

## A Message for Disciples

### Matt. 5-7

The Sermon on the Mount is introduced, "And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him." The mountain setting appears to be away from the multitudes and with the disciples. By the time the sermon ends, it seems as though the number of listeners has grown, "And so it was when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching..." It seems fair to say that Jesus gave the sermon to the disciples (more than the twelve) on behalf of both them and their people and that as He spoke more and more of the multitude arrived and heard what Jesus was saying.

When you speak to a group of people, you always want to speak to them in a way that connects with them. The group of disciples who grew into a larger and less specific crowd as the sermon was spoken had a number of characteristics. They were 1st century Jews. They were there with the belief that Jesus was the Messiah. They had a cultural understanding of the Law of Moses and their duties as the faithful chosen people of God. They had accepted certain behaviors as characteristic of spiritual or religious leadership. They lived in a hostile world in which they were often helpless and hopeless. They wanted to live according to God's will but they had no idea of what such a life would look like.

The sermon is a message of contrasts. Whatever the crowd might have expected Jesus to say, what He did say was different and sometimes opposite of those expectations. Jesus was not a controversialist for its own sake, but had a message that was outside of the box. He spoke the truth to them when they knew only a version of faith that was dead rather than alive. It is where the sermon seems most foreign to us, where it seems to instruct us to do what is not possible that our experience of hearing the sermon is most like the experience of those who were there to hear it when it was spoken for the first time. They listened to what

they had never heard of before. We hear familiar words that still shock us so that we say, this must not be for me.

The Beatitudes are a call to find satisfaction in the deepening of our inner life. It is not what you accomplish, or what you have, or your status in the neighborhood that brings fulfillment but instead, what we want more than anything is gained through the development of our spirit in right relationship to God. It is important to note that this kind of satisfaction belongs to those who develop the character that God values rather than that which they might prefer.

But, lest we take the joy of our spiritual fulfillment and keep it buried within as if it were a hidden treasure, Jesus reminded His disciples that they were to serve as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They were to take all they gained through the discipline of obedience and share it with a desperate world. "Let your light so shine before men, that they see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

Jesus was an outsider to the religious system of Jewish worship. His teaching of the Law was outside of the mainstream. The core value among the Jews was adherence to the Law. Some assumed that Jesus, since His message was so different, meant to destroy this foundation of Jewish faith. But Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law and the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill..." In regard to the religious standard that they admired, "unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus then challenged the thinking of the disciples by taking the teaching of the Law on the commandments, "Thou shall not murder... thou shall not commit adultery, and thou shall not bear false witness to another level. The commandment, do not murder also means do not be angry. The commandment, do not commit adultery also means do not objectify women and do not divorce your wife to be with someone else. The commandment, do not bear false witness also means do not rate your responsibility for truth telling by the significance of what you swear by. Jesus added the principles of an eye for an eye and loving your neighbor by turning each of them upside down.

When it came to the ways that one's devotion to God was to be expressed, Jesus made the case that His world was upside down. If the point is to express your devotion to God, why would it be so important to be seen doing so by men? So, in Jesus' day, almsgiving was trumpeted, prayers were spoken in the synagogues and on the street corners and if anyone was fasting they were careful to put on a mournful air so that everyone would be sure to notice. Jesus' remedy was to give alms secretly, to pray in the closet, and to fast joyfully so that no one will notice. Is our devotion to God or to the admiration of men?

Jesus then spoke to the principle of treasure. Earthly treasures are all temporary and uncertain. If that is your focus then you will no doubt suffer loss and distress. The alternative is to "lay up for yourself treasure in heaven." Heavenly treasure is secure but even more than that, wherever your treasure is, this will also be where your heart is. No one can serve two masters.

If you had been there that day, you might have thought, but with no money, how am I going to eat? Jesus' answer was "don't worry." If God can feed the birds of the air and clothe the lilies of the field then surely He'll be able to feed and clothe you. So, don't

worry about what you will eat or drink or what you will wear for God knows that you need these things. Seek God's kingdom first and all these things will be added unto you.

A community characterized by a high level of commitment to a cause will tend to be distracted by varying levels of commitment. Jesus said that there would be great danger if His disciples were to begin judging each other. Such things must be left to God and let each disciple focus on the consistency of his own devotion.

Where we are in doubt about the consistency of our devotion, we can ask God for His help. "Ask, and it will be given you, seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened unto you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." In respect to others, "whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the prophets.

Those who follow Christ will be required to "enter by the narrow gate for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction... narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to life, and there are few who find it."

There will be false prophets but you can know them by their fruit. even at the end there will be those who will claim to have done great works in Jesus' name and He will say to them, "Depart from Me, I never knew you."

"Therefore, whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock. and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But 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; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell and great was its fall."