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Day 299 - October 26

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## Jesus the Christ (5 BCE – 30 CE)

### *The Sermon on the Mount*

Readings: *Matthew 5:1-48; 6:1-34; 7:1-29; Luke 6:20-49*

#### **Reflections:**

- Matthew 5-6 (called the Sermon on the Mount) as well as Luke 6:20-40 (called the Sermon on the Plain) capture a summary of Jesus' teaching. Both capture what was held as Jesus' core teaching. Matthew's is a bit longer but the essential content is the same. This same message Jesus would have given many times and people understood this as his core discipleship teaching.
- The teaching opens with what has been called the Beatitudes. This list captures a progression of personal, transformational heart qualities.
  - Poor in Spirit = the kingdom of heaven belongs to them: The journey to becoming true children of God starts with being poor in spirit. This means being emptied and surrendered to God. Psalm 14:6, 22:24, 25:16, 34:6, 40:17, and 69:29 all refer to a kind of righteous poor. Jesus is not talking just about being materially poor, although the materially poor are in a better position to understand his message. Jesus is talking about those who have abandoned the trappings of this world. The kingdom of heaven is the starting point and ending point of this list. In other words, it all starts with and ends with entering into and experiencing the kingdom of heaven.
  - Mourn = be comforted: "...those who mourn" most likely a reference to repentance and mourning for sin and the brokenness of the world. They are comforted by the grace they receive and the power of God's grace in the world.
  - Meek = inherit the earth: "...the meek" refers to those who are humble and live as servants. Rather than the powerful taking over the earth, the meek inherit it. In other words, they don't have to conquer the world and its power structures. God will simply give that to them.
  - Hunger and thirst for righteousness = be satisfied: "...hunger and thirst" captures the notion of people following God in the desert. The Israelites were both hungry and thirsty in the wilderness. Jesus declares that to follow him is to live a desert life where we hunger and thirst not for food or water but to see

God's righteousness restored to this world. The promise is that as we crave his righteousness, we will be fully satisfied as we are made righteous.

- Merciful = shown mercy: If our posture is meekness and our goal is righteousness, then our activity is to show mercy. Our goal as Christ-followers is to be agents of mercy, helping everyone we can who is in need. In return, we receive mercy from those around us and most importantly, from God.
- Pure in heart = see God: This process of transformation results in an inner purification of our hearts where we experientially receive the new heart that was promised by Ezekiel (18:13, 36:26). This will be the work of the Spirit to guide us through this renewal of our hearts, minds and lives. As we receive a new Spirit and God gives us a new heart ("pure heart") then we are restored in intimate relationship with God. To see God is to be in intimate friendship with God, to be in complete right standing before him.
- Peacemakers = children of God: Our transformation doesn't stop with just our inner transformation but results in God using us to be agents of peace and reconciliation in the world. Then we are not just restored in our intimacy with God but we are also restored to a grace filled relationship with those around us as they call us "children of God." We become God-like and are restored as his image bearers within the world, even better we become his children.
- Persecuted for righteousness = kingdom of heaven: Our transformation and mission does not stop here. The kingdom of heaven is at war with the principalities and powers of this dark world. The result of that clash is that we can anticipate that we will be persecuted for the sake of our righteousness. We begin with the kingdom of heaven as our only source of security when we were just poor in spirit. We end with the kingdom of heaven being our only source of safety when we are persecuted. Jesus expands on this to say that as people verbally speak against us and attack us because of our relationship with Jesus (like the prophets were persecuted) we can have joy because God will reward us in heaven. Interestingly Paul the apostle will claim that his reward in heaven will be the people he led to have a restored relationship to God. These people were his joy and his crown (see Philippians 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 2:19). Paul does also refer to a crown that he receives from God (1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 4:8).
- This list of transformational progression is meant to help us understand the developmental steps of spiritual maturation. In a sense, this is like a spiritual grown matrix that helps people understand what it means to grow spiritually closer to Christ and to live more fully surrendered to his heart and mission.
- This approach to life change is also incredibly irreligious. The focus is completely on our heart condition and approach to relationships. There are no rules, rituals or magical formulas. It is all about living a life of love and service to God.

