

Text: Matthew 7:28-29 *When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*

Title: The Final Challenge

I just recently finished a study on what many people, including myself, consider to be the most perfect sermon ever preached. It is the sermon that was preached by Jesus that is recorded in Matthew 5-7. People often refer to it as the Sermon on the Mount.

As we were going through that series, some of you commented to me how impressed you were with the teaching of our Lord that is recorded in the sermon.

If I could take a survey and ask each person here which part of the Sermon on the Mount impacted you the most, how would you respond? Would it be the Beatitudes that define so clearly the character traits of a Christian? Even the order Jesus listed those traits helps us to understand the process a person goes through to become a Christian. Perhaps the thing that impacted you the most was the section where Jesus explained what we must do to have a righteousness that surpasses the kind of righteousness practiced by the Pharisees, that is a righteousness based on principle and not rules. Maybe it was the section on the devotional life, beginning in Matthew 6. In that section we find teaching which helps us to know how we should relate to our heavenly Father. Was it that section that impacted you the most? If not, maybe it was the following section where Jesus taught us how we relate to the material world around us. Remember how He taught us not to lay up treasures on earth and not to worry about the things needed for basic survival? Did that section of teaching touch your heart the most, or was it the following section where Jesus taught us how to relate to people? He told us not to judge people the wrong way; rather, we are to judge them the right way. In other words, we are to exercise spiritual discernment so we can use the best possible method to help people around us know God better than they already do.

Which section of teaching impacted you the most? Was it the very end of the sermon where Jesus taught us that the only way we can possibly apply the truths found in the Sermon is to ask and seek and knock? Was it one of the three tests Jesus gave to help us realize whether or not our Christianity is genuine? For everyone here who has read the sermon or sat through the series of studies we did on the sermon, I ask you this question: In what way, if any, have you been impacted by the sermon? Try to keep that answer in your mind for a moment as I ask you now to consider something else.

Pretend that it were possible for us to enter into a time machine and travel back to the very first time this sermon was ever preached? Pretend that we are now using the same kind of survey to see how the Sermon on the Mount impacted those people who first heard it preached. What would their response be?

Well we don't have a time machine to help us answer that question, but we do have something else. We have the eyewitness account of one who observed the response of the crowd to the sermon. And the eyewitness account is backed by the testimony of the Holy Spirit who inspired him to record the observation. The observation is recorded in Matthew 7:28-29. The name of the person making the observation was Matthew, and this is what he recorded: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."

Please notice what impacted these people the most about the sermon. Matthew did not say that these people were amazed at Jesus' teaching on Christian character or how to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees or how to have a devotional life or how we are to relate to the world and judge other people. The thing that amazed them and impacted them the most was the authority of the One who was speaking. More than anything else, those people were challenged by the authority Jesus was claiming for Himself.

This is an extremely important point. I know that many of you missed hearing the series I preached on the Sermon on the Mount. You missed my attempt at explaining all the great teachings in the sermon. The teaching did not impact you, because you weren't here to hear the teaching. But if you can be impressed today by the same thing that caused those people who first heard the sermon to be amazed, then I think you will be better off than those who did study the sermon and took away nothing more than just a knowledge of the sermon.

What was it that so amazed and challenged those people after they heard Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount? And how does this challenge relate to those of us today? Let's try to answer these two questions.

First of all, what was the final thing that challenged the people who heard this sermon the very first time it was preached? Again I must emphasize the fact that, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Matthew did not mention anything about how the people who heard the sermon were impressed or impacted by any part of the teaching. That does not mean they were not impressed. I must assume that they, like most people today, found the teaching to be so flawless and so logical and so much in tune with reality that they would have said “Amen” to every section of the sermon that they understood.

However, the final thing that amazed them had nothing to do with the teaching itself or even how the teaching should be applied. The final thing that amazed and challenged them had to do with the Preacher. Specific words spoken by the Person preaching the sermon caused the crowds of people who had gathered around Jesus to come face to face with the most important question of all; namely, who is Jesus Christ?

All through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made reference to Himself in a way that unquestionably equated Him with God. Time and time again Jesus purposely called attention to Himself. Let's try to recapture this. We tend to gloss over the references to Christ's deity in this sermon, but for the people first hearing the sermon, each reference to Christ being God would have presented a major challenge to their thinking.

First of all, please notice the way Jesus indirectly made reference to His deity. When Jesus preached this sermon, He did not try to defend His teaching by quoting from other writings. That is the way the Jewish religious leaders taught. They would say, “Based on the this or that scripture, this is the way it is.” But Jesus bypassed that step. In much (if not most) of His teaching, Jesus simply said, this is the way it is. For instance, Jesus began the sermon by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” This teaching does not contradict the Old Testament, but neither is it a quote from the Old Testament, nor is it based on a quote from the Old Testament.

When Pastor Tim or I preach, we need to back up everything we say with sound argument and sufficient Biblical references so you can see that we are not making up our teaching. But Jesus did not have to do this. In a very authoritative way, He stated His teaching as fact. This was entirely different from the teachers of the law during that time. It isn't that the teachers of the law were wrong in the way they taught. Not a single one of those teachers could claim to be God, so they had to back up what they said by quoting from scripture or from the writings of other teachers.

