

The Teacher Who Transforms

2nd Weekend of Easter – April 22/23, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Matthew 7:13-27 (NRSV)

¹³“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

¹⁵“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus you will know them by their fruits.

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ ²³Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

²⁴“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

We speak so often of the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is a lengthy portrait of the place where God rules. But it is not Jesus’ teachings that transforms, it is the teacher.

Wander into Barnes & Noble someday and try counting the self-books. The truth is that they are countless. Shelf after shelf filled with the latest bits of wisdom and advice. And lots of it is good advice. I could pick up pretty much any diet book on the shelf and lose the ten pounds I’d like to lose – if I actually did as the author suggests. But, of course, I don’t.

Oprah fills her show with people offering lots of great advice on marriage, parenting, finances, personal fulfillment, and the rest. Yet, Oprah never has to worry about working herself out of a job. The good advice will be listened to but rarely practiced.

Read the Tao or the teachings of the Buddha or Plato’s *Republic*. There is so much to learn that could help us – if only we could live it.

The Sermon on the Mount

We find ourselves at the Sermon on the Mount once again. Sometimes it almost seems that all the biblical roads lead here, though as we’ll see today, they do not. All biblical roads lead to the cross.

This is the largest single block of Jesus’ teaching in the New Testament, spanning chapters 5-7 in Matthew’s Gospel.

The teachings spell out, often very directly, what it means to live a life under the rule of God. Jesus had more to say about God’s kingdom than any other subject. In these three chapters, we have the fullest statement of what life in the kingdom is really like. And it is profoundly counter-cultural.

The Sermon on the Mount turns the world on its head. Up becomes down. In becomes out. Power becomes weakness. Jesus is not laying out some idealized picture of what life might be like someday when he returns. No . . . Jesus is setting out his expectations of his disciples. They are a community formed by God and empowered by God’s Spirit. The Sermon on the Mount is a sort of guidebook to life in this community.

It is always helpful to remember how Jesus closes the sermon. He tells the story of two people who build homes (see Matthew 7:24-27). One builds the house on rock so that it could withstand the storms. The other builds on a foundation of sand that is easily washed away. The one who builds on rock is the one who hears Jesus’ words and does them. The one who builds on sand is the one who hears Jesus’ words but does not do them. The choice is clear and ours to make – though the power to make the right choice comes not from the teachings, but the teacher.

The Sermon on the Mount was the subject of a five-part sermon series in August 2003.

The background studies are posted at www.standrewccl.org and provide some helpful information and insights on this enormously influential block of Jesus’ teachings.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is an extended portrait of the kingdom of God, the place where God rules. It is neither pie-in-the-sky nor some impossible ideal. It is not other-worldly, it is this-worldly. This kingdom is not about escaping to some distant spiritual realm, it is about the physical realm you and I live in every day. And Jesus announced that God's Kingdom was arriving in his own ministry and vocation.

"Are God and the Spirit the same?"

This is a question that was e-mailed to me when we read through Mark.

After Jesus' resurrection, his disciples had to come to grips with what had happened, who Jesus really was. As they talked and remembered and reflected, what emerged was their recognition that not only was Jesus the Jewish Messiah, he was God incarnate. This posed a problem for Jesus' first followers, as they were all good monotheistic Jews. How could Jesus be God-made-flesh if there is only one God? And what do they make of the Comforter promised by Jesus at his last supper with the disciples (John 14:15-31)? How about this overpowering Spirit who came upon them at Pentecost (Acts 2)?

What emerges is seen in Paul's letters, which are the oldest Christian writings we have. Throughout them, without surrendering his monotheism, Paul embraces both Jesus and the Spirit as fully and completely God, though neither is all of God. For Paul there is one God who is inherently relational; one God whose very being is a community of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If you go looking for a neat little formula for this in Paul (like Erasmus' insertion of 1 John 5:7 in the 16th century) you will be disappointed. Instead, Paul's Trinitarian understanding of God is woven throughout, embedded in his paragraphs, sentences, and phrases, such as the "Spirit of Christ."

What does Jesus mean when he promises that where two or three believers are gathered, he will be among them (Matthew 18:20)? He can't mean bodily for he returned to God's dimension ("heaven") to be with the Father (Acts 1). But surely he means that he will be with them in more than just memory or a feeling. Rather, the Spirit is God present with us and the Spirit is Christ present with us. When Paul speaks of the Spirit dwelling within us, he is speaking of Christ dwelling within us (see, for example, Romans 8:9-11).

So . . . *no*, God and the Spirit are not the same, in that there is more to God than the Spirit. But . . . the Spirit *is* fully and completely God, though not all of God.

If you ever think you have this all figured out, you can bet that you are getting something wrong! Contemplating God's being requires humility first.

In God's kingdom, there is no murder, there is not even any anger. In God's kingdom, there is no adultery, not even any lust. In God's kingdom, it is not the wealthy or the strong who get served first at meal-time, it is the poor and the weak. In God's kingdom, there is no mourning, no revenge, no worry, not even any self-deception. Who wouldn't like to live in such a place? Praise God, one day we shall.