- Luke's addition of the "Woes to you" continues to develop this theme but moves it in the complete opposite direction. Here Jesus warns against bonding with a self-centered approach to life: the pursuit of wealth, physical satisfaction (well fed), feeling great all the time (only wanting to laugh), and popularity. This appetite for pleasure, prestige and power will leave you dissatisfied in the end and empty. The way of following Jesus means we must lay down our own lives if we are to follow him as our Lord. Jesus will continue to make this crystal clear.
- The saying about salt losing its saltiness is intriguing. Salt can't not lose its saltiness. It is impossible. Joshua ben Chananja (CE 90) a Jewish Rabbi underscores this understanding with one of his sayings. Therefore, Jesus is saying that his followers are called to be the salt of the earth – they are to bring out the best in the world around them and also help preserve the world (the two main properties of salt). Having said that, if what is suppose to be salt (religious Israel) is not actually doing this, then it is thrown out as dirt because it is worthless and has shown itself not to be true salt. Without doubt, this is a strong statement against those who claim to be God's world changers but in the end are just dead in their own self-absorbed religious worldview and insular community. We should note that in the Sermon on the Mount there are a number of impossible and humorous images. Salt that isn't salty, dark light, and a guy with a pole sticking out of his eye. Jesus uses these crazy images to engage the crowds and no doubt cause them to laugh and remember his point.
- Jesus continues to develop this theme by using the image of light, a city and a lamp. He begins with the property of light and how we are to bring God's warm (love) and illumination (truth) to the world. As a community we are to be like a light-giving city that everyone can see and move towards as they look for refuge. The image of a lamp echoes this vision as a lamp can bring light into a home for all to see. Here Jesus adds that it makes no sense to put a lamp under a bowl but rather people put lamps on lamp stands. Again this is an indictment against the religious establishment that was trying to keep the Gentiles away from God's truth and grace rather than for looking for ways to share it and include them in community. Those who follow Jesus are to live their lives to be expressions of his love and truth so that all can see God at work in their practical actions of kindness. Jesus basically says we need to live the message so people can understand it and in turn, reach out to God.
- Jesus then turns his full attention to the Law and walks those who would be his followers through the process of correctly understanding and interpreting the role of the Torah. Jesus first establishes that he as the Messiah did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. The Law and the Prophets represented what we would consider today as the Old Testament scriptures, not simply the Ten Commandments or the five books of the Torah. He needs to say this because his approach to life with God appears to be constantly breaking the Law. Rather, he came to fulfill the Law. In other words, the Law was pointing in a direction that was incomplete and unfulfilled. Jesus came to reveal the

final and full version of what it means to live in true relationship with God and your neighbor. Therefore the Law is both fulfilled and obsolete all at the same time. It is not rejected as categorically wrong but is replaced with something better. Jesus then says that every bit of the Law will remain until the time of the new earth. It will play a role but not the one they anticipated. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commands (the Law) and teaches others to do so will be called least (or “out to lunch”) in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus’ new approach isn’t about breaking all the rules or trying to get others to join you in living as rebels for rebellion sake. Jesus’ love ethic doesn’t set out to break Law but transcend it with something far better. In this way the spirit of the Law, the vision of a love-ordered life, is fulfilled while the shackles of a blind, obsession with rules are broken off of our life. The love ethic actually empowers us to be able to rightly understand, teach and live the essence of what was captured in the Law. The Spirit of God changes our heart from the inside out and then gives us a heart of love so that we can actually not live the rules of the law but the love that the Law was calling for. Jesus concludes with his most powerful statement: Unless our righteousness surpasses the religious leaders of his days (and they were obsessed with legalistic righteousness) we won’t enter into the kingdom, Jesus’ new way of doing things. This would have shocked his hearers. Again, Jesus isn’t calling people to be gold-metal decathletes in the religious Olympics. He is announcing that his new order will lift people to a whole new level of living love that will completely surpass anything that can be achieved through religion or a rules-based approach to life.

