

One Sermon That Changed The World

“The School of Christ”

August 20, 2023 A.M.
West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“Jesus traveled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. News about him spread as far as Syria, and people soon began bringing to him all who were sick. And whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon possessed or epileptic or paralyzed—he healed them all. Large crowds followed him wherever he went—people from Galilee, the Ten Towns, Jerusalem, from all over Judea, and from east of the Jordan River. One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them.” (Matthew 4:23-5:2 NLT)

WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT?

I have a question for our students. Why are you *really* in school?

Randy Harris tells the story of one of his classes. He encouraged his students to draw a box and write in the box the real reason, the ultimate reason, why they were taking a philosophy class. The students turned their papers in, and one by one Randy read off their answers. “Because its required.” Wrong! “Because it sounds fun.” Wrong! “Because I want to graduate.” Close, but wrong! Then one student wrote the right answer. He put “boat.” You see, he had to pass the class to graduate. He had to graduate to get the job he wanted. He had to get the job he wanted to get the money he wanted so he could buy the boat—which is what he really wanted!

Boat. Right answer. Or is it?

What is it that we really want? Why do we go through the pain, the sweat, the tears? Endure the years of pressure, experience the daily grind, or take the nervous leap? You know what it is: the good life. Life with a capital L. And so, get our your pen and write in the box. What is it that you really, really want?

The perfect house, maybe? The perfect car? The perfect job?
Maybe some black gold—Texas tea; swimmin’ pools filled with movie stars.

Go ahead. Put it in the box.

The problem is that most things we put in that box just doesn’t seem to deliver. The wise and rich king Solomon spent years chasing after the good life, only to conclude that it cannot be found in the right job, the right spouse, the right retirement plan or the right vacation (Ecclesiastes 1:14; 2:3-11). But we know that, right? We know, don’t we, that having the *good* life is not the same thing as having the right *goods*? Could it be that what truly leads to the good life is something that isn’t even on my list?

FACING DEATH

I have some bad news. You are probably going to die. The church believes and confesses—as one of our 7 core confessions—that the Lord will return one day, and that could happen in our lifetime, but if we past behavior is indicative of future performance, odds are, you are going to die. Are you curious about it? Several years ago, I ran across a story from NBC news that if you were to going to die of natural causes, AI is able to predict with remarkable accuracy the time and the cause. Would you want to know?

We may fear the when and the how of our death, but we also wonder what will they be saying about us at the funeral?

Very few of us get a preview of that coming attraction. But Alfred was given a gift. Alfred had dedicated his life to the art of war. He developed several new types of explosives—355 patents to be exact—for things like nitroglycerin detonators, blasting caps, and smokeless gunpower. And at the age of 34, Alfred invented dynamite, which was used profusely in wars all over the world. He was called “the dynamite king,” and became enormously wealthy as a result.

But then the most curious thing happened. In 1888, when he was 55 years old, Alfred’s brother suffered a heart attack and died. Due to poor reporting, one newspaper got the brothers confused and published an obituary for Alfred. Can you imagine waking up one morning to read in the newspaper your own obituary? It gets worse. He wasn’t called “the dynamite king.” Oh no. The newspaper article began with these words, “the merchant of death is dead” – a man who spent his life and considerable wealth developing new ways to mutilate and kill.

On that day, sitting in his chair at the breakfast table, staring face to face with his own mortality and reputation, Alfred Nobel had a change of heart. He called up his lawyer and rewrote his will—establishing the Nobel Peace Prize to be given out each year to the person who did the most to promote peace.¹

What if I asked you to write your own obituary. I'm curious, what would you write? I suspect that, as you put pen to paper, whether to write your obituary or even to put your answer in the box, you too might have a change of heart.

You see, we all seem to keep two different lists in our pocket. One we might call the “resume” virtues. Most of us spend our time at school, and most of our lives, chasing after these: those things that show you are competent at your job, you can beat the competition, you can climb the social ladder, or you can out-manuever everyone else in this kill-or-be-killed world.

