

Imagine if the invitation came by text:



The book of Exodus, chapter 24, in the Heikman Experimental Translation. :)

In a slightly more accurate version, *“Then God said to Moses, “Come up to YHWH, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu (the high priest and his family), and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance. Moses alone shall come near to YHWH; but the others shall not come near and the people shall not come up with him.” ... Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders*

of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under God's feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay a hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank."

"YHWH said to Moses, ' Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction."



It's an old, old story but it's central to the identity of the ancient Hebrew people and their modern spiritual descendants, of which we are a part.

What happens on the mountain?

Two things: One, God shows up. In this version of the story, God is physically, or at least visibly present. I can't tell you how that worked, exactly, or if this is mostly a metaphor, but the point is: God was somehow, really, truly, verifiably there. On the mountain, God shows up.

And Two, that encounter with God leaves behind a new or renewed vision of how we should live. God's presence translates to ethics.

In the book of Exodus, that meant tablets of stone, the *Torah* law and commandments, a system of instructions for the shared life of God's people.

In the gospel of Matthew, that meant a collection of practical, straightforward teachings from Jesus.

Over the next two months, we're going to take a look at Matthew chapter five, the first of three chapters known as Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." (We might come back to chapters 6 and 7 after the season of Lent and Easter, I'm not sure yet.)

The Sermon on the Mount contains some of the most famous sayings of Jesus: "The Lord's Prayer," "love your enemies," "no one can serve both God and money," "turn the other cheek," "go the extra mile," and of course "The Golden Rule."

Those are some pretty inspiring words. And we typically treat them individually, like proverbs or the wisdom sayings of Confucius, or inspirational quotes from a daily calendar.

There's a lot of value in looking at each of these pieces individually, and that's mostly how this series is going to go, with seven different speakers over the next eight weeks.

But let's not forget that Jesus, or at least his editors, put all of these teachings into a single sermon, one single message from a particular time and place. Somehow all of these are meant to hold together with some common themes and a singular vision.

That's the main question for today, what is the purpose and vision of the Sermon on the Mount?

Because the book of Matthew was put together with great intention and skill, you literature teachers will be glad to see that the theme begins with the setting:


"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying..."

Sound familiar? A leader of a large, rather unorganized, group of followers goes up on a mountain, sits down with his officers, and talks about how they are to live together.

What happens on the mountain? God is present, and God's presence reveals the right way to live.

What is the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount?
What happens on the mountain?

1. The presence of God is revealed
2. A new social order is given



This scene mirrors the Exodus story. (Which is hopefully not surprising to most of you now that I've been jabbering on about that for six and half years here....)



The emphasis of that story from Exodus 24 is on, who gets close to God. The masses stay far away at the bottom of the hill. Representatives are chosen to go closer, the seventy elders. Those seventy were the judges in that society, the heads of the clans, all powerful and wealthy and male.

Now, the Exodus story gives multiple accounts, with most suggesting that not even those elders went all the way to the top, that was reserved for only the high priests, Aaron and his two sons. And then Moses alone went into the actual presence of God.

By the Old Testament narratives, that hierarchy was God-ordained, for the good of the people, for the maintaining of order and justice. This hierarchy was then mirrored in the ordering of the Hebrew camp around the Tabernacle, and then later in the Jerusalem Temple. The Presence of God was at the center, carefully managed by the system of rituals and sacrifices. If you wanted to get to God, these were the hoops you had to jump through, the fees you had to pay, the commitments you had to make. And those legal structures just happened to benefit the wealthy and powerful and priestly.



That was the world that Jesus was born into, with a very clearly defined social hierarchy. Everyone knew their place, politically, economically, socially, religiously, (and it could be broken down into much greater detail than this.)

Now, does anyone know, in Matthew's gospel, after Jesus is born and moves back to Nazareth, when Jesus is grown up, what is the first story of Jesus' adult life? Who does Jesus run into first?

John the Baptist, this wildman, self-styled prophet, out in the wilderness by the Jordan River, preaching a coming revolution and inviting people into the water.

