

last call for hungry hearts | sermon series

PHIL CAMPBELL preaches through Matthew 1-7 ...

Introduction

“The Sermon on the Mount must be interpreted within the historical, cultural and social context in which Jesus expounded. It must be understood that it was addressed to Jews who were assumed to share the presuppositions of their covenant... The Sermon... recalled Israel to the covenant and had the reconstitution of scattered Israel in mind. It was a covenant charge and a call to decision to Israel... The proclamation of the Kingdom of God was seeking for the renewal of Israel.” [William J Dumbrell, The New Covenant, p 30, 33]

With those simple words in his highly condensed commentary on the synoptic gospels, Bill Dumbrell sets the scene for a fresh reading of the Sermon on the Mount.

The problem with previous (less contextual) approaches to the Sermon on the Mount fall in two directions. Either the Christian reader is pushed towards what looks very much like “salvation by works” (and a law-based works, at that); or we adopt a “straw man” reading, that places the attainment of the standards of the Sermon on the Mount as an impossibility, so as to hopefully push the reader towards the need for God’s mercy as the only possible way of salvation.

Reading the Sermon on the Mount as a call for Israel’s national repentance in line with the Covenant allows an integrated

reading, not just of the sermon itself, but of the surrounding chapters.

The Sermon on the Mount in Context

It’s notable – but not often observed – that the genealogy that opens Matthew’s gospel paints Israel’s history in three phases; the closing phase being “from the exile to the Christ.” Matthew’s perspective on history immediately places Jesus Christ at the point of resolution of Israel’s crushing exile.

In fact, Mervyn Eloff (From the Exile to the Christ, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Stellenbosch) argues that “return from exile is a valid ‘hermeneutical prism’ for the interpretation of Matthew’s gospel” in its entirety.

John the Baptist’s ministry, then, is seen as a preparation for repentant Israel’s return as per the requirements of Deuteronomy 30:1-6. (Eloff, 4:18, and footnote 4-43).

It is helpful to keep the words of Deuteronomy 30 in mind – particularly the preconditions God sets for a “return to blessing” after the exile.

When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, 2 and when you and your children return to the LORD your

God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, 3 then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes [1] and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. 4 Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. 5 He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. 6 The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.

Significantly, if Israel is to be re-gathered and re-blessed, and have “circumcised hearts,” they will need to return to the Lord their God and obey him with all their heart and soul, according to the law Moses is delivering to them. To know God’s blessing, Israel will have to do more than simply obey their law mechanically; they will need to return to God with hearts properly humbled by their exile, keenly desiring to do his will from the heart.

But where can such an Israel be found? Nehemiah ends the OT historical narrative looking for signs of exile-humbled hearts... and was disappointed. Malachi ends the prophetic canon with the prospect of a “new Elijah” who will be fore-

runner for the day of the Lord's visitation. For the repentant, there will be blessing – while the unrighteous will be burned to ash.

It's on that note that Matthew introduces John the Baptist – an Elijah figure preaching for a national repentance signified by baptism, which would lead to a new "Jordan crossing" and return from spiritual exile. [Dumbrell p24, 25] Like Malachi, John warns that the coming Christ will present only two options for Israel – baptism by the Spirit, or a baptism by fire, in which the tree would be cut down and burned.

Jesus, on the other hand, is presented as the tested and true returning Israel... in him, the hopes of restoration will be fulfilled. The Sermon on the Mount asks, "Who's coming with me."

Preaching The Sermon on the Mount

It is hugely helpful to keep in mind the context of the Sermon on the Mount as you preach it, especially because of the factors that gear it towards Israel's situation.

This is not an "evangelistic sermon" in our sense. Rather, it is a call to re-commitment, aimed at those who are already God's covenant people. It's not about "getting in" – it's about the very real threat of being "thrown out." It's not about "being saved by works" – it's about the righteousness that should be expected from God's chosen people Israel. It's not "raising the bar too high" – it's about the sort of righteousness God always intended to be displayed by his people.

For I have chosen [Abraham], so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." (Gen 18)

Particularly, it's helpful to see that the call to return to the Law is aimed uniquely at Israel-in-exile. Deuteronomy 30 specifically states the requirement for Israel to turn back to the law with all their heart and soul. Why would we expect Jesus to call for anything different?

The Sermon on the Mount, then, is a dramatic denunciation of the failure of the Pharisees and Scribes, who think that outward observance of the law is enough. The fact is, it's far from enough. To think that turning back to God with a heart that says, murder is wrong, but hate is okay, adultery is wrong, but lust is okay... is not really turning back to God at all.

