

Sermon on the Mount

Message 1

Jesus' Vision of His Kingdom

Matthew 5:1-2

Introduction

What would motivate you to drop out of Lehigh, travel to a harsh, distant country, endure grueling military training, and then kill yourself in a suicide mission? The world was stunned five years ago when four airplanes were hijacked and exploded in the twin towers and the pentagon, killing thousands of people, causing billions of dollars of destruction, and seriously damaging western economy. Why? What would cause someone to do such a thing? If you have been reading about the Muslim extremists, you know the answer. They dream of a better world. They are 100% convinced that the west is immoral and corrupt, that Islam is the answer to the world's problems, and that there will be peace and harmony when everyone submits to Allah. Furthermore, they long for paradise – a wonderful place where their dreams will be fulfilled. Plenty of delicious food, 70 virgins for every man, and endless leisure are theirs – if only they will die for Allah. How does that sound? Would you leave Lehigh, endure hardship, and execute a suicide mission for that dream?

Well, what *is* your dream? What brought you to Lehigh and keeps you here? What do you hope to achieve in life? Are you living for anything more than a good job, a wonderful husband or wife, and fun on the weekends? Do you have a dream of how the world should be? What vision keeps you going and pulls you on? What puts the zip and sparkle in *your* life? What makes life worth living?

In spite of all the drubbing that the Dilbert comic strip gives to corporate vision statements, true vision is an essential ingredient in leadership. Think of the accomplishments of Alexander the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Lenin. Not only were they geniuses in military and political tactics, they succeeded in reshaping their world because they implanted their vision in the hearts and minds of their followers. The Greek footsoldiers, the French citizens, and the Russian comrades were all captured by a vision of world conquest, and they dedicated themselves to achieving their goal. One of the greatest visionaries of all time was also one of the cruelest men. His insanity led to the butchery of whole populations of people and produced the deadliest war in the history of mankind, yet the whole nation of Germany eagerly followed Adolf Hitler and his dream of world conquest. Vision is intoxicating, and you must be sure your source is trustworthy.

Asa Packer's Vision

All great undertakings begin with a clear, strong vision. Such was the case with Lehigh University. Asa Packer was a visionary person who, after he built his industrial empire set his sights on education. Here is a description of the founding of Lehigh that I clipped from Lehigh's web site.

When the sound of the last cannon of the Civil War died away, statesmen, educators, and industrial pioneers marshaled the victorious forces of the North and turned their attention to education. They wanted to increase the number of trained scientists, engineers, and other skilled people so they could transform the vast natural resources of the country into a strong and independent national economy.

Asa Packer was one of the industrial pioneers. He built the Lehigh Valley Railroad and controlled a coal-mining empire in the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania. He knew, as did many others, that a strong national economy depended on more than technical skills. It needed above all people broadly educated in the liberal arts and sciences – people who could combine practical skills with informed judgments and strong moral self-discipline. He kept this in mind when founding and

endowing Lehigh University.¹

Packer could see past his own business and self interest and envision a university which would shape the men of future generations. Today, Lehigh University is the legacy of that vision.

When we turn to the ministry of Jesus we find that a major part of his ministry was giving people new hope, a new understanding of the Law, a new perspective on the future – in a word, a new vision. While this is a characteristic of all Jesus’ teaching, nowhere is this more clear than in the book of Matthew. So before we dive into the Sermon on the Mount, we shall first take a brief survey of Matthew’s gospel.

Overview of Matthew

First some general characteristics of Matthew. This gospel is unique in its focus on fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. All the gospels treat these prophecies, but Matthew leads the way in frequency. For example, it is the only one to mention Micah’s prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. This is related to the strong Jewish flavor that runs through Matthew. Although this has been vigorously debated in this century, the church has historically taken Matthew as the first gospel written, probably while the church was still predominantly Jewish. This Jewish flavor shows up in the focus on the Law, in referring to Jesus as the Son of David, and in the use of the word “Heaven” as a circumlocution for “God”, since the Jews considered it irreverent to pronounce God’s name. However, Matthew is by no means a “Jewish” gospel, for it clearly has the whole world in its view. This universal scope is evident in the Great Commission in the final three verses, where Jesus tells the disciples that He has all authority in Heaven and earth, and that they should preach in all the world.

It is no wonder that Matthew concludes in such a way, for throughout the book Jesus has been presented as the “King of Heaven”, beginning with His challenge as an infant to King Herod and His worship by the magi from the east. There is evidence that Matthew was the teaching material of choice for the early church. Its clear structure made it a natural for catechetical instruction, i.e. for establishing new members of the faith in the doctrines of Jesus. It was used extensively for apologetic purposes, to explain and defend the faith to the pagan world of the Roman Empire. And it was used liturgically, for it breaks into even sections for reading.

