

The King Who Speaks as God

Matthew 5–7

This morning we begin looking at what is no doubt the most famous collection of Jesus' teachings in the Bible, the "Sermon on the Mount," which is "a description of the lifestyle of those who belong to [the] kingdom" that Jesus came to establish.¹

So many of the sayings we find here are known and loved throughout the world by both Christians and non-Christians alike. Whether you are here this morning, just kind of observing and seeing what this Christianity thing is all about, or whether you have known and walked with God for a lifetime, who among us hasn't heard phrases like:

- "Blessed are the poor in spirit" or "Blessed are the peacemakers" (5:3, 9)
- "You are the salt of the earth" (5:13)
- "A city on a hill cannot be hidden" (5:14)
- "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (5:39)
- "Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (6:9-10)
- "No one can serve two masters" (6:24)
- "Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient is the day for its own trouble (6:34)
- "Judge not, that you not be judged" (7:1)
- "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you." (7:7)
- "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them" (7:12)

These words have captured imaginations throughout civilization for millennia. But more than just the words, the ethical vision of this sermon, the moral lifestyle it shows us, is also known and celebrated by both believers and non-believers. President Harry Truman is attributed as saying, "I do not believe there is a problem in this country or the world today which could not be settled if approached through the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount."² Similarly, when the great Hindu leader and pacifist, Gandhi, was asked what he thought would solve the problems between Great Britain and India, he took a Bible and turned to the fifth chapter of Matthew and

¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 3.

² <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/harrystru153791.html#bVOaHxjsg60bQty1.99>

said: “When your country and mine shall get together on the teachings laid down by Christ in this Sermon on the Mount, we shall have solved the problems not only of our countries but those of the whole world.”³

The moral vision of this sermon is powerful. And yet it’s not a moral vision for humanity in general; *it’s a very particular vision for life lived under the reign and rule of Jesus Christ*. Life as part of God’s kingdom, lived in utter submission to Jesus’ authority as King. One of the problems with how so many people treat this passage is that they focus on the ethics of the kingdom without connecting them to the King who gives them out of his own authority and power. We make the Sermon on the Mount about us, hijacking its teaching and using it to advance our own vision for life, our own definition of social justice, which means at some point we invariably have to throw out the ethics here that we don’t like (maybe the teaching on divorce, or lust, or judgment). What we’re left with in the end neither resembles the sermon’s actual content nor respects the authority of the one who gave it. In other words, we often want many of the values of the kingdom, but we don’t want the King.

Now there’s another side to this coin—those who want the King, but don’t really want the kingdom teaching, this moral vision of life in his kingdom. They like Jesus, but they don’t want to live like Jesus. Maybe it’s because we know we are utterly incapable of living up to this vision, and we just feel guilty reading it, and so we try to find a way to downplay it or get rid of it. Or maybe we think that God isn’t really that holy, and that my sin isn’t that sinful, and so it doesn’t matter how we live as part of his kingdom. So we find ourselves softening the sharp edges of this sermon, ignoring the hard teachings, or maybe even just relegating the whole thing to a different time and people so it no longer applies to us.

But here also we’re falling into the trap of disconnecting this vision of kingdom life from the submission to the King. Just before this passage, Jesus came announcing, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (4:17). The kingdom is at hand—the reign and dominion of God, because *the King is at hand*. And if the King is at hand, then he has authority to tell us how to live as members of his kingdom. *There is no following the King without living out his kingdom values, and there can be no kingdom living without utter submission to the authority of the King*. As author and pastor Sinclair Ferguson says, “living out the Sermon on the Mount can never be divorced from a right relationship to Jesus Christ.”⁴

So before we can say anything about the *message* of Sermon on the Mount—what that message is, and how we live it out—we first have to reckon with the *messenger*, the King who speaks as God. As we’re going to see, living out the Sermon on the Mount “means, fundamentally, bowing to the authority of Jesus.”⁵

So what does the Sermon on the Mount teach us about who Jesus is, the one giving the sermon? We heard read earlier what we might call the “bookends” of the Sermon on the Mount, the first two and the last two verses of this section. And if there’s one theme highlighted in how it opens and how it closes (not to mention everywhere in between), it’s his *authority*. His authority.

