

November 2020: Growth Tracks / Life Groups

The Sermon on the Mount

Transcript

NB. This is a transcript of the video that JB has produced. I have interjected this transcript with questions and prompts (in red) that you can pose – especially if you are not using the video.

I would however recommend in your own preparation that you watch the video (approx. 25 mins) just so you get a sense of where JB is going.

Introduction and outline.

Hey everybody, I hope you are well! I am really excited to be running these Growth Tracks, these Bible Studies via our Life Groups for the month of November. As a Church we are going through the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5-7. Currently on Sunday's we have handpicked a number of themes from this Sermon which we are teaching on mainly focussed on **Matthew 6-7**. During the course of the next two Life Groups we are going to be focussing on **Matthew Chapter 5** – in this first session we will discuss the relevancy of the Sermon on the Mount and understand something of the context to it...

Along the way you will be given tools to do some Bible Study together, discuss and share together. Following on from Life Group number one we are then running via Facebook and our website daily devotionals on the Beatitudes. These devotions will lead us to our second Life Group in November whereby we will reflect on these Beatitudes and do some further group and interactive Bible study on the Sermon on the Mount.

By the time we have finished this series it will almost be Christmas and in some way shape or form as a church we would have covered the majority of the Sermon on the Mount. It is my prayer that by the end of this whole series – we will have some knowledge and understanding of the Sermon on the Bible – what it says and what it means; that we will be challenged to be the difference; we will be challenged to make the difference; we will have a renewed sense of the Mission that God is calling us to; We will see his Church grow and expand over the next few months because His church have become the hands and feet of Jesus, salt and light to a world that sorely needs it.

- **Question for discussion: What do you know about the Sermon on the Mount?**

The Sermon on the Mount is the best known of Jesus teachings! It is however the least understood and definitely the least obeyed. It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that Jesus ever uttered, it is Jesus own description of what he wanted his followers to do and how he wanted his followers to be. The Sermon On the Mount is not just the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5 - (we are going to do a series of devotions starting tomorrow on these) but it in fact ends in Matthew chapter 7. Two chapters of incredible teaching that we would be foolish not to apply to our lives and if we do apply to our lives – we will benefit.

- **Read Matthew 7:24. What did Jesus mean?**

In **Matthew 7:24** – Jesus is about to tell the parable of the Wise and Foolish Builder – he caveats the parable with the words – **Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise...** The Sermon on the Mount ends with these words – **Matt 7: 28-29 – When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teachings, for he taught with real authority, quite unlike their teachers of religious law...**

- **Why were people amazed at the teachings of Jesus?**

If we truly listened and applied what Jesus is saying in this Sermon we too would be **wow'd**, amazed at the depth, the reality, the truth of what on first glance can appear very simple sayings – there is a lot of guff and waffle out there – in the 21st Century a lot of guru's Christian and secular alike try to tell us how we should live our lives... The only person that we need is Jesus and these truths that were preached 2000 years ago are so relevant to us today that if we apply them they truly will change our lives!

The Relevancy of the Sermon on the Mount.

- **As followers of Jesus Christ we believe the Bible is relevant to us, our society, our context. What does the word relevant mean?**

The Sermon on the Mount is completely relevant to us, our situation today. Obviously the whole Bible, the entire Word of God is relevant to us – that goes without saying... God's word is truth, God's word is life, God's word is my daily bread, God's word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path and the sermon on the Sermon on The Mount is all of that as well – it stands out for its relevancy and it's counter cultural theme. We are living in a day and an age of Brexit, COVID 19, Black Lives Matter, Protest, Fake News, Post Truth, race riots, economic hardships, political extremes – left and right. At the time of preparing this Growth Track the US is going through an election which in itself has been controversial and raised lots of questions. In this country we are dealing with restrictions due to COVID and our hearts go out to those who being effected by the economic consequences of COVID. Another consequence of COVID are the injustices that we see in the nation in terms of poverty, kids school meals... The sermon on the Mount speaks into this stuff. We are living in an age of self, selfish thinking and me, me, me. You can be who you want to be, you can love who you want to love – sex, pleasure, love of money is high on the list of many.