Ultimately, the Sermon on the Mount is both a call and an offer – a call to real repentance for Israel; and an offer of refreshment to those with hungry and thirsty hearts.

Hearts that hunger and thirst for the righteousness Jesus is talking about will be filled with it... for the Christ who has come calling for repentance is going to bring about the "circumcision of hearts" that will enable righteousness that *goes right to the heart as he baptises with the Spirit.*

This offer of "circumcised hearts" is later extended to the Gentiles as well – as demonstrated by the faith of the Centurion in Matthew 8. In fact, Israel's rejection and Gentile

inclusion are always foreshadowed as Matthew's narrative unfolds. For hermeneutical reasons, it is helpful to keep this timeline on view. The parable of the banquet in Matt 22 is a helpful bridge... "The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find." If Israel is not hungry and thirsty for righteousness, others will be.

Benefits of an integrated reading of The Sermon on The Mount

Approaching the Sermon on the Mount from this angle has many benefits. First, it represents good exegetical technique – reading in context is important. Second, it resolves many theological difficulties presented by other approaches to the Sermon on the Mount – and especially makes sense of the strong "pro-law" statements Jesus makes to Israel, which the New Testament explicitly does not carry across to Gentiles. Thirdly, it makes great sense of the teaching of Jesus, which is otherwise atomised, and reduced to "random sayings."

One example is the "casting pearls before swine" statement in Matthew 7. Traditional commentaries spend pages analysing the type of people who may represent the swine in our own situations, and the justification to stop sharing the gospel with them. In context, though, this is a climactic call in the Sermon. To an Israel at great risk of throwing away their Kingdom – the pearl of great price! – Jesus says, "whatever you

do, don't do it!" Don't give what is sacred to the dogs. (Notice the strong echoes of the later encounter with the Gentile woman asking for "the dog-crumbs under the table.")

Israel stands at a fork in the road. The restoration of God's blessing is at hand... if they want it. But there's another road that leads to their destruction. The call is clear... the tension is high... and the remaining chapters of Matthew's gospel bring resolution.

The Series Breakup

I preached this series at St Paul's Stellenbosch Mid-Year Conference. A more complete treatment of Matt 1-4 is available on www.mpc.org.au.

Talk 1 – What's in a Name (Matt 1)

Jesus comes at a key point in Israel's history, as the one who will save "his people" (Israel) from their sins. This talk sets the scene by taking a lightning fast overview of the history of Israel, highlighting the problem that their sin has brought about. In the end the solution to sin was extended to more than just Israelites. Are you keen to share it?

Talk 2 – Testing Time (Matt 3:1-4:11)

Jesus passes the tests that Israel failed. This is the start of something new and better. (Israel was tested to "know what was in their hearts.") Jesus comes to John for Baptism, as the start of the new, returning, humble hearted and obedient Israel. But will anyone join him? Or will he be an Israel of one? (In the end, the offer was opened to more than just Israelites. Are you interested?)

Talk 3 – Hungry Hearts (Matt 5:1-16)

God is waiting for an apology from a humble, hungry hearted Israel. That's why they haven't been blessed. The beatitudes are a call for the new Israel to step forward, be filled, be righteous, and be persecuted. (Jesus will do it himself if nobody wants to join him!) This is good news even today for those with hungry hearts. Are you hungry for righteousness?

Talk 4 - Super-Size Me (Matt 5:17-48)

The documentary "Super Size Me" showed it was possible to be well fed but malnourished if you're eating a McDonalds diet. The problem with the Pharisees is that they're full... full of confidence in their own righteousness. They say murder is bad, but hate is okay, adultery is bad but lust is okay, divorce is bad, unless the paperwork is okay, and promises are binding as long as you read the small print. They are not hungry for righteousness at all. They look like they're keeping the law... but they're not. We need a righteousness better than that. It comes by the Spirit (Gal 5), and not by keeping the law.

Talk 5 - Best Actor Award (Matt 6:1-18)

A hypocrite is simply an actor. The Pharisees were good at acting the part for a human audience. Real righteousness seeks to please God instead. If you're hungry and thirsty for righteousness, you'll be wanting to do better than that.

Talk 6 - Where's Your Treasure? (Matt 6:19-34)

The Pharisees and Scribes of Israel are so busy getting rich that they're missing the blessings God promised. They've got an eye in every direction. The Israelites listening to Jesus are in danger of being misled about what's really important. Are you?

