

THE SERMON ON  
THE MOUNT

SERIES ON MATTHEW IV  
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR  
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PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

*Heather Dodson*

Almighty One, Creator, Sustainer,  
The One who was and is and is to come  
Our view of you is too often limited by our own natures  
Our physical self-centeredness, mental sluggishness,  
Moral retardedness, spiritual apathy  
Not only cripples us but affects all those around us.  
We are chastised when we take an honest look at our own hearts  
You who rule the whole cosmos, with justice and mercy  
You who are great and awesome beyond anything we can imagine  
We do not presume to come to you in our own merit  
Hear the cry of our feeble hearts as we humble ourselves before you

Forgive our foolish independence  
Forgive our self preserving pride  
Forgive our peace-shattering pace of life  
Forgive our seeking after favour from others  
Forgive our preoccupation with ourselves  
Forgive us for not acquainting ourselves with you

Would you give us a spirit of wisdom  
Would you give us revelation of the knowledge of you  
Would you enlighten the eyes of our hearts to know the hope of your  
calling  
Would you show us the riches of the glory of you Inheritance  
Would you reveal to us the surpassing greatness of your power towards  
us who believe  
Would you give us peace

We choose to come before you – our Most High God –  
Bringing our whole selves, which is of value to you –  
Reveal your heart to us

## S E R M O N :

Can you imagine their feelings as the first four disciples went up on a hill to see Jesus? Can you see them walking with a slight spring in their step, asking questions about each other's family history, childhood memories, working out their different connections, who knew who. It was small talk that you would expect when you start any new job or school—finding out about the people around you.

Perhaps one of the stories they recounted was when they each had gone to hear John the Baptist down at the river, they were trying to work out if they had seen each other then. They had all appreciated the sense that there was something different about John as well. But compared to Jesus he was rustic and open airish.

Not long before, they had heard Jesus repeat John's proclamation: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." But, for some reason when Jesus spoke them, there was a ring of truth in his words that made them inescapable. He would speak and they would listen and He spoke like no-one they had heard before. Jesus was somehow more refined.

He was doing a circuit, teaching in the synagogues and creating quite a name for himself. He was in many respects a celebrity itinerant preacher.

Why? Because he had an authority that no-one had ever had before. And the way he explained the scriptures was refreshing and real. He was introducing tangibility into their religious lives.

But it wasn't just his words, there was the fact that he was healing people left right and centre. There were no struggles, drawn out exegesis, he just said it and it was so. The healings that people witnessed were real and authentic. People who used to have broken spines were walking around, those who were marginalised because they had chronic epileptic seizures were living in the confidence that they need not live in fear of the unexpected anymore. Demons had been cast out and those with skin diseases and disabilities had watched themselves get better almost instantly.

Oh yes, this Jesus was quite a man. And these disciples were cashing in on the new found popularity they were experiencing as they were special members of this cult of personality.

You can almost hear them boasting a bit when people talked to them. "Yeah, me and Jesus, Yeah, well we get on ok. I like him, and he's got some good things to say . . . but he's just a little well, too nice and caters to everyone a bit much, and don't tell him I said this but, if I was doing his ministry I'd be concentrating on just one specific group of people. He needs a better strategy,

focus. Jesus needs to not spread himself so thin. Well that's my opinion." And they had lots of opinions when Jesus wasn't around and the people would stand back and wow and awe at them. Behind every famous person are the people who went to school with them, behind every great prophet are the people who know the people who were under him.

And the people would walk away secure in the fact that they had been that one step closer to this man Jesus even if it was merely talking to the inflated ego of one of his disciples.

Oh yes, I think the disciples were relishing this time. It was exciting, it was fresh and it was new. It just didn't get any better than this! They were so confident in this new thing that they had left everything behind. They no longer had fulltime work, they no longer had any commitments, they were dedicated. This man, they thought, was the one they had been looking for.

Indeed, this is the truth of it. In spite of the glory of what they were experiencing every day they began to see glimpses of something that made Jesus different from any other prophet. It looked like this man Jesus might be something more. Peter was the first to admit it later, but they were all suspecting that this might be the Messiah, the one who would save the nation.

When one of them had first suggested this, there was a terrible hush that followed. To make this suggestion was incredibly dangerous. Not because it would appear to be some kind of blasphemy but because the messiah was going to free them from the rule of the Romans. Implying something even remotely subversive would get you killed.

But after the awkward silence, they started to talk about it again. One of them recited from Isaiah where the Messiah was going to bring about a time when "the wealth of the nations would come to them. (Is 60.5)" And of course they began to warm to the idea. They began to get excited about the prospect of getting not filthy rich but at least well off. They saw a bright future for their families and for their families' families. They could see the justice of God prevailing against the oppressors. No more persecution. The nation of Israel would once again be established as an entity in her own right! The punishment for their national sin was over, they could again enjoy fellowship with God!

It was through these glazed eyes that the first disciples looked at Jesus when they sat at his feet on the mountain. And they waited eagerly for him to say something.

