

## **LIVING ON THE MOUNTAIN**

### **Dr. George O. Wood**

I invite you today to turn to the fourth chapter of Matthew. I will read verse 23, through 5:2. What I want to do today is provide a backdrop which next week I'll be beginning on the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 4:23 "Jesus went about all Galilee teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people. So his fame spread through all Syria. And they brought him all the sick those afflicted with various diseases and pain, demonics, epileptics, paralytics. And he healed them. Great crowds followed him from Galilee and from the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. Seeing the crowds Jesus went up on the mountain and when he sat down his disciples came to him and he opened his mouth and taught them."

There's something about me that wants to be on a mountain. I love to get up on a mountain and look down. To look down on the panorama of landscape and beauty. I recall when I was single and had the time, that I loved, when I was a student at Fuller Seminary, to hike out on an afternoon into the mountains, climb up with several books and knapsack and find a perching point somewhere high that I could look down on the city and even linger to twilight to watch the lights come on. There's something about being in a place of physical elevation that corresponds to an inward feeling of psychological and spiritual elevation.

In fact we use topographical terms to describe how we are feeling. We say for example, "I'm in a valley." We know by that we infer that a person is not living on a mountain. Or "I'm on a plateau in my life." Or those rare moments when we feel like maybe we can say "I'm on the mountain."

The Sermon on the Mount to me is not only a sermon that occurs on a physical mount but it's the teaching of the Lord which is designed to help us live on the exhilarating height of personal and spiritual adjustment which brings us in tune with ourselves, our environment, our society and most of all our Lord.

As we overview this sermon we note some things just in picking the sermon apart by chronology we can't help but see that Jesus began by talking about attitudes – the Be-attitudes. Which refer to the kind of psychological adjustments that Jesus is asking for in his disciples, the ability to live in peace with oneself. Jesus goes on to talk about the influence of his disciples, us being salt and light. He next moves to talk about relationship with other persons. Then in chapter 6, relationship with the Lord in piety through prayer and fasting and giving and through trust in him. And of course the sermon concludes with the choice where Jesus in effect as the evangelist throws the net out to invite a response of those who had listened.

The sermon really speaks to our psychological needs. It speaks to our sociological needs, how to get along with other people. It speaks to our theological needs. How to be related to God.

As we go through this sermon together over the next three and a half or four months we will find these kind of questions being answered. For example, Must I live according to what my family and my environment made me? Am I a captive of my background? Or does the gospel of Jesus Christ bring an update and an input into my experience which gives me the possibility of

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change. Is it possible that my life can be lived in view of the future that is before me rather than the past that is behind me?

I think another question we'll find answered is the question, Am I significant? Am I important? Is anyone aware of me or is God aware of me? Or am I lost on a dust speck somewhere in the galaxy of space. Must I settle for a cosmic loneliness when instead I can be a special child of God.

I was fascinated this week to find in the newspaper there was an account of Liz Taylor and Richard Burton getting together again. "Liz and Dick pray at the Wailing Wall." An interesting comment that Richard Burton made on the occasion. He said as he walked away from the Wailing Wall, having prayed, "It is a very strange and mixed feeling even for an agnostic like myself," Burton said afterwards. "I think you might describe it streak in the atavistic bones that comes back." I thought what is atavistic? I found that it means some part of the organism, which through genetic transmission over the course of generations has ceased to exist but has all of a sudden manifested itself again. A throw back. Richard Burton is in effect saying, As I am at the Wailing Wall I find a throw back religiously to God.

Even Richard Burton must come to a knowledge that God has care for him as a person. He loves him as much as he loves everyone.

Am I significant? Yes, Jesus continually says in this sermon your Father knows, your Father knows.

Another question, how can hate and bitterness be healed? What is the secret of joyful and pure sexual experience? Is there hope for my marriage particularly. It is in trouble. How can I really get along with, enjoy and love others including my parents, my kids, my neighbors, my boss, the people that I may not relate especially well to, the people that I relate aggravatedly to. How can I even relate to a restaurant waiter or waitress or when their service is not what I would hope it to be? Can the Bible be so specific as to apply to a situation like that?

How can I be a spiritual person? Can I find forgiveness? What priority must I establish in my budget and my financial planning and goals? Can I be free from worry and anxiety? How can I be free from a harsh and critical spirit and tongue? Is there a way to spiritually distinguish between truth and error? How can I face the disasters of life – death, defeat, disillusionment, divorce and the like. The Sermon on the Mount provides the answers to these. To help us live on a spiritual elevation.

