

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. **His love endures forever.** Give thanks to the Lord of lords.... to the God of gods. His love endures forever.... Give thanks to the God of heaven. His love endures forever. –Psalm 136:1-3,26

Glorious and majestic are the Lord's deeds, and **his righteousness endures forever.** –Psalm 111:3

You are near, O Lord, and all your commands are true. Long ago **I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever.** –Psalm 119:151,152

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. –Hebrews 13:8

The world and its desires pass away, but **the person who does the will of God lives forever.** --I John 2:17

Diamonds Aren't Forever – Only God Is

In 1938, the Philadelphia advertising agency N.W. Ayer was hired by the De Beers mining company in South Africa to find a way to increase North American diamond sales. During the Great Depression, those sales had slowed to a trickle. At the same time, global diamond mining and production had steadily grown, resulting in an abundance of gems on the market which drove down the price everywhere. The Ayer agency studied the problem and decided on an ad campaign which would prop up the price by perpetuating the “myth” that diamonds were exceedingly rare. It also would promote the idea that diamonds were the ultimate expression of the value felt toward a potential wife, and that their indestructibility would suggest the long-term fidelity of a couple's marriage commitment.

Despite the economic strain of World War II, the Ayer campaign succeeded in slowly increasing the popularity of diamond engagement rings. Soon after the GIs returned to the US at the end of the war – many looking to marry their sweethearts who had waited for them -- a woman named Mary Frances Gerety at the Ayer agency in 1947 created **an ad for De Beers bearing the simple slogan, “A Diamond is Forever.”** The ad swept the nation, and in a very short time, the diamond engagement ring became a must-have cultural standard. Prior to the De Beers campaign, it is said that only 10% of engagements or marriages included diamond jewelry. The slogan still is used in jewelry ads today. **It is certainly understandable that people in the early- and mid-20th century would be drawn to something that promised consistency and durability.** In the span of only thirty-five years, the world had experienced two global wars and an economic depression which impoverished entire nations and left nearly everything in a state of disarray and uncertainty.

The Unsettled World Jesus Entered Bible scholars use similar terms to describe the world into which Jesus arrived in around 5 BC. That world too had been through a succession of wars between global powers which left displacement and poverty in their wake. In his book *The Sermon on the Mount*, Clarence Jordan writes of it as a time of spiritual vacuum, with **quite a bit of religion but little spiritual transformation.** The Hebrew people living under the oppression of Roman military occupiers were subjected to slavery, racism, injustice, and pronounced economic inequality. Nearly all of them were frustrated, resentful, fearful of what would come next, and hoping for some sort of miraculous deliverance. Factions of the Jews organized to attempt different responses to the occupiers. The Zealots armed themselves and trained for violent resistance. The wealthy, educated Sadducees tried compromising, bargaining, and collaborating with the Romans. The Pharisees advocated for ever-stricter adherence to their latest additions to Moses' Law, bargaining with God rather than the Romans that their righteousness would require God to facilitate their political freedom. The Essenes chose to withdraw to remote desert areas to avoid and simply wait out the Roman occupiers.

Jesus' Preparations At around age 30, Jesus sensed that the time had come for him to proclaim to his frustrated fellow Hebrews the certainty of God's “forever Truth” that would open the way to “forever Life” in his presence. In fulfillment of the Old Covenant Law and prophets, Jesus presented himself to his cousin John for baptism in the Jordan River (Matt. 3, Mark 1, Luke 3) when John was there calling Israel to repentance. He then was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he fasted for 40 days, then was tempted (unsuccessfully) by the devil to abandon his redemptive mission in exchange for physical, spiritual, and political power (Matt. 4, Mark 1, Luke 4). Soon thereafter, Jesus began living at Capernaum where he spoke about the nearness of the kingdom of heaven and **echoed John's call to repentance**, to turn away from dependence upon human power to seek God's power instead. He invited people to become his disciples, and he moved around Galilee performing miraculous healings. His reputation quickly spread, and big crowds from all over the region began gathering to hear his message and seek healing. In Matthew's account, Jesus went to a mountainside to teach them – perhaps for visibility, or better acoustics, or for a symbolic reason. Some Bible scholars think Matthew was making a comparison for his Jewish readers between Moses receiving the Old Covenant on Mount Sinai while rescuing Israel from Egyptian captivity, and Jesus giving the New Covenant from a high place near Capernaum while saving humanity from sin's bondage.

