

“The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached” The Sermon on the Mount Series (Intro)

Liturgical Date: Epiphany 3 (A)

Primary Text: St. Matthew 4:12-25 (although this sermon is primarily topical)

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The sermon for this morning is primarily topical but will reference our Gospel text from St. Matthew 4. The title of the sermon is, “The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached.”

What is the greatest sermon that you have ever heard preached? Perhaps there is one that stands out for you, that you will always remember. Maybe it has a special connection to your life and faith in God. It could be that you heard it preached from a pulpit, read it in a book, listened on the radio, over the television airwaves, or through the internet. On Sermon Audio alone, there are millions of sermons! And for some of you, maybe you can't just pick out one, there may be a few great ones that you have heard. Over the course of my life, I have experienced literally thousands of sermons in various formats. I have preached a few hundred of them. There is not one that I can pick out that I have heard or preached and say “that is it” but there are certainly some that have been powerful and memorable and have had an impact on my life. In thinking about the best sermon you have ever heard preached, I can pretty much guarantee that it is probably not going to be this one!

There are many candidates that people may bring forward as the “Greatest Sermon Ever Preached” and many of those are found in the Bible. This morning a strong candidate for the “greatest sermon ever” is brought before you. And many people, if they think about it, would likely agree that this may well be the best one ever. It is well known. It is rich in spiritual content and has application to our lives. And it contains zero errors and exactly what needed to be said was said with

neither fluff nor filler. And that is because God Himself preached it. Jesus, God in the flesh, spoke these words so we know they are just right. This, of course, is the Sermon on the Mount.

I can't tell you how many times that I have been preaching, teaching, or conversing with someone about the things of God and something from the Sermon on the Mount comes up. I have said many times, "Just as Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount...". There is so much there. I am sure that many of you have had this experience too in thinking about and talking about the things of God, so many times the Sermon on the Mount is brought before us. As we go through this series, which will take us through Easter Day, there may even be things brought forward that you have heard of before and didn't realize they were from the Sermon on the Mount.

St. Augustine said, "*the sermon before us is perfect in all the precepts by which the Christian life is molded.*" Bible commentator Paul Kretzmann wrote that this text is, "*one of the most beautiful and impressive in the entire New Testament.*" Martin Luther saw its importance in saying it is a summary, "*of the fruits and good works of a Christian.*" Luther encouraged pastors to preach and teach on the Sermon on the Mount in saying, "*Let every preacher or minister be urged to keep faithful and diligent watch over the little flock entrusted to him, and to help preserve the right interpretation. So long as the devil and his world stand, he will not stop attacking this chapter.*"

Obviously, our assigned Gospel text for today is not a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, but it is the text immediately before it. As I often say, knowing the context of a verse or passage of the Bible is a key to understanding it. Our text for today sets the scene for this great sermon from our Lord. We know based on what happens right before the Sermon on the Mount that this is early in Jesus' public ministry. It was not the first sermon that He preached, as verse 17 tells us, "*From*

that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' But it was early, and it is the first recorded sermon text we have from Jesus. St. Matthew records 5 major sermons of Jesus in his Gospel, and this is the first of those 5. The Sermon on the Mount covers 3 entire chapters of Matthew, Chapters 5-7. If you have a “red letter Bible” you will notice there is a lot of red in this part of the Scripture. Only the first two verses of Chapter 5 and last two verses from Chapter 7 are not words directly spoken from the mouth of Jesus. As important as this sermon is, Matthew is the only one of the four Gospel writers to include it in the Gospel they penned under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. St. Luke does record something very similar in Chapter 6:17-49 and some scholars see that as his recording of the Sermon on the Mount. However, I would side with those who see that as a separate “Sermon on the Plain” later in Jesus’ ministry that had much of the same content.

In reading our text from Matthew 4 are also given information as to the “when and where” of the Sermon on the Mount. From the chronology we know that this is early in Jesus’ ministry. Verse 12 opened by saying that after John (the Baptist) was arrested Jesus “withdrew” to Galilee. This is the area of northern Israel around the sea which bears the same name. In verse 13, Jesus leaves His hometown of Nazareth and went and lived in Capernaum, which was a city on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The early part of Jesus’ ministry would be based in Capernaum. The text also tells us how it fulfills prophecy and links this to Epiphany in that, *“the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light.”* (v16). As I said before, Jesus then begins preaching in verse 17. He calls the Disciples, beginning with Andrew and his brother Simon Peter, the fishermen that He will make “fishers of men.” Then come more fishermen, the sons of Zebedee, brothers James and John. With the Disciples gathered, the Bible tells us in verses 23-24 that Jesus went all around Galilee teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the

Gospel, healing the sick and pained, and casting out demons. This brought Jesus quite a bit of notoriety. “Great crowds followed him” all over the place. Early on in His ministry, Jesus was very popular, largely due to all the miracles that He was doing. So, when Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount, a bunch of people are trying to get near Him. While the message of the sermon had the immediate audience of the 12 Disciples, there were many others who would hear what He had to say.

