



## **The Sermon of a Lifetime, #1**

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When Phil Johnson asked me in December to be co-pastor of Grace Life, I knew within five to ten minutes of that conversation that I would be preaching from the Sermon on the Mount. That is the passage that has been drawing my attention for number of years and it is a passage that in God's timing is perfect for GraceLife right now; perfect for you right now. And so in the time that I am teaching you over the coming months and we will see how long it goes, we will be looking at Matthew, chapter 5, 6 and 7.

This is not the easiest thing for me to do. It would be a whole lot easier to come in here and preach a lot of messages that I have preached before and not to have to prepare for because I have never preached through the Sermon on the Mount. But this is an appointed time for all of us to meet with this text and to come to grips with it. We have a phenomenal time ahead of us. I have no doubt.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said when he began his series on the Sermon on the Mount, he raised this question, he said,

*Why should we consider Sermon on the Mount at all? Why should I call your attention to it and to its teaching? (He said) Well, I do not know that it is part of the preacher to explain processes of his own mind and his own heart. But I supposed that fundamentally my main reason for preaching on the Sermon on the Mount is that I felt this compulsion, this leading of the Spirit. I say that deliberately because, if I had been left to my own choice, I would not have chosen to preach a series on the Sermon on the Mount. And as I understand this sense of compulsion, I feel the particular reason for doing so is the peculiar condition of the Christian church at the present time.*

I understand a little bit about what he is saying. I could only echo his comments about what led him to the Sermon on the Mount because I have the same sense of utter compulsion to preach it to you and to preach it here in this environment.

It is not just the church universal that needs the Sermon on the Mount today, although that could be said world-wide in light of the condition of the church today.

It is not just Grace Community Church that needs to hear what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, although that is very true as well.

It is not just GraceLife that needs to hear the Sermon on the Mount, to hear the voice of Jesus, the very words of Jesus through the Sermon on the Mount, although that is true also.

When you get right down to it fundamentally, it is you that needs the Sermon on the Mount. It is me that needs the Sermon on the Mount. We desperately need this message from the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, I am convinced that for too many of you, Christianity has been reduced to something less than what is intended to be—something less than the glory of being in union with the Lord Jesus Christ and being a devoted follower of him. “Every moment, every day, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:31.

For many of you, Christianity has been reduced as a means to another end. Christianity has been reduced to a means to analyze doctrine. Or, Christianity is reduced as a means to utilize God to help you with your problems. Or, Christianity is reduced as a means to criticize other churches or teachers who don't quite get it. There is a place for elements of all those things when they are done with the proper spirit, but you cannot reduce the heart of Christianity to any of those points.

The problem with all of that, and the reason why we are facing the Sermon on the Mount in the days to come, is that that approach and that mind set, as unconscious as you as you may be drift into it without realizing what you are doing, the problem with that, beloved, is that it completely externalizes Christianity. From day to day, from week to week, your Christianity is never internalized.

It is never you mourning over your sin. It is not you, mourning, hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

It is always about something outside, somebody else. Your problems. And the concept which is really at the heart of Christianity—the life of God in the soul of a man—is obscured to the point of obliteration.

The Sermon on the Mount will cure that. You need the cure. I need the cure.

For others of you, perhaps your experience of Christianity has settled into a fairly shallow routine that is relatively comfortable but vaguely unsatisfying. Your spiritual life lacks consistent power. Consistent passion. And you wonder, is this all there is to it?

The Sermon on the Mount will cure that.

Beloved, we need to get back to the internal, transforming, spiritual dynamic that is real Christianity. We need to dust off the concept—the clear reality—that you are a sinner living out life in the presence of a holy God who sees your every thought, every word and action, and your every sin. To get back to that sense of intimacy, to get back to that sense

of awe, to get back to the sense of utter nobility that is the Christian life and stop making it so completely external.

And, beloved, we need to do that in a way where you welcome that, because you understand that God's presence is such that you can have utter confidence in His relentless intention to bless you as one of the children of His kingdom.

Over the next several months (hey, if it goes two or three years, it goes two or three years) the Sermon on the Mount is going to accomplish that in our lives, I am utterly convinced of it. And it is with great sense of anticipation—in my mind anyway we launch this journey today.

What I want to do today is introduce the Sermon on the Mount to you. Kind of get you warmed up to the things that God has been warming up my heart with over the past several weeks and probably do a little more introduction next week as well.

