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John Stott

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SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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John Stott

With Notes for Leaders


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Getting the Most Out of *Sermon on the Mount*

The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed. It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers to be and to do. The Sermon is found in Matthew's Gospel toward the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Immediately after his baptism and temptation Jesus had begun to announce the good news that the kingdom of God, long promised in the Old Testament era, was now on the threshold. He himself had come to inaugurate it. With him, the new age had dawned, and the rule of God had broken into history. "Repent," he cried, "for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17). Indeed, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23).

The Sermon on the Mount, then, is to be seen in this context. It portrays the repentance (the Greek meaning is "the complete change of mind") and the righteousness which belong to the kingdom. That is, it describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God. And what do they look like? Different! Jesus emphasized that his true followers, the citizens of God's kingdom, were to be entirely different from others. They were not to take their cue from the people around them, but from him, and so prove to be genuine children of their heavenly Father. To me the key text of the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew

6:8: “Do not be like them.” It is immediately reminiscent of God’s word to Israel in Leviticus 18:3: “You must not do as they do.” It is the same call to be different. And right through the Sermon on the Mount this theme is elaborated.

Their character (the Beatitudes) was to be completely distinct from that admired by the world. They were to shine like lights in the prevailing darkness. Their righteousness was to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, both in ethical behavior and in religious devotion, while their love was to be greater and their ambition nobler than those of their pagan neighbors.

There is no single paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount where this contrast between Christian and non-Christian standards is not drawn. It is the underlying and uniting theme of the Sermon; everything else is a variation of it. Sometimes it is the Gentiles or pagan nations with which Jesus contrasts his followers. At other times he contrasts them with Jews. At all times Jesus teaches his followers are to be different—different from both the nominal church and the secular world, different from both the religious and the irreligious.

The Sermon on the Mount is the most complete description anywhere in the New Testament of the Christian counterculture. Here is a Christian value system, ethical standard, religious devotion, attitude to money, ambition, lifestyle and network of relationship—all of which are the total opposite of the non-Christian world. The Sermon presents life in the kingdom of God, a fully human life indeed but lived out under the divine rule.

Perhaps a majority of readers and commentators, looking the reality of human perversity in the face, have declared the standards of the Sermon on the Mount to be unattainable. Its ideals are noble but unpractical, they say, attractive to imagine but impossible to fulfill. At the other extreme are those superficial souls who glibly assert that the Sermon expresses ethical standards that are self-evidently true, common to all religions and easy to follow. “I live by the Sermon on the Mount,” they say. The truth lies in neither extreme position. For the

standards of the Sermon are neither readily attainable by everyone nor totally unattainable by anyone. To put them beyond anybody's reach is to ignore the purpose of Christ's Sermon; to put them within everybody's reach is to ignore the reality of our sin.

They are attainable all right, but only by those who have experienced the new birth that Jesus told Nicodemus was the indispensable condition of seeing and entering God's kingdom. For the righteousness he described in the Sermon is an inner righteousness. Although it manifests itself outwardly and visibly in words, deeds and relationships, it remains essentially a righteousness of the heart. Only a belief in the necessity and the possibility of a new birth can keep us from reading the Sermon on the Mount with either foolish optimism or hopeless despair. Jesus spoke the Sermon to those who were already his disciples and thereby also the citizens of God's kingdom and children of God's family. The high standards he set are appropriate only to such. We do not, indeed could not, achieve this privileged status by attaining Christ's standards. Rather by attaining his standards, or at least approximating them, we give evidence of what by God's free grace and gift we already are.

This Bible study draws on material first published in *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, a volume I have written in The Bible Speaks Today series (IVP). I recommend that book as supplementary reading for those using this guide. I am grateful to Jack Kuhatschek for the trouble he took and the skill he showed in preparing this guide under my general direction and to Donald Baker for making the necessary changes in this revised edition.

Those who first heard the Sermon on the Mount were astonished. I pray that you too will be astonished and challenged by the greatest sermon ever preached.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.

2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.

3. Each study deals with a particular passage—so that you can delve into the author’s meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. If you are studying a book, it will be helpful to read through the entire book prior to the first study. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.

4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. *Observation* questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. *Interpretation* questions delve into the meaning of the passage. *Application* questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.

Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God’s Word.

5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.

6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.

7. You may want to go on to the suggestion under “Now or Later,” or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for Members of a Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.

2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your

group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.

3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

1

Unexpected Blessings

Matthew 5:1-12

A hymn by William Cowper reminds us to look for blessings in unexpected places.

You fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

GROUP DISCUSSION. How would you define the word “blessed”? Ask each member of the group to write their definition on a piece of paper. Collect and read each definition, letting the group guess who wrote each one. What do the responses reveal about their authors?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Who do you normally consider to be blessed or fortunate?

In the Beatitudes we find a simplicity of word and profundity of thought that has attracted each fresh generation of Christians and many others besides. The more we explore their implications, the more seems to remain unexplored. Their wealth is inexhaustible. Truly, “we are near heaven here.” *Read Matthew 5:1-12.*

1. How does our normal description of the blessed or fortunate person compare with those Jesus considers blessed (vv. 1-12)?

2. To be “poor in spirit” (v. 3) is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty, our bankruptcy before God. Why is this an indispensable condition for receiving the kingdom of heaven?

Why is it so difficult for us to admit our spiritual poverty?

3. Why would those who are poor in spirit feel a need to mourn (v. 4)?

4. Those who mourn feel sorrow not only for their own sin but also for the sin they see around them. What have you heard in the news lately that causes you to mourn?

5. How do you think those who mourn will be comforted (v. 4)?

6. How would a true estimate of ourselves (vv. 3-4) lead us to be “meek”—to have a humble and gentle attitude to others (v. 5)?

7. From the world’s point of view, why is it surprising that the meek will inherit the earth?

8. What has Jesus said so far that might lead us to hunger and thirst for righteousness (v. 6)?

9. Biblical righteousness has three aspects: legal, moral and social. What does it mean to hunger and thirst for each of these?

10. Jesus promises that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled (v. 6). What can you do to cultivate a healthy, hearty spiritual appetite?

Ask God to satisfy some of your hunger and thirst as you study the Sermon on the Mount.

Now or Later

Continue your study of the Sermon on the Mount focusing on verses 7-12.

11. Jesus says the merciful will be shown mercy (v. 7). Why do you think our treatment of others will affect God's treatment of us?

12. Why would the promise of seeing God (v. 8) be reserved for those who are pure in heart?

13. How can we be peacemakers (v. 9) in our homes, in our churches and in society?

14. Why would the world hate the kind of people described in the Beatitudes?

15. How have the Beatitudes challenged you to be different?