

Food for Thought—The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain



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Strangely, many Christians seem to be comfortable in the epistles but shy away from the words of, well, Jesus Himself. This is an odd thing since He is our Lord and the Author and Finisher of our faith. People are especially inclined to turn away from or ignore (or pretend we forgot) what he said in His Sermon on the Mount and in Luke's Sermon on the Plain and other Lukan passages recording equivalent teachings (Luke 6, Luke 12, etc.). It is very likely that the ideas in these two sermons are ones which were—with some variation—shared throughout his ministry. They were likely spoken often—in the many different places where Jesus (or His disciples) taught. They showed what the Father's heart is like, they show what our priorities should be, and they show what sets Jesus apart and what sets His Kingdom apart. Why, then, do Christians, of all people, sometimes run away from these teachings?

I think one reason for this is based on a very common misunderstanding regarding English expression. At one point in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us (perhaps even pleads with us) to "be perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Here many people come to a screeching and panicked halt and often jump overboard. What they are thinking is something like, "I can't be as perfect as God! That's impossible! The Sermon on the Mount must be saying something different from what it appears to say!" And they then work hard to come up with the something else it must be saying or perhaps just stop reading it and try to stay away from it in future. Some think that the Sermon on the Mount's purpose is simply showing us how far from perfect we are and thus in need of Christ. It is true that it shows those things, but if we stopped there and said "case closed," we've missed much that Jesus wanted us to hear. Jesus is NOT saying "be as perfect as God is" (notice that to say "be as perfect as God is" would use the word "as" twice, not once). He is saying "be perfect in the way that God is. (The word translated "perfect" here, by the way, also means "complete," so another way to put it is, "be complete in the manner in which God's goodness is complete." What manner of love or goodness is God demonstrating? That is made clear in the verses immediately preceding verse 48. God, Jesus tells us, does many good things—like sending the sunshine and rain, which are both essential for life—to both the just and the unjust, to the thankful and unthankful. We are to behave in a manner that goes beyond the natural way of things. We are to be kind not just to nice people or not just to those who will be kind in return. We are to be generous to people who have nothing to give us, to people who cannot repay us. We are called to try to follow in our Father's footsteps in this distinctive part of his character.

A second reason, I think, why people want to run away from the Sermons on the Mount and Plain comes from a second set of misunderstandings. We hear Jesus telling us to do more than love our friends (every halfway decent person does that); He tells us to love our "enemies." He also says "resist not evil" and speaks of turning the other cheek. These things, in English, sound repellent, repugnant, and naive. If we suddenly stop and think of Jesus dying on the cross to make eternal life possible even for the people who put Him there, that helps. But, even so, one of our next thoughts is likely to be something like, "You mean, I'm supposed to be nice to

Hitler?!" The short answer is "No, we are not supposed to be Hitler's buddy." (And, anyway, being good to Hitler would mean seeking what is good for him, which would include doing all in our power to stop him from committing atrocities.) But we are still asked to do something that is not in the normal way of things. Greek has enough words to handle this difficult topic, but English doesn't. The Greek word translated "evil" in "resist not evil" is *poneros*, and it means "things or people that are hurtful in effect but not in essential character." This "evil" is not all-caps EVIL (there is a different Greek word for all-caps EVIL, and it is *kakos*).

So, when Jesus is telling us to love our enemies or resist not evil, he is not talking about child traffickers or demons. He is talking about people who are hurtful to us personally, people who are jerks to us, people who are our political opponents, people who show off around us, people who probably gossip about us. And he is not asking us to encourage them in their "jerk" behaviors. He is calling us not to respond to them in kind. He is calling us to not dump our trash in their yard; He is challenging us to maybe pick up the beer can someone else threw in the jerk's yard; He is calling us to greet them politely, to perhaps offer them a place to stay if a tornado took their house.

But, have no fear, God is the defender of the fatherless and exploited, and we are to follow in His footsteps in that way too. He is not asking us to bake cookies for child traffickers. God expects us to do whatever we can to stop traffickers from destroying the lives of children as well as their own souls. And he expects us to intervene when we see someone being mistreated. But He is asking us to pray for the person who just cut us off in traffic instead of to curse them (or at least, after the curse, remember to pray). We don't know what the driver's back story is. We don't know the circumstances of his day. We don't know why he is in such a hurry or so distracted. Also, we are good at forgetting about our own traffic errors immediately after committing them. Remembering such things can help us pray for others.

Jesus's teachings, it is true, set the bar high, but if we run away from the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain and his other teachings, what we miss out on is inestimable. It is in these teachings that we see the heart of God. We see what the Father values, and we hear what our priorities should be. Aren't we glad that Jesus made these things clear? It is in these teachings that we see clearly that God is not interested merely in our outward actions but in our inward motivations. We see that not only does He not want the actions of adultery or rape, but that He doesn't even want men to do such things in their imagination. What a relief! Aren't we glad to know that God sees caring for our family members as of much more value than a showy gift to the church? Aren't we thankful that he tells us to mend our relationships with our brothers and sisters and to make them a high priority? Aren't we glad to know that there is such a thing as a treasure in heaven which leaves all that earth has to offer in the dust? Aren't we glad to know that God doesn't want people to show off when they pray or fast? Aren't we glad He wants to remove our blindness to our own pride? We discover that with His help, we can be more generous than the world expects, not less generous. We see the assurance that He cares about the sparrows and lilies of the field and that He cares about us. We see that we are indeed to keep trying, knocking, and seeking. Aren't we glad that the meek will one day inherit the earth? We may not know exactly how or in what manner that will happen, but we can tell that such a promise heralds a Kingdom so much better than the world as it is now. Aren't we glad that God notices and values mercy? If we do not run away from Jesus's teachings, we are rewarded with this great revelation of God's heart.