveness through Jesus' death, whereas the prayer spoke only of obtaining the daily temporary forgiveness which Moses' law offered (see Hebrews 10).

Jesus' concluding remark after the prayer, that God won't forgive us unless we forgive others, shows the importance he attached to God's forgiveness (Matthew 6:14, 15). He did not mean that we are to forgive others to earn God's forgiveness. A forgiving spirit shows we have accepted God's forgiveness, while a bitter spirit reveals an unbelieving heart. This was probably directed at the Pharisees who claimed salvation for themselves despite their unbelieving, bitter attitudes.

Jesus next mentioned a final example of Pharisaic hypocrisy, fasting: "When you fast, don't be gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to appear to people to be fasting" (v. 16). Each Monday and Thursday the Pharisees ritualistically fasted, and some donned pained expressions to make sure their sacrifice was observed. Jesus' description of this grotesque ritual probably amused his audience—except for the guilty parties.

### ***TWO KINDS OF TREASURE***

Jesus now broke off his attack against the Pharisees to focus on one of the most gnawing problems of human existence, money. "Don't store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupt and thieves break in and steal," he urged, "but store up treasures in heaven where moth and rust don't corrupt and thieves don't break in and steal, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (vv. 19-21).

"Moth and rust" picture whatever eats up and corrodes material wealth. In ancient times, clothing handed from one generation to another was an important segment of wealth—styles rarely changed! Yet moths often devoured these garments. Today, inflation and world economic ills gobble up material possessions. One way or another material wealth disappears, but spiritual treasure lasts forever.

Jesus' linking of one's heart and his treasure highlights the tragedy of ultimate devotion to money. The person who devotes himself to a treasure which is here today and gone tomorrow is an inevitable pauper. The heart devoted to moth-proof, rust-proof, burglar-proof spiritual possessions has security even when material wealth vanishes.

### **DEVOTION AND POSSESSION**

Jesus added two more illustrations: "The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. No one can be the slave of two masters. Either he will hate one. or love the other.... You cannot be a slave to God and money" (vv. 22-24).

The ancients believed that eyes were like windows through which light entered the body. Good eyes brought in the health and benefits of light and bad eyes shrouded the body in darkness which produces disease. Jesus revealed the spiritual truth that devotion to God will make our whole life bask in light, but devotion to material values will plunge us into darkness and confusion. Our attitude toward money reaches into every corner of our existence.

Jesus used the analogy of slavery to show that as a slave cannot devote himself to two masters, so we cannot devote ourselves to piling up material and spiritual wealth at the same time. Either God or money will enslave us. Jesus attacks *devotion* to wealth, not *possession* of it. We may possess wealth without devotion to it (though this is regrettably rare), or we may lack wealth entirely and yet be devoted to a desire for it.

### **CAREFREE LIVING**

Jesus moved on to examine the underlying anxiety which often stimulates devotion to money. A flock of birds may have flown over the audience at this time, as this was a crossroads of bird migration. Jesus said: "Look at the birds of the air-they don't sow or reap or gather into barns, and your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth more than they? Which of you by worrying about it can add eighteen inches to your life span?" And looking around the Galilean hillsides, dotted with bright wild flowers, he added, "Consider the wild flowers how they grow. They don't toil or spin, but I tell you Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of them" (vv. 28, 29).

Probably two more memorable illustrations never fell on human ears. His audience was spellbound. The illustrations do not imply -of course, that *work* is unnecessary. Birds work for their food. But Jesus teaches *anxiety* is unnecessary. God cares for the birds and flowers which are here today and gone tomorrow. "Will he not do much more for you, O you of little faith?" (v. 30)

These people weren't anxious over payments on the color TV. They worried whether they would starve or freeze that year! But Jesus tells them to trust a loving Father. He adds that since worry can't add five minutes to our life span, it is utterly useless.

He concludes this magnificent section of the sermon with the famous words: "Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Don't worry about tomorrow, tomorrow will have its own worries. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (vv. 33,34).

Anxiety over money has always hounded us. Here Jesus dispenses a cure: trust in the loving Father who cares for nature and will care much more for us. A corollary of such trust is a proper order of priorities: it is not money first and God on the side, but God and his kingdom first. This is the way to freedom from financial worry.

Jesus' was not denouncing planning for the future, but worrying over the future. He advises us to shrink our burdens to those of the present moment rather than weight ourselves down with imagined problems of tomorrow.

