

A Sermon Series for Lent 2024

Sermon 2: The Beatitudes, an Impossible Challenge from Jesus: Are they Offensive or Gracious?

Sunday 3 March: The Third Sunday in Lent

A series of talks focused on Jesus, to lead us through the Season of Lent, into Holy Week and to our celebration of the Resurrection at Easter.

- Warning Label: This week's sermon has some tough material.
- Themes and some quotations are from "The Jesus I Never Knew" (1996)
- Next week's sermon has a very different focus: "A Revolution of Grace". Don't miss it... it is a necessary follow-on from today.

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The Beatitudes – the Sermon on the Mount – seems to be a sermon from Jesus that is uncompromising and impossible to follow.

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect", said Jesus, in a statement that seems to be tucked in casually between commands to love enemies and give away money. Be perfect like God? Whatever did he mean?

It is hard to dismiss this absolutism. We come across it elsewhere in the Gospels. When a rich man asked Jesus what he should do to ensure eternal life, Jesus told him to give his money away – not 10 per-cent or even 50 percent, but all of it.

When a disciple asked if he should forgive his brother seven times, Jesus replied, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Other religions taught variations of the "Golden Rule," stated in a limited, negative form: "Don't do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you."

Jesus expanded it into a form without boundaries: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."

Has anyone ever lived a life as perfect as God's? Has anyone ever followed the Golden Rule? How can we even respond to such impossible ideals? We humans prefer common sense and balance.

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Philip Yancey writes about a friend of his, Virginia Owens, who assigned the Sermon on the Mount to her composition class at a Texas University, asking the students to write a short

essay. She had expected them to have a basic respect for the text, since the Bible belt extends across Texas, but the reactions of her students was something else:

"In my opinion religion is one big hoax," wrote one.

"There is an old saying that 'you shouldn't believe everything you read' and it applies in this case," wrote another.

Virginia recalled her own introduction to the Sermon on the Mount in Sunday school, where pastel poster illustrations showed Jesus sitting on a green hillside surrounded by eager, pink-skinned children. It never occurred to her to react with anger or disgust.

Her students thought otherwise:

The stuff the churches preach is extremely strict and allows for almost no fun without thinking, is it a sin or not. I did not like the essay "Sermon on the Mount." It was hard to read and made me feel like I had to be perfect and no one is.

"At this point," Virginia wrote about the experience, "I began to be encouraged. There is something exquisitely innocent about not realizing you shouldn't call Jesus stupid... This was the real thing, a pristine response to the gospel, unfiltered through a two-millennia cultural haze. ... I find it strangely heartening that the Bible remains offensive to honest, ignorant ears, just as it was in the first century."

Early in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed head-on a question that worried most of his listeners: Was he a revolutionary or an authentic Jewish prophet? Here is Jesus' own description of his relationship to the Torah:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them...

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

That last statement surely made the crowd sit up and take notice. Pharisees and teachers of the law competed with one another in strictness. They had turned God's law into 613 rules, consisting of 248 commands and 365 prohibitions. They were bolstered by another 1,521 limitations.

To avoid breaking the third commandment, "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD," they refused to pronounce God's name at all.

To avoid sexual temptation, men would lower their heads to avoid even seeing women. The most scrupulous observers of this rule were known as "bleeding Pharisees" because of frequent collisions with walls and other obstacles.

To avoid defiling the Sabbath they outlawed thirty-nine activities that might be construed as "work."

How could an ordinary person's righteousness ever surpass that of such professional holy men?

"I returned to (considering) Jesus and found that the concept of grace is present in his teaching throughout the Gospels and especially in the Sermon on the Mount."

Jesus never lowered God's Ideal. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," he said. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

The point is: not even Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa, nor anyone else, has completely fulfilled those commands.

Yet the same Jesus tenderly offered absolute grace. Jesus forgave an adulteress, a thief on the cross, a disciple who had denied ever knowing him. He tapped that traitorous disciple, Peter, to found his church. Later he would turn to a man named Saul, who had made his mark persecuting Christians.

Grace is absolute, inflexible, all-encompassing. It extends even to the people who nailed Jesus to the cross:

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" were among the last words Jesus spoke on earth.

Yancey wrote: For years I had felt so unworthy before the absolute ideals of the Sermon on the Mount that I had missed in it any notion of grace. Once I understood the dual message, however, I went back and found that the message of grace gusts through the entire speech.

It begins with the Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek; blessed are the desperate – and it moves on toward the Lord's Prayer:

"Forgive us our sins ... deliver us from the evil one."

Jesus began this great sermon with gentle words for those in need and continued with a prayer that has formed a model for all twelve-step groups. "One day at a time," say the alcoholics in AA; "Give us this day our daily bread," say the Christians. Grace is for the desperate, the needy, the broken, those who cannot make it on their own. Grace is for all of us.

"For years I had thought of the Sermon on the Mount as a blue-print for human behaviour that no one could possibly follow. Reading it again, I found that Jesus gave these words

not to cumber (burden) us, but to tell us what God is like.” The character of God is the (foundational text) of the Sermon on the Mount. Why should we love our enemies? Because our clement Father causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good.

Why be perfect? Because God is perfect.

Why store up treasures in heaven? Because the Father lives there and will lavishly reward us.

Why live without fear and worry? Because the same God who clothes the lilies and the grass of the field has promised to take care of us.

Why pray? If an earthly father gives his son bread or fish, how much more will the Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.

How could I have missed it? Jesus did not proclaim the Sermon on the Mount so that we would furrow our brows in despair over our failure to achieve perfection. He gave it to impart to us God's Ideal toward which we should never stop striving, but also to show that none of us will ever reach that Ideal.”

The teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount force us to recognize the great distance between God and us. Legalism like the Pharisees' will always fail. Spectacularly!

We are all desperate, and that is appropriate to a human being who wants to know God.

Having fallen from the absolute Ideal, we have nowhere to land but in the safety net of absolute grace.

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[Next week: A Revolution of Grace.]