Another way Jesus indirectly made reference to His position of absolute authority comes in that long section where Jesus uses His own sayings as the final authority on many controversial issues. Over and over again Jesus spoke these words: “You have heard that it was said...But I tell you that.” In other words, ‘For many years now, the teachers of the law have been saying that is the meaning, but I say that they are wrong. The correct meaning is this...’ Jesus made it very clear that His interpretation was the only correct one. He left no room for doubt.

And then, at the very end of the sermon, we find yet another example of an indirect reference to Christ's deity. “Therefore,” Jesus said, “everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man.” Notice that Jesus did not say, “Everyone who hears these words of God or these words from the Holy Scriptures.” Jesus said, “...these words of mine.” By talking that way, Jesus was claiming unique authority.

And now let's look at some examples of direct references to deity made by our Lord in this sermon. Let's take them in the order in which they appear. First, in Matthew 5:11 Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” Jesus did not say, ‘You will be blessed if you suffer this for God's sake.’ He said, ‘You will be blessed if you suffer for My sake.’

Then, in Matthew 5:17, Jesus is recorded as saying, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

Here Jesus speaks as one who has arrived in the world. He is not just an ordinary person born of a woman. He is One who has come into the world from somewhere else. He has come from eternity. He has come from heaven. The Old Testament talks about the Messiah as the One who will come. For example, Malachi 4:2 refers to the Messiah as the ‘sun of righteousness who will rise (or come) with healing in His wings.’ And now Jesus says of Himself, “I have come.” No wonder the people were amazed. This is no human teacher. This is the Son of God.

He has come to fulfill the Law, and to fulfill the Law one must be perfect. God gave His law to Moses, but no one has ever fulfilled it or kept it. 'There is not one righteous person who has ever lived, no, not one.' But Jesus said, 'I am going to keep it. I will not break even the smallest letter of the law. I am going to fulfill it. I am going to keep it perfectly. Here is Someone who is claiming to be sinless.

And Jesus also claims He is fulfilling the prophets. He is the One to whom all the Old Testament prophets pointed. He is the Messiah. 2 Corinthians 1:20 says, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ."

And then we come to the amazing statements made at the end of Matthew 7 where Jesus claims to be the judge of the world. Jesus said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord'...but then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you.'" Jesus did not say that the people would be making their appeals to God on Judgment Day. He said that the people would be making their appeals to Him. And He would be the One to answer them.

I hope you can understand how these indirect and direct statements to deity would cause the people of that day to be amazed and wonder who Jesus was. Unlike many of us sitting in this auditorium, most of them had not given lip service all their lives to the fact that Jesus was God. It is one thing to feel that everything Jesus taught is good and good to put into practice. But it is quite another thing to confess Jesus is God. For most of those people, that would have been a major step of faith with huge consequences.

But for them not to confess Jesus is God would also create for them an enormous challenge. It would mean one of two things. Either the person who just preached this perfect sermon is a liar or he is crazy. There is no denying the fact that Jesus spoke as though God Himself were speaking. People who deny that Jesus claimed to be God have to work hard at it, because the references He made about Himself are too many and too clear to deny.

The people who heard Jesus preach the sermon could not deny it. So they were left with this final challenge: Either Jesus is God, or else He is lying or else He is crazy. But the words and actions of our Lord are not the words and actions of either a liar or a crazy man.

Some of you here today have been exposed to enough of the Sermon on the Mount that you are convinced of its value. You have confessed the teaching to be true and you have expressed your desire to put the words into practice. But you have not come to the point where you are willing to confess that the One who preached the sermon is God who came to this earth as a man. That concept is still more than you can handle.

No one in this room (including myself) can or even should force you to accept as fact the concept that Jesus is God. You must be convinced yourself, and it is the Holy Spirit who must convince you.

But it is very important that you don't miss the claims of the One who preached the Sermon on the Mount. If you feel at all impacted by the teaching itself, you must now consider the Teacher. You must not gloss over the things I just shared with you. They are the things about the sermon that caused the listeners to stand in amazement and wonder about this carpenter from Nazareth. He spoke with the authority of God Himself. And He made direct references to Himself as the One who came from eternity and would judge the world in the end.

The same thing that challenged these people must challenge us as well. We must not be content with accepting the teaching without giving any thought to the Teacher. It is absolutely essential to our faith that we answer the question, "Who is Jesus?" The teaching itself is good, but the teaching will not save you.

Remember the three tests that Jesus gave at the end of His sermon to reveal who is truly a Christian and who is not? One was the test of difference where Jesus said that a true Christian is a person who goes through a narrow gate and walks the narrow way. The second test dealt with our ability to recognize truth. A true Christian will speak and live truth in a way that will cause conviction. And a true Christian will have the ability to tell the difference between those who are really speaking and living the truth and those who are not. The third test dealt with our very lives. Lives without a rock foundation will not stand up against trials and temptations. The standards used in these three tests are the narrow way and the truth that causes people to become convicted about their sin and the life that is built on a foundation of a relationship with God.

Referring to Himself, Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father accept through me.” You cannot pass the tests by knowing about the narrow way and about the truth and about the life. You can know about all these things by studying the Sermon on the Mount. These teachings can impress you. But they will not save you. To be saved, you must have a healthy fear for the authority of the One who taught them. You must give your life completely to Him. This is the final challenge presented to the people the first time the sermon was preached. And it is the final challenge for us as well.

Andrew B. Pigott
Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey
October 4, 2003