

Reactions to the Sermon on the Mount

David Flatt

The Sermon on the Mount is the defining sermon of Jesus. The sermon marked a major shift in how the public viewed Jesus: “And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29).

Since then, generations have analyzed Jesus and His sermon. Surprisingly, people have reacted in similar ways over time. The remainder of the article contains various people’s reactions to Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. As you read them, see if you recognize any recurring themes.

1. Frederick Nietzsche (1844-1900). Nietzsche was a German philosopher. He was known for his contributions to post-modernism. He believed that truth was independently determined by one’s perspective. Therefore, he viewed Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount with contempt. He considered Christian morality as “the most malignant form of falsehood.”

2. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950). Shaw was a famous English playwright. In 1925, he received the Nobel Peace Prize in Literature. He criticized the Sermon on the Mount as being an “impractical outburst of sentimentality” but also acknowledged some virtue. Before WWII, he said the sermon was “a very moving exhortation, and it gives you one first-rate tip, which is to do good to those who despitefully use you and persecute you.”

3. John Herman Randal Jr. (1899-1980). Randal was the son of a Baptist minister. As an adult, he rejected Christianity. He became a Humanist and was a co-signer of the Humanist Manifesto. Randal appreciated Jesus as a moral philosopher, but could not accept Jesus’ authority over human morality. He felt Jesus’ teaching was nothing more than a reflection of His age and had no bearing on modern society.

4. Freshmen English class at Texas A&M (1987). An English professor assigned her class to read the Sermon on the Mount and write their reaction. Most of the students came from homes the professor described as “conservative” and “Christian.” She was stunned by the negative reaction of her students.

“The stuff the churches preach is extremely strict and allows for almost no fun without thinking it is a sin or not.”

“I did not like the essay ‘Sermon the Mount.’ It was hard to read and made me feel like I had to be perfect and no one is.”

“The things asked in this sermon are absurd. To look at a woman is adultery? That is the most extreme, stupid, un-human statement that I have ever heard.”

“In this essay the author explains the doctrines of an era in the past which cannot be brought into the future in the same context. This essay now cannot be taken the same way it was written. It can be used as a guideline for good manners.”

“This is a direct quote from the Bible. Why is it in the Literature Book? It simply states what I’ve studied in Sunday School & Confirmation over the past 18 years. I see no point in this. College is a time to reassess your life.”

“Many believe that this sermon should be taken literally. I believe, on the other hand, that, because the scriptures have been interpreted from so many different languages, we should use them as a guide—not law. Another fallback is that certain beattitudes are irrelevant to current life-styles. Loving your enemies, for instance, is obviously not observed by the majority today.”

5. Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007). Vonnegut was a famous American author. He served in WWII. As a POW, he survived the Allied firebombing of Dresden, Germany. Like his parents, Vonnegut was a Humanist. Surprisingly, he recognized the radical nature of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. He found it interesting how politicians would call for the Ten Commandments to be displayed in public spaces; yet, those same politicians never called for the public display of the Beatitudes.

At the end of his life, Vonnegut wrote, “For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that’s Moses, not Jesus. I haven’t heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. ‘Blessed are the merciful’ in a courtroom? ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ in the Pentagon? Give me a break!”

What’s the Point?

This collection of reactions to Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount was made over several generations by older and younger people. Some impressions were given by people who lived before the invention of the automobile. Others lived in the age of MTV and the Internet. Yet, there are recurring themes in these reactions.

First, like those who first heard this sermon, everyone recognized the authority of Jesus. He commands our moral and ethical behavior. This is what typically makes us uncomfortable.

Second, most view Jesus as a mere mortal. Just a man. Just another philosopher. Treating Jesus as only a human gives justification to dismiss His message. The authority of Jesus’ teaching comes from His paternity. Jesus was the Son of God. This was proven by His miracles and His resurrection from the dead.

Third, most of these reactions acknowledge the radical and challenging nature of Jesus’ message and that most people do not live by the sermon. But, these reactions beg a question:

what is my reaction to the Sermon on the Mount? Do I acknowledge the authority of Jesus? Do I realize this sermon's profound challenge to change how I think and love? If I do, am I willing to submit to His rule and accept His challenge to change?

Conclusion

Sometimes those who reject Jesus can see the radical nature of Jesus and His message better than those who seek to obey Him. Sometimes believers attempt to remake Jesus in their image. This is foolish.

Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount elicit one of two reactions. 1.) I recognize Jesus' authority to command my life and I reject Him. 2.) I recognize Jesus' authority to command my life and I obey Him. There is no third option: no middle ground. How will you react?