

The Sermon on the Mount – Leith 12/8/18 Kristin Jack

We don't have a lot of time this morning, & here I am wanting to tackle one of the richest & deepest sections of Scripture to be found in the Bible!

Last week Philip Hill did a great job of taking us through the first 12 verses of Matthew 5, the beatitudes, that list where Jesus says **blessed are you who are humbled, blessed are you who are mourning, blessed are you gentle, blessed are you who hunger & thirst for what is right & just, blessed are you who show mercy, blessed are you who have an undivided heart, blessed are you who make peace, and blessed are you who are persecuted for doing what is right & just.** Phil laid down a wonderful foundation of understanding for us, & even produced a very helpful table that laid for us what the character of those who belong to God's Kingdom look's like, and the inheritance that awaits us – or if you like, the fruit that our lives will produce if we live out Kingdom values & seek to become more like Jesus. And of course the goal of life for us is that we would become more like Jesus. That table is available at the back of the room.

The section of Scripture that Phil took us into last week is known as the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount **the biggest sustained block** of teaching by Jesus to be found anywhere in the NT, and we know from the research of scholars that it was the **most quoted section** of the Bible in churches, & in church writings, for the **1st 300 years** of church history. It was the **go-to section** of the Bible for the early church in order to understand what it meant to be a follower of Jesus, and a genuine Christian in this world.

It begins in Matthew chapter 5, verse 1, saying this – *“Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying...”* Now in Jesus' day, when a Rabbi or teacher had something of utmost importance to teach – he wouldn't stand up at a podium while his students sat down as we would today, but instead the Rabbi would sit – making it clear he was about to deliver something profound, & his students would sit at his feet – which is what is happening here.

In the middle of the Sermon is the exhortation to *‘seek first God Kingdom & his righteousness & justice above all else, & then everything else we need will be given to us as well’* (6.33). And of course the Lord's prayer is found in this Sermon as well. So its three chapters of wisdom and gems & exhortation from the heart of Jesus to his followers.

And it ends with those verses Janine read to us earlier, with Jesus concluding – *not everyone who calls me Lord will enter my Kingdom; & then comes the reminder that it's not enough just to hear Jesus' words, but that we need to put into practice Jesus' words, and if we do we will build our lives on a rock that can never be shaken.*

And the very last two verses of this Sermon on the Mount crescendo by saying that all those who had been listening to these words were stunned with awe & amazement, overwhelmed by the sense of spiritual authority that Jesus spoke with.

Some of the most influential lives ever lived on our planet have been by people who took the SOM seriously & sought to live it out: - people like **Francis of Assisi, Leo Tolstoy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr, Mother Teresa & even Mahatma Gandhi** – these are people who sought to build their lives around what they had read in the SOM.

And I want to tell you now about one of those people just mentioned - the great German **theologian & Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer**. How many of us here have heard of DB or know much

about his life? He is such a courageous & fascinating character, from whom we can so much about what it means to follow Jesus.

Bonhoeffer is most famous as one of the few German Christian leaders to oppose & speak out against Adolf Hitler as he rose to power in Germany through the 1930's. Bonhoeffer was actually, in terms of IQ, a bit of a **genius**. He had written his Phd & graduated in theology from University by the time he was 21.

But here's the interesting thing – even though Bonhoeffer had been involved in the church since his youth, and though he had done all this deep theological study & thinking & writing – Bonhoeffer himself said that he didn't truly **become a Christian & a follower of Jesus** until he went to the United States to do further study in the late 1920's; and the two things that he said lead to his real conversion were these

1. Through various unusual friendships he found himself regularly attending a black American gospel church in Harlem, where all they did was preach about & sing about Jesus. I mean, can you imagine it – this very proper, very intellectual German man attending this black gospel church in the 1920's?

(clapping – are we having fun yet? Ja, we are!). And the **2nd thing** that Bonhoeffer said led to his conversion to become a real follower of Jesus was that he began to read & reflect on Jesus' SOM. Matthew chapters 5 – 7.

This is what he wrote in a letter to friend about that time:

"I had plunged into my work in a very unchristian way. I was ambitious in a way that made my life difficult. Then something happened, something that has changed & transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible. I had often preached, but I had not yet become a Christian. Then the Bible, and in particular the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from all that. Since then, everything has changed and there has been a great liberation."

Bonhoeffer had come to the conclusion that taking the SOM seriously meant **love for every brother & sister**, love for the **enemy**, and love that extends to **every human being** – and that certainly included the Jewish people that Hitler was now persecuting & about which the German church, to their shame, was being almost totally silent.

