

“The Presence of The King”

Introduction: By now you’ve no doubt noticed the two scarecrow figures our elementary Sunday school class set up last week. It’s part of our participation in our town’s fall scarecrow contest, but it also gives us an opportunity to communicate a message to those passing by. And the message of this pair, who represent followers of Jesus, and who have a lamp sitting on the table between them, is this: “Let your light shine before others.” This phrase comes from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says,

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. [Ma. 5:14-16]

When you think about it, this is actually a message for us, the followers of Jesus, more than it is for those who are walking or driving by. It’s a message which reminds us that how we live matters, that how we live either attracts people to Jesus or drives them away. I believe that the world today desperately needs followers of Jesus who actually seek to live the way he directs us to live, to let the light of the light of the world (Jesus) shine through our lives into all the places of darkness we see around us.

As we cry out this fall, “Restore us, O God!” What does it look like when our light begins to shine with the light of Jesus? Where might our light need to be restored, or recharged? Over the course of the next several months, we’re going to use the Sermon on the Mount to guide us in pursuing this question. These are not easy words. Some have concluded that the Sermon is a message designed to produce the greatest amount of guilt in the fewest possible chapters! But I think there are more helpful ways to understand it. However, before we consider how this teaching guides our character and our conduct, we need to first consider the one who is doing teaching, this Jesus person. Who is he? Why should we listen to him? Let’s start by hearing from both the beginning, and the end of his message. [READ]

I. The One Who Fulfilled Prophecy

A. They were sitting in a kind of natural amphitheater, on a sloping hillside beside the Sea of Galilee. Some were rough fisherman with their hired hands. Some were shrewd tax collectors with their cronies. Others were hard working tradesmen, religious leaders, and moms with their kids. They were all, really, ordinary people, people like you and me, wondering, really, what life was really all about, and perhaps even worn out by it all. They had gathered because there was a new fellow in town who seemed worth listening to.

Illustration: I remember in both college and seminary one of the fun things you got to do was pick your own courses. Yes, there were required courses for any major, but in general, you could choose. Often, you would choose based upon who was teaching. And while there were professors everyone said you should avoid, there were also some who you just shouldn’t miss.

B. Jesus, it seems, was one of those “don’t miss this guy” teachers. Why? Matthew gets us thinking about this in the big picture he draws when he introduces the public ministry of Jesus to his readers with the declaration that Jesus is the fulfillment of the hope expressed in the prophet Isaiah:

“. . . the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Ma. 4:16). These words come just before the ones we also know well from Isaiah 9: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. . .” Jesus is this child, Jesus is this great light.

C. The world was in desperate need of this light because its people had been sitting in darkness for a long time. Yes, God had spoken a good and wonderful world into being, but the people of the world went on to make the sad and tragic decision to “go it alone,” to not trust God to be God, and to take our lives into our own hands. The effects of this decision can be seen everywhere we look. Such a decision broke our relationship with God, with our neighbor, with ourselves, and with creation. Fortunately for us, no sooner had we turned against him than this God of grace and mercy (we would learn) made a promise to one day come and undo the ruin we had caused. This coming, this radical intervention in history, this healing of our brokenness began, Matthew tells us, with Jesus.

Why should we listen to Jesus? He is worth listening to because, big picture, he is the long expected one, the fulfillment of prophetic hope. His teaching just may have something to do with the hope the world needs.

II. The One Who Is the King

A. Matthew gets more specific in the next verse when he gives us the favorite topic of Jesus as he preached and taught: “From that time on, Jesus began to preach, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*” (Ma. 4:17). And then Matthew summarizes Jesus’ ministry with this: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over . . .” (4:23f).

B. What is the kingdom of heaven (or of God...same thing), and what is the good news about it that Jesus was proclaiming? The kingdom is not a specific geographic location, or even a specific nation. The kingdom of God is located wherever, and in whomever, God is King. It is found where the reign of God, where the will of God is being lived out. The good news of the kingdom was that it had come near. It was that somehow in Jesus the dimension of heaven had begun to break into the dimension of earth because the King himself had arrived. The good news was not only that he would take away our sins, or that he would adopt us into his family, or that we would receive the gift of eternal life. The good news of the kingdom was that in Jesus, God’s new world order was breaking into our hurting, sinful, anxiety-filled world with the gift of restoration and repair. His healing of the sick and demon possessed all revealed his presence and authority over that which had become broken.