- Jesus now turns to a number of key statements in the Law and points out the higher calling or the failure of a religious mindset. Jesus basically says, “Don’t think that just not killing people is good enough. When you are angry with another person, you are still in trouble and in danger of judgment (note: Gehenna or sometimes translated “hell” was a valley of historic judgment outside Jerusalem and was a visual image of dying under judgment). Live a life of reconciliation and keep short accounts with people because it’s key to your relationship with God.” Remember the Jews wanted to kill all the Romans and felt free to hate the Romans, Samaritans, and Jewish tax collectors.
- Then he turns to adultery. The religious leaders were obsessed with attempting to maintain sexual purity by getting rid of all prostitutes through stoning. See John 8:1-11. Jesus basically says on this point, “Don’t think that not committing adultery is good enough. You all commit adultery in your hearts when you lust. So what causes you to sin? Is it your eyes or your hands? Do you cut off your hands or poke out your eyes to try to stop yourself from lusting? Of course not! It is your heart that causes you to sin. Get a new heart! You know, even by obeying the Law you in essence are promoting adultery! So why are you obsessing with adultery when you practice free and easy divorce and are constantly lusting in your hearts after women? You need a new heart!” Jesus’ statements here are not about trying to give us one reason why divorce is okay. He is challenging the religiously minded to look at their own lives and their confidence in the Law as a means to righteousness in God’s sight. We shouldn’t obsess with judging

everyone's sexual sin or go around poking out our eyes to stop our lusting. That is ridiculous and doesn't work (in the same way as stoning a prostitute does to get rid of my temptation to sin). We all need new hearts!

- On oaths, Jesus basically says, "Stop being so super-spiritual with your oath taking and trying to say that your religious loyalty to heaven, Israel, or Jerusalem puts you in some elite class. You do not have authority to change anything in your own life so why talk like you do? Keep it simple. Just say yes or no and then follow through.
- Jesus now moves on to the most radical teachings. It is at the climax of the Law because it gets right at the core of our addiction with self-saving and our inability to really trust God with everything.
- Jesus continues to rewrite the heart of the Law. He quotes the principle of justice from the Law, "An eye for an eye" (See Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21) and then goes on to reverse the entire approach to people who hurt you. Do not resist but submit to your enemy and even look for ways to be generous. Jesus' words at first sound ridiculous but he actually is teaching what works to restore relationship. Counter attacks only ignite a cycle of hatred that escalates the destructiveness of the relationship. Someone has to be the first not to attack back and so Jesus calls all of his followers to go on the offense to love their enemies, do good to them. Jesus' approach is to wipe out your enemies by making them your friends. Jesus says that our motivation to do this is to be like God who extends love to his enemies, particularly expressed through Jesus laying his life down to restore us to relationship with him (See Romans 5:10, Colossians 1:21). What should be our motivation to adopt such a wildly self-sacrificial approach? We will be rewarded by God, we will be truly God's children, and we will be like God. Many people struggle with this teaching because they feel it will allow evil people to have unchecked advantage at doing their destructive work (e.g. who would stop Hitler?) as well as leave their own loved ones at risk (e.g. But what if someone breaks into my house and is going to kill my children?). Jesus never predicted that his movement would be anything but a minority movement. He called all who would follow him to be a trans-national movement of peacemaking, self-sacrificial servants to express God's grace to everyone. He declares upfront that this is dangerous and may cost people their lives. In terms of the natural instinct to protect our children, this one teaching causes us to search our hearts to see how much we trust God. Do we trust having a gun in our house rather than being a family of prayer who depends completely on God for our life and protection? (Note: families with guns have more fatalities in the family than families without guns. The children are actually statistically more likely to be killed by the gun the parents keep, than the gun of an intruder).
- Jesus then moves on to challenge those who want to turn their spirituality and acts of service to God into a platform for their prideful self-promotion. Whether giving to the poor (it is assumed) or praying, both are to be done humbly and in secret. Jesus directly

challenges the inherent pride of the religious leaders of his days and calls them hypocrites (or “pretenders” or “actors” – a hypocrite was an actor in a Greek play).