But here is the point about today about you living out your life in front of the Sermon on the Mount. It is vitally important for you to see the big picture of the Sermon on the Mount before you start to address individual details. Vitally important to see the broad themes in this sermon so that you can have a context for understanding how individual passages apply to you.

So we are going to, as it were in a sermonic way, we are going into the space shuttle and we are going to take a really big-picture, high-altitude view of the Sermon on the Mount. As we do that, I am utterly convinced that you are going to be drawn to it and want to see more. So we need to address a little bit of background of the Sermon on the Mount to get ready for what God is about to launch in our lives.

Two kinds of backgrounds: the wrong kind and the right kind.

### *The Wrong Kind of Background*

The wrong kind of background when you approach the Sermon on the Mount is to get yourself so immersed in technical details that you completely miss the point of what Jesus is saying here. Technical details that occupy the minds of modern commentators to a point that I just want to bang my head against the wall and run and scream.

Questions like “When did Jesus preach this?” “Was this the same sermon as he preached in Luke 6?” “Where was the hill that Jesus preached the sermon on?” “Did Jesus ever repeat this sermon?” “How many beatitudes are there? Are there seven? Are there eight? Are there nine?”

You laugh and it is laughable. And we may address some of these questions in passing in the days to come. But I am here to tell you that I am not interested in those questions at all, even though they tend to dominate modern discussions about the Sermon on the Mount.

Modern evangelicals would do well to heed the words of commentator Alfred Plummer back from 1915 when he said this:

*All these questions sink into insignificance compared with the supreme importance of understanding and appropriating the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount.*

You see, we must not, we cannot, we will not turn the Sermon on the Mount into an abstraction that that is discussed at theoretical levels as if it, too, were an external object to be dissected and discussed as though it was something outside of us.

No. The Lord who preached the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord of your soul and He intends for this sermon to come to you with power and for you to face up to it and to look at yourself in the mirror with the backlight of the mirror being the Sermon on the Mount. Seeing yourself, seeing what Christ intends.

So we are not going to spend a lot of time on technical details that would lead us astray from the main point of the Sermon on the Mount.

#### *The Right Kind of Background*

What is the right kind of background then? What I want to do today is this kind of background to help put the Sermon on the Mount into some kind of a biblical context.

Turn to Matthew 3. When Jesus appeared on the scene some 2000 years ago, born to the Virgin Mary, He grew in the wisdom and stature before men.

At that point in time, there had been approximately 400 years of silence from God to the Jewish people. The prophets had spoken but then there was a long period of silence where there was no prophetic voice on the scene.

Four hundred years ago in American history would put us back to about the time of Jamestown in Virginia and that is a long time ago. Think about before the time of Washington, going way back into the very roots of American history.

That is how long it had been since the people had heard from the Lord. So as we come to Matthew, that long period of night is coming to an end. That long period of silence is about to be broken. And in Matthew chapter 3, John the Baptist is the one who breaks the silence. Look at Matthew, chapter 3, remembering that the 400 years of silence that had dominated the Jewish landscape. Matthew 3:1-4:

*In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea saying repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness. Make ready the way of the Lord. Make His path straight." Now John himself had*

*a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist and his food was locusts and wild honey.*

Notice what happens in verse 5.

*Then Jerusalem was going out to them and all Judea and all the districts around the Jordan and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.*

This latter part is really important to take into account. There were crowds gathering around John the Baptist. The people were famished for a word from God and all of a sudden, a seeming prophet has risen up who spoke with power and authority and the people flocked to him.

God, as it were at that time in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, shown a bright spotlight down on John the Baptist and drew the attention of people to him. What was the point of that?

As John himself made clear, it was not about him at all. God blessed his ministry so that he could be the one who could take the spotlight and then point it over to Jesus. God started the plan with a forerunner who would attract the attention of the people and once their attention was captivated, John could shift it over to the Messiah who would take it from there.

John had the baton for only a short time. The intention of his ministry was always to hand it off to Jesus. Look at verse 11 as John is preaching. He says:

*I baptized you with water for repentance. But He who is coming after me is mightier than I and I am not fit to remove His sandals. He will baptize you with Spirit and fire.*

And so, John says as they are watching him and as they are listening to him, he says there is one coming after me that surpasses me. I can't even tie His sandal if it is the matter of personal worth. And look at what happens in verse 13 as Matthew unfolds his narrative for us. Who is this one that is mightier than John? Who is this one that is mightier than the one who has captured the attention of an entire nation?

*Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan, coming to John to be baptized by him (Matthew 3:13).*

John is stunned, shocked at the thought. He is appalled at the thought that a sinful man would baptize the Son of God. And so he says,

*I have need to be baptized by you. And do you come to me? But Jesus answered him, "Permit it at this time. For in this way, it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." And then he permitted him.*

Verse 16:

*After being baptized, Jesus came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Son of God descending as a dove and riding on Him. And behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”*

And so as you come to the end of chapter 3, and the passage that takes you five minutes to read in your devotion, all of a sudden, something spectacular has dawned on the scene in the nation of Israel. A prophetic voice has arisen. He has affirmed Jesus and they have had this voice from heaven. The Father Himself has spoken and declared His affirmation of His Son.

And so what has happened here is that an entirely new era in the history of redemption has been launched. No longer was God going to speak through sinful human prophets. No longer was it going to come from a mere man what God had to say. Now the day had arrived where God was going to speak in His Son. You may remember the verse at the start of the books of Hebrews where it says:

*God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers, in the prophets, in many portions and in many ways, in these last days, has spoken to us in His Son (Hebrews 1:1-2).*

And so there is a transcendent quality to what is taking place here—a transcendent event in the history of God’s plan for man. God’s outworking of His eternal plan for all of the cosmos is taking place before our very eyes. Jesus is on the scene. And if you would think that John the Baptist got attention, then the Son of God would draw attention as well.

And that is certainly what we encounter. Jesus goes through a period of temptation at the hands of the devil in verses 1-11 of chapter 4. But that time passes, Jesus triumphs as He always does, and then look at verse 12 at what happens. A progress. Jesus is about to begin His ministry.

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum which is by the sea in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who were sitting in darkness, saw a great light and those who were sitting in the land, in the shadow of death, upon them, a light dawned” (Matthew 4:12-16).*

And so as Matthew is writing his gospel, he is building up to this great crescendo of revelation. This great crescendo that is the launch pad, as it were, for the ministry of Christ. And look at what he says in verse 17:

*From that time, Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

Matthew presents this summary statement, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” as a summary, as an overview of the content of the intent of everything that Jesus said.

And as we come to the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5, what we are getting is an unfolding of what Jesus meant. The Sermon on the Mount is unfolding what it means to repent and to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. We cannot view the Sermon on the Mount in isolation from this introductory statement which summarized Jesus’ teaching, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” So it is an expansion of what Jesus’ theme was in all that He said at this point in His ministry.

So as chapter 4 concludes, Jesus calls some disciples in verses 18-22. Then in verses 23-25, look at what is happening here.

*Jesus was going through all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, healing every kind of disease and sickness among the people. And news about Him spread throughout all Syria. They brought Him people that were ill to heal them. Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and beyond the Jordan (Matthew 4:23-25).*

And so you have this scene that Matthew has reported how crowds flocked to Jesus in greater measure than they flocked to John the Baptist. And so Jesus has the attention of the multitude from east and west, north and south.

He is going to launch what it means to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” And what does He say now that he has their attention? What does he say at this outset of His ministry?

He preaches the Sermon on the Mount.

This is intended to be foundational, fundamental truth about what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Matthew wants you to see the connection between that general statement, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” as this opening salvo, as it were, to Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount.

### *The Nature of Repentance*

With that little bit of biblical background, I want to talk about the concept of repentance for just a moment. Jesus preached repentance. It’s the same message that John the Baptist preached.

We did not spend any time developing that thought, but John came out saying, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Jesus said the same thing.

It is important to know what it means to repent. The great commentator John Broadus puts it this way:

*This word signifies to change the thought and so to change the opinion or purpose. It is an interchange that turns away from serving self to serving God in Christ. And it leads to a corresponding change of outward life. It includes grief at the previous wrong course that you now determine to abandon.*

We could say it this way, to repent, as a spiritual term in the New Testament, is to change your mind, change your thought, change your purpose regarding sin in the service of God.

And beloved, it is a change that is naturally going to be accompanied by deep sorrow for past sin. A person who is truly repentant is going to be shocked and amazed and disgusted at his prior way of life, at his prior course of mind and his prior thinking about God and his prior way of responding to God. A change that is so thorough and so pervasive that change is the inevitable outworking of it.

