

Discovery Hour
E100, Week 12
March 28, 2010
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The bulk of the book of Matthew is organized around five discourses or teachings of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount is the first of these. The others are his instructions to his disciples in 10, the parables in 13, teachings on the church in 18, and the Olivet Discourse in 24-25. There is a shorter version of the SOTM in Luke 6:20-49 typically referred to as the Sermon on the Plain because that is the setting given by Luke. Most take the two to be drawn from different teaching situations when Jesus spoke the same message. This contrast is a good place to see how each of the gospel writers, drawing from their experiences and the experiences of others, compiled very similar, but not identical accounts. Still, reading both these accounts one is struck by the consistency of the sermons as recorded by the two writers.

The manner in which the SOTM has been interpreted throughout history is interesting. At the heart of the difficulty in interpretation is that Jesus' words are quite absolute, some would say, legalistic for example "if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away," (5:29) and "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). We cannot cover all the interpretations here, but a few may serve to give us a sense of this. The first is that taken by dispensationalists who would see in the SOTM not a teaching to be applied today, but rather the kingdom ethic that will be applied when Christ returns and inaugurates his kingdom on this earth (Rev. 20:1ff). It is, in this way an eschatological teaching, given to Christians to help them understand where this world and era (the church age) is headed. While there are moral principles such as loving others and seeking true spirituality (instead of an external law) that believers should follow today, the full implementation is not for this time period. A second interpretive frame is that taken by the Catholic Church, which originated with St. Augustine, and divides the teachings in the SOTM to general principles and specific counsels. All believers must adhere to the first, but only priests must adhere to the specific counsels. For example, based on the SOTM priests must not serve in the military but parishioners may do so. Lutherans see the SOTM as "law," words of Jesus designed to show us our need for grace. Martin Luther famously developed a two realms view (sacred and secular) teaching that the SOTM applies in the spiritual realm but not the physical, secular realm where a person has responsibility to their country and family. Anabaptists see in Jesus' words an ethic for both believers and non-believers and a call to renounce all violence, namely pacifism.

Discussion Questions:

Do the words of Jesus apply to believers today?

Do the words of Jesus apply equally well for non-Christians, that is, does the SOTM provide a blueprint for all of society?

Should we anticipate fulfilling Jesus' words on this earth as believers? If so, to what extent are we doing so? If not, how are we to understand them?

A Christian friend of yours in reading their Bible and specifically Jesus' Sermon on the Mount struggles over several verses in the sermon asks to meet with you to discuss them. They ask you how they are to understand the following verses which seem either too difficult to apply to their lives and/ or contradictory.

1. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell" (5:29, 30).

Question: Seems like I will be without hands and eyes pretty quickly here, what should I do?

2. "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'NO,' 'No'; any thing beyond this comes from the evil one." (5:33-37).

Question: Should I not say the pledge of allegiance? How about swearing on the Bible in a U.S. Court of law?

3. "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." (MT 5:38-48).

Question: If someone tries to beat me up, should I just let them and not resist at all? Should countries not defend themselves militarily?

5. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:25 – 34).

Question: Can I just sit by the side of the road, not worry, and expect good things to come to me?