³ Robert Kirby, “The Sermon on the Mount Site: Perceptions of the Sermon on the Mount.” Available at: <http://www.sermononthemount.org.uk/SermonOnTheMount/Quotes.html>

⁴ Ferguson, 4, italics his.

⁵ Ferguson, 5.

Look again with me at Matthew 5:1-2: “Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them . . .” But the imagery used to describe the posture of Jesus’ teaching—going up the mountainside and then sitting down—suggests a certain weightiness to what he’s about to say. For instance, mountains are kind of a big deal in the Gospel of Matthew; important things happen on them. Things like his temptation in ch. 4, the transfiguration in ch. 17, what we call the “Olivet Discourse” in ch. 24, and the Great Commission in ch. 28—all happen on a mountain.⁶ Second, the posture of sitting suggests an authoritative teaching posture. Later in Matthew Jesus describes the Pharisees as sitting in “Moses’ seat”—there’s a certain authority to their teaching role (Matt. 23:2, cf. Lk. 4:20). Even today when the Pope in the Catholic tradition speaks authoritatively, he is said to be speaking *ex cathedra*—from the seat (of his office).⁷

So his posture at the beginning suggests that he’s teaching with a certain authority. But listen to the reaction of the hearers when he’s done. The last two verses of the sermon (7:28-29): “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, *because he taught as one who had authority*, and not as their teachers of the law.”

So what kind of authority does Jesus have? Why should we pay special attention to him, and what’s at stake in whether or not we acknowledge his authority and obey? We see Jesus’ authority displayed in two ways in the sermon. The first is that Jesus is a New Moses.

A New Moses

We’ve mentioned in previous weeks how Jesus relives ancient Israel’s story. Israel was God’s special, covenant people in the Old Testament—his special possession, with whom he made a special deal, to be their God and for them to be his people. But we’ve seen how, just like Adam in the garden, Israel was unfaithful to their God, and brought on themselves the curses of God’s covenant with them. In contrast to both Adam and Israel, Matthew shows us that Jesus is the faithful Son of God. And much of the early chapters of Matthew show how Jesus relives Israel’s story, succeeding precisely where they failed, *in order to be the faithful Son who brings Israel and the nations back to God*.

In Matthew 2, just as Israel sojourned in Egypt and returned to Canaan, so Jesus sojourns in Egypt and returns (Matt. 2:13-15). Just as Israel’s deliverer, Moses, was saved from a tyrant king’s infanticide (Exod. 1:22-2:10), so Jesus, Israel’s Savior, was saved from the same fate (Matt. 2:16-18). Just as Israel was born through the waters of the Red Sea, so Jesus inaugurates his ministry through the waters of baptism (3:13-17). As Israel was tested for forty years in the wilderness, so last week we saw Jesus tested for forty days, yet succeeding precisely where Israel failed (4:1-11).

If we keep following that comparison, it’s unmistakable that when Jesus ascends a mountain in order to give instruction about being God’s people, Matthew wants us to see Jesus as a *new* Moses, as it were, giving a *new* law, a new vision for how God’s people should live as members of his new kingdom. Not that it’s so much a *different law*, but a *new way of living out* the vision of God’s law from the Old Testament. Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I have

⁶ See Doug O’Donnell, *The Gospel of Matthew* (PTW; Crossway, 2013; pre-published manuscript), 72.

⁷ See O’Donnell, 72.

come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” He’s not making the Old Testament obsolete, or saying it doesn’t matter any more. He is saying that the way we live it out is changing now that Jesus is here. We’ll look more closely at that in a few weeks.

As Jesus sits down on the mountainside to teach, he teaches in full accordance with the Old Testament Scriptures and the Law of Moses, himself functioning as a new Moses. And yet, the Jesus we meet in the Sermon on the Mount is so much more than a new Moses.

More than a New Moses

Even when Moses taught God’s people, he taught as a prophet. The greatest prophet in many ways, but a prophet who said “Thus says the Lord.” Moses never spoke out of his own authority. But Jesus does something different.