Maybe Jesus looked at them wryly through the corner of his eye as he began to speak.

“God’s smile envelops those who know they are spiritually deficient for they will discover his kingdom before long.”

You can hear the stylus scratching the record of their dreams and the enormous bang as the giant bubble of their expectations burst.

“What? What did he say? How can un-spiritual people be blessed?”

More beatitudes. More confused looks.

“Same with those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake—they too will understand God’s delight in them.”

“Count it a God given privilege when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for you will surely see that this will not be unnoticed by God and he will look after you very nicely in the life to come. Remember how the prophets were treated? Well, consider yourselves in the same boat.”

You can see their faces dropping. Where on earth did this come from? This isn’t good stuff, this is really stink! What’s he talking about persecutions for? How come he’s talking like that? Why did he say that to us? A small amount of panic started to set in. Their world was being turned upside down.

Uh oh, some more people had started to arrive. Jesus has really blown it this time. And the crowd began to amass once again.

But Jesus began to reinterpret the religious rules for everyone. He started to make sense. He taught about divorce and eye for an eye and stuff that really mattered to them. He began introducing the law with a new dimension of love. He was bringing a sense of relationship and care to their understanding of God, he was making the people recognise their God who had seemed to be a distant for so long.

Jesus was also condemning the religious fanatics they were supposed to respect! “And when you pray, do not be like those ministers who stand and pray in the synagogue and at street corners so that they may be seen by others.

“Don’t flaunt your spirituality over the TV screens for the world to see. Don’t aspire to sell lots of worship albums in the name of personal spirituality. There’s a lot of disguise in that stuff. Praise God in secret behind closed doors, where your heart is tested by God and God alone.” What did he say? But they are the spiritual ones!

Think about the crowd that had gathered that day. They were the spiritually downtrodden normal everyday struggling people. But I suspect that when Jesus looked out across the hillside he saw scattered around not people—but what looked like the putrefying remains one would see in the

aftermath of a huge battle, corpses of self pity, and self-derision, Jesus saw the gaping wounds of words spoken in hate, put downs and insults, he saw the scars of gossip, he saw the broken egos of pride seething for revenge, yes he saw the stuff that hurt and the stuff that was motivated from brokenness.

He looked at all these people who were so confused by their supposed connection with God, perhaps they thought they were content with feeling that their faith could never progress beyond simplicity. Perhaps they thought that all that they had to offer God was some kind of religious commitment. Perhaps they thought that their small and perhaps inconsequential faith was all that they were ever going to have and therefore they would be of not much significance to God whatsoever.

And they betrayed this feeling of inadequacy by attending a big meeting on the side of a hill. They betrayed a semblance of hope, a momentary glimpse of what might yet be. And these bedraggled listeners were sitting on this mountain side and were astounded to hear words that they felt should not be said to them but really spiritual people. These words didn't make sense to their current understanding of the world, yet they rang with a sweet truth that they had never in all their lives heard but had always known it was there somewhere.

Jesus opened up the opportunity for the normal people to engage with God! Jesus opened up the way for the people who have a distorted spirituality to experience God! Jesus did not see a crowd of religious fanatics, but something more like Symphony in the park.

And he said to them, those who had taken the time out of their lives to come and listen, those who had made one small step in the direction away from self-serving, to those who suspected that Jesus had some kind of answer for them. Jesus spoke to the uncertain crowd and said with enormous certainty: "You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth!"

He wasn't talking to the super duper Christians, he was talking to those who could be likened to the pew sitters, those who have a passive faith, the disillusioned, the cynical, those who we look upon as second class citizens within our own church buildings—the spiritually poor! For those of you who are here tonight who are holding on to this faith by a mere thread, and feel as though you are slipping away. Those of you who are doubters and consider yourselves not very good Christians, take heart, look away from yourselves because Jesus has called you blessed.

In the next 2 chapters of Matthew we find some of the great statements of our faith. We hear that the common person can connect with God through

the Lords prayer, we are taught to do unto others as we would have them do to ourselves, we are taught about the futility of wealth, about being honest with our words, about not worrying about tomorrow. We are taught about how we shouldn't stand in judgement of others, how we should give to the needy, how we shouldn't show off our faith for our own glory.

But we are also told some terribly difficult things. The command "Do not murder" is opened up to include anything that destroys the dignity of another human being—insults and gossip are just as bad as killing the person. The command not to commit adultery is opened up to include any behaviour that compromises the sanctity of the marriage vows—even looking for sexual intimacy somewhere else is wrong. We are told to turn the other cheek if someone strikes us in the face—and Jesus demonstrated that to the bitter end on the cross.

There are some hard teachings here. The rules were not being changed though. All that Jesus was doing was showing that people look at what we do on the outside, but God looks at the heart. Good deeds can be a form of manipulation too . . .