Repentance is radical. Repentance is revolutionary. Repentance, beloved, is the end of you and the beginning of life in the kingdom of God. You can't miss its effect. You can't see it happen, but you can't miss its effect. People who have repented are people who are broken before God.

It would be appropriate for me to step back as it were and ask you if you have repented. Have you come to a crossroad in your life where you have recognized that you were sinful and spiritually bankrupt before God where you had to abandon any notion, any cherished thought that you somehow had some strain of righteousness in you? That there were some manner of good works that were in your account that mattered? A person who is truly repentant realizes that that is a mist that does not even exist.

The person who has repented has renounced any claim to self-righteousness, renounced any claim to having any merit before God. It is the end of you.

And the flip side of repentance is that it comes with a new desire and new heart. The desire is to pursue God and a life of holiness.

In some ways it seems like it be so much easier if you had truly repented that a red dot would go off in your head or on your head and you could see if the light was on or not, you would know. But there is no outward physical sign like that.

But there is something that is even surer, something that is even more radical, something that is even more undeniable. The question about the fruit of repentance is whether you have a new heart with new attitudes that are unnatural to this fallen world. It is not



natural to take the blame for your own conduct. It is not natural to say in an unqualified statement, “I was wrong before God.” But that is the mark of true repentance.

The Sermon on the Mount calls you not only to that end of yourself and that end of self justification, but the flip side, the positive side of repentance of pursuing God and a life of holiness. And so, that is where Jesus is going as He preaches the Sermon on the Mount.

It is clear that the Sermon on the Mount describes a life that flows from God-wrought repentance in the soul. This is the life of the kingdom. This is the life of the citizen of the kingdom. And as you are going to see, what a life it is. What a noble life this life of the Sermon on the Mount is.

And there are two twin calls in the Sermon on the Mount that I want to call to your attention. This is a very broad look. The twin calls that should echo in your heart as you read this sermon, as you hear it proclaimed. The first one is this.

### **1. The Sermon on the Mount Is a Call to Holiness**

It is a call to a righteous life. It is a call to the dynamic character of the citizen of the kingdom of heaven that reflects the character of God himself. I want to show you this from a few passages. I want you to see how the call to holiness and the call to righteousness permeate this sermon.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be satisfied (Matthew 5:6).*

*I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).*

*Therefore, you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).*

*Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil (Matthew 6:13).*

*Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33).*

*Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven (Matthew 7:21).*

So it is a call to righteousness. It is a call to stand at attention as it were and be startled and be taken back, to be challenged, to be humbled by the call to holiness.

Now beloved, this is about to get really personal. The Sermon on the Mount is a clarion call to your personal holiness. And I want you to see something very important. I won't

bother going through the verses that support this, but I am just walking through Matthew 5-7 when I say this.

It is a clarion call to holiness in a world of mourning, insults, false accusations and persecution, murder and anger, adultery, lust and divorce.

The Sermon on the Mount is a clarion call to holiness in a world of evil attacks, lawsuits and lies, enemies, hypocrisy, poverty and false religion.

It is a clarion call to holiness in a world of vengeance, anxiety, criticism, false prophets and ultimately the coming judgment in the presence of Christ.

The world of the Sermon on the Mount is a real and sinful world. You as a believer will encounter all of these obstacles to your personal holiness. All of these things that would distract you either through anger or bitterness or discouragement or tears, the Sermon on the Mount comes to you and calls you to holiness despite the hostile environment in which you live.

I say this with a lot of grace and love and tenderness in my heart, but the difficult people in your life, the difficult circumstances that you are facing, is no barrier to the pursuit of holiness because this is a clarion call to holiness that transcends all of that.

It tells you to be righteous despite those obstacles. And it takes away all of your excuses for sinful attitudes and sinful conducts. It strips you before God and says be holy, be righteous anyway.

Beloved, I want you to see that as a highly noble call. The call of God on your life to be holy despite your circumstances is the most noble call that anyone in the world receives.

You see, at the superficial level all of these things seem unpleasant, and they are. But the Sermon on the Mount beckons you to a perfect spiritual life in the midst of those hostilities against your soul. And the very fact that God issues the call to you tells you that you can prosper despite those circumstances. And the call itself sets you free from all of it.

Do you understand that? God is calling you to holiness despite the problems that you are facing—a holiness that produces profound joy and produces profound glory to His name. Because you are showing that despite the obstacles, you are not into Christianity because of what you can get out of it. You are into Christianity because God calls you into it. And you pursue Him because of His inherent worth no matter what happens.