I like how Richard Rohr says it in his talks on the Sermon on the Mount:

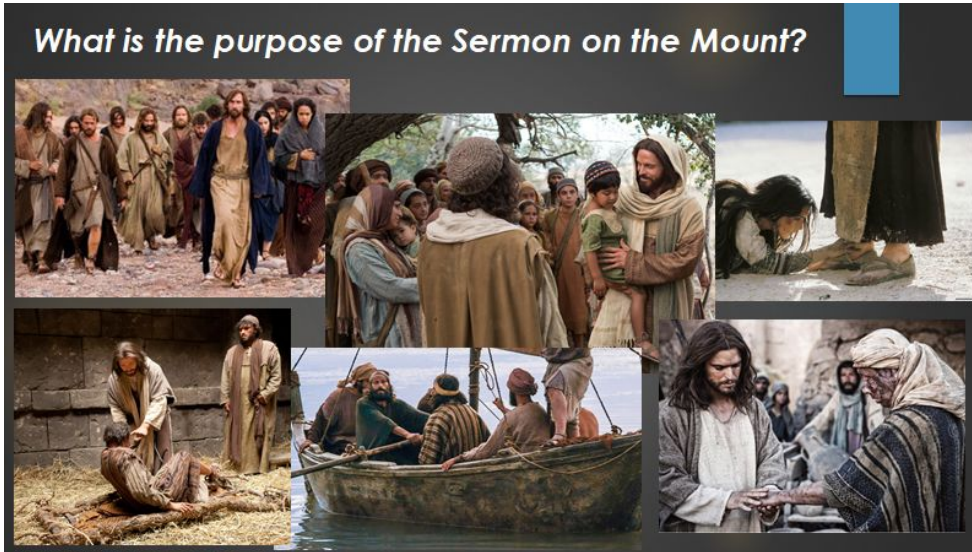
[Richard Rohr - "God is available as Water" audio clip](#) from Rohr's [Sermon on the Mount](#) talks

What is the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount?

"We have in Jerusalem an entirely water-tight system for getting into the Temple and getting your sins forgiven and getting worthy and declaring who's in and who's out... and now we have this joker out in the desert just saying 'God is as available as water!'"

The complex block contains a central text quote on a dark background. To the left is an image of John the Baptist standing on a rock. Below the quote is an image of Jesus being baptized. To the right is a smaller version of the temple hierarchy diagram from the first image, overlaid on a background image of a river with people being baptized.

That's what happens in Matthew chapter 3. In chapter 4 is the temptation of Christ. Jesus has a vision of the devil showing him all the power of the world-as-it-is, economic power and political power and religious power, the Temple Mountain again, and Jesus rejects all of it.



Instead, Jesus left the capital region and went to the backcountry, blue-collar Galilee. And there he called disciples, followers, common fishermen. And his fame as a teacher and healer spread throughout the region, and Matthew says, *“they brought to him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, possessed by demons, suffering from*

epilepsy, those who were paralyzed...” So there’s this great crowd of followers, nobody special, mostly outcasts, even Gentiles.

And then, chapter five, Jesus brings *his* people to the mountain.

And on the mountain, God shows up, and teaches people how to live.

But who is with God on the mountain, this time? *Jesus taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor, the grieving, the gentle, those who show mercy...”*

There is no barrier keeping the people from God. There aren’t any go-betweens, With the weak ones, the ones on the bottom.

God’s presence is not locked away on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, God is here on *this* other mountain, already present with the ones on the bottom.

On this mountain, the hierarchy is turned upside down: God is already with those who were following Jesus, the lower classes, the outcasts.

Blessed are the poor, the ptóchos (toe-khaas), literally, the ones who crouch or cower. The lowest ones.

What is the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount?
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“Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven!”

God

Unclean/Women/Gentiles

When I lived in Vancouver, my youth group took part in an “urban mission adventure” where we spent a couple of days exploring a small taste of the lives of those living in poverty in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Part of the experience was walking the few blocks between the dirty streets of the Downtown Eastside and Vancouver’s gleaming business district. We were invited to go to Robson Street, known for its expensive shops, and to simply sit on the sidewalk for an hour.

We weren’t panhandling, just sitting, and paying attention to what that felt like to be sitting there while the world moved busily around us and over us. I don’t remember any particularly interesting experiences, though some of the youth had people ask them what they were doing and offer them food. I just remember the physical experience of being that low in a world that was all about what was going on “up there.” I was literally beneath everyone. It felt like all the important things were up and moving and hurrying and climbing, and I was just out of it, irrelevant.



So much of our world worships at the altar of upward mobility, higher education, investing and increasing profits, career advancement, self-improvement. Onward and upward!

But wait, Jesus says, there is blessing down here, with the ones who are crouched and covered. Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Now that’s a challenge. Why do we chase and climb and strive to get to the top, when God is already present on the bottom? How can we look down on those poor folks beneath us, how can we feel okay about stepping on their backs, cutting their funding, to lift ourselves up and balance our budgets, if God is there with them?

