

# *Training for the “Impossible”*

## Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – August 3, 2003

### Sermon Background Study

#### *Scripture Passage*

*Matthew 4:23-5:5(NRSV)*

<sup>23</sup>Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. <sup>24</sup>So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. <sup>25</sup>And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

**5**When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. . . [the rest of the Beatitudes follow]

*Matthew 17:14-21 (NRSV)*

<sup>14</sup>When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, <sup>15</sup>and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. <sup>16</sup>And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” <sup>17</sup>Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” <sup>18</sup>And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. <sup>19</sup>Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” <sup>20</sup>He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

*Today begins a five-week series on the Sermon on the Mount, which is from chapters 5-7 of Matthew’s Gospel.*

#### *The Sermon on the Mount*

Spanning three chapters, the Sermon on the Mount is the largest and longest block of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew’s Gospel. Indeed, there is so much here that even a five week series will touch on only a few of Jesus’ teachings. Though we may not realize it, much of the Sermon on the Mount is familiar even to Christians who don’t read the Bible. In it we find the Lord’s prayer, the Beatitudes, the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” lust in the heart<sup>1</sup>, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, “love your enemies,” “do not judge, so that you may not be judged,” the narrow gate, wolves in sheep’s clothing, houses built on rocks v. houses built on sand – all this and much more! With so much here, the obvious question is what do we do with it all? How do we begin to make sense of it?

#### Who took shorthand?

It is easy to read the Gospels as if someone had a steno pad and took down every one of Jesus’ words. So-called “red-letter” Bibles contribute to this problem. However, the Sermon on the Mount is not a report of an actual speech delivered by Jesus on a Galilean hillside. Instead, Matthew has pulled together a number of Jesus’ teachings into one carefully constructed sermon.

Rather than diminishing the significance of Jesus’ teachings, a proper understanding of the Gospels enables us to see that Jesus’ teachings and ministry were told through the eyes of the early Christians. The four Gospels (and no others!) are all God-inspired accounts. They narrate the significance of what Jesus’ followers had experienced in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

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<sup>1</sup>In 1976, presidential candidate Jimmy Carter gave an interview to Playboy magazine in which he said that though he had never had an affair, he had “lusted in his heart.” This got a lot of public attention at the time (he dropped 15 points in the polls), but Carter was only striving to be true to Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, though why he chose that forum in which to bear his soul always puzzled me!

Because there is so much in the Sermon on the Mount that seems far removed from the “real world,” many Christians tend to see the Sermon as an impossible ideal reflecting a world that will be great when it comes . . . but sure has little to do with the lives we lead right now! Even when we correctly understand that the Sermon is about the Kingdom of God, we think of the Kingdom as

*A Rabbi Talks with Jesus<sup>1</sup>*

Jacob Neusner is one of the most respected Rabbinic scholars of our generation. Ten years ago, he wrote a book about the Sermon on the Mount. In it, he tried to imagine that he was a devout Jew of Jesus’ day. What would be his reaction to Jesus’ sermon?

Rabbi Neusner believes that had he heard Jesus teach he would not have become a follower of Jesus. It isn’t so much what Jesus taught. Other Jewish teachers of Jesus’ day expanded and elaborated on the Law of Moses. Other teachers interpreted the Law to be about the heart, not merely external conformance with rules. Rabbi Nuesner’s argument with Jesus would have been with the authority Jesus took upon himself.

Rabbi Neusner put it this way, “Here is a Torah teacher who says in his own name what the Torah says in God’s name . . . So we find ourselves . . . with the difficulty of making sense, within the framework of Torah, of a teacher who stands apart from, perhaps above, the Torah . . . We now recognize that at issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is doing far more than merely showing his followers a better understanding of God’s Law. Jesus is taking upon himself the very authority of God as he shapes and molds a community of the Kingdom of God.

some future-only reality, rather than remembering that the Kingdom is *present-but-still coming* or *already/not yet*.<sup>2</sup> In the end, reading the Sermon on the Mount as if it is a wonderful, but impossible, ideal is the one thing we cannot do.

*Training in the Kingdom of Heaven<sup>3</sup>*

Richard Hays<sup>4</sup> notes that Jesus as an authoritative teacher is a dominant theme of Matthew’s Gospel. The church is seen as a community of disciples, of those being taught to be evermore Christ-like. In this light, we see that the Sermon on the Mount is training in the Kingdom of God. Jesus provides the disciples plenty of on-the-job training as they carry out Jesus’ ministry. But Jesus also trains his disciples as a Jewish teacher would – by sitting them down and talking to them about the nature of the Kingdom. So it is no surprise that the Sermon opens with Jesus reminding his followers that they are the “light to the world” – the training has a purpose that goes beyond these individuals. Likewise, Jesus closes the Sermon with a call to obedience. What is the point of training if there is no action?

The Sermon on the Mount is not about how well we can conform to a set of rules. Rather, it is about our character. Our actions flow outward from our character. Selflessness is a matter of the heart, not a rulebook. But, you might ask, isn’t what Jesus is asking of his disciples unrealistic and impossible? Jesus’ answer is “no.” We have been born from above (John 3); we are new creations. With God, all things are possible. With faith, nothing is impossible. In the healing story from Matthew 17, one cannot miss Jesus’ palpable frustration that as far along in their training as they are, the disciples still don’t get it. By virtue of God’s creative work in our lives, nothing is impossible. Our selfish, cynical hearts can change. Jesus’ demands in the Sermon are not unrealistic, they lead us toward what is truly real and good and enduring in this world and in the kingdom of God.

<sup>2</sup>This goes back to the study for June 29, 2003 on the Christian *already/not yet* proclamation of God’s kingdom – the study I suggested you save! I cannot overemphasize how transforming an experience it is to grasp and hold on to the truth that God’s Kingdom is present though not yet in all its fullness. It will change your life and it will deepen your understanding of the New Testament.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew’s Gospel is the most “Jewish” of the four Gospels in the NT. Respecting the sensibilities of his Jewish readers, Matthew refers to the “Kingdom of God” as the “Kingdom of Heaven.” God’s name, even the word “God,” was so sacred to many Jews that they would not say it aloud. Even today, you can find ultra-orthodox websites that will only spell out “God” as “G-d”!

<sup>4</sup>You may have noticed how often I refer to Richard Hays’ book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. This is a passionate and highly regarded book that brings together the ethical choices of our day and the vision of Jesus and the early Christians. If you are ready for a little meat, I recommend it.

## Daily Bible Readings

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 4:23 – 7:28 This is the entire Sermon on the Mount. Please read it in one sitting.</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 6:17-49 Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain”</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 13 How might these Kingdom parables shed light on the Sermon on the Mount?</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 4:23 – 7:28 The entire Sermon again ~ in one sitting.</p>
<p>Day 5 Matthew 18 The fourth discourse of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Scott Engle's new SS class, *Something More*, is at 9:30!!

We've begun a new adult Sunday School class at the 9:30 hour. The class is led by Scott Engle, the author of these background studies, and is open to all adults. The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions and answers.

We meet in Room 4 of Piro Hall on the Garden Level of the new sanctuary.

**Please join us next week!**

*Tuesday night, August 12, is the lecture on "Love"*

A week from Tuesday (August 12) is the final lecture in our St. Andrew Summer Lecture Series – "Faith, Hope, and Love" presented by Scott Engle. We will gather at 6:45 in Room 4 of Piro Hall on the Garden Level of the new sanctuary. Registration is not required. Childcare will be available by reservation – call 214-291-8024.

For more info go to [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org).

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. So often, it seems that our scripture passage for the week takes us back to talk of rule-making. Perhaps we simply like to have a nice, orderly set of rules to live by. Certainly, there is no shortage of efforts to turn the Bible into a rule book. But it is not a rule book. The prominent word "Law" in the Bible could just as easily be translated "Instruction." God's instruction is not arbitrary, it is intended to lead us to him and to a better life. Discuss your reactions to the Sermon on the Mount. If it isn't a bunch of new rules, then what is it? Toward what sort of life does Jesus point us?
2. There is a strong temptation to set aside Jesus' teachings when we return to the "real world." So often, Jesus just seems unrealistic! If we think of the Sermon on the Mount as being in the "language of virtues" rather than the "language of rules," what would a virtuous person look like and act like in the workplace. Could we spot them? Where would their virtues be tested?