This sermon on the mount is a pretty powerful piece of scripture. The message is clear. And as the conclusion to it draws near, Jesus tells us how there are two choices that we are confronted with. Two gates through which we may pass, one is wide and one is narrow. Choose the narrow one for life—we will discover how ugly our insides really are as they are exposed by the penetrating gaze of Jesus, but we will become better people. Growth comes through pain. Love is tested acutely when times are tough.

Go through the wide gate and live a life like gravel coated in candy. Sweet to taste for a while, but when it comes to the bite you'll break your teeth. Shallow living, no growing, glossing over the hard stuff? That's the wide gate and Jesus says it leads to destruction.

And this is the beauty and the mastery of the sermon on the mount. Jesus chops everyone off at the knees and brings everyone's ego down to size. There is no escape. There is no escape from the judgement of God. There is not one who is righteous on their own. There is not one who makes the grade of the law.

Jesus says this in his sermon. "those perfect people you call the Pharisees, you know the ones, the ones who keep every minor point of the law, those ones who look like they've got it all sown up and who do everything right, who are what you would call righteous? Yeah, well, let me tell you

something, unless you are even better than them, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Ouch. Even the Pharisees don't make it.

Jesus said, “There were two men who built houses. There was a very simple difference between the two designs. One was built upon a concrete reinforced foundation and the other on a sand dune. Which one stood the test of the storm?”

“It's not rocket science is it!” said Jesus. “When the storm came the house on the sand dune fell to pieces and what had once been a roof over the family's head became nothing but rubble.”

And he continued: “You've heard some hard teaching today people.

You've got your religion, but it's not the truth. It won't set you free. You've got moral lives, on the outside at least, but that's not where it counts to God. You do good by being holy, but it will not save you and set you free.

Construct your amazing faiths if you want. Go ahead. You can call it evangelicalism, or liberalism. You can call it Catholicism, or Pentecostalism. Have your expressions of worship, be it through liturgy, hymns or the latest greatest music.

But be warned, if all these things are building protective walls to hide behind and safeguarding your heart from being exposed to the work of God, then you have constructed something that looks and acts like a house, but will wash away at the first sign of trouble.

There is no visible difference between belief and facades. But I tell you what, whichever it is, when the storm comes, when the real hard stuff of life comes along to test your faith your foundation will be revealed.”

And the crowd dispersed. And the words settled.

“Good sermon Jesus, I really like how you constructed it. I suspect that that's the best sermon I've ever heard. I dare say it's one of the best one's in well, history! Well, I'll be seeing you next Sunday then. Cheers.” And they shook his hand and went out the door amazed at the teaching but holding it at arms length because they were desperate to remain unchanged, building their houses in the same way that children build sandcastles against the incoming tide.

And the disciples stood silently and considered how the entire crowd had been made into a mass of equality based on failure.

And Jesus sat down and contemplated what had just taken place.

“Jesus” said a disciple. “You've gone and made everyone feel stink. Don't you think that you were a bit unfair?”

And Jesus looked at him and said “Do you not understand that in order to be healed, you have to acknowledge that you are sick? Most people don’t want to face up to the horror of who they really are.

“People are fighting these battles right? The battle to discover self. The battle to discover meaning. The battle to live with a purpose. And they find satisfaction in the most bizarre places. Clothing labels for example. Did you know that the Tommy Hilfiger clothing label doesn’t manufacture anything but subcontracts lots of companies to make it’s clothes? For instance Jockey make the underwear and put the Tommy logo on it. Are you really getting better quality for the extra that you pay? But for some reason people feel better wearing Tommy Hilfiger instead of Jockey. Go figure. Who is Tommy Hilfiger anyway? People invest where they think they will look best.

It’s like that with so many things in life. People are driven by whims and fads. There are these demarcations of those who have and those who have not. Some are driven by having a wonderful family name that generates respect. Some are driven by being rockstars and famous. Some are driven by being good at sports in order to feel needed. Some will live alternative simple lifestyles to prove how unaffected by materialism they are. Some will live opulent and luxurious lives to prove how happy and powerful they are.

But most of them are building houses that will not last. Because at the end of the day they have no substance. They’re fundamental philosophy of life is serving self. You’d be amazed my friends if you could only see what I see.”

And the disciples paused and understood that Jesus was looking right through them right then and there. He was turning the closet of their hearts upside down and giving it a good shake to get those skeletons out. Jesus saw their hearts, the stuff they tried to hide not just from everyone else, but from themselves too. The things they thought that time would heal. And they were ashamed. And it hurt like hell. But before they could scramble for cover, before they could pick up the bones of brokenness and stuff them back in, Jesus spoke to them.

“Growth hurts. But listen to me,” said Jesus, “are you tired of that religion? Burned out by the rules. Come to me and I will let your burden become easier. I offer you grace. I offer you my love and my comfort if you would all but rest with me.

Bring it all with you. Everything you are ashamed of. And lets work through it bit by bit. Lets make you whole again.

Do you see it now? Blessed are those who are spiritually poor, because they will come to me. Blessed are those who mourn, for I will comfort them.

Come to me. Come to me and I will give you rest. Repent, and enter the kingdom of heaven with me!”