As Richard Rohr said, it’s no wonder they killed Jesus--those at the top were totally invested in the system that restricted access to God’s blessing. And here Jesus is presenting a totally different worldview, a new mountain to challenge the Temple Mountain. You don’t need that old way of thinking, that old way of treating people. In fact, Jesus says later on in the book of Matthew, you can tell *that* mountain to throw itself into the sea. If you have faith, God is already as close as a prayer. You don’t need any temple. Because the poor are already blessed.

I don’t think that Jesus is glorifying the lives of the lowly ones or minimizing their suffering. Instead, he’s calling for a new world order that recognizes the presence of God at the bottom just as much, if not more than, at the top.

Again, Richard Rohr:

“Such a new world order is so foundationally different, so transformative of perspective, that mere education or intellectual assent is inadequate for even preliminary understanding. It demands

what becomes Jesus' next favorite theme--conversion--a complete turnaround of worldviews... Conversion is not a learning as much as it is an unlearning...

"One will not, of course, turn away from what seems like the only game in town (political, economic, or religious) unless one has glimpsed a more attractive alternative. Jesus is a living parable, an audiovisual icon of that more attractive alternative. We cannot even imagine it, much less imitate it, unless we see one human being do it first. Jesus has forever changed human imagination...there is good news to counter the deadening bad news, but one first has to be turned away from the conventional way of seeing.

"The most unsettling of his alternative wisdom, and perhaps the most consistent, is that the outcast is in the head-start position, precisely because he or she has been excluded from the false sacred system...Jesus thus begins by a most incredible statement: the poor are the blessed ones! Life has already freed them from the lie that the rest of us cannot see... If the system is a mess, those outside of it are at a significant advantage!" ([Jesus' Plan for a New World](#), p7-8)

Imagine that. What if all this stuff that so many of us live for, the security and success and status and influence, what if all of that is not only *not* bringing the promised fulfillment that we really want, but actually keep us from seeing and understanding the true meaning of life? What would it look like to live in search of that deeper reality, the Kingdom of Heaven as it's called in Matthew's gospel?

That's the theme and vision of the Sermon on the Mount.

What is the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount? Conversion to a New Worldview

1. The presence of God is revealed...
if we have eyes to see
2. A new social order is given...
if we have courage and imagination to follow

When we recognize the presence of God as existing outside the present world order, and even turning the whole thing upside down, then that *conversion* will lead to a very different ethic. Not just personally, but socially and religiously and economically and politically. The whole thing must shift, an invitation to move to a whole new way of seeing and behaving.

I hope we can keep that holistic vision in mind as we work our way through the Sermon on the Mount. Our tendency, the pattern throughout the history of the church ever since these teachings were given, is to focus on the individual teachings. But when we try to understand them one at a time, they often don't seem like they're "working" and so we set them aside or spiritualize them.

For example: later on in chapter five, in verse 42, Jesus says this: **"Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."**

Confession time: As your pastor, in your name, I blatantly disregard this verse at least once or twice a month. People call the church or stop by the office to ask for things quite often. Some of them we see regularly, most of the time it's just one-offs, people who seem to be googling churches at random or driving around stopping wherever they see a car in the church parking lot. They all have a story, a reason they need some help, a family that needs food and shelter, some justification for why I should give to them or loan them some money.

And almost always, I lie to them. In the nicest, well-meaningest way. Oh, I offer what we have prepared to help, food in the freezer and pantry. Sometimes, we give them gift cards to Superstore that they can use for food or gas or diapers or whatever--we have about \$250 in our annual budget for those, and we try to spread them out to throughout the whole year.

But most of the time, I can't come close to giving them what they were hoping for. And so I say something like, "that's all that we have to offer," or "we have a limited budget." "I'm sorry, there's nothing more I can do for you."

Which is really not true. There is plenty more that we *could* do. We have \$250 in our budget, sure, but we *could* easily do more. I *could* easily do more. Even beyond the financial stuff, I could actually demonstrate that I care about them and offer them some genuine attention instead of just kind of standing there uncomfortably, hoping they go away so the awkwardness will go with them.

Or I could actually do what Jesus says, and "give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." Instead, I directly disobey Jesus and turn them away with money in my pocket.

And I justify it, by telling myself that we do have limited resources as a church, we can't *literally give to everyone who asks*. If we did, well, they'd just come back again next week and the next, and they would bring a friend, and the word would get out and soon we'd have people here every day. And we really would run into a budget shortage. I mean, we're just not set up to feed all the hungry people in Saskatoon, that's not our purpose, right? We don't want to be taken advantage of, that's not good, right? I mean, if we really followed what Jesus said, we'd have to give away everything we have, and soon we'd be the ones that are begging and borrowing.

And so we set aside that commandment. I try to forget about it, because, well, what else are we supposed to do, actually believe and follow?