The Lord intends for you to live this way and beloved. I really want you to get this. I want me to get this. The sins of other people are no barrier to your walk with Christ. You can be holy. You can live holy. God calls you to this despite the barriers and ultimately the sins of other people against you are no barrier to your deep internal, spiritual satisfaction when you find your satisfaction in the God who calls you.

So it is comprehensive as you pursue this sermon. It exposes your spiritual poverty because you immediately (or at least soon into the process) you say, “I don’t live this way. I can’t live this way in my own power”. And so this sermon exposes your spiritual poverty and it breaks you because you realize you do not measure up to its standard.

And yet, at the very same time, it shows forth and it shines forth the greatness of Christian character, the greatness of the nobility of the Christian walk. It beckons you to a higher ground. It says, “Yes, I know that this is not where you are at, but this life is possible! Come up here where the air is fresh! Come up here where the vision is glorious!”

So beloved, come to that higher ground. Come to the life of holiness. Come to the Sermon on the Mount.

Now while you contemplate this greatness of the call of the Sermon on the Mount to your holiness, I want to lay out a very important second point. That is that:

## **2. The Sermon on the Mount Is a Call to Blessing**

First, it is a call to holiness. Secondly, it is a call to blessing.

The call to righteousness that floods out of the Sermon on the Mount is unmistakable. But beloved, this is really important. That call to righteousness does not come from an austere, harsh God who has His arms folded across His chest in remoteness, expecting you to tow the line. No, no, no.

The Sermon on the Mount is filled with the promise of untold, immeasurable blessings upon you. Upon the people who live this way. Upon the people who are the people of the kingdom.

Because it not only exposes your spiritual poverty, but it also points you to the spiritual resources found at the Father’s right hand that are yours to call upon and to appropriate. The richness of these promises! Promise upon promise, blessing upon blessing.

In the Beatitudes alone, nine times Jesus pronounces blessing on men and women of this character. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” “Blessed are those who mourn.” “Blessed are the gentle.” And on it goes.

Look at chapter 6 just to add to this a little bit. Look at the promise of the blessing that emanates out of this great sermon:

*Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:4).*

*Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:6).*

*Your heavenly Father will forgive you (Matthew 6:14).*

*Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:18).*

*All these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33).*

*Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be open to you (Matthew 7:7).*

*He who does the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21).*

Blessing upon blessing upon blessing. Beloved, I want you to understand that this is *grace*.

There have been Bible teachers in the past who have said that the Sermon on the Mount is about God's law. Wrong. This Sermon on the Mount is about God's grace to people who deserve judgment. These are the promises that belong to the children of the kingdom.

But I can't tell you how many times as I have been preparing to preach this, that I have protested vehemently against the idea of even standing in this pulpit to preach it. I would preach these things?

What man is fit to speak the lofty character that is found on Jesus' lips?

What man is free from the conviction that these words bring?

What man is fit to speak of the goodness of the Father to His children?

What man is fit to preach the weighty words of eternal judgment that are contained at the end of this sermon?

And like Isaiah, I protest and I say, "Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." Like Peter in the boat, I say, "Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man."

And yet, that sense of spiritual poverty (that should mark all of you as you approach this sermon) that sense of spiritual poverty that on the one hand repels you from the Sermon on the Mount should be outweighed by the attraction that comes to the holiness and the goodness of God and the promise of His blessing upon His people.

The Sermon on the Mount makes you conscious of your unworthiness. And somehow at the same time it attracts you to something better. And you are irresistibly drawn to it, despite your unworthiness. God says you're right, you are unworthy. Come anyway.

And so, in the months to come, we must come face to face with this magnificent sermon. We must face its precepts squarely, examine our hearts, and let God do the work that He intends.

In many ways, the Sermon on the Mount is the sermon of the lifetime. It is the great words of Jesus.

But it lays out such a comprehensive view of the Christian life that it will take you a lifetime to live it out. It will be a time of rebuke and humbling to be sure.

But yet, as you hear and respond, not to me but to the God who spoke His word, you can know the promise of His blessing that He lays out for those who build their lives on this strong foundation.

So in the days to come, let us humble ourselves before this great passage of Scripture. Let us humble ourselves before the transcendent Lord who preached it. And may God grant us the blessings that He promised in this sermon, to His glory, to the evangelization of the lost, and to our profound, eternal good.

*This transcript was prepared by Shari Main.*