And so with this new found spiritual awakening, Bonhoeffer **returned to Germany in 1931**, because he knew he had to speak out against the rise of Hitler & the rise of the Nazi's, to rescue as many Jewish people as possible, and also to try & rescue the German church which was now falling in line with & in fact supporting Hitler. And the tragedy of the German church in the 1930's is that **90%** of German Christians & German churches supported Adolf Hitler. And how could they have been so **deceived** - well – because they were **seduced** when they heard Hitler speak about the need for Germany to be guided by '**Christian morality**' & by Hitler's deep certainty that it was **divine providence** that was guiding Germany & himself; they were seduced when Hitler promised to restore the **broken German economy**, to provide jobs, to be that strong, **strong leader** that Germany needed, and tragically most Christians like most Germans just lapped it up.

And so Bonhoeffer returned, speaking out & preaching against Hitler, working to **smuggle Jewish people** out of the country; & at one stage, he opened an **underground seminary** that met in the woods, training pastors who would be willing to follow Jesus' teachings no matter what the cost. He linked up with the **small German resistance** movement, not as a fighter, but as someone who was

able to pass on valuable information he gleaned from the friends he had who were connected to the military or to the Government.

In **1939**, as the Gestapo were closing in on him, Bonhoeffer, fled to London, where he pastored a church, but almost immediately he felt convicted that it was wrong for him to be living in safety when so many people were suffering & being persecuted in Germany, & so **in early 1941** Bonhoeffer made the decision to return to Germany, even though many people begged him not to.

But he did return, & inevitably the end came for Bonhoeffer – he was **arrested in April 1943** and imprisoned in first Buchenwald and then finally Flossenburg concentration camp, where he acted as an unofficial pastor to his fellow prisoners. Finally on the **April 8th, 1945**, Bonhoeffer was executed by hanging – a month before the camp was liberated by the allies.

Bonhoeffer's is the story of a person **transformed from being religious**, from being a Christian in the broadest, loosest, intellectual sense of the word, to becoming an actual follower of Jesus – through meditating on Jesus' teachings, particularly those in this SOM.

As Jesus said – *“not all who call me Lord will enter my Kingdom, but only those who do the will of God – those who hear these words of mine - & put them into practice.”* And the key word here is practice – these are spiritual practices that we can only learn by doing, & by doing them over & over & over again. Loving our enemies, forgiving those who wound us, and trusting God unconditionally.

But here's the thing - **at first glance**, Jesus' teachings in the SOM do look incredibly hard, perhaps even humanly impossible. For example, we read **Matthew 5:21**- *‘You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to God’s judgment.”²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to God’s judgment. And anyone who says to a brother or sister, “Raca” (“you little piece of spit” in Aramaic!) ...and anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell’*

We'll that does seem impossible – because **we all get angry**, and we've all called someone a fool at some time or other. *But Jesus isn't saying to never get angry.* That would be ridiculous, because of course we see examples of Jesus getting angry in the gospels. In **Mark 3:5** When he looks around the Synagogue at all the religious people trying to stop him from healing a man because it's the sabbath, & people shouldn't be working on the sabbath, it says that *“Jesus looked around at them in anger, deeply distressed at the stubbornness of their hearts”* – and then he goes ahead & heals the man anyway.

And in the week leading up to the crucifixion, we of course have Jesus **cleansing the temple** in Jerusalem, over-turning the tables of the money lenders and those selling animals for sacrifice, and denouncing them for having *‘turned a house of prayer into market place & a den of thieves’*. I think Jesus was pretty angry at that point.

But a key insight is given to us by Paul in **Ephesians 4:26** when he gives this instruction to the church: *“Be angry but do not sin; and do not let the day end with you still being angry”*. In other words its ok to be angry - & in many situations of injustice & abuse we should be angry, but **harness that energy** & let it drive you to do something good & useful & liberating & healing, rather than something harmful.

And back to our passage in Matthew 5:21-24, & here I'm really indebted to two wonderful **Bible scholars** called Stassen & Gushee – because they have pointed out that when we look closely at Mathew we see a **powerful three-fold** pattern that occurs over & over through the SOM, & the pattern is this:

1stly, Jesus identifies the traditional morality people have been living up to, & then (**2nd step**) reveals the sinful pattern that's the real root of the problem; and then (**3rd step**) identifies the transforming action that we need to take to break out of that sinful pattern and to liberate our selves & our world from the vicious cycles we are trapped in.

