

# Sermon On The Mount

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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The Sermon on the Mount is a collection of the teachings of Jesus which Matthew records in Chapters 5 through 7. The sermon ends with a teaching from Jesus about a difference between those who are wