

The Sermon on the Mount

Overview and Conclusion

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Many readers of the SOTM are struck by its tremendous demands (listed above). Coupled with Jesus' insistence that he did not come to abolish the law but fulfill it, one is left grasping for any signs of grace in these chapters. Not that they aren't there—Jesus clearly says the kingdom belongs to the “poor in spirit” (5:3) and if the peacemakers are “children of God,” then God himself must be a peacemaker, not one who delights in imposing impossible standards. In fact, the beatitudes describe well someone who has accepted (and acted upon) God's grace. And the “forgive as we forgive” verse also says that God is offering us his forgiveness if we are willing to be members of the forgiving people. Jesus tells his disciples that to receive they have only to ask—and we know his disciples hunger for righteousness.

Nevertheless, Jesus' threats of hell may be difficult to put aside entirely. That the grace in the Sermon needs to be pointed out is evidence that the emphasis is on character more than grace.

Carson suggests the reason for this emphasis is Jesus' audience:

...I would argue that the reason we are currently seeing such an embarrassingly high percentage of spurious conversions to Christ is precisely because we have not first taught people their need of Christ. In one of his letters to a young man who wanted to know how to preach the gospel, John Wesley offers a quite different approach. He says that whenever he arrived at any new place to preach the gospel, he began with a general declaration of the love of God. Then he preached “the law” (by which he meant all of God's righteous standards and the penalty of disobedience) as searchingly as he could. This he kept up until a large proportion of his hearers found themselves under deep conviction of sin, beginning even to despair of the possibility of forgiveness from this holy God. Then, and only then, did he introduce the good news of Jesus Christ. Wesley explained the saving significance of Christ's person, ministry, death and resurrection, and the wonderful truth that salvation is solely by God's grace, through faith...

How often does Jesus' own ministry reflect the same perspective! He has an uncanny knack of putting his finger on the sorest spot of the biggest hindrance in the life of the person with whom he is dealing. The rich ruler, in love with his wealth, needs to get rid of it (Lk 18:18+). The Samaritan woman is prepared to talk about religion, but Jesus brings up her adulterous relationships (Lk 4:7+). He warns prospective disciples to count the cost (Lk 14:25+), concluding his illustrations of this point with the penetrating statement, “IN the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:33)...

Of course, this is only one side of the picture. Jesus can also be found giving broad invitations (see Mt 11:28-30; Jn 7:37+); and he is known as the one who will not break bruised reeds nor quench smoldering wicks (Mt 12:20). But this only means that to the crushed, bruised, downtrodden, and weary he shows himself to be gracious. Jesus is called as a doctor to the sick, not to the well; as a

Savior for sinners, not for the righteous (Mt 9:12+). The broken people do not need large lessons on poverty of spirit; they've already learned them, and now need the words of grace and hope.¹

- (a) Have you ever been troubled by the impossibly high standard of the SOTM?
 - (b) According to Carson, how are the emphases in the SOTM shaped by its position as the first of five discourses in Matthew?
 - (c) If you buy Carson's argument, how should this affect the way you read the SOTM? As you read the gospels, should you ride the roller coaster from the gut-wrenching disappointment of the rich young ruler to the ecstatic relief of the Zacchaeus? i.e., to what degree should you read *all* of Jesus' words as directed at you?
 - (d) Again, if you buy Carson's argument, then what's the purpose of James, which is for all intents and purposes a commentary on the SOTM? Do you find in James the balance of law and grace which is found in the gospels, or Paul, as a whole?
2. The SOTM has several passages which Christians throughout history have found very demanding. Foremost among these are the “antitheses” of 5:21-48, the verses which begin “you have heard that... but I say to you” and include memorable phrases such as “if you say, 'You fool', you will be liable to the hell of fire,” “everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart,” “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery,” and “do not resist an evildoer.” If that weren't enough, Jesus adds, “if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses,” “the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it,” “not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven,” and “everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who build his house on sand.”

We have already surveyed (twice) the various ways to understand these radical demands, including²:

The Church Fathers: These took the demands as a “straightforward presentation of Christian ethics... Origen's youthful castration, by his own hand... shows how seriously Jesus' teaching could be applied by some.”

The Middle Ages; Thomas Aquinas: Divided Jesus' teaching into two levels, the “commandments” for all Christians, and the “counsels” for a small fraction of more advanced believers. The latter were generally applied to the priestly and monastic groups in the form of vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

The Anabaptists: Read the SOTM as applying in a straightforward and strict way to all believers, in conflict with participation in civil government, requiring Christians to withdraw from “participation in this world order.”

The Luther: Luther rejects both Aquinas and the Anabaptists. He sees the hard sayings of the SOTM as both driving us toward grace, and as applying particularly in the sphere of church life.

¹ *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World* (1999, Global), 125-128.

² David Crump, “Applying the Sermon on the Mount: Once you have read it what do you do with it?,” *Criswell Theological Review* 6.1 (1992), 3-14.

They are not to be applied to secular life, where they would conflict with the duties and obligations of civic life. Civic life must be guided by a heart filled with Christian love.

Calvin and Zwingli: These men sought to establish Christian, theocratic states in Zurich and Geneva, seeing all aspects of life as under the dominion of Christ. They rejected the two-kingdom ethic of Luther and the isolationism of the Anabaptists. They were realists about civic life, finding ways to understand the SOTM that maintained basic participation in the “secular” world.

Reformed Scholasticism (e.g. **the Puritans**): Jesus, the New Moses, is in the SOTM bringing a New Law. Like the old law, it serves to make us aware of our sins and drive us to God's grace.

Protestant Liberalism: The goal of the SOTM is not a new set of burdensome laws, but the “discovery of a new, radicalized love for both God and neighbor”—a love which is to guide decisions in the private and secular spheres.

Dispensationalism: Jesus was giving a new Law to the Jews; he wasn't talking to Christians at all, as they are under grace. It only applies then to the Jews who will reign with Christ in the age to come.

Given our observation that Jesus is addressing disciples (in the company of the crowds), which of these interpretations is correct?

3. In the SOTM Jesus makes it clear his disciples stand before God without a righteousness of their own. Wesley likewise made sure to acquaint the unbeliever with his sin before preaching grace. Carson contrasts this with many modern converts:

In much contemporary evangelism, there is little concern for whether or not God will accept us, and much concern for whether or not we will accept him. Little attention is paid to whether or not we please him, and much to whether or not he pleases us. Many popular evangelistic methods are molded by these considerations. As a result, there is far too little stress on God's character and the requirements of the kingdom, and far too much stress on our needs. Worse, our needs are cast in preeminently psychological categories, not moral ones (alienation and loneliness, not bitterness and self-seeking and hatred; frustration and fear, not prayerlessness and unbelief). To top it off, peace, joy, and love are preached as desirable goals. These are desirable, but they suffer from two defects. First, virtues such as peace, joy and love can easily be interpreted in merely personal, almost mystical terms. As a result, the biblical emphases on peace with God and with men, joy in the Lord, and tough-minded love which gives sacrificially to both God and men, are reduced to a warm, pleasant glow. Second, these virtues need to be set alongside complementary virtues such as justice, integrity, righteousness, truth, humility, and faith. (126)

Is there a place in our inquirer's class for ensuring new members know not just Reformed history distinctives, but are grounded in a knowledge of their sin? Is this message received clearly by our youth in Sunday school? How do we ensure that the younger Christians in our church (of whatever age) don't fall prey to the shallow spirituality described by Carson?

4. Single-minded devotion is a theme which runs throughout these three chapters and lies at the Sermon's

core. As the Suffering Servant is “a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver” (Isa 49:2b); called by the Lord before he was born (49:1); who spends all his strength (49:4) for God's reward; and “set [his] face like flint” (50:7) despite mocking and persecution, we are to set our hearts on the eternal; love in the face of hate and shame; and pursue such single-minded purity that our every thoughts align with our purest actions.

(a) Evaluate whether the following is consistent with the SOTM:

Like that of the Servant, ours is a mission which can't be accomplished by anything less than such devotion. This Sermon, like the passages describing the Servant, suggest that while a half-hearted Christian life might lead to salvation, a fruitful Christian life can only flow from this sort of purity. Much as an arrow which is a little off the mark will never hit its target, so for the Spirit to work powerfully in us, we must shed not just the worst, but most or all of our private sins and worldly aspirations.

The Christian life is thus a battle between this sort of devotion and Aristotle's Golden Mean. This world is constantly assuring us that the balanced, sensible middle road is the wise path while Jesus is calling us to a life *out of balance*, a life poured out for him, and for others. The typical model of Christian growth—start like your non-believing neighbor, add some repentance and public confession and gradually grow more and more like Jesus—is inherently flawed. Follow this path and you may be saved though it will be as through fire (1 Cor 3:10-15). To live the Christian life in a way which will change your life, you must do so with abandon.

(b) In what part of your life do you find Aristotle whispering in your ear most frequently? Where would you most like to break the chains of conventional wisdom and put the pedal to the metal, spiritually speaking?



Fun fact: It was with some skepticism that *The Christian Century* quoted President Truman in September 1949 as calling the SOTM “what we try to live by,” to which Truman added that “If we [the British and the Americans] can get all the world in that frame of mind, we will come nearer to stopping these terrible wars than by any other method I know of.” (Editorial, Vol 56, No. 38, p. 1091.)