

“The Sermon on the Mount: Design for Discipleship”
Part One in a Series on the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 5-7

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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Let me pose a riddle: What do Russian Orthodox novelist Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Indian Hindu attorney Mahatma Gandhi, and American Baptist preacher Martin Luther King, Jr., have in common? Answer: Their lives were profoundly shaped by the Sermon on the Mount.

Today we embark on a sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount, but I should warn you, if you genuinely wrestle with these three chapters of the Gospel of Matthew—as the afore-mentioned individuals did—you, too, could be profoundly changed. Perhaps it would be prudent, then, to begin this sermon series by reflecting on how the Sermon on the Mount dramatically altered the course of these famous individuals’ lives.

SCENE ONE: Tolstoy, author of such renown novels as *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, experienced a dramatic spiritual awakening through his study of the Sermon on the Mount. Because of his deepened Christian convictions expressed through his powerful novels and essays, Tolstoy was eventually excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church. His opposition to the Czar’s oppressive and brutal empire also landed him in a heap of trouble. Looking back, it is clear that, if the Russian people would have heeded his call to nonviolent social reform instead of violent revolution, the Russian people might have avoided the long, sad chapter we know as the Bolshevik Revolution and rise of the Soviet Union. But his writings live on, and in the 1970s they sparked a spiritual awakening among the Russian intelligentsia, which contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union a decade later.

SCENE TWO: As hard as it is for us to fathom today, most of the churches in Germany supported Hitler in his rise to power. Bonhoeffer was the leading voice of the minority of German Christians who opposed Hitler, known as the Confessing Church. His anti-Nazi activities eventually landed him in a concentration camp, but even in confinement, he converted his guards who smuggled out his writings, including his most important book—indeed, one of the most famous Christian books of the 20th Century—*The Cost of Discipleship*, which is a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. Sadly, Bonhoeffer was executed by hanging before the Allies liberated the concentration camp in which he had been confined, but his writings live on.

SCENE THREE: Gandhi, a Hindu, was deeply influenced by the writings of Tolstoy, who pointed him to the Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi became a student of comparative religions, and his immersion in these deeply spiritual and ethical writings led him to envision a social movement characterized by passive, nonviolent resistance that he felt would lead to an India free from British rule, living under a constitution that protected religious pluralism. Eventually,

the British ended their colonial rule in the face of Gandhi's nonviolent moral movement, but unfortunately, the British carved the land into two nations: predominantly Hindu India and predominantly Muslim Pakistan, thereby thwarting Gandhi's hope of harmony among the world religions. The religious violence following the partitioning of the land deeply distressed Gandhi, who attempted to intervene on behalf of peace. Sadly, he was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist. But his teachings live on.

SCEEN FOUR: We are more familiar with the life of King, the towering leader of the Civil Rights Movement, but did you know that his convictions were deeply shaped by the Sermon on the Mount and the social reform tactics of Gandhi? As a Baptist minister, he called upon all Christians to embody the unconditional, radical love of Jesus. He trained his followers to "turn the other cheek" when attacked, to ensure that the movement remained a shining example of nonviolent civil disobedience. Under his wise leadership, the movement achieved notable progress encapsulated in the Civil Rights Legislation of the 1960s, but tragically he was assassinated in 1968. Without his strong, Christian leadership, many in the civil rights movement abandoned his call for nonviolence and turned to violent means, which, I believe, is one of the reasons progress toward racial equality slowed after King's death. And I'm troubled today when I see the so-called Anti-Fascists on the extreme left using violence to counter the rise on the extreme right of Neo-Nazis, the KKK, and white nationalists. As Dr. King said, "Violence begets violence." We desperately need another religious giant shaped by Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Many today are pointing to the Rev. Dr. William Barber, who I am happy to say is a Disciples minister, as the most likely candidate to pick up the moral leadership mantle worn by Tolstoy, Bonhoeffer, Gandhi, and King.

Clearly this is a dangerous passage of scripture we are about to study. Of the above men, one was excommunicated, one was executed, and the other two were assassinated. "What's Ron getting us into?" you may ask.

The Sermon on the Mount was the most quoted and commented on passage among the Early Church Fathers, that is, the early Christian leaders who lived during the four centuries after the deaths of the original disciples. And the prominence of the Sermon has continued to this day. Without doubt, the Sermon on the Mount is the most famous passage in the New Testament—other than the birth stories and the stories of Holy Week. Why is this so? On a purely literary level, this passage is filled with beautifully crafted poetry and vivid metaphorical images. On a spiritual level, the Sermon is the largest repository of Jesus' teachings.

What are to make of the Sermon on the Mount? This is the question that has faced every person who has undertaken a serious study of the Sermon. Does it advocate an "idealized" ethic or a "realizable" ethic? If you examine how the Sermon on the Mount has been interpreted over the course of Christian history, you will discover that interpretations of the Sermon have varied remarkably. For example, some have understood it to be the perfect plan for Christian living; that is, the Sermon has been understood as a design for the lifestyle of a disciple.

Others, however, have argued that the Sermon sets forth an unreachable, perfectionistic standard. “Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (5:48). “That’s setting the bar a little too high, don’t you think?” they complain. Consequently, many interpreters have attempted to “water down” the Sermon. Let me offer four examples.