### **BLIND EYE DOCTORS**

Jesus began the final part of his sermon with a warning against self-righteous criticism of others. With a glint of humor he said, "And why do you keep seeing a speck in your brother's eye, but you don't consider the beam of lumber in your own eye? Or how will you say to your brother, 'Let me pick the speck out of your eye,' and behold the beam of lumber in your own eye!" (Matthew 7:3,4)

The ludicrous exaggeration struck home the truth. An overly critical spirit usually covers blindness to one's own faults. The Pharisees were so intent on catching violators that they never looked at their own shortcomings.

Then Jesus quoted a proverb which flashed the other side of the coin: "Don't give what is holy to the dogs, or cast your pearls before swine" (v. 6). Despised packs of wild dogs roamed the streets of ancient cities, and pigs were unclean animals to Jews. Here they symbolize not the sinner or outcast, but those who mock and scorn God's truth. Jesus' followers need not feel obligated to present the truth to such. At his trial the depraved King Herod Antipas hoped to see Jesus perform a miracle—he got not even a word from Jesus (Luke 23:8,9)

Jesus gave encouragement to prayer by telling us not to give up, but to "keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking," as the Greek original implies (Matthew 7:7-8). The reason, he explained, is the loving character of God. "Which of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he wants some fish will give him a snake? If you, being sinful, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father give good things to the ones asking him?" (vv. 10, 11)

The way to receive from God is to ask, not simply wish; and we may be sure God will respond only with good gifts—though they may be different from what we ask!

### ***THE GREAT SUMMATION***

Jesus summed up much of what he had said in what has come to be known as the "Golden Rule." "Whatever you wish that people should do to you, do this also to them—for this is the law and the prophets" (v. 12).

Jesus masterfully captures the personal ethics of the Old Testament in less than twenty-five words. Confucius and the great Jewish teacher Hillel had stated this in negative form. "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you." But the positive form Jesus gives requires not simply refraining from harming others, but a positive, costly, and rewarding expression of love.

### ***TWO GATES, TWO WAYS, TWO HOUSES***

The climax of the sermon was a sobering exhortation to choose Jesus' way and enter his kingdom. He spoke of the wide gate and popular road that leads eventually to destruction, and the narrow gate and lightly traveled road that leads to life (vv. 13,14). The image was suggested by gates in walls of ancient cities that were wide for heavy traffic, whereas occasional small doors off the beaten path were used only by a few.

In spiritual matters, the majority are often wrong, Jesus indicates. Throughout most of its history much of Israel had turned against its true prophets, and the prophets began to say that only a "remnant" would believe and find deliverance from God. A minority of the Jewish people believed in Jesus when he came, and only a remnant know their Messiah today.

Jesus warned the listeners about false prophets who are like "wolves in sheep's clothing" (vv. 15-20). He makes the astonishing claim that he personally will keep these false leaders from entering the kingdom of heaven (vv. 21,22).

Dramatizing man's two destinies, Jesus described two houses, one built on the sand, the other on rock (vv. 24-28). Israel had two seasons—wet and dry. During the rains some areas would be flooded and the swamped houses built on rock would stand, while those on a sand base would collapse. Jesus and his words are the rock which will support when the storms of life come, while other foundations can only erode and disintegrate.

### ***THE PROPHET LIKE MOSES***

As Jesus finished, the crowd was shocked because he "taught as one having authority and not as their scribes" (v. 29).

The Jewish scholars constantly appealed to teachings of earlier great rabbis. Tradition was everything. Jesus referred to no other authority but himself, and on this basis he boldly set aside traditional interpretations. Such innovation frightened them. It seemed safer to stick with the old

traditions than to follow this radical new teacher into uncharted waters. What they overlooked, of course, was that his teaching unveiled as never before the great spiritual truths of the Old Testament which their tradition obscured.

Jesus' disciples must have been perplexed. All that Jesus said had the ring of truth, but the standards he set that day were so high that if a man must keep them to enter heaven, who was qualified? Later they would understand that his death for them, not their keeping the uneatable Sermon on the Mount would bring them acceptance with God.

Perhaps someone listening that day remembered what God had told Moses, "I will raise up a prophet ... like you, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (Deuteronomy 18:18 NASB).

From Mount Sinai Moses had unveiled God's law to his people. From a mountain in Galilee Jesus now unveiled a higher law to their descendants. For centuries Israel had yearned for the prophet like Moses to come. That day had finally arrived.

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