In this sermon, Jesus teaches his disciples that they are to build *for* God's kingdom as they await its final completion. They are to be beacons of light and carriers of love. They are not only to hear Jesus' teachings (the easy part), they are to actually do it . . . and that is where the trouble begins.

It's not the teachings, but the teacher

It is very tempting to think that we can divorce the teachings from the teacher, that the teachings are the keys to the kingdom. J. Budziszewski calls this "The Second Tablet Project."¹ When Moses brings down the two tablets, the first speaks to our relationship with God (no other gods, for example) while the second tablet speaks to our relationships with others (no coveting, for example). Thus, the Second Tablet Project refers to the attempt by many in our world to live according to the second of the tablets while disregarding the first – trying to live by the teachings while ignoring the teacher.

But, as Ellsworth Kalas, so aptly puts it, "the teachings did not prove the greatness of the teacher; Jesus proved the greatness of the teachings."² Jesus' disciples acknowledged that these teachings came with an authority greater even than Moses because of what they saw in Jesus, not what they heard in the teachings.

These teachings are not capable of transforming us, only Jesus transforms. Left to ourselves, we could never love our enemies. To the extent that we can do so at all is because the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9) works within us. Jesus is more than our teacher. He is our Savior. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Trying to live out the teachings of Christ without the power of Christ is a project doomed to failure.

But by the grace of God, we are not on our own as we strive toward true kingdom living. God's Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, works with us, transforming us into ever-truer disciples of Jesus – in all things.

¹His essay, "The Second Tablet Project," is available on-line at *First Things* journal, www.firstthings.com, in the archive.

²from Kalas' reflections on the Sermon on the Mount in *The Grand Sweep*.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

April 23 - 29

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Matthew 20-22; Psalm 66 Jesus enters Jerusalem and confronts the temple leadership.</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 23-25; Psalm 67 Jesus laments for the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple..</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 26-28; Psalm 68 Judas' betrayal; the Last Supper; the trial and the crucifixion; Jesus' resurrection</p>	<p>Day 4 Judges 1-3; Psalm 69:1-18 Israel does not complete its conquest of Canaan and turns to disobedience; God raises up a judge who will bring the people back to God.</p>
<p>Day 5 Judges 4-6; Psalm 69:19-36 We meet a woman judge, Deborah, and Gideon.</p>	<p>Day 6 Judges 7-9; Psalm 70 Gideon's triumph and death; the downfall of Abimelech</p>
<p>Day 7 Judges 10-12; Psalm 71 Like Gideon, Jephthah starts out well, but continues the tragic cycles of the judges, falling into unfaithfulness himself.</p>	

Sermon Notes

Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten small groups meeting now and a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewcccl.org.

April Book Recommendation

***Finding God in the Questions*, by Dr. Timothy Johnson**

Yes, this is the Dr. Timothy Johnson you often see on *Good Morning America*, as he is the Medical Editor for ABC News. He also graduated from seminary before becoming a doctor. In this brief volume, Dr. Johnson tackles some of the big questions he has had to face as he sought to maintain a commitment to Jesus and to science. The book has three sections: "Does God Exist," "What is God Like?," "What Difference Does It Make?" I thought that the portions of the book looking at science and the existence of God were the most interesting. He also includes an epilogue with many recommendations for further reading in the sciences and biblical studies – including a strong recommendation to read N.T. Wright.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

A Gnostic writing from the third-century is much in the news lately, the so-called Gospel of Judas. It was not written by Judas nor does it shed any light on Jesus or the beginnings of Christianity. But Gnostic writings are all the rage these days, fueled in part by *The DaVinci Code*. For the Gnostics, the physical world we live in is the lesser creation of a lesser god. The physical world is secondary, even evil, and salvation consists of escaping to the world of pure spirit. The problem is we don't know this; it is a secret from us. Thus, the key to salvation is gaining knowledge (*gnosis* is Greek for "knowledge") of these secrets. For the Gnostics, ignorance is the most fundamental human problem.

In contrast, Jews and Christians hold that the fundamental human problem is not ignorance, but sin. We know how we are to live, but we just don't/can't do it. Thus, the key to salvation (overcoming the separation from our Creator that results from sin) lies not in the teaching but in the teacher. All biblical roads do not lead to the Sermon on the Mount, they lead to the cross. We don't lack for teachers; we need a savior who can do and be for us what we cannot do and be for ourselves.

Discuss the simple statement, "It is the teacher who transforms, not the teachings." Do you see what point I am trying to make? Do you agree? What has been your own experience in life? Do our problems really stem from ignorance or do they stem from our inability to do the things we know we ought to do and avoid doing what we know we ought not do. Paul writes that he doesn't understand his own actions. He doesn't do what he wants to do and does the very things he hates (Romans 7:15; also see chapters 1 and 2). Has this been your own experience? Have you seen this in others? How do we become better doers of Jesus' teachings?