Matthew has one of the clearest structures of all the books of the Bible. After an introduction in the first four chapters there are five major sections, each with a discourse, or teaching part, followed by a series of stories from the life and ministry of Jesus. The parts which recount the events of Jesus’ life illustrate and apply the concepts presented in the preceding teaching part So it is not necessarily a chronological account of Jesus’ life, but that has no bearing on its trustworthiness. It *is* what it presents itself to be – a topical account of Jesus’ ministry, true in all its details and compelling our belief and obedience. A complete outline of Matthew looks like this:

Structure of Matthew.

1. Ch. 1-4 Introduction.
2. Ch. 5-7 Vision of the Kingdom.
Ch. 8-9:34.
3. Ch. 9:35-10 Service in the Kingdom.
Ch. 11-12.
4. Ch. 13:1-52 The Faithful in the Kingdom.

¹ Principal author is Dr. W. Ross Yates, Professor Emeritus at Lehigh.

- Ch. 13:53-17:27.
- 5. Ch. 18 The Heart of Kingdom People.
Ch. 19-22.
- 6. Ch. 23-25 Warning the Hard-hearted.
Ch. 26-28.

Jesus' Vision

From this it is easy to see the purpose and function of the Sermon on the Mount. It is the foundation and gateway to the rest of the book. While chapters 1 to 4 provide the historical background which is very important and necessary for a defense of Christianity and for linking Matthew to the Old Testament, chapters 5 to 7 lay the conceptual foundation for the rest of Jesus' teaching. In Matthew we can see Jesus teaching and modeling service and faithfulness in His Kingdom. We see Him teaching about the heart, its centrality to true religion; and we see Him warning the hard-hearted. We see Jesus saying and doing all sorts of things, but they are not fragmentary events or piecemeal stories. They all build on the vision of the Kingdom that he lays out in His opening sermon.

What is the future of the human race? What is the goal of history? In the midst of a thousand different denominations, each with its own perspective on the truth, what ought the church to look like? The answer to all these questions is, "The Sermon on the Mount." For Jesus really *is* the high king, the King of Heaven and Earth. He really does have all authority, even over history, and will accomplish His purpose. Here in this sermon, as He begins His ministry, Jesus lays out His vision for His people.

Obedience to the Vision

Our goal in Reformed University Fellowship is not to study the Bible merely for the sake of understanding it better. As the living word of God, the Bible always compels our obedience. So how is one to obey a vision? Obedience to commands we understand, but a vision – isn't that to inspire rather than to prompt obedience? A vision is not as direct as an explicit instruction. Instead it asks, "Does your life look like this picture?" Does this vision describe you? Living as you do now, do you really fit into the picture Jesus paints of His Kingdom? In your friendships, your dating, your prayer, your use of money, do you look like you belong in Jesus' Kingdom, or do you look like an imposter?

Matthew teaches all the way through that the central issue, and the central need of all men is a change of heart. If we do not live like members of Jesus' Kingdom, it is because we do not have the *heart* of a member of His Kingdom. In chapter 7 Jesus says, "Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit." Not only is it difficult – it is impossible to obey Christ until He changes our hearts. The good news, the gospel, is that Jesus is the expert heart transplant surgeon. He gives a heart of obedience to those who ask. Again in chapter 7 He says, "If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" Therefore our primary application as we study the Sermon on the Mount is to ask God to give us a heart to obey.

Jesus' Call to Listen

But in addition, right here in the first two verses we are challenged to specific obedience. One of the chief characteristics of the Kingdom is that Jesus' people have the habit of gathering to be taught by Him. Your coming here tonight is one sign that you fit the Kingdom vision – not that I am Jesus(!), but because the book of Matthew is Jesus' word. But what will you do tomorrow? And the next day? What about Friday, and Saturday, and Sunday, and Monday? Do you set aside time everyday to come apart from the crowds, the noise, the busy-ness of life, to hear Jesus speaking in His word? I hope you make a strong effort to read the Bible and pray everyday. That is how we interact with Jesus now that He is not physically on earth. This also is why RUF has Bible studies throughout the week. They are another chance to hear Jesus for yourself

and discuss His message with others. And every day at noon we meet for 20 minutes to read a psalm and pray. Most important of all is Sunday worship, where Christ speaks through His ministers and feeds us in the Lord's Supper.

See, everyday, all day long you are being trained to forget about Jesus. You are being programmed by influences around you to live as though He has not spoken and doesn't even exist. You are being shaped by another vision – a vision of the world in which Christ has no place. Which vision is true, Jesus' or the world's? The stakes are high. Secular universities like Lehigh teach that God is irrelevant to understanding the world. In this they are dead wrong, and therefore mislead many. Popular culture presents a vision of unending pleasure in entertainment and sex – a vision which ultimately leads to despair. The terrorists who died in the twin towers bombing died for a vision – a false one – and will suffer forever for their mistake. But the members of Jesus' Kingdom resist the world's message. They know it's a lie. They have caught Jesus' vision of a Heavenly Kingdom, and they are determined to live differently. So as we begin our study of the Sermon on the Mount, let us ask Christ to give us the heart – the desire – to hear His voice and to do His will.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
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