Politics dominates our time and thinking... the control of our masters seems to be ever present, our freedoms seem to be limited because of the current pandemic, the government can do no right... We are living in a day and an age where there is disillusionment, people are disaffected, poverty is high, crime is high, anxiety, fear, depression amongst all age groups is high. Peace, joy, laughter, hope, selflessness are in short supply. That is just our country! Let alone the rest of the world where countries seem to be fragmenting due to the strains of COVID and the knock on effects of economy and politics.

People more than ever are searching for truth, people more than ever are searching for hope, people more than ever are searching for acceptance – they are searching in the wrong places and in this day and age the Church has an opportunity to bring a counter cultural message of hope, love and truth to a world that sorely needs it. And Jesus certainly gives us the tools, the principals in this Sermon on how we can be counter cultural – in other words live differently to the world around us, be radical in our Spirit Led thinking and truly make a difference. I suppose one of the challenges is have we as Christians, have we as a 'Church', have we conformed to the world or are we willing to make the bold step and be **counter cultural, be the difference, be the light**. Jesus is the hope of the world and by default the church is the hope of the world... but are we...?

Opportunity for discussion.

Counter Culture

- **The Sermon on the Mount has been called ‘Counter Cultural’.**
What is the definition of ‘Counter Cultural?’

During my introduction I have used the word ‘Counter Culture’ or ‘Counter Cultural’ a few times but what does it actually mean?

The **Cambridge Dictionary** defines ‘Counter Culture’ as:

A way of life and a set of ideas that are completely different from those accepted by most of society, or the group of people who live this way.

Opportunity to read through the Beatitudes.

Let’s take the Beatitudes **Matthew 5:3-10** for example – daily devotionals will be following on these tomorrow:

Jesus challenged the normal human perspective on:

- spiritual poverty and success
- Sadness and mourning
- Meekness and gentleness
- Passion and hunger
- Mercy and compassion
- Purity and integrity
- Peace making and revenge
- Persecution and adversity

Let me ask you another question:

- **How is the church different from the ‘world’?**
- **What is unique about the church that sets us apart from the prevailing culture?**

- **Here are a few things to think about and then discuss.**

A Counter Cultural Presence – the Church is a community that meets with regularity to worship, pray, break bread together – which other organisation does this?

A Counter Cultural Family - Another gift the church can offer the 21st century is to remind people that they are created as *relational* beings meant to flourish in community. I love our church family!

A Counter Cultural Change - The Christian church should be a place where transformation happens. Christianity doesn't just say "you're OK as you are." It's a faith that meets us where we are and doesn't let us stay there.

A Counter Cultural Mission - We must always remember—and keep front-and-centre—the church's radical and countercultural mission. In short, this mission isn't not about us. It's not a self-help mission. It *is* about our growth and change, but it isn't for our own sake. It's about our lives bearing witness to the gospel and the glory of Jesus Christ.

Context to the Sermon on the Mount

With all that in mind lets now look at the Context to the Sermon in the Mount from Matthew's Gospel. Let's try and understand the 'times' in which Jesus was speaking and therefore why his Message was so radical in the first century – here are a few things – this isn't everything!

Theologian N. T. Wright says:

'We cannot understand the New Testament unless we make sense of the historical environment in which the early church was conceived and grew in the first century AD. To understand the origin of Christianity and the meaning of the first believers, theology demands that we get to know the historical setting and the social, cultural and religious world in which Jesus and the apostles lived...'

- Why do you think it is important that we understand the History, Society, Culture of the day in which Jesus lived?

For centuries, even before Jesus was born, the land of Israel had been fought over – for the Jewish people it was their homeland, it was the Promised Land, it was the land flowing with milk and honey, but in centuries of history (which you can trace back into the Old Testament) that land had been taken over, the Jews had been sent into captivity, come back to the land again, only to have limited rule and be subjected

to other empires and civilisations – Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, competing empires... Despite all that many, many Jews believed deeply that the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah would come true in their day and age whereby a Messiah would come, free them, make them the rulers not the ruled, destroy their enemies and justice would be had; for those Jews who believed that Israel was their home, their spiritual home centuries of captivity, subjection, disappointments etc had left a mark on many – a sense of anger, a sense of fierce pride in their heritage, a sense of arrogance, a sense of nationalism was visible... so much so that Jews would freely rebel and protest against any kind of authority. There are stories of individual Jews who would try to become the new leader, the new messiah determined to free their people from the grips of their enemies who ruled them but, they would get crushed and then somebody else would rise up.

