

“Mountaintop Experiences: The Sermon on the Mount”

On most of our mountain stops in this Mountaintop Experiences series, we’ve witnessed the incredible, almost unbelievable. In fact, I might dare to say that much of it we wouldn’t believe except that God has revealed it to us in his Word. We have seen the glory of God settle over mountaintops that shook and were filled with smoke and thunder. We have seen the ravages of a worldwide flood in its immediate aftermath. We’ve witnessed God providing a substitute for sacrifice right at the moment when one was needed. We’ve even seen God rain down fire to accept a sacrifice from his prophet on the top of a mountain. Amazing things. Astonishing things.

But today’s a little different. On this mountain we won’t see the cloud-and-thunder glory of God. We won’t find fire pouring down. We won’t witness anything all that incredible or exciting, at least on the surface. No, what we see is a crowd of people gathered to listen and a speaker speaking to them. We’ve seen it before. This is a sermon, like the sermons we might hear at church any given week. And though it may not seem like much in comparison with some of the more action-packed accounts that we’ve considered, this mountaintop experience reminds us of a very important truth. Jesus teaches us. Jesus teaches us, and we need to listen to him.

Of course, the fact is that the sermon we are looking at is no ordinary sermon, and it is preached by no ordinary preacher. This in fact may be the most famous sermon ever preached. It is the Sermon on the Mount. A few things need to be explained as we consider this experience. First, we are not going to look at the Sermon on the Mount in its entirety today. Three chapters of the Gospel according to St. Matthew record this sermon. Our text this morning is just the very first part of the famous sermon.

Secondly, some have mistakenly assumed that since this sermon is so famous that it must contain the whole message of the Christian faith. It does not. It is preached by Jesus in a context where his disciples, those close followers of his for some time, those who have had many more interactions with him before the sermon, are the main audience for these words. Of course, there were crowds of others following Jesus throughout the region of Galilee at the time. Many of them no doubt heard his words as well. But rather than the entire message of Christianity, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is a treatise on Christian living. It is spoken to believers about how they might put their faith into action. And though they were not going to learn everything about Christianity in this instance, those who heard the sermon and we who study it so many years later learn much from Jesus about our lives of faith.

Jesus begins this famous sermon with the Beatitudes, a series of statements of blessing. Here already, we may misunderstand these words if we take them to mean that by having the right attitude we may become blessed, that is we can be ultimately happy. Instead, the point that Jesus is making in these words is that those whom God has brought to faith in him are blessed. Their faith produces these God-pleasing attitudes. These are not different types of believers, but different aspects of the faith-worked attitude. We won’t consider every aspect Jesus mentions, but a few will illustrate the point. Jesus says, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** The poor in spirit are those who understand that they have nothing to offer or to give to God for their salvation. They have no worthiness of their own. They have not earned anything from God. Instead, they look to Jesus for everything, and he gives them the kingdom of heaven.

In the same way, as sinners, we ought to hunger and thirst for righteousness, always aware that we have not been righteous in the ways that God expects and demands. We ought to always seek to display the righteous acts to which God directs us. And we will be filled as Jesus gives us his own righteousness and as he motivates and creates good works in us.

But perhaps the most shocking of these statements is the final one: **“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”** Though it may be obvious from many of these statements, this one perhaps is the most stark in illustrating that true blessedness, the kind that Jesus speaks of, is not found where many people expect it to be. How could we

be blessed and persecuted at the same time? How could we be truly happy if people are making fun of us and speaking evil of us? The world finds this ridiculous. It finds just as ridiculous the idea that blessing is to be found in lowliness and meekness and poverty of spirit. But in Jesus it is. True blessedness is found there because in him true blessedness affects not only the here and now, but also the eternal future. Jesus is speaking of a blessedness that transcends this life and this world. One that extends into eternity.

Even though this mountaintop experience may not look like much, it is vitally important because the same truths that Jesus was teaching on the mount that day are the truths we need to learn and to know today. Jesus still teaches us. He tells us how we have fallen short of the perfection that God demands. He teaches us to look to him as our only answer. He makes us truly blessed by replacing our sins with his righteousness and filling us with all good things now and forever.

And he still teaches us to make a difference in the lives of others. He calls believers salt and light in the world. Salt in those days was used as a very important preservative for foods. Believers are like salt as God preserves the world for their sake. Recall the account of Sodom and Gomorrah. God was willing to forgo punishing those wicked cities for the sake of ten righteous people that lived there. That was his answer to Abraham's prayer. Though those ten were not to be found, God in many cases is patient with punishment for the sake of believers. He continues to preserve the world for our sake, so that we may serve him and share him with others.

Light, likewise, provides a beautiful picture for the life of a Christian. We reflect the light of God and his goodness. We reflect that light through the good works we do in service of others. Others may notice these good deeds and ultimately be led to praise God for them. God has made us salt and light. Jesus teaches us to let our lights shine.

As we prepare to leave this mountain, it is worth reflecting on the method of Jesus' teaching. There is for us no mountain that we can ascend to sit at the feet of Jesus, to see him physically with our own eyes and to hear his voice echoing in our ears. We cannot join with a crowd like the one that first gathered for the Sermon on the Mount. But Jesus still teaches us. Even the message has not changed, just the method by which it is shared.

That method begins with the Holy Word that he has preserved for us to this day in the Bible. That is where Jesus reveals his message to us. There we hear his words of the Mountain Sermon and so many other instances where he taught his disciples. He still teaches us through the living and active words that are recorded on the sacred page.

And Jesus teaches us through the teachers that he sends. As we read earlier, God provides pastors and teachers in the same way that he provided apostles and prophets. He has his faithful messengers proclaim his message of faithfulness. And so, we are to listen. This is why a relationship with your pastor or pastors is so valuable. Jesus uses them to teach you.

And this is why you will hear them encourage you so frequently to spend time in God's Word, to read and study the Bible. Just as in the Old Testament believers were instructed to make the Word of God a constant part of their lives, so we, too, can have God's Word reach into every aspect of our lives. It can start on a Sunday morning. Don't settle for an hour a week in the Word at worship. There are many chairs still available at Sunday morning Bible Study. To join with the crowds there listening to the voice of the Savior is a great joy for the Christian.

And Bible Study is something to take home. Spend some time each day listening to the voice of Jesus in his holy Word. Sometimes it is easy for us to underestimate the importance of this, in just the same way that the Sermon on the Mount doesn't seem quite as exciting as some events. But it is. Jesus teaches us exactly what we need to know for this life and for eternal life. Let's never stop listening to him.

The text: Matthew 5:1–16 (NIV84)

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,
² and he began to teach them, saying:

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

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.