

The Way of Jesus: Counter-Cultural Faith
Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 5:1-2

Introduction – Longing for Good News

We've been fortunate this last month to have very mild temperatures. Makes you kind of wonder when the other shoe – the frigid temperatures – will drop. Tomorrow is Groundhog Day. Regardless of what the varmint in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania says, I guarantee you: we'll have at least another six weeks of winter. We're right in the middle of it and right about now, if you're like me, you're dreaming of spring.

Seems like we're always longing for a fresh start. Life seems to be a cycle of struggles. We're looking for good news – a new set of rules that will bring a better life. I remember the excitement that Diane and I felt when we purchased our first home together in 1985. My mother-in-law had purchased a home for us to live in while we were in the Los Angeles area. Grandchildren make you do strange things. She didn't want her first grandchild being raised in an apartment complex in LA. At the time, landlords could discriminate against families with children. The complexes that allowed children were generally not very desirable. The house was a real blessing, but it wasn't ours – it was my mother-in-law's. We were still tenants.

The back yard was overgrown, but I couldn't thin it out for more garden light because our "landlord" determined that we needed the privacy from the apartment complex behind us. Just to make things fun, my father-in-law would come down from the Bay Area twice a year with his pruning pole and saw and make a pile of branches six feet high and twenty feet square. He said, "Now if you'll cut those up into three foot pieces and tie them together with twine and put them on the curb, the trash service will take them." Well, I'm not sure how he filled his days, but I was a new father holding down two jobs and grad school. As soon as they left town, I rented a dumpster for \$35 and disposed of it all. But we had one very troublesome bush in the backyard that literally grabbed my attention. It's called a bougainvillea. It had wicked two-inch thorns that would impale me every time I walked by it. Bougainvilleas are beautiful when they bloom. This one didn't bloom so I cut it down. Well, the landlord wasn't pleased. Learning from that experience, there were other things I wanted to do with the house; but since I wasn't the owner, I restrained myself.

So when I got a better-paying position in another city, Diane and I were very excited to purchase a home. It was a tough time to buy with interest rates around 15% but we qualified for an FHA loan with 5% down. The day we were approved for our loan was truly a great celebration for the good news that we received. The house was still being built and we had to wait to move in. But we were excited and our imaginations ran wild with the new possibilities and reality that we now anticipated.

Many of you have had a similar experience. If you're politically aware at all, you go through a cycle of longing for good news every four or eight years. If you were a progressive Democrat in 2008, you couldn't wait to get rid of George W. And when Barak Obama was elected, you reveled in the good news that the direction of the country was going to take a sharp turn. Even if you weren't a Democrat, you might have also celebrated the good news that this country finally elected a black man. Now, six years later, if you are a conservative Republican, you're desperate for good news – hoping for a candidate that can win a presidential election in 2016 and turn the country's direction once again. Now, have I offended you all equally?

For all of us, good news means real hope based on a new reality and ways of doing things. Personal and political good news comes and goes. Our new house developed issues shortly after we moved in and our political heroes quickly develop feet of clay once they are in power. But there is Good News from God that never goes bad. That is what Jesus came to declare.

Text – Matthew 4:17; 23-5:2 (ESV)

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

...And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

The Backstory: Jewish Expectations

People in Jesus' day desperately longed for good news. By the time Christ came on the scene, the Jews had been under the harsh heel of the Roman Empire for nearly one hundred years. It must have been a great source of irritation to have pagan gentiles who worshipped idols rule over the people of the one true God. The Jewish prophets had long promised a deliverer who would restore the glory of Israel. Every devout Jew was waiting for their messiah to deliver them from the political oppression they felt under the heavy hand of Rome's military might.

The longing and expectation for a messiah had often come and gone for the Jewish people of that time. Nearly two hundred years before, the Maccabean Revolt overthrew an evil and pagan king to establish a Jewish kingdom – an event still celebrated today at Hanukkah. But it wasn't to last. In 63 BC, the Roman army overran Palestine, effectively establishing the Empire's control to the Jewish homeland. After that, several self-described messiahs led political revolts against the Romans only to be eventually crushed by military might. The presence of the Zealots in

Jesus day – even one of his disciples was among them – illustrates the resentful passion of the Jews against the Romans and their longing for deliverance. The fact that John the Baptist gained a considerable following in the desert shows that the people were looking not only for political deliverance but spiritual revival as well.