But then, somewhere deep in the recesses of our minds, we keep another list. This one we might call the “eulogy” virtues: those things people will hopefully say about us when we are gone. I doubt seriously we will care very much if people mention how much money we made, or how cut-throat we were in our jobs. They probably won't mention either of those things. But will they speak of our humility and kindness, our bravery, honesty, and faithfulness? We hope so. But it's telling, isn't it, that somehow, it takes us far too long to realize that the first list doesn't automatically lead to the second one. So if we spend our lives chasing the resume virtues, why would we think we would ever achieve the eulogy virtues?

No, what you chase after is what you become. You see, the list of things you live for is the list of things your heart craves. Show me what you live for, and I'll show you what you love. That is why St. Augustine said, “you are what you love.”

THE SCHOOL OF CHRIST

That means the only way we are going to intentionally move toward the eulogy virtues, toward the obituary you want to have written for yourself, is to change the things we love.

“we don't become better because we acquire new information,” writes David Brooks; “but because we acquire better loves. We don't become what we know. Education is a process of love formation. When you go to school it should offer you new things to love.”

¹ <https://www.history.com/news/did-a-premature-obituary-inspire-the-nobel-prize>

That quote is both telling and compelling. Because one early church historian says the problem with the way we approach church history is that we tend to study it as a history of ideas. But all those ideas volleyed back and forth in the early church was “at the service of a much loftier goal” than to give new ideas. No, says Robert Wilken, “the church gave men and women a new love.” They gave men and women “Jesus Christ, a person who inspired their actions and held their affections.” The church saw its mission to win hearts and minds, and thereby change lives.

Call it “the school of Christ.” It was Jesus Christ who said, “a thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of” (John 10:13 MSG). “Life with a capital L.”² Progression in the school of Christ involves transformed habits and having new things to love. And in the school of Christ, the curriculum designed to aid you in adopting new loves, becoming a transformed self and finally experiencing the good and abundant life is known as the Sermon on the Mount.

THE CURRICULUM

It's just 3 chapters long. You can read it in less time than it takes for me to finish this sermon. And yet, that sermon has become known as **the** Sermon. Augustine called it “the charter of the Christian life.” Wesley called it “the complete art of happiness.” All the great figures in church history wrote commentaries on it. The early church fathers quoted it more than they quoted anything else.³ And for centuries, the Sermon was the textbook in all schools for everything from ethics to parenting.⁴ And it wasn't just appealing to Christians, being listed as one of the most inspiring texts throughout the world by Mohatma Ghandi. It's the most unique sermon that strikes a chord with believers and nonbelievers.

So, it makes me wonder. If the Sermon is so good, so rich, and so aimed toward our own ultimate desire for the good life...what's the catch? There must be a catch. Because the Sermon is often...quite often...highly neglected.

² Ronald J. Allen, “The Surprising Blessing of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-9),” in David Fleer & Dave Bland (eds.), *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007), p. 88.

³ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), p.3 n.2.

⁴ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), pp. 134-135.

Try wading through ethics textbooks today and good luck finding the Sermon on the Mount included. Go to the “self-help” section at the local bookstore and pick up a parenting book. See if the Sermon on the Mount figures prominently. I bet it doesn’t.⁵ John Stott famously said that of all the teachings of Jesus, “the Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known...arguably...the least understood, and certainly...the least obeyed.”⁶

HOW TO READ IT

Well, that makes sense, doesn’t it? If it’s the “least understood,” of course it would be the least obeyed. But what it means to “obey” the Sermon gets tricky.

If you read the sermon (and its parallel in Luke 6) and take it on face value, you might be in for a shock. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the persecuted. Do you want to be blessed? Of course. Do you want to be poor and persecuted? That’s a different question. Or is it?