If we look at the setting for the Sermon on the Mount I'd just like to say a couple of things about the setting. First the chronological setting and then the event itself.

Before the Sermon on the Mount takes place there are three important things that occur in Jesus' life at the outset of his ministry which we must understand as a backdrop to this sermon.

The first event that occurs is his baptism. The second his temptation. The third is his opening campaign through the synagogues and villages and cities of Galilee and he has three activities in respect to this campaign.

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First of all his baptism. From eternity past, he is the Son of God, the Messiah. Although he holds that position of savior in respect to us he does not begin to exercise his office so to speak until his baptism when he is anointed of the Spirit and the Father speaks his approval of him. The baptism marks Jesus' first public disclosure. If I were putting it on some kind of scale I would say that Jesus had been elected in eternity past, the divine eternal Son of God to be our savior. But he did not begin to exercise the functions of his office until his inauguration by John and the baptism in the Jordan. From that anointing or that inauguration, Jesus moves into a 40 day period of wilderness temptation when the manner in which he is going to bring the kingdom as king is to be thoroughly hammered out and tested and he is to be tempted in respect as to the way his kingdom will enter in. Will he for example do a miracle for himself? Turning stones into bread is as crucial as the question which was flung to him on the cross: Save yourself and come down. Both relate to the same issue – would he do anything as a miracle for himself?

The second temptation describes the way in which his kingdom will come. Will he call men to faith in him and by so doing, strip away the freedom to say no. If he jumps from the pinnacle of the temple, human freedom is lost because a person cannot say, No, it cannot be. His miracle ministry must gradually come in such a way that it can be received by faith or rejected by disbelief.

His third temptation which will determine how his ministry is going to be conducted is a crucial one for when he is visibly confronted with Satan who would no doubt make an appearance in the form of an angel of light, when he sees before him physically the kingdoms of this world, Jesus has the choice of embracing the visible or embracing the invisible. Choosing the material or the spiritual. Making the kinds of choices that you and I are required to do. Whether we are to serve the invisible God or serve those things which we can see and feel and smell and taste. Jesus chooses the invisible because as he has said, My kingdom is not of this earth.

Jesus, following his temptation, commences in his opening campaign, I like to describe it as a campaign. It is a strategy of advance where Jesus is out to conquer the hearts and minds of the world. So in his opening campaign he conducts that campaign along three fronts of approach. Three lines of advance.

The first line of advance is his preaching and teaching ministry. Jesus came speaking. In the early stages of his ministry I find three sermons which he was preaching.

The first sermon was a sermon he preached to the synagogues in Galilee. It's a sermon recorded for us in outline form by Mark in 1:14-15 which says, The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, repent and believe the gospel. Four points to the sermon. That's it. Basically Jesus was saying God has acted. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom is come. You respond. Change your mind, repent, believe. That his first sermon, a sermon of evangelism. Evangelism literally means to bring men the good news.

His second sermon was preached in his home town. In his home town synagogue. He stood up in the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed himself as the liberator. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he's anointed me to preach good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, to set the captive free. To proclaim release to those who are bound. To proclaim the acceptable year of God's favor. If in the first sermon in the synagogues of Galilee Jesus came as the evangelist, in his second sermon at Nazareth he came as the liberator.

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His third sermon is the Sermon on the Mount. Which is his detailed sermon on discipleship. Here he is building on the evangelism and the liberation which he has accomplished because once a person has been saved, once a person has been set free or liberated then that's not sufficient. One must know how to live. Jesus is concerned with making disciples and telling us and sharing with us his own life. I see the Sermon on the Mount as really a detailed description of how Jesus Christ himself thought and acted.

If Jesus was teaching also in his second line of advance, he was calling. Calling men to follow him. Matthew 4 we read he called four fishermen. I like these people. I like them more and more as I get on a little bit. I find that when Jesus calls people he doesn't call people who are finished products. Thank God! He calls us when we are straight, raw material. I have a feeling that there is so much of me that is yet unfinished that it gives me a great deal of encouragement to look at these men.

