

# **A Sermon On The Sermon On The Mount**

## **by Philip Hunt**

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James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree  
Took great care of his mother, though he was only three.  
James James said to his mother, "Mother," he said, said he,  
"You must never go down to the end of the town, if you don't go down with me."

James James Morrison's mother put on her golden gown  
James James Morrison's mother went to the end of the town  
James James Morrison's mother said to herself, said she,  
"I can go down to the end of the town and be back in time for tea."

King John put up a notice. Lost Stolen or Strayed  
James James Morrison's mother seems to have been mislaid  
Last seen, wandering vaguely, quite of her own accord  
She tried to get down to the end of the town. Forty shillings reward.

James James Morrison's mother hasn't been heard of since.  
King John said he was sorry. So did the Queen and Prince.  
King John, somebody told me, said to a friend he knew,  
"If people go down to the end of the town, well what can anyone do?"

James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree  
Took great care of his mother, though he was only three.  
James James said to his mother, "Mother," he said, said he,  
"You must never go down to the end of the town, without consulting me."

Is it about the child or the mother?

For the child, the end of the town is scary and completely beyond understanding.

For the mother, going to the end of the town might change you forever.

The idea I want to explore for a few minutes is this:

Learning to live cross-culturally in the cultures of earth, develops skills we can use every day to live cross-culturally in God's Kingdom and the Kingdom of the world. Are we trapped in the world's culture? Or are we free to live in the Kingdom of God?

When we travel the world, we tend to carry our worldly culture with us. Like a suitcase.

Commenting on the interior design of Holiday Inn rooms, Clive James reckons that they are

so alike across America that he believes that when he leaves the room he folds it up into a suitcase, puts it on the plane with him, and unfolds it when we arrive.

And then there are Accents. Everybody *else* has one. Once I was on a bus at LA airport and I sat next to a woman from Louisiana. You know, she had the most delightful accent. Full of highs and lows, lots of colour and tone. And as I was listening to her talk, she was obviously listening to me answer and she said what was actually also in my head. She looked me in the eye and said “*Y’all have the most delightful accent.*”

### **Language stories**

I remember an American telling me I was *Travelling light*. But to my ears it sounded like *travelling late*. He was looking at my suitcase, and I was looking at my watch.

And when we lived in Austria and Australian friends visited they would get a good laugh out of advertising signs with the words *Gute fahrt!* In German it just means *Bon voyage*. And there’s a town named *Bad Aussee!* Every Aussie wants their photo taken by the town sign. The German for EMERGENCY EXIT is *Not ausfahrt* which is perfectly OK except that the word *not* in English does not mean *emergency* it means *not*. It took me a little while to avoid reading that sign as *not the exit*.

### **Customs & Ethnomethodologies**

When I was a boy no-one ever sat on the ground? Now everyone under 30 uses the ground as a convenient resting place.

Eye contact. In Austria people avoid making eye contact in street. Is this rude? In Austria it is considered rude to speak to someone before you have been introduced or unless you are in a business relationship (like a shopper with a shopkeeper).

### **Culture stories**

Language is a bridge into culture.

Greetings in English are about health and well-being. *How are you? Fine.*: In Chinese they are about food. *Good afternoon=Have you eaten rice yet?* Austrians say “God bless” instead of “Hello.”

You can get into trouble.

Some American's have heard “G'Day” but haven't worked out it means “Hello.”

The convention of *Looking forward* to the future. History is behind us. PNG tribe look backwards into the future, because the past is visible, the future is invisible. Who is more sensible?

In America light switches work upside-down. Or do ours here?

In Japan, door locks work back-to-front. Or do ours here?

In France, the Hot tap is labelled C. But helpfully, the cold tap is labelled F.

In Russia, the Hot tap is also labelled X, and the cold tap has a lower case r on it. But usually, both taps are cold.

What in the world does this mean?

Culture is not absolute. We think it is, travel teaches us that it isn't.

The Kingdom of God is a different culture too.