Everybody knows the rule “don’t murder,” and everyone knows what happens if you do! But Jesus says you and I are guilty and will face the same consequences for simply being angry with a brother (Matt. 5:21-22). It seemed like good policy to give an evil person his due in the form of “eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth”. But Jesus says “do not resist an evil person”—whatever he asks for, give it to him and more; and if anyone wants to borrow from you, don’t ever turn them down (Matt 5:38-42). Jesus, can you summarize in one sentence what this new standard of righteousness is? Sure, replies the Lord: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48).

I have a simple question for you: does he mean it, or not? In Christian history, some have argued that he doesn’t really mean it. Jesus is giving rules no one can keep, so that we’ll fall on our faces and appreciate Jesus for doing what we could never do. It’s a beautiful sentiment, but it doesn’t square with Matthew. The story with which Jesus ends the sermon on the Mount begins with this line: “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock”, whereas “whoever hears these sayings of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Matt 7:24, 26). The Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus telling his Apostles to “go and make disciples of all

⁵ William C. Mattison III, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2017), pp. 1 & 4.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), p. 15.

nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20). Wouldn’t that include the Sermon on the Mount?

“I’m giving you a high calling,” says Jesus... “and I intend for you to obey me by putting these teachings into practice.” If that’s the case, why do we hem and haw when trying to obey this difficult sermon? Well, because it’s not a question of whether Jesus meant it; but there *is* a question of what he meant *by* it. Yes, some have wrongly suggested that Jesus doesn’t mean it; but others have read the Sermon like a daily checklist of rules—a New Testament Deuteronomy, so to speak. “Do these things, do them right, and you’ll be righteous, you’ll be good, you’ll be blessed. And when you’ve done all these things the right way, then you’ll be happy and enjoy the good life. Good luck!”

But if Jesus is really trying to give a one-stop shop rigid set of rules meant to be applied directly to every situation, then we ought to think people deserve to be put in maximum security prison for harboring anger in their hearts (after all, says Jesus, it’s the same as murder). We ought to be against the practice self-defense or even serving as a defendant in court (He says no oaths—is that no pledge of allegiance or swearing to tell the whole truth? How about being a scout?). If Jesus is giving a rigid set of rules to be read legalize, then you ought to never say “no” to your kid’s constant request for money from your wallet—the text says “if someone asks for your coat, give him your shirt,” and “do not resist an evil person,” [and who is more evil than a whiny teenager]?

We know in our bones that there is something more challenging than claiming this only applies to Jesus, but something more reassuring than saying we are only pleasing God when we live perfect lives. Jesus is not giving “case law” (where a rule is meant to be applied hard-and-fast to every case); he’s demanding that we get to the heart of the matter, rather than settling for legal-ease that justifies our selfish desires. He really means it – that God is watching our hearts; the heart of anger that leads to murder is the real heart of the problem. But trying to read this as a list of straight-forward rules for every case will drive you crazy. It was not intended that way. I want to suggest a better way to read.

ITS ABOUT CHARACTER FORMATION

Most Christians think the Sermon on the Mount is primarily about making ethical decisions: what to do, what not to do, and how to do or not do it. But what if the Sermon on the Mount is less about what you are supposed to do and more about who you are called to be?

The Sermon doesn’t just inform us, it transforms us. The sermon is about character formation: how to become the kind of person whose intentions and motivations lead

us to want and to choose what is good. So when we read the Sermon, we should constantly be asking ourselves this question: “how does this teaching shape my character and make me a better person?” “How do I get into heaven” is a great question; but the Sermon causes us to ask another one: “What kind of person will I be when I get there?” Not just “how do I enter the kingdom of heaven”, but “what kind of person will I become as I live within it?”

Have you ever tried to keep up something you had no investment in? A new year’s resolution someone else wrote for you? A new elective that was the only one that fit into your schedule...underwater basketweaving. If you have ever tried to break a bad habit you know that will power is not enough. It’s never enough.

Dallas Willard reminds us that the gospel message can’t be reduced to sin management and behavior modification. The good news of the kingdom is not “if you keep saying no to what you really want, and force yourself to do the right list of things, then you can win a ticket to heaven when you die.”