In 63 BC, the Romans arrived in Judea! The Roman Empire was continually expanding and the Romans easily took Jerusalem becoming enemy No 1 to many of the Jewish people. Other Jews quickly made an uneasy alliance with the Romans – compromising their faith for power so they could rule it over their own countrymen as puppets of the Romans. Herod the Great is such an example.

So during the time of Jesus Politics was fragmented:

- The Romans
- Those Jews who supported the Romans
- Zealots – nationalists who believed in protest and revolution against their overlords – they wanted a messiah who would crush the Romans...

Other groups of people who had mega influence in the Political and Religious world included:

The Pharisees: The supposed leaders and rule keepers of the Jewish Faith. Distinguished by strict observance of the traditional and written law, and commonly held to have pretensions to superior sanctity. Jesus had a lot to say about these types of people.

The Sadducees: Politically and religiously motivated party of Jews who were leaders and officials. Jesus had a lot to say about these types of people.

Let's quickly talk about economic life in Palestine.

Palestine including Galilee and Judea was an agrarian society. The majority of people lived in rural villages and small towns. In each of these villages and small towns throughout Palestine a clear social structure would have been visible from the ruling elite all the way down to those who are classed as slaves.

N.T Wright says it like this:

- There is first the ruling elite, comprising a ruler.
- There are regional elites.
- There are municipal elites
- There are lower level retainers like governing officials
- There are the professional class of small merchants
- There is the peasant class
- There are the destitute – beggars, prostitutes, widows, the disabled, the infirm, orphans and untouchables like lepers...
- In another category again you would have slaves... anyone could be a slave all you had to do was be on the losing side in a battle or suffer a major business failure...
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People could move up or down this social scale but it is apparent that in 'Jesus world' there were constant downward pressure, forcing people towards debt and destitution, and in some cases even towards banditry or slavery as desperate strategies for survival...

- **How does the 1st Century AD (Jesus time) compare with our scenario and situation in the 21st Century? Try and spot some similarities as well as differences.**

I could talk more about the social life in Palestine, the different sects that operated, religious views and teachings, daily life – suffice to say that there was a lot of hatred:-

- Jew towards Jew depending upon where you lived and your occupation;
- Varying levels of devotion to the Jewish faith although for the majority they cared sufficiently about their God, the scriptures and their Jewish Heritage – they prayed, they fasted, they went to the synagogue, they travelled to Jerusalem for their regular feasts;
- Different politics – although it must be said that not every Jew living in the Galilean countryside for example identified with religious political parties. Most ordinary Jews were consumed with

the daily struggle for Jewish existence – farming, paying taxes, trading, putting food on the table...

So with all that in mind let's now focus on Matthew's Gospel as we build towards the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew's Gospel is a teaching book about how to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Matthew's Gospel attempts to connect Old Testament thinking with the new way of Jesus Christ.

N. T. Wright says this:

'Matthew is quite clearly offering a manual for discipleship, for a church living as a minority group in a hostile majority culture'.

- **What does N T Wright mean?**

Turn to Matthew 4.

In Matthew 4 – Jesus has overcome temptation by Satan in the wilderness and in **verse 12** of Matthew 4 Jesus begins his Ministry in Galilee – that northern part of Israel which is socially and culturally distinct (some would say backwards) in terms of manner, attitudes, learning and wealth from the south of the country.

Verse 17 says 'From that moment Jesus began to preach 'Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand'.

Keep your eye out in Matthew's Gospel for the phrase '**Kingdom of Heaven**' – Jesus immediately begins to preach a counter cultural message – **The Kingdom of heaven is at hand – not the Kingdom of the Romans, not the Kingdom of the Greeks – but the Kingdom of Heaven!**

- **As a group read through Matthew 4:23-25**
- **What did you learn from this?**
- **Where did Jesus go to preach?**
- **What was His message?**
- **What else did he do?**
- **What happened as a result?**

- **How far did His fame spread? What does this say about the message of Jesus?**
- **Reflect upon what we have covered this session.**
- **Who or what do you think people thought Jesus was?**

Now we do finally get to the **Sermon on the Mount!**

Between now and the next Life Group / Growth Track

- **Read through Matthew chapter 5.**
- **Watch the Beatitudes devotionals on Facebook or via our website.**

We will reflect and chat this through next time we meet.