- Jesus then goes on to give a basic teaching about prayer called “The Lord’s Prayer.” It is strikingly simple and irreligious. First, God is referred to as father. God is intimate, personal and accessible like a parent. The focus is on God’s kingdom, his will and way of doing things being done within our relationships and lives. Our needs are basic necessities, forgiveness and the enablement to forgive others, and strength to avoid temptation and to be rescued from the power of evil. The prayer is simple, conversational and practical. Jesus basically says, “Keep it simple, talk to God from the heart, and know that he cares about all aspects of your life.”
- Jesus adds an additional teaching about forgiveness after teaching us to include forgiveness when we pray. What is amazing is that the disciples didn’t need to go to the temple to be forgiven. They also didn’t need to go through John’s baptism to be forgiven. Now all they had to do was simply pray and they would be forgiven. Talk about an anti-religious approach to God! Jesus also consistently connects our receiving forgiveness from God as the basis for us forgiving others. We don’t forgive people because they ask for it or deserve it or can guarantee they will never hurt us again. We forgive because we were forgiven. Our debt that was paid off was so big that we naturally look to forgive others as an ongoing expression of gratitude for God forgiving us. The key then to forgiving someone is to continually meditate on all the ways God has forgiven you and set your own experience of hurt and betrayal in the context of the cross of Jesus and his death and suffering for you.
- Jesus concludes his section on hypocrisy by including fasting in the list of things to do in secret. Fasting is choosing not to eat for a time to be devoted to a more focused time of prayer and seeking God. Our hunger becomes a constant reminder to focus on God, to see him as our sole provider and satisfier of our life, and to practically express a complete dependence on God as we await his response to our prayers.
- Jesus now turns his attention to seeking first the kingdom, trusting God with everything and rightly discerning what truly matters in life.
  - The first section (Matthew 6:19-24) focuses on three paralleled insights: two kinds of treasures, two ways of gazing at life, two masters to rule your life. There is treasure on earth and treasure in heaven. There is a heavenly light that is true light to your heart and an earthly light that becomes darkness. There is a heavenly master God and an earthly master named stuff (or mammon – money and possessions). We have a series of choices to make. What will we value – heavenly or earthly treasure? What will we make our focus – true light or dark light? What/who will be our master – God or stuff?
  - The second section (Matthew 6:25- 34) focuses on true contentment. The key is faith in God. Jesus calls his followers to observe God’s care for creation and to

then trust him with daily provisions of food, drink and clothing. He points his followers to a higher pursuit: “Seek first his kingdom (the outworking of his purposes in our relationships and in the world) and his righteousness (the true experience of his rightness working in and through your life) and everything else will fall into place. The religious leaders were focused on the earthly kingdom of Israel and religious righteousness according to the Law. Jesus is calling his disciples to a higher loyalty to God’s kingdom and to a restored relationship with God. Jesus says that his followers must be intentionally near-sighted when it comes to assessing risk. Focus on today and allow God to take care of tomorrow. This doesn’t mean you don’t plan and prepare for the future. It does mean you don’t stress about things you can’t control – like the future. All of this adds up to a God-focused dependency and trust.