I saw an insight this week into that experience of Jesus calling the fishermen. It dawned on me that when Jesus first called Peter he said, I will make you to become a fisher of men. When the gospel closes at the end of the gospel of John, Jesus is telling Peter he is to be a shepherd. He started out making him a fisher and when Jesus was through with Peter, Peter was able to be not only a fisher, to catch men, but he was able to be a shepherd, to provide and care for. There's a lot of difference between the two aspects of employment.

A third front of Jesus' activity, a third line of advance was his healing ministry. His power to heal the body, his continual evidence of his authority over the inside of man. But the Sermon on the Mount another teaching is necessary because Jesus never believed or taught that all that needed to be set right in us was physical healing. Unless a person is made well on the inside, physical healing is of no great significance as awesome as it might be.

Oscar Wilde in kind of a parody of one of his works tells in a symbolic way of Christ coming into a town and describes what happens when men are healed on the outside but are not healed on the inside. Let me read to you from him: "Christ came from a white flame into a purple city. As he passed through the first street he heard voices overhead and saw a young man drunk upon a window sill. 'Why do you waste your soul in drunkenness?' he said. The man replied, 'Lord, I was a leper and you healed me. What else can I do?' A little farther on through the town he saw a young man following a harlot and said, 'Why do you dissolve your soul in debauchery?' The young man answered, 'Lord, I was blind. What else can I do?' And last in the middle of the city he saw an old man crouching, weeping on the ground and when he asked why he wept, the old man answered, 'Lord, I was dead and you raised me to life. What else can I do but weep?'"

God wants us to have healing on the inside. To know how we can get it together in our inner man. Jesus' purpose in this Sermon on the Mount is to help us become healed on the inside. I like to think that the Sermon on the Mount and the totality of Jesus' ministry does to me what it did to Peter. It turned sand into rock. Or putty into permanence.

The overall chronology the Sermon on the Mount comes at the beginning.

What about the event itself? The first two verses in chapter 5 describes a little bit for us. Jesus saw the crowds and when he saw the crowds he went up to the mountain. When the statement is made – Jesus saw the crowds – I don't believe that Jesus saw people as faceless masses. He saw the individual in the crowd. And each individual was the focus of his concern. Continually in

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the sermon he is saying words of individual counsel to persons. Jesus had a personal ministry. I'm glad they didn't count the crowd that listened to the Sermon on the Mount. They counted other crowds in scripture but I'm glad this one wasn't counted. We might have judged success of the sermon by how many were or were not there.

Interesting enough I don't believe that when Jesus saw these crowds that he got up... My mistake often in preaching is the larger the crowd the more tendency I have to shout. So that after a while I'm speaking at the height of my voice and I've forgotten that I'm just speaking to a group of individuals – one by one. Jesus had that unique ability to relate to us as individuals. He still does. Another infallible proof of his resurrection is that he speaks to us today.

He saw the crowds so you know what he did? He went up on the mountain. Jesus knew that on the level place he could not be well seen or heard. The guys or gals that were shorter would be hidden behind the people that people that were taller. If he were going to be seen he would have to get up high. Jesus wanted to be heard. That's why so frequently he taught by lakes and mountains because a natural amphitheater effect is created.

So going up to the mountain the crowds gathered around him. No doubt setting like a carpet, a living colorful carpet, upon the mountainside they were assembled to hear his message.

When Jesus sat down the disciples came to him. Let's pause for a moment. This whole sermon is given by Jesus in a setting position. I recall how a number of years ago when I was trying to memorize some of the Sermon on the Mount I was going through my more bombastic style speaking than what I probably have now so I was at the top of my lungs wailing away and emphasizing and gesturing. Really going to town. I was through about the first 14 or 15 verses and all of a sudden I realized *he sat down*. Immediately when you set down you start being calm and more level and more personal. I was tempted when I recognized that to preach this whole series setting down. But I thought that might be too much of a change for both you and me. I don't know if I could adjust to that.

When Jesus sets down, what he's doing is take kind of a stance that a rabbi would take when it was time to give former teaching to disciples. Still today in the university we have such a thing as the professor's chair. The seat of authority. So Jesus when he sets down is saying visibly I take that seat of authority. The disciples gather around and set down before him. They're in the front of the crowd. I praise the Lord that some disciple was there taking notes. I like to think that Matthew took notes on the Sermon on the Mount. If he did are we going to be thankful that somebody took notes?