Go ahead and look with me at Matthew ch. 5. Notice in Jesus’ teaching in vv. 21-48, how he introduces what he has to say about the proper way to live in God’s kingdom.

- Verse 21: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (5:21-22).
- Verse 27: You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (5:27-28).

Then again in vv. 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44. Jesus gives God’s law not like the prophets did, but *as one who speaks as God himself*. As Pastor Doug O’Donnell puts it, “He opened his mouth, . . . not merely to speak from or about the Scriptures, but in fact, to claim authority of interpretation and application over them, and even fulfillment of them.”⁸

This is what the crowds were talking about in 7:28-29 when they marveled at how Jesus teaches *with authority*, unlike their scribes. The scribes of the Pharisees and Sadducees in early Judaism rarely taught out of their own authority. Not only did they have to appeal to the authority of Scripture, they were constantly citing what other rabbis and teachers had said about the Scriptures. Jesus doesn’t do this. He speaks with his own authority as God. Imagine if I stood up here and said things like, “You’ve heard it said in Genesis 3 or in Ephesians 5, but I say to you . . .” What would you think? “*Who is this nut? He’s setting himself in the same place as, or even above Scripture!*” But that’s what Jesus did. “You’ve heard it said, but I say to you.” Jesus spoke as though he himself had written the book. (It’s not without reason that the Gospel of John introduces him as “the Word of God,” John 1:1, 14.) Jesus speaks with an authority greater than any prophet—he spoke as God.

We see Jesus’ unique authority illustrated in a second way in the sermon, in *how he speaks with unique insight into how we should to relate to his Heavenly Father*. He is intimately acquainted with how the Father works and what he’s looking for in his children. “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from

⁸ O’Donnell, 72.

your Father in heaven” (6:1). He teaches us how to pray to his Heavenly Father (the Lord’s Prayer, 6:9-13). He reveals the loving and compassionate heart of the Father. “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (7:11). Only Jesus fully knows the will of his Father, because he is the eternal Son, who is one with the Father and the Spirit. He speaks with authority as God.

Third, we see that Jesus is more than a new Moses in how he presents himself as the Judge of all humanity. Listen to ch. 7:21-23:

Not everyone who says *to me*, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say *to me* on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from *me*, you evildoers!’ (7:21-23)

Prophets don’t make those kinds of claims. Good, moral teachers don’t say things like, “At the end of the age, you’ll all stand before me and I will judge you, whether you enjoy eternal life or not, based on whether or not *I know you*.” Jesus’ vision for kingdom living is not just, “follow these principles and life will be better”; it’s “bow before me as King and Judge.”

Finally, we see Jesus’ divine authority in the final verses of the sermon in 7:24-27, where he speaks as *the one in whose words we find wisdom and life*. Verse 24:

Therefore everyone who hears *these words of mine* and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears *these words of mine* and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (7:24-27)

Again, good teachers don’t say things like this—that the whole course of your life depends on listening to and obeying their words. Only God can say things like this. Jesus is the King who speaks as God, and obeying this sermon means first recognizing his authority.

Reckoning with the King who Speaks as God

So how do we respond to Jesus’ authority as King? First, we have to get over the idea of submitting to anybody’s authority other than our own. For many of us, the idea of authority is simply offensive. Maybe it’s because we’ve seen authority abused, or have been personally wounded by someone’s abuse of authority. Maybe because he have a hard time trusting those in authority over us.

But for many of us, it’s the simple idea of someone else telling us what to do that we find offensive. Someone else telling us what’s right and wrong, what’s significant and meaningful and worthwhile, and what is empty and destructive. We think that freedom is the ability to do whatever we want, whatever we think will satisfy or fill us, and any kind of authority outside of oneself is therefore a threat to that freedom.

But what we fail to realize is that the freedom and life and meaning and pleasure we're looking for comes not from knocking all other would-be kings off the throne and taking the seat ourselves, but in the glad surrender and joyful submission to the one who *rightfully* deserves to be sitting there, to the one who is wise enough, powerful enough, righteous enough, holy enough, and gracious enough to fulfill the duties of the throne, accomplishing God's plan for both heaven and earth. And what the Gospel of Matthew is telling us from beginning to end, and what the Sermon on the Mount makes clear, is that Jesus is that king. The king of heaven and earth.