- The third section exercising true discernment.
  - The measure we use with others will be used on us.
  - We will become like the people we follow.
  - If we have a plank in our eye, how can we help anyone else?
  - If we entrust what is most valuable to the wrong people, we will suffer ruin.
  - All of these are strong warnings to Jesus’ followers to discern carefully, humbly and wisely.
- The fourth section returns to trusting God and making him the sole focus of our love and loyalty and supply for our needs. It is interesting that in a parallel account in Luke 11:11-12 that Jesus states that God will give the Spirit to those who ask. Here Matthew records Jesus saying that God will give good gifts. Both are obviously true and we see that Jesus’ whole approach to relationship with God is revolutionary. People can receive grace, gifts and even the Spirit from God just by asking. No religious hierarchy to climb. No merit system to follow. God’s generosity overflows to those who love and trust him.
- Jesus concludes his complete revisionist approach to the Law and the Old Testament teaching by saying this, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12 – Also see Matthew 22:36-39 and Mark 12:27-29 for Jesus’ teaching on the greatest commandments that sum up the Law and the Prophets). Here we see Jesus conclude that the essence of the Old Testament is a proactive love that prefers others. Now, again many of the practices were far from what we might consider loving but Jesus is attempting to press past the religious system of the Old Testament to unearth the principles that ultimately pointed to preferring others to you. We should note that up until this point the “golden rule” (as this has been termed) was primarily understood in the negative form, don’t do anything

to someone else that you would not want done to you. In other words, leave others alone. Jesus puts it in the positive and raises the expectation radically. We are to not just “not hate our enemies” but go out and actively choose to love them and see to meet their needs. As we do this, we enter into God’s whole approach to relationships.

- Jesus concludes with a final teaching about the choice that all people face. There is a narrow path that leads to life and a broad path that leads to destruction. Jesus acknowledges clearly that his movement will always be a minority movement. Jesus acknowledges that the God-surrendered, other-centered approach to life is something that most people will reject and they will do this to their own demise. It is a fearful warning but we see it lived out all around us in countless big and small ways.
- Jesus then makes it clear that there will be even in his movement people who are not truly his followers but false prophets. They say all the right things and look good on the outside (wolves in sheep’s clothing – another very funny image) but only bad stuff comes from their lives. So where does the fruit of our words and actions and approach to relationships come from? Jesus makes it clear: our hearts. This final section is critical to understanding everything about Jesus teaching: “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart... For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven but only he who does the will of my Father... Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.’” So it comes down to this: Has your heart been changed? And do you know Jesus? If this is true, then the next words from Jesus are no problem at all. If your heart has been changed and you know him, you will do what he says. You won’t rationalize your way out of it but will rather put into action his teaching. Following Jesus is not about giving mental assent to a set of doctrines but is a relational approach to life that flows out of a radically transformed heart saturated with love from top to bottom. If you actually embrace the truth of what Jesus teaches, your life will be rock solid and able to endure the persecution that comes from living as a counter-cultural, truth-based, love-motivated, Jesus centered life (see the opening progression of the Sermon on the Mount).
- So we see in the summary of Jesus’ teaching that he addresses:
  - True spiritual growth - an empty, repentant, humble, merciful life which leads to being pure in heart and seeing God, becoming peacemakers and gaining the reputation of being God’s children, and will culminate in experiencing persecution as we stand against the forces of evil;
  - The failure to grasp the essence of the Law and the call to follow the higher principles within the Law;

- The failure to comprehend the true nature of love and the call to practice enemy love;
  - The failure to pursue the true nature of relationship with God and the call into personal, intimate and secret expressions of relationship with God rather than putting on a show for others;
  - The failure to perceive the higher value of God's kingdom over chasing after material security and the call to complete trust in God and singular pursuit of his kingdom and the commitment to humble self-evaluation;
  - The warning concerning being deceived to follow the broad road to destruction and the importance of actually knowing Jesus in a real relationship and actively doing what he teaches and in doing so, to find the narrow road to eternal life.
- The people's response to Jesus: Amazement at his authority in speaking the truth in love, rather than the hollowness of the religious leaders. When your life is founded on God's truth and love, God's authority comes with it. Religion must rely on control because it possesses no true authority to see lives changed. Bottom line? Jesus is amazing!