

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

READ

Picture the scene...

Christ and his closest followers are gathered on a hillside with a crowd of people from the surrounding area. These are not the elite of society. These are farmers and fishermen, normal people looking to live out their lives on the shores of a beautiful blue lake known as the Sea of Galilee. Jesus notes the crowd and finds a spot on the hillside to sit down and engage the people around him. What happens next changed the world.

This hillside teaching is commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. It's referenced, even by those who do not follow Christ, as both profound and insightful. Profound teaching is often found not in the complex, not in lengthy explanations, not in confusing language, but in the simple. Jesus used simple and memorable statements, and oftentimes stories and metaphors, to communicate depth of insight to common people who were ignored by the celebrated teachers of his day. Interesting that those celebrated and complex teachers are now long forgotten, but the teachings of Christ continue to inspire and challenge us over two thousand years later.

As you read the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in both Matthew and Luke, you'll notice many things. For starters, you'll notice the teachings are written as a series of distinct nuggets of wisdom covering a variety of topics. As you read and later meditate on these topics, listen for themes that unite these statements of Christ. What was his passion? What motivated him? What did he care about? Yes, themes will not always be readily apparent, especially on the first read. The more you read the teachings of Christ, though, the more his heart, passion, and mission will emerge. Understand this passion, embrace this passion, enjoy this passion, and you too will be changed by this teaching that has changed so many before you.

You'll also notice differences between Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount and Luke's abbreviated account, so much so that scholars differ in their opinion on whether Matthew and Luke are recording the same event. Whether the two accounts record a single event or two events is inconsequential, but it does point to an important insight for reading the teachings of Christ. Christ's disciples did not sit with pen in hand and transcribe his every word. Rather, they followed him from town to town for several years hearing him teach again and again. By the end of this time they would know his teachings well, as Christ repeated his core teachings and themes. Later, under guidance of the Holy Spirit, they collected the teachings of Christ and transcribed them for our benefit. This perspective is reinforced by this week's final two readings, sections of Christ's teaching not considered part of the Sermon on the Mount but sounding strikingly similar. Clearly, Christ had consistent themes he'd repeat in varying settings and gatherings. Hearing how he addressed similar teachings in these various settings not only offers interesting nuances to his teachings, but it also underscores the importance of these repeated themes. We'd be wise to carefully consider teachings offered by Christ not just once but on multiple occasions.

Finally, remember that this is not just reading but is intended to inspire ongoing conversations with God. People in Jesus' day would travel from miles around to hear the great Teacher speak. Likely, few had the awesome privilege of dialoguing with him one on one about their own personal questions or troubles. And yet today, we have this astounding opportunity always before us. The same Jesus who climbed the hillside beside the Sea of Galilee is available to us on a moment-by-moment basis in prayer. Are you puzzled by what you read? Ask Christ to explain as you dig in and study. Do you wonder how a teaching might apply to your own

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situation? Ask Christ for counsel. Do not let this great opportunity to talk one on one with the great Teacher pass you by as you read.

MEMORIZE

This week's memory passages come from the Sermon on the Mount and address the pressing realities of life. Consider them in their entire context (Matthew 6:19-34). Without question, this section of the Sermon on the Mount gives great cause for pause as it deals with aspects of life that commonly wear us down.

This week's memory verses:

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money (Matthew 6:24).

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own (Matthew 6:33-34).

MEDITATE

As mentioned, Jesus often taught spiritual truths through physical metaphor. Through stories and comparisons to daily life, he made the intangible spiritual realm understandable and accessible. In much the same way, bringing physical metaphors from daily life into our prayer language can greatly enhance our communication with God, making our own complex thoughts and emotions tangible and easier to express.

For instance, suppose you have a particularly hard day at work and you feel as though life is closing in on you. Perhaps this emotional feeling reminds you of the physical feeling you once felt in the middle of a crowded concert. You might start a conversation with God like this: "Today at work, I felt like I did at the concert when strangers were pressing in all around me and jostling me in every direction. I felt suffocated and threatened. I felt out of control today just like I did in the middle of the crowd. Why did my day go that way? What can I hear from you and from your Scripture that would bring feelings of freedom and liberation?"

Or on days when you have extended time to talk with God, consider the following options:

- If you are artistically inclined, express the metaphor through your art. You might first draw how you feel now (e.g., tightly bound) and then how you want to feel (e.g., open and free). Invite God to collaborate with you in this artistic process.
- If you are athletically inclined, consider if there are songs or passages of Scripture that remind you of your present circumstances, and take these with you on a run or to the gym. Or consider using the metaphor of physical exercise to talk with God about how you feel spiritually and the endurance you may need to push through life right now.
- If you enjoy a change of scenery, go to a place that is itself metaphorical for your current situation. For example, if you long to feel open and free, you might go to a place with a wide open view of nature and talk to God about what you feel in this environment.

As always, remember that your conversations with God should be highly personalized to your own situation. What is most important is that you continue to cultivate an authentic relationship with God through daily connection. Talk to God about what is truly on your heart and do so in a way that is most natural for you. If you find it helpful to incorporate metaphor into your prayer language, use it; if not, leave it and blaze your own trail.

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