It was about this time last year that I shared with you a story from my teen years. Wanting to be a preacher, I cut my teeth on old “sermon outline” books. Somewhere along the way, I remember running across a 3-point lesson based on this line from Paul: “Touch not! Taste not! Handle not!” ([Colossians 2:21 KJV](#)). The sermons three points were something like “don’t touch a woman before you are married, don’t taste alcohol, and don’t handle drugs.” Who knows. It might even have been the old line “we don’t smoke, and we don’t chew, and we don’t go with girls that do!” I can’t remember.

What I do remember is how shocked I was when I read the passage in a different translation, and discovered Paul’s point was radically different.

You died with Christ. Now the forces of the universe don't have any power over you. Why do you live as if you had to obey such rules as, "Don't handle this. Don't taste that. Don't touch this."? After these things are used, they are no longer good for anything. So why be bothered with the rules that humans have made up? Obeying these rules may seem to be the smart thing to do. They appear to make you love God more and to be very humble and to have control over your body. But they don't really have any power over our desires. ([Col 2:20-23 CEV](#))

Paul here is saying that the Christian religion—rooted in the good news of the kingdom—cannot be reduced to sin management and behavior modification. Seeking to control my sin behavior by just trying harder to live by a new set of rules puts me in a hopeless and miserable position. It leaves me constantly aware of my failures with no power to be different! This is the very definition of legalism. You are then forced into an endless cycle of doing the same things, using the same tools, and expecting a different

result (if you've heard that before, that's the definition of insanity). Sometimes you can break a bad habit through will power when it is accompanied by a strong desire. Something you crave more than the bad habit. Call it "a new thing to love." Trying to change what you do, without having changed what you love, is insanity. It simply won't work.

But what if there was a way to adopt new things to love? Listen to a famous passage in an unfamiliar translation: [Galatians 5:22](#). The Spirit produces fruit in our hearts and lives, and the goal here is to get rid not just of our outward desires, but our inward condition: for "those who belong to Christ have crucified their old nature **with all that it loved.**"

AN INVITATION

See the Sermon on the Mount as an invitation—an invitation to become a different person than you are now, a better you than you have ever seen. A you that is changed from the inside-out. Where your heart, your mind, and your will are so utterly transformed that you actually do give in to what your heart craves—give in to what your gut thinks—give into what your heart desires, and it feels so natural because your heart has become aligned with God's.⁷ Dallas Willard says see an invitation:

An invitation to live lives free of contempt and anger.

An invitation to live free from the domination of sexual lust.

An invitation to be free of the desire to dominate, manipulate, or control other people.

An invitation to live a life free from grudges, free from the constant need for fairness, free from the vicious downward spiral of payback and revenge.

An invitation to become the kind of person who is able to love your enemies and bless those who curse you.

The kind of person who does not perform for human credit.

The kind of person who doesn't trust in money, food, and clothing, or see them as answers to their deepest needs.

The kind of person who doesn't manage others, judge others, criticize others, compare themselves to others, but simply loves others for the sake of Jesus Christ.

And this will have a profound difference not only on how we read the Sermon on the Mount, but why we put it into practice. Why do we turn the other cheek when an enemy strikes a blow? Why do we give without expecting in return? Why do we stay true to

⁷ For this great summary of Willard's material, see Dallas Willard here: <https://www.facebook.com/dallas.willard.0717/posts/the-commands-of-jesus-in-the-sermon-on-the-mountain-are-invitations-to-be-a-certain/2744272219117603/>

our word in every area of our lives? For the same reason we don't kill our neighbors and destroy our friendships. Not because we have to tell ourselves to avoid our desires, but because our desires have been changed into love.

In short, hear an invitation to form habits of the heart that lead to the eulogy virtues—to become the person you always wanted to be.

We need new things to love, and we need a new community who shares our new loves.

Welcome to the school of Christ.