I suspect that some of you have similar arguments in your head whenever you pass a panhandler on the streets.

I honestly don't know what we're supposed to do with a command like that. There aren't easy answers--simply giving away everything I have might just create as many problems as it solves. I'm certainly not telling you how you should respond to panhandlers; there might not be a right thing for

some situations. So I mostly muddle through and offer what help I think is reasonable, and try to avoid the awkwardness however I can.

I think that part of the reason I get stuck here is that I'm so immersed in the old way of seeing. I'm concerned about budgets and sustainability and what might happen to me if I'm *too* generous, because that's how I've been taught to think in a world obsessed with that kind of thing. I'm so caught up in the "business as usual" that I can't see what new thing God might be doing.

I can't imagine any other way than what already is, and so I set aside Jesus' teaching because as an individual piece it seems impractical and unrealistic.

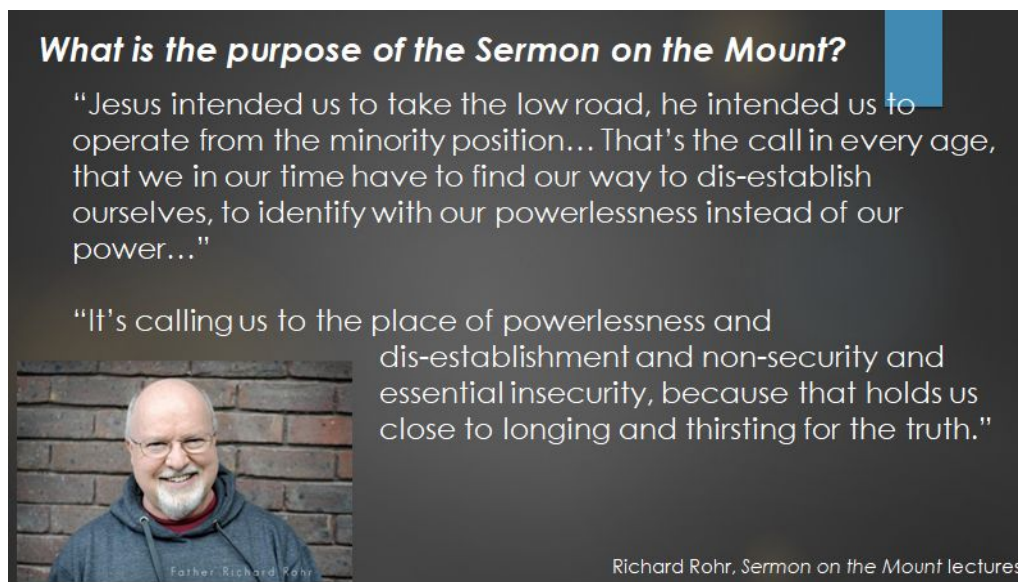
But the invitation of the Sermon on the Mount is to "throw that other mountain into the sea" and instead see through Jesus' upside-down worldview: blessed are the poor. How might I respond differently if I focused not on the set of problems that limit my generosity but instead saw truly, the image of God in this one person right in front of me? What if the bigger issue isn't their immediate request, but what might be possible if I were to actually invite them into an ongoing relationship with our church community? What if the real teaching isn't about limitless generosity, but about breaking down the walls that divide givers from receivers, lenders from borrowers? Conventional wisdom says giving money to panhandlers won't solve their problems, but what if conventional wisdom was part of what created the situations that drive people to panhandling in the first place? What if I could replace my awkwardness in these situations with wonder and deeper sight?

Part of the issue is my lack of imagination, part my inability to trust that Jesus knew what he was talking about. Beyond that, I don't know. I've assigned this text to our new interim pastor to preach about in February, so hopefully Eileen has all the answers. :)

One more word from Richard Rohr:

[Richard Rohr - "Identifying with powerlessness" audio clip](#)

from Rohr's [Sermon on the Mount](#) talks)



What is the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount?

"Jesus intended us to take the low road, he intended us to operate from the minority position... That's the call in every age, that we in our time have to find our way to dis-establish ourselves, to identify with our powerlessness instead of our power..."

"It's calling us to the place of powerlessness and dis-establishment and non-security and essential insecurity, because that holds us close to longing and thirsting for the truth."

Father Richard Rohr

Richard Rohr, Sermon on the Mount lectures

Do we want the truth? I guess we'll have to stay tuned to find out!

God of the lowly, open our eyes to see you with those on the bottom.

God who gave up power, give us the courage and imagination to follow.

God of love, meet us where we are and convert us, transform us with your Spirit.

Amen.