Let's lay that out as a little table, so these three steps become more obvious:

The Traditional Morality & Righteousness that addresses the surface problem	The sinful pattern & the root problem	The transforming action & breakthrough initiative that addresses the heart
Matthew 5:21 "you have heard it said 'you shall not <u>kill</u> ' & 'whoever <u>kills</u> shall be liable to judgement'	Matthew 5:22 "But I say to you that everyone being <u>angry</u> with his brother will be liable to judgement; whoever <u>insults/abuses</u> his brother shall be liable to the council; & whoever says to his brother ' <u>you fool!</u> ' will be liable to the fire of hell"	Matthew 5:23-24 "so if you are offering your gift at the altar & remember that your brother has something against you, <u>leave your gift there & go & be reconciled</u> with your brother, & <u>then</u> come back & make your offering"
Killing & murder	Anger, insult, abuse	Reconciliation b4 worship

And you can see that **Step One** only takes us so far – it doesn't address the underlying heart problems of **anger & abuse & trading insults**. But if Jesus only took us as far as **Step Two**, we'd be even worse off – we would feel **condemned & trapped** & like miserable sinners who can never change. But Jesus doesn't leave us there – he moves us onto to **Step Three** & shows us how we & the world **can be liberated** & delivered from our bondage to anger & abuse & violence & killing – by practicing reconciliation with each other (a spiritual practice). And he adds teeth to that by telling us that if we aren't interested in being reconciled with a brother or sister, well, then God is not very interested in our worship or our offerings to him.

Ok let's look at **another example** from further into Matthew chapter 5 of how Jesus uses this three step process to teach us how life-destroying cycles can be broken.

Matthew 5:38-41 Stassen & Gushee translation (S & G pioneered this research into how Jesus uses this three-fold transformative approach in the SOM)

³⁸ 'You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." ³⁹ But I tell you, do not retaliate revengefully by evil means against a person. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

And you'll immediately notice how, where most of our English Bibles say 'do not resist an evil person', S & G & many others now agree, that a better translation of Jesus' words is "*do not retaliate revengefully by evil means*" & again that makes more sense, because Jesus spent his whole ministry resisting evil & injustice, & the evil one, & he instructs us to do the same.

So let's use a table again to really highlight these three steps that lead to transformation.

The Traditional Morality & Righteousness that addresses the surface problem	The sinful pattern & the root problem	The transforming action & breakthrough initiative that addresses the heart
<p style="text-align: center;">Matthew 5:38</p> <p style="text-align: center;">‘You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Matthew 5:39</p> <p style="text-align: center;">‘But I tell you, do not retaliate revengefully by evil means against a person.’</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Matthew 5:39-41</p> <p style="text-align: center;">‘But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles’.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">See also Romans 12:17-21</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Tit for tat payback</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Revenge drags us into doing evil</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Overcome evil with good so the one doing evil will feel ashamed & repent</p>

Jesus here, is laying out a way to **break the cycle of violence & revenge** that was predominant in his day, & is continuing to destroy the **Middle-East** these days, where cycles of violence & revenge never seems to stop. As MLK said – an eye for an eye, & eventually the whole world ends up blind.

Now on the surface, Jesus simply seems to be saying - **turn away from revenge – literally turn away**. Or if someone points a knife or gun at you & demands your shirt or your wallet, give it to them, because a human life is worth more than a shirt or a wallet.

But there are even **deeper layers** to it than this, & when you understand the cultural situation, & the Roman military laws of the time, Jesus instructions about turning the other cheek & going the second mile make even more sense, they are not about becoming door mats, but turn out to be a brilliantly, subversive & liberating move that turn the tables on an oppressor & return power to the oppressed.

Now I realise this morning that I have **only just scratched the surface** of these incredible life changing, world transforming teachings of Jesus. These teachings are explosive, they are dynamite, & they have the power to turn our world up-side down and **to break our cycles of violence & oppression & consumerism & broken relationships** they deserve far more time than I've given them this morning. And so I'm going to do **two things** – one is a hand out, that outlines the 3 step transforming actions Jesus talks about in the SOM, & on Saturday the 18th of August, if people are interested, we'll have our Saturday Breakfast club set aside as a teaching & discussion on the rest of the SOM, & the rest of the transforming actions & breakthroughs that Jesus outlines here.

But as we come to communion this morning, let's ask Jesus to help us where we've been blind & where we've fallen short of his teachings – because of course the power to do all this & to follow Jesus' teachings comes from God; they are hard teachings, & we can't possibly do these by ourselves in our own strength . It's only the power of God that transforms us & enables us to become more & more like Jesus, our Master. As the prophet **Zechariah** said: *“It's not by might, it's not by power, but it's by my Spirit says the Lord” (Zechariah 4:6)*