That was the world of great anticipation that Jesus came into. But he was not at all what they expected.

The Radical Nature of the Sermon on the Mount

And that's just exactly how God operates. Our ways are not his; seems like we are always surprised by what God does. We want things a certain way and we want them now. God does it completely different and he almost always makes us wait. Following God demands that we trust him and have faith. It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus expects the same.

The Sermon on the Mount is radical. It is 180 degrees out from the way most people order their lives. Take these teachings from the passage, for example:

- Right from the beginning, Jesus shocks us by asserting that the most fortunate people in the world are those who are poor in spirit, mourning, deferential, yearning for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and persecuted. That's not the way to get ahead in this world. You gotta have pride, hide your pain, assert yourself, break the rules, settle the score, do unto others before they do it to you and stand up for your rights!
- Jesus set a higher standard than even the Jewish law which prohibited murder and adultery. But the new expectations of the kingdom of heaven made you guilty if you called a man a "fool" and if you just *looked* at a woman as a sexual object.
- The law provided for equal retaliation but Jesus said to turn the other cheek when someone slaps you in the face. He pushed beyond the rhetoric of the Old Testament to insist that his followers love their enemies rather than hate them.
- And if you think the measure of acceptance with God is to be like the religious leaders – think again. If you want to be in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus told his audience, their righteousness had to exceed that of the theological scholars and the religious fundamentalists of the day.

The sermon that is recorded in Matthew 5-7 and paralleled in Luke 6 is an essential part of the Good News that Jesus was bringing. It had to be unsettling to his listeners. But Jesus, as God in human flesh, would be constantly exploding expectations.

Some Bible teachers have taught that the Sermon on the Mount was intended to describe a standard so impossibly high that it was only relevant for some future time – the millennial reign

when Christ would rule on the earth. Others teach that Jesus' intention in teaching the sermon was that people would despair of their own righteousness and look to him in faith for his imputed righteousness.

I believe the second view has some merit, but it falls short because it allows us to brush off a way of life that Jesus clearly expected of his people. Moreover, the history and testimony of Christians for over two thousand years is that this way of life is possible. We cannot brush it aside as simply a high standard that cannot be pursued in this present life. That's a theological cop-out.

No. I can't go there. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was teaching was a new and practical ethic that would stand out as light from a "city on a hill" to the rest of the world. As those who would seek to follow Jesus, the teachings given here serve as signposts to the pathway of the Kingdom.

Still Longing for Good News

Friends, the world is still longing for Good News. Not the political or financial news that can turn around in just a short time. The world is longing for lasting Good News that will change everything forever. Only Jesus offers that kind of news.

But some may ask, how are Jesus' teachings any different than other world religions? What makes the Sermon on the Mount lasting Good News? It is because they are the way of the Kingdom of God. Every other religious leader offered "advice" rather than good news. Every other religious leader died and remained in the grave. But Jesus came inaugurating the kingdom of God – demonstrating his power over the world's broken system through his miracles and healings. He came announcing and teaching the Kingdom through his parables and passages like the Sermon on the Mount. The big difference between Jesus and other religious leaders is that not only did Jesus die a martyr's death, but he was resurrected on the third day to defeat the power of sin and death that had broken the world since the Garden of Eden. All other religious teachings of the world are simply advice. Jesus' message was real Good News because ushered in a new kingdom and a new reality when he died and rose from the grave. That is why the Sermon on the Mount matters.

What could happen if we became a people who truly and radically followed Jesus in his teachings? You and I would be changed. There is enough in this sermon to touch each and every one of us in many ways over the coming weeks and months. If we will open our hearts and be willing to obey Jesus' teaching, he will address our motivations, our fears, our beliefs, and, ultimately, our actions. We would, in fact, be the light of the world – the light of Aberdeen – of your school – of your work – of your neighborhood. Our lives would change. People would

see it and say, “Let us come with you, for we see that God is changing you for the better. I want that kind of life.”

Our purpose – our mission – is to help people find and follow Jesus. It begins with an open heart to hear and obey the teaching of Jesus. Jesus closed the sermon with a great warning and promise. At the outset of this series, it is prudent for us to hear it:

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

Matthew 7:24-27

We all endure storms in our life. The way to stand – and to stand strong – is to hear and *do* these radical words of Jesus.

Prayer

The Lord’s Table