

Healing Our Broken Humanity

Chapter 9: Recover Life Together

“What do radical discipleship and community look like? How do we recover this life together and in the world? The Sermon on the Mount offers a profound insight into Jesus’ social ethic and into his vision for discipleship and his people’s life together.”

The “Sermon on the Mount” found in Matthew 5-7 is the longest speech of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. “This speech is a stunning description of Jesus’ vision for life, discipleship, ethics, prayer, reconciliation, hospitality, justice, and community. It includes the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer, and it leaves his audience (ancient and modern) shocked and uneasy. Jesus calls his church to embrace a new, radical, and alternative way of life together in the world.”

This isn’t simply a picture of what an individual righteous life looks like, it is a social ethic. “This is a vision of a community of disciples who pursue lives together and in the world and who witness to him, to a new humanity, and to the age to come.” This isn’t a new legalism, but a vision of a community completely reliant on and empowered by God’s grace. “This is a vision of a people who mirror in their life together the nature of God. Jesus calls his people to pursue God’s ethics and morality with great enthusiasm and dedication, but also to realize that they are only able to achieve any righteousness through grace.”

The Blessed and Ethical Community (Matthew 5:1-12): In the Beatitudes Jesus describes the postures, outlook, and behaviors of blessed, happy people who please God. They display a compelling and distinct personal and social ethic that is rooted in the character of God. Such people are moved to bear the character of God and to depend on God’s grace to do so.

The Distinct and Life-Giving Community (Matthew 5:13-16): The church has a distinct identity and a unique social ethic shaped by the story of Jesus and Israel. The church is formed by the work of Jesus and embodies extraordinary unity and diversity in its life and mission in the world.

The Righteous and Just Community (Matthew 5:17-20): Jesus doesn’t abolish the law and the prophets; he fulfills them. Properly understood they reflect God’s will and purpose for humanity. They speak of a righteousness revealed in the love of God and neighbor in the pursuit of justice, compassion, mercy, and humility.

The Reconciled and Reconciling Community (Matthew 5:21-26): Jesus calls on his disciples to take conflict and resolution seriously. He says that God will judge those embrace and foster anger, division, conflict, and hatred. He calls on his followers to replace these with peace, forgiveness, love, and reconciliation.

The Holy and Virtuous Community (Matthew 5:27-37): Jesus calls on his people to be different in their life together, resisting and putting away addiction, lust, selfishness, moral failure, lies, corruption, and deceit. Pursue integrity and moral excellence.

The Relational and Enemy-Loving Community (Matthew 5:38-48): A focus on relationship is at the heart of Christian faith. God invites people to share in the life of divine love and relationship. This is expressed most profoundly in our love of enemies.

The Generous and Compassionate Community (Matthew 6:1-4): The church of Jesus is generous and compassionate, particularly to those in society who are poor, marginalized, and oppressed.

The Praying and Humble Community (Matthew 6:5-18): Prayer is at the heart of our life together. The prayer Jesus teaches his disciples to pray is simple, quiet, and unobtrusive. Every part of the Lord's Prayer reflects the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount.

The Simple and Content Community (Matthew 6:19-24): The challenge of Christianity isn't relating or being relevant to a secular, consumerist society. It's about realizing how much Christianity has been assimilated by that society and then choosing to resist and follow another way. Live simply and be content so that others may simply live.

The Trusting and Dependent Community (Matthew 6:25-34): The church of Jesus is a community that has learned to trust and depend on God in the midst of the anxieties of life. Such communities embrace the practices of peacemaking, prayer, and hospitality.

The Gracious and Welcoming Community (Matthew 7:1-6): Instead of being critical of others, highlighting their faults, and judging their failings, Jesus calls on the church to be different. We are to be a gracious and forgiving people, anxious to see the best in others and to forgive their shortcomings and failures. The church is called to be safe and welcoming place for all people.

The Believing and Grace-Dependent Community (Matthew 7:7-12): The task of recovering life together involves discovering or rediscovering the power of faith and belief. Being direct with God, and believing that God can and will answer the righteous and faithful prayers of those committed to the work of God's Kingdom. From this perspective we approach God with hope and expectation.

The True and Faithful Community (Matthew 7:13-23): Discipleship in the way of Jesus is not easy and comfortable, it is a difficult and challenging way of life. It requires sacrifice, discipline, integrity, and truthfulness. The church is called to rediscover and cultivate the rigor of faithful discipleship and an uncompromising commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Wise and Strong Community (Matthew 7:24-26): The wise, strong, and faithful community is one that works diligently to put the Sermon on the Mount into practice, learning to rely on the grace and power of God to turn our efforts and intentions into reality. Such communities are conscious of their powerless and weakness in the face of the world's challenges but trust that God is able to bring deliverance in the face of what sometimes seem to be insurmountable forces.

Practices, Challenges, and Activities for Small Groups

Complete Baylor University's six-week series on the Sermon on the Mount. The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor has developed a six-week series for small groups focused on the Sermon on the Mount. It offers prayers, Scripture readings, meditations, reflections, discussion questions, and songs on the teaching and implication of Jesus' words in Matthew 5-7.

Write modern versions of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Form a small group and spend an evening writing modern versions of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. If Jesus were delivering these today, what would he say and how would he say it? What other words might he use and what other issues might he address? See the six "new Beatitudes" recently proposed by Pope Francis for modern Christians.

Put the Sermon on the Mount into practice in your neighborhood. Read through the Sermon on the Mount and list all the ways you might put it into practice in your local neighborhood. Make sure these are practical and make sense for your neighborhood. See examples in the book and at <http://parishcollective.org> and <http://inhabitconference.com>. Start putting these into practice in your community and neighborhood.

Discussion Questions

What did you learn from this chapter about the Sermon on the Mount?

What would the church be like if we focused on the Sermon on the Mount as much as we do on Paul's letters or on the Ten Commandments?

Why is love for enemies such a radical ethic? How can you and your church find practical ways to love our enemies?

Which part of the Sermon on the Mount was most striking to you? Which parts have the most significant implications for life and the life of your church?

What needs to change for you and your church to recover life together as a transformed community that live out the vision and ethics of the Sermon on the Mount?

What steps will you take to apply this practice fully and in the long term?