The Reporters and Their Report Matthew (also called Levi -- Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27) was a Hebrew “deputy” tax collector working for the Roman official in charge of revenue collection in the Capernaum region. Such deputies

were seen as collaborators and weren't appreciated by other Jews. He records in Matthew 9:9-13 that Jesus called him out of that despised role to be a disciple, and he responded immediately. The detail with which Matthew wrote chapters 5-7 in his Gospel suggests that he must have been present when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, if indeed it was given all at once at a high elevation in Galilee in the first year of his public ministry. Many Bible historians think that even if Matthew was not yet a disciple and was not present "on the mount," he spent so much time listening to Jesus for the next three years that he knew the Lord's message by heart and faithfully reconstructed it in writing his Gospel thirty years later. Scholars also believe that, much like traveling evangelists nowadays, **Jesus likely gave a similar message nearly everywhere he went.** Matthew's overall goal was to convey Jesus' most important teachings in a form that would connect with a primarily Jewish audience in order to show them conclusively that he was the promised Messiah.

Luke's Gospel, written a few years later than Matthew's, records much of the same "on the mount" teaching (6:17ff) but suggests it was delivered at "a level place" after Jesus came down from a mountainside prayer meeting with the disciples. We know that Luke was not present for these events – he only appears in scripture much later (Acts 16:6ff) – but was working from Mark's and Matthew's Gospels and interviews with other original disciples.

The Audience Both Matthew and Luke wrote that a large crowd of people from all over the region was present when Jesus gave this message. Most of them would have been people much like us – community citizens, laborers, farmers, craftsmen, fishermen, parents, and kids. Most of them would have been **weary of living under Roman oppression and were longing for something better.** They probably wondered if this new teacher had a better answer than that offered by the Zealots, Sadducees, Pharisees, or Essenes. Some wanted to hear his message of hope, many wanted healing for physical ailments, and others may have been there just for the spectacle of it all. There was a substantial synagogue at Capernaum, so it is reasonable to assume that Jewish religious officials also were in the crowd, perhaps hoping for an invigorating debate over points of the Law.

The Sermon The American theologian Harvey Cox has written that the Sermon on the Mount is probably "the most influential moral and religious discourse in human history." It is so because of the timeless Truth it expresses, spiritual principles which were essential to godly human life at the time of Abraham's covenant with God 4000 years ago and which remain just as essential today.

Charles Moore, the editor of *Following the Call*, divides the Sermon into three sections: 1) the nature of God's kingdom and the character of its citizens; 2) the countercultural community they form; and 3) the new possibility for allowing God to transform us to live by his values rather than those of the dominant culture around us. Moore writes that the Sermon is so effective partly because Jesus illustrates spiritual principles using things ordinary people deal with in everyday life. He calls Jesus' teaching "proverbial," incorporating both eternal Truth and simple common sense. He also points out that the Sermon's call to unresisting discipleship exposes our human tendency to dilute Jesus' teaching with our own logic, convenience, and rationalizations, to our own spiritual detriment and harm.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer laments that religious teachers both before and after Jesus have frequently seemed to try to complicate God's wishes with multiple layers of manmade dogma and human-decided, human-controlled conditions. Bonhoeffer held that the Sermon on the Mount was given **to explain how Jesus simply calls each of us to be his disciple, following his Spirit rather than humans' rules.** In that life, we must never ignore the seriousness of his call, but rather must fully consent to and embrace his call in order to receive the liberty and fellowship with God it makes possible. **Only those who try to resist Christ's call to discipleship find it unspeakably difficult.** To that point, Walter Kaufmann once wrote rather tongue-in-cheek that "Christianity is the ever-renewed effort to get around the message of the Sermon on the Mount without repudiating Jesus."

The Upside-Down Kingdom Anabaptist theologian Donald Kraybill in the late '70s wrote a book titled *The Upside-Down Kingdom* in which he addresses the Sermon on the Mount in both general overview and specific detail regarding Jesus' radical call to discipleship. In the idolatry, violence, poverty, and injustice of his time on earth, **Jesus lived as an example of the way God intends his children to confront and respond to those challenges.** In every case, Jesus responded with eternal qualities of sacrificial love, chosen suffering, undeserved mercy, and unwavering Truth when people expected an opposite, earthly response. He was able to do that because **he was the very embodiment of the spiritual principles and character described in the Sermon.** We in 21st century life are confronted by the very same kinds of spiritual challenges on a regular basis. Only if we are indwelt by that One who embodies those principles and that character will we be able to respond in his Spirit as he did. Let's all use the next several weeks to immerse ourselves in his character and principles as described in Matthew 5-7. It'll be worth it!

--Ron Ferguson, 21 January 2024

Queries for Worship-Sharing and Reflection

- 1) Do you think the Sermon on the Mount should be taken literally, metaphorically, or both? How should we decide?
- 2) What aspects of living for Christ in our culture feel to you like they're part of an "upside-down Kingdom"? Why?
- 3) Do you agree that the Sermon on the Mount is one of the best templates for devoted discipleship? Why, or not?
- 4) Why do some make discipleship harder than it needs to be? Why do others dilute it to no-cost personal liking?