There are temptations in listening. Can you picture just for a moment. If you could visualize just for a moment the crowds that are gathered around Jesus, seated all around the mountainside. Can you speculate on the temptations to listening that occur? That occurred whether the crowd is listening to Jesus or whether it's you and me listening to someone else. Oh, the distractions! There must have been babies in the crowd how easily the attention of the crowd could have been riveted to the crying baby rather than to the word of Jesus. I knew too, I know what time the baby cried on the Sermon on the Mount. He cried when Jesus came to the conclusion. That's always when babies cry.

Tempted to be distracted. When are we going to get out? When are we going to eat? How long is it going to take to get home? Where is our little boy in this crowd? All the temptations to

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distractions. All the temptations to let one's mind wander while the greatest teaching that the world has ever known is being given. And maybe even too a few fell asleep. Wouldn't surprise me. But somehow the sermon got through. When Jesus was set down the disciples were close to him.

Then the text tells us he opened his mouth and taught them. That phrase "opened his mouth" is more than some superfluous term. It is a technical term meaning that when it is used we are to expect that an authoritative, formal, grave teaching or declaration is to now take place. As I study the scripture I cannot help but conclude that when God speaks things happen. And when Jesus opens his mouth things happen. He created the world by his word. Jesus said "Let there be light." Can you imagine what that one effective word of God did in bringing the creation into existence?

When Jesus speaks there is power. When Genesis says he spoke light. I take that to be the kind of heat, effective energy. When the Lord speaks a nation is reborn as we see in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones. The word of the Lord said, Bones stand up and live. And they lived. When Jesus speaks to the wind and the waves they must be silent. When Jesus speaks to demons they must leave. When Jesus speaks to the dead they must hear his voice. When Jesus returns in his glory as seen at the end of Revelation, when he comes with his army. No one has a weapon. Only he has a weapon. With that one weapon he defeats the totality of the army of the antichrist. It is simply the sword which comes from his mouth which is no loess symbolism than when Jesus speaks the strongest army of the world must disassemble and dissolve because his word is active, it is effective.

So when we find in this sermon, Jesus opened his mouth, get ready for a release of divine energy in your life which will make you and make me. There's only one thing in heaven or in earth that can refuse to obey the voice of God. That's you and that's me. We are the only ones who can say when Jesus speaks, forget it! We can disobey. The wind must obey. The demons must obey. Death must obey. The elements must obey. But we can disobey.

That's why as we approach this sermon it's important that we approach it from a willing and an obedient heart. Because if we let Jesus speak to us he will speak things into being.

In the Sermon on the Mount it lays the foundation for our individual life and for society. There are problems which we have as individuals and which we have as society. There are ecological problems which involve the separation or alienation of man from his environment. There are sociological problems which involve the alienation of man from his fellow man. There are psychological problems which involve the alienation of man from himself. And there are theological problems which involve the alienation of man from God. If we're to be reconciled, if we're to know what it is like not to be alienated then we begin with the theological. We begin by coming into relationship with God and when we are in relationship with God we can get in relationship with ourselves – the psychological. When those two things are accomplished we can get into sociologically with our fellow man and when that is accomplished we can get into relationship with our ecology, with our environment. The world has a wrong handed approach by tacking the last thing first and the first thing last.

Jesus would bring us to a point of union with himself. If the questions are how can the alienation with myself and with others and with God be at an end? If those are the questions then Christ is the answer. This sermon creates a life within us.

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We think, Lord, of the word of St Paul “Eye has not seen nor has ear heard nor has it entered into the heart of man the things which you have prepared for those who love you.” Lord, as we are at the outset of our experience together in this crucial teaching of yours on discipleship it has not yet entered our heart or mind what beauty and wonder you can create in our lives. We stand/set today Lord as candidates for creation. As persons in hope that you will begin or in some cases (most cases) continue the work which you have begun. I pray, Lord Jesus, for any individual in here who has not yet come to a relationship with you by confessing their need for you. In this very quiet moment of prayer that there would be an inner prayer on their part to you which meets your simple terms – here I am Lord. Here I am with my needs, here I am with my sin. Forgive me, Lord. Restore me, Lord. Make me, Lord. I believe in you. Lord, your word comes the moment we do that and creates within us eternal life, union with you. Lord God, breathe upon us as a body of individuals the life that is in you, the style of life the quality of life, the winsomeness and wonder, the elevation of being in your presence. We seek these things and give you thanks that you will indeed complete all that you have begun in us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.