First, some interpreters have argued that the Sermon on the Mount was intended only for “a spiritual elite” to aspire to—you know, people like monks and maybe priests and ministers. Jesus didn’t intend for this to apply to the rest of us who live in the real world. Right?

Second, others have proposed that the Sermon sets such a high, exaggerated standard in order that we will see just how far short we all fall in our attempts to live good and moral lives. Thus, the Sermon is actually a call for us to repent of our sins and throw ourselves on the grace and mercy of God. You know, “Repent, and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). We aren’t supposed to approach the Sermon as instructions on how we should really live. No, we need to use a little common sense when it comes to how we should live our lives in the real world. “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (5:39). Surely Jesus didn’t mean that literally—did he? “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you” (5:42). Ah, come on; that’s just hyperbole— isn’t it? Surely Jesus just meant we are to be generous in our giving. Right? You’ve got to use your common sense and “water down” Jesus’ statements. Right?

Third, a few interpreters have suggested that the rigorous teachings of the Sermon on the Mount were intended for only a short interim period—the brief period of time between the death of Jesus and his imminent return, which his first disciples thought would be in their lifetimes. Thus, the demanding ethics of the Sermon were not intended to be a way of life for a long period of time. Of course, it goes without saying that the first disciples were wrong about Jesus’ imminent return. Two thousand years have come and gone, and still Jesus hasn’t returned. So, if the Sermon on the Mount was not intended to be a “brief interim ethic,” does this mean that Jesus really meant for the Sermon on the Mount to serve as a blueprint for living as one of his disciples?

Fourth, other interpreters, known as Dispensational Premillennialists, understand the New Testament to teach that Jesus’ return will not occur until some point in the far distant future. Only when Jesus returns and reigns over all will his followers be expected to follow the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. This interpretation conveniently does away with the problem of having to wrestle with the Sermon’s ethical teachings in the here and now. They are teachings for the far distant future.

As this brief survey of how the Sermon on the Mount has been interpreted over the course of the last two thousand years clearly reveals, many Christians have spent considerable energy attempting to water down—or completely do away with—the rigorous demands of the Sermon. But is this the correct approach? I think not. I believe Jesus really intended for the Sermon to be his *design for discipleship*, his *blueprint for a new world*.

The Sermon on the Mount calls for us to incarnate—that is, to make flesh and blood—these “impossible possibilities.” I’ll be the first to admit that. Jesus’ design for discipleship is ultimately unattainable. We are going to fall short of the mark. But only when we are challenged by impossible possibilities, will we continue to grow.

Think of Olympic-caliber athletes. Are any of them ever satisfied with breaking the world records in their sports? No, they strive to improve their personal best, to improve the world record—and their coaches urge them on.

Think of school teachers and their students. Studies reveal that students seldom rise above the level of a teacher’s expectations. And thinking back, didn’t you learn more under those teachers who were the most demanding?

That is how we should approach discipleship. If perfection is the goal, then there is always room for growth. Discipleship is an ongoing journey, not a final destination.

But this raises a serious question. How can we live with the internal tension such an understanding of Christian discipleship inevitably produces? We are going to fail in our efforts—time and time again. How can we cope with that sense of failure these “impossible possibilities” produce?

That question was the topic for discussion in one of my ethic classes in seminary. Our professor invited Dr. T. B. Matson, an elderly, retired ethics professor, to bring the day’s lecture. I recall him shuffling into the seminar room, supported by a cane. He couldn’t stand for an entire class period, so he sat on the corner of the desk instead. Here is the gist of that memorable lecture:

The question for today is based on a misunderstanding of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon is not to be interpreted as saying, “Follow these ethical demands, and then you will enter the kingdom of God.” No! That approach to spirituality is legalism. Here is the proper way to understand the Gospel. We first awaken to God’s gracious, redemptive activity in our lives, and then we naturally respond to God’s grace by attempting to follow the Sermon on the Mount. The ethics demanded in the Sermon are the response to grace, not the means to grace. The experience of God’s grace and love precedes the call to discipleship, that is, the demands of the Sermon on the Mount.

Dr. Matson then concluded his lecture by taking a rubber band out of his pocket. He said that tension is necessary for a rubber band to do its job. For example, without tension, a rubber band cannot hold a stack of cards together; the cards scatter. Too much tension and the rubber band breaks, scattering the cards just like no tension did—and ruining the rubber band, too! No, a healthy tension is needed. The same, he said, is true when it comes to Christian discipleship. No tension in our lives, and we accomplish nothing. Too much tension, and we snap. Healthy tension is attainable only when we understand that *the demands of the Sermon*

on the Mount are the response to grace, not its means. Discipleship is based on grace, not legalism.

And so, as we study the Sermon on the Mount during the course of this sermon series, let us remember the words and the rubber band illustration of that wise, elderly, ethics professor. The Sermon is Jesus' *design for discipleship, Jesus' blueprint for a new world*. But this disciples' ethic can only be enacted after we have experienced God's gracious, redemptive activity in our lives.

And that's today's good news. Amen.