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A A Milne, the creator of JJ, Winnie the Pooh and Christopher Robin did not write for children. He wrote for the three year old in each of us. The 3 year old in each of us still reckons that going down to the end of the town is a scary and dangerous thing. But perhaps James James Morrison's mother knew something that most three year olds do not know, or that the 3 year old in us does not want to admit. Namely, that maturity comes when we have the courage to venture outside our comfort zone.

I have learned that when I go to the end of the town you run the risk of being changed. Like James James Morrison's mother my old self, my old three year old self, may very well disappear entirely.

As Jesus said, to enter the Kingdom of God, our hearts need to be changed, our minds transformed. Indeed, we need to be born again.

James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree  
Took great care of his mother, though he was only three.  
James James Morrison's mother, said to her son, "My Dear,  
"The idea of going down to the end of the town, is not something we should fear."

When Jesus preached his message of the Kingdom of God, he took his listeners right to the end of the town. And then a bit further.

Let's hear our Bible Readings....

“And seeing the crowds, he went up a mountain...”

Tradition today puts us on a hill beside the Sea of Galilee. It's not a very big hill, but if Jesus sat near the top where, inevitably, there is a church standing today, Jesus could hardly have been heard by people down by the shore-line.

We're not sure whether Jesus preached to thousands. We don't know whether what we have recorded in Matthew's account is one long speech, or a compilation – a kind of Best of, or Jesus' Greatest Hits.

When Luke records the same ideas he begins, as Matthew does, with four “Blesseds.” But then he adds four “Woes.” “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.” and so on.

Something unfamiliar rears its head here. Something revolutionary. Something worrying. What is it?

Who are blessed?

Those rich in spirit? No, the poor in spirit

The bold? No, the meek

Those who live fulfilled lives without regret? No, mourners

The movers and shakers? No, those who hunger for justice

Those who guarantee and insist on human rights? No, the merciful

The smart of intellect? No, the clean of heart

The conquerors, the winners? No, the peacemakers

The people who are in the right? No, those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice

The successful and famous ones? No, those who are reproached and persecuted.

I'm sorry. There's something very wrong here.

For what we have here is something quite upside-down and wrong-headed. Something revolutionary even.

Jesus is taking us to the end of the town. And then some.

Jesus is taking us far away from our comfort-zones to a place we feel distinctly uncomfortable.

James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree put it this way:

Halfway up the stairs isn't up and isn't down

It isn't in the nursery, it isn't in the town

And all sorts of funny things run through my head

It isn't really anywhere, it's somewhere else instead.

The Sermon on the Mount does two things to us. Or at least it OUGHT to do two things to us.

First, it knocks down and wipes out everything that the world calls greatness. It simply obliterates it.

Second, the Sermon on the Mount erects a new kind of greatness. An authentic greatness. A greatness that comes, not from the world, but from God. A divine greatness.

Jesus is saying that he did not come simply to add a new link to our already existing chain of knowledge. He did not come to establish a new ideal that reinterpreted our value system because suddenly the time was ripe. Actually, it's the other way round entirely.

From the abundance and wealth of heaven, Jesus brings divine reality to earth. As one writer puts it, "He is the living water from the eternal source of the Father's love to the thirsting world."

Jesus comes from "above" to establish a new way of living that it was impossible to establish from below. And this new way of living, when seen only from our natural level, seems subversive and incoherent. It seems wrong.

With the Beatitudes Jesus walks into our lives, like he walked into the temple knocking over our beliefs like he knocked over the tables of the money-changers. Our value systems are shaken from their cages like the doves they were selling in the temple. I'll bet some of us scramble to catch the doves before they fly away. Our worldly values are precious to us. Who is this man who comes into our private temples with a whip and attacks everything we believe?

Who is he? He is God, the Son of God. That's all.

Why is Jesus being so rough with our worldly value system? Why is he so tough on us?

The answer lies in the kind of response that is necessary. You see, in order to take part in this new order, one has to open one's heart. We have to free ourselves from the clutches of the world's rules. We have to get rid of the old, deeply rooted claim the world is sufficient. We have to un-believe that the world is the only reality.