Talk 7 - Don't Give Your Pearls to the Pigs (Matt 7)

It's a terrible thing if you don't recognize a treasure and you throw it away. But that's exactly what Israel is about to do. Their leaders are judgmental, unmerciful and proud – the very opposite of hungry-hearted. That means they're throwing away the Kingdom – they're heading down the wrong road, knocking on the wrong gate; they're the wrong tree, with the wrong fruit. And yet, all they have to do is hear the words of Jesus and humble their hearts, and they'll be filled. Ultimately, they didn't listen. Are you listening?

Talk Outlines

Full text of these talks is available at <http://phil.mpc.org.au> – listed under "Useful Articles"

Talk 1 - What's in a Name? (Matt 1)

1. Nominative Determinism

- does your name influence your career?
- Scott Constable and Nita House
- it does when it's part of God's plan!

2. Naming Jesus

- betrothal betrayal?
- Angelic announcement

- Call him “God Saves” ...
- Call him “God with us” ...

3. So what's the problem?

- A brief history of Israel (v1 and v17)
- Abraham to David (v2-6)
- David to Exile (v7-11)
- Exile to Christ (v11-16)

When you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, 3 then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. (Deut 30:2-3)

4. Sin, Israel, Jesus and You

- What's the real problem?
- What's the real solution?

Talk 2 - Testing Time (Matt 3:1-4:11)

1. 1,2,3 testing

2. Israel Under Test

- A speech by Moses right back at the start...

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these FORTY YEARS, to humble you and to TEST YOU in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands... (Deut 8:2)

“when you and your children RETURN to the LORD your God and obey him WITH ALL YOUR HEART and WITH ALL YOUR SOUL...” (Dt 30)

3. John the Baptist - Turn or Burn

- final challenge for Israel

4. The Baptism of Jesus

- the true Israelite comes back

5. True Israel Under Test

6. The Test... and You

Talk 3 - Hungry Hearts (Matt 5:1-16)

1. The Apology Australia was waiting for

2. The Apology God was waiting for

- a proud Israel
- Isaiah's reminder

3. Enter Jesus...

- the Sermon on the Mount part 1
- humble hearts
- hungry hearts

4. Dangerous Company

- come with me and be persecuted

5. Positions Vacant

- are they going to be salt, or aren't they?

6. The Apology God's waiting for from you...

Talk 4 - Super-Size Me (Matt 5:17-48)

1. Super-Size Me

- well fed but malnourished

2. Background Check

- When all these blessings and curses I've set before you come upon you and you *take them to heart* wherever the Lord disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and *obey him with all your heart and all your soul* according to everything I command you today... THEN, the Lord your God will restore your fortunes... Dt 30:1-3

3. Position Vacant...

- Wholehearted lawkeepers
- Until everything is completed

4. The Problem with Pharisees...

- Murder is bad, but hate is okay
- Adultery is bad, but lust is okay
- Divorce is bad, unless the paperwork is ok
- Promises are binding... if you read the small print
- Revenge is okay, as long as it's in the limits
- Love your friends and hate your enemies

5. Hungry for Righteousness?

- Super size me?
- The ultimate Israelite
- Galatians 5
- Christians and Law

Talk 5 - Best Actor Award

(Matt 6:1 -18)

1. Acting the Part

2. When you Give...

3. When you Pray...

- How you **SHOULDN'T**
- How you **SHOULD**

4. When you Fast...

5. Who are YOU when no-one is looking?

- the things we do and who we are

Talk 6 - Where's Your Treasure?

(Matt 6:19-34)

1. Consumed Consumers

- Ross Gittins on Australia 2003
- Around the Cape, 2004

2. An Israel like the pagans...

- treasure in the wrong place

3. One eyed servants...

- about the Kingdom

4. What are you worried about?

5. Being Different...

Talk 7 - Don't Give Your Pearls to the Pigs - (Matt 7)

1. Treasure un-recognised

2. The problem with Israel...

- The point of the Sermon on the Mount
- Judgmental, unforgiving and proud

- Or hungry for righteousness from the heart?

3. Losing the Kingdom

- don't throw it away (v6)
- (the kingdom is a "pearl of great price" – ch 13)
- no place for judgmental hypocrites

4. So don't be so sure...

- two gates, two trees, two builders

5. The place of grace...

- all you have to do is ask!

6. Truth and love...

- Are you listening?

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