So, we know that the Sermon on the Mount took place early in Jesus’ earthly ministry, a lot of people wanted to be near Jesus at that time, and that it would have been preached in Galilee. Where exactly, though? On what mount? The Bible does not tell us the exact location. However, records going all the way back to the 4th Century AD show that Christians believe it took place on a high point called *Heptapegon* (*Tabgha* in Hebrew) that rose right near the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is located 1.8 miles west of the city of Capernaum and to the east of the city of Gennesaret. If you were to go to Israel today, this is where the tour guides would take you to show you where the Sermon on the Mount happened. We don’t know 100% if that is the exact spot, but geographically it certainly makes sense.

And think about this. A lot of important things in the Bible, including in the ministry of Jesus, happen on mountains. And when we consider that much of the Sermon on the Mount contains points about how God’s people are to live, what event could we draw a parallel to in the Old Testament? The giving of the Law, the 10 Commandments, atop Mount Sinai. It was there that God Himself spoke to Moses and then the message was delivered to the people. The Sermon on the Mount is sometimes seen as the “New Testament 10 Commandments”. And of course (more on this in a bit), the “rules” given from both mountains are impossible to keep perfectly and point us to our need for a Savior who can keep the Law perfectly and has done so on our behalf.

We have heard, and know, that the Sermon on the Mount is held in high esteem by many. We have also examined the context in terms of the “when and where.” But what about the “what”? Obviously, there will be a fair number of Services between now and Easter in which we will hear about the content of the actual sermon that Jesus preached. We will see the application for us as we work through it. However, today, I do want to preach a little on the overall content and message of the sermon in giving us a summary. We also need to understand what the Sermon on the Mount is not.

Many have twisted and distorted the meaning of this sermon from Jesus. Of course, even non-religious people and other religions may see some value in some of the things that Jesus is saying as good ideals like the “Golden Rule” and such. But even among those claiming to be Christians, some bad interpretations have arisen. There is a volume in Luther’s works on the Sermon on the Mount that I am using as a resource for my study in this series. This commentary from Luther is actually transcribed from a lengthy sermon series of about 275 pages that he preached around 1530. In his introduction, Luther—in language that is “so Luther” (am only giving a taste of it today) addresses these erroneous interpretations. As I often say, in theology, there are almost always “two ditches” that one can fall into, with the “straight and narrow” in the middle being the correct interpretation. Luther put it this way, “*the devil blows and broods on both sides.*” In speaking of the false teachings regarding the Sermon on the Mount Luther wrote, “*Still the infernal Satan has not found a single text in the Scripture that he has more shamefully distorted and into which he has imported more error and false teaching than this very one, which Christ Himself ordered and appointed in order to head off false doctrine.*” And, “*Out of this beautiful rose they have sucked and broadcast poison, covering up Christ with it and elevating the Antichrist.*”

What are the main errors people have made in interpreting the Sermon on the Mount? The one ditch is that the false teachers (Rome in his time) would argue that the directives Jesus gives are not really binding on the average Christian today. It is true that the way Jesus presents for one to live is very difficult, actually impossible to do perfectly, so the advocates of this position are essentially throwing up their hands and saying we can't do it, so don't even really try that hard! They would see the ideals that Jesus will bring forth as "advice". Other more modern thinkers have argued that this message on living was only really applicable to Jesus' First Century audience or that it only speaks of the future utopia when we could really try to live this way. Perhaps "super Christians" like monks, nuns and the like, Rome would argue to try to live like Jesus is saying here, but it is not really for the general population. To take that position robs the Christian Church of one of the greatest messages on Christian character and conduct. Additionally, just about everything Jesus preaches about in the Sermon on the Mount can be found in other places in the New Testament. The other ditch is that people tried to apply these teachings in extreme ways. The Anabaptists, or as Luther referred to them, the "crazy heads" advocated a strict separation from the world where people could not have private property, swear an oath in court, hold government jobs, and never use force to defend themselves or the weak. Ultimately, both of these faulty interpretations focus us back to ourselves, our works, what we are doing or not doing.

Then how are we to view the overall message of the Sermon on the Mount? Because if we do so properly, we see the Christian life is one of grace and glory, and we understand that these things come not from ourselves, but from God Himself. The Sermon on the Mount is not a mere philosophical lecture. It is one that, by grace, opens the kingdom of heaven to all of Jesus' disciples. We understand this rightly when we view the Sermon on the Mount through the lens of

Jesus. In Chapter 5 He shows the essence of the Law, in Chapter 6 He teaches on true righteousness, and in Chapter 7 concerning the coming judgment. Certainly, we cannot keep all of the precepts of this sermon perfectly-as we will clearly see as we go through it in coming weeks. But it does not mean we don't apply what Jesus is teaching. What it does mean is that we look to the only one who could, and did, keep what is being preached perfectly. And that is none other than the one giving the sermon, Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount is about the important of His Kingdom action for those that would live in His kingdom. Jesus is at the center. He is the one that will demonstrate these things as the obedient servant. He fulfills the Law with His own perfect righteousness and obedience. He is the one that goes the extra mile for the other, all the way to the cross and out of the empty tomb.

Come along, for the journey to and out from the Sermon on the Mount. I am looking forward to it, and I pray that you are too.

Amen.