And, naturally, this kind of self-release is most difficult for those of us for whom the world holds the most delights. It is hardest for the powerful and creative. It is really difficult for those who have a large share in the greatness and beauty of earth. It is hardest for the rich, the satisfied, the laughing, the praised and honoured ones. That's why Luke records Jesus as saying "Woe" to such people.

On the other hand, who are blessed? The poor, the mournful, the hungry and the persecuted. They are not blessed BECAUSE they are poor. There is nothing blessed about the condition. Being poor is not nice. But the poor, the mournful, the hungry and the persecuted discover that more than the world exists. Their own need teaches them only too well how inadequate the world is in providing blessedness. And once they learn this lesson, they turn more easily from earth to heaven for something better. And that's a blessing.

But I suspect this doesn't help most of us here at St Pauls. Or indeed most of us in this country. Very few people in this church, or this suburb, or even this country are as poor as half the world existing on no income and without social services to provide a safety net. It is no surprise to me that the good news of the Kingdom of God gets a better hearing in Africa than Australia these days.

For us, what Jesus says and does challenges us to re-evaluate what we believe, what we consider to be real.

Healthy common sense says that wealth is blessing. The fullness of possessions – blessing. Happiness and pleasure and fame – blessing.

And our natural reaction to the Beatitudes is one of distaste. But it is surely much better to face that distaste openly and to try to overcome it. Rather than just accept what Jesus says without thinking about it, and just shovel his words away as if they are just too pious and idealistic, not intended to be taken seriously in our practical, real world.

But of course, pious and idealistic is the last thing they are. These words do come from heaven, but they shake the foundations of earth.

There are two ways in which we may abuse the message of Jesus. The first is simply to reject any questioning of earth's supremacy. Many do this. We are so locked into operating on the world's terms, that we just are unable to hear what Jesus is saying. His words fall on stony ground. They don't even register. We do not have ears to hear.

But the other way we may abuse these words, is to hear and accept the words and then make not the slightest effort to put them to work in our own lives, to realise in our own lives the thoughts behind the words.

On the one hand we hear men and women who use the Beatitudes to justify their own weakness. They have caved into the strong demands of the world and they distort the clear messages of Jesus shamefully.

On the other hand, we hear the falsely pious. These people use the Beatitudes to attack the beauty and wealth of the world as if this is Jesus' main message. Jesus is not proclaiming the world as bad. He is proclaiming captivity to the world as bad.

These wonderful words of Jesus from the mountainside require us to keep a clear eye for the great and beautiful things of life. But at the same time, he confronts us to understand that even the best things of earth are nothing compared with the things that come from heaven.

Jesus is trying to communicate something of heavenly worth. He can only express it by turning all our values inside out. Jesus is trying to shove us into a world of new logic, and when we are willing to accept the push, we are forced to make a genuine effort to understand.

We are only reading part of the Sermon on the Mount this month. What follows are teachings about loving your enemies, doing good to those who persecute you, being merciful as our

Father is merciful.

This is no longer mere justice or even goodness. It is no longer the voice of earthly reason that speaks. Something entirely different is being demanded. Something beyond our human resources, frankly. Positive, heroic acts of goodness, kindness and love that can only be acquired from God.

And here we begin to see what Jesus is driving at. A way of relating to others that expresses a freedom that comes from God. Divine freedom. World leaders talk about freedom. Divine freedom is something different. Freedom is not what law and order demand, but what true liberty gives. And the measure of liberty is love, the love of God.

To this we want to reply, how can we possibly behave like God?

And the question is a good one. How can we possibly behave like God?

Alone, we certainly cannot.

But Jesus Christ does not stand by like an army boot camp sergeant, prodding us to use our own strength to clamber over the obstacles. He invites us to participate in the supernatural life of the children of God. As long as we think from the world's point of view, this is, of course, out of reach. But Jesus looks at us and says, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

He shows us that God not only demands this of us, but that he gives us his own understanding, God gives us his own strength, so that we are able to deliver on his demands.

And this, we must accept on faith. When the mind cries, But this is impossible, faith replies, "It *is* possible." As it says in 1 John 5:4 "Whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith."

And that's a subject for another sermon.

A-men.