Why should we listen to Jesus? Because he is the King who has come and is bringing heaven to earth. His teaching just may have something to do with his will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

III. Ascending and Sitting

A. Narrowing down even further on the Sermon itself, a third angle Matthew gives us to help us consider why we should listen to Jesus is found when Jesus goes up the mountain to give this teaching. Now Jesus could have done this just because Jesus liked to hike, and he needed to get out and stretch his legs before he spent the weekend teaching. I think, I should mention, that the “sermon,” which only lasts ten minutes when read aloud, is probably not a formal sermon as such (unless you’d like to believe that Jesus is here modeling a ten-minute message!) More likely is that it’s a summary of teaching that

took place over a kind of weekend retreat. But though I believe Jesus probably liked to hike, there are a couple of deeper things going on here.

1. First of all, mountains in the Bible, are significant places of divine revelation. They played key roles in turning points in Israel's history, the most poignant of which is Mount Sinai upon which God gave his Law to Moses and then sent him back down the mountain to share it with his people. And this is interesting because it seems as if Jesus, in ascending the mountain, is being presented as a new Moses figure as he spends much of the sermon, we will see, talking about deeper ways to think about that Law. It speaks to the authority of Jesus over the law.

In fact, when Jesus taught, it wasn't with a "Thus saith the Lord" kind of declaration. It was with a "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . ." It was his word that carried the day, not a reference to another authority. And so, when he was all through teaching, what the crowds discussed as they made their way back down the mountain, was the authority with which Jesus spoke. He was someone who spoke and acted for God in a way that far surpassed any of their prophets or religious leaders.

2. Secondly, when Jesus arrived on the summit, he sat down before beginning to teach.

Illustration: I remember a favorite seminary professor of mine with whom I took summer Hebrew. It was certainly a different way to spend a summer – eight weeks of class for three hours a day – and Dr. Pratico knew the challenge that lay ahead for us. On the first morning, after going through the syllabus, he looked up, and, with his fingers pausing on the knot in his necktie, said to us: "Do you have any more questions? Because when I loosen my tie, your summer is over!" Things, in other words, were about to get serious.

In like manner, when Jesus sat down, the position assumed by a rabbi when he taught, or a lawgiver when he spoke, it was an indication that he was about to get super serious, and that he had the authority to do so!

Why should we listen to Jesus? Because what he has to say is serious stuff, because, as the writer of Hebrews puts it (ch. 3), one greater than Moses is here.

IV. The Wise and the Foolish

A. Finally, we also would do well to notice the expectation Jesus has for those who come to his teaching. In his summary statement, we hear that he expects us not only to hear his words, but to put them into practice (7:24)! This is a good word for those who see this sermon as being intended only for those who have a special religious calling like monks and nuns, or pastors and priests. The average lay person, this view holds, doesn't really need to worry about what Jesus is teaching. But, Jesus actually expects all of his followers to put what he teaches into practice.

B. And this is a good word for those who believe just the opposite, like Martin Luther, who held that in the sermon Jesus made impossibly high demands in order to make all people aware of their sin and therefore of their need for him. To be sure, we will all stumble as we seek to put his teaching into practice, but it doesn't mean that, with the Spirit's empowerment, the character and conduct we find in the sermon can't be that which more and more describes our life, and, therefore, the light Jesus calls us to shine. While the bumper sticker proclaims, "Christians aren't perfect just forgiven," the late Dallas Willard reminds us that there is still a lot of room between forgiven and perfect!

Why should we listen to Jesus? Because the one who is the fulfillment of prophecy, the one who is the King who is bringing heaven to earth, and the one who is above all earthly teachers, says it would be wise to do so and foolish not to!

So, here's an assignment: Read the Sermon this week, maybe even a couple of times if you can. As you do so, notice where you seem to be pretty well in sync with what Jesus is teaching. Then, notice what you consider to be ridiculous in his teaching. Then, notice what you'd consider to be impossible. Finally, where do you find yourself wanting to argue with Jesus?! Take all these observations and turn them into prayer, into a conversation with the one who is our teacher and Lord.

And then, pray as British commentator Martyn Lloyd-Jones prays:

God give us grace to face the Sermon on the Mount seriously and honestly and prayerfully until we become living examples of it.