So how do we respond to his authority? You can really only do one of two things—you *can take it or leave it*. You can take it or leave it. What you cannot do is take the Sermon on the Mount without Jesus, or take Jesus without the Sermon on the Mount.

First, you can take Jesus' authority. You can recognize that he is the King who speaks as God, and who therefore demands our allegiance. Which means you can both take Jesus *and* his vision of life in his kingdom. But first you have to take Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount is a *description* of life as a member of God's kingdom; it doesn't tell us much about how we *enter* that kingdom. We need the rest of Matthew's Gospel, and the rest of the Bible to fill out that picture. You cannot follow the ways of the kingdom if you are not first reconciled to the King.

Later in Matthew 19, when Jesus is describing how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, his disciples protest, "Who then can be saved?" (Matt. 19:25). Jesus answers, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (19:26). In other words, God does the work of salvation. It's through trusting in him and his work that we are able to enter the Kingdom, to become his child and servant. The gospel is good news, not good advice. It's not something we do, it's something God has done for us, specifically in living for us and dying for us on the cross, to give us his righteousness and take away our sin. It is through faith, through trusting in Jesus that we take hold of him as King and Savior (cf. John 5:24).

But if you take Jesus as Savior and King, then you are also called to follow the ways of his kingdom. The idea that you can trust Jesus but it doesn't matter how you live is completely foreign to biblical Christianity. We are called to follow Christ. Not to pay him back, or make it up to him, but out of love and gratitude and loyalty. Not out of your own effort and strength, but working hard with the strength that God himself supplies through the Holy Spirit. Not because we're saved by works—we're not; but because we're saved *for* works—serving God in holiness as faithful children and servants of his kingdom, who bring glory to him after the pattern of his Son.

Again, over the next couple months we're going to take a closer look at this vision for kingdom living, life lived in personal relationship with and joyful submission to the King.

The other option is to leave Jesus' authority. To reject him as King. To disagree with his claim of authority, perhaps even to deny he exists, and to submit yourself to some other authority. And sadly, many people choose that route.

If that's where you're at, I want you to know that I'm glad you're here. And you don't have to put on a show for us and pretend otherwise. We want everyone to be able to be honest here, and

we want to know you and love you just the same, *though in our love for you we do want you to meet Jesus.*

But if you leave Jesus, you need to know that *you cannot with integrity claim any part of his law for your purposes.* With all due respect, Truman and Ghandi were both dead wrong when they suggested that we could achieve world peace by following the tenets of this sermon. They wanted a kingdom without a King. But it doesn't work that way. First, because no one in and of themselves actually lives that way. We are all sinners and rebels against God, and apart from knowing Jesus and being strengthened by his Spirit, we can't obey, at least not from the heart. Second, because without a King to give instruction and judge people for whether or not they follow it, no moral system can even exist. You cannot have a kingdom without a King. And those who try are simply replacing the true King with some cheap substitute—either themselves or something else.

So you can leave the king, but that means leaving the kingdom. And just so you know, a decision to leave Jesus' authority doesn't actually mean you're no longer answerable to it. You can "leave" the authority of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, but if you get caught speeding, you still have to pay the ticket, even if you don't "accept" the state's authority—because it's real. If what Matthew is saying is true, then what we read earlier from Matthew 7 about Jesus judging us in the end stands for you whether you recognize his authority or not (7:21-23).

You can take the King, or you can leave him. But you cannot stay neutral. C.S. Lewis, who spent his early adult life as an atheist and came to Christ kicking and screaming, put this reality in a very memorable way:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or . . . you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God.⁹

Jesus is the King who speaks as God. Take him or leave him—but *I plead with you to take him.* There's no greater freedom, there's no greater security, there's no greater satisfaction, there's no greater love, than to know and follow Jesus as King and Savior. That's what he made you to do; that's what he saves you to do. He is the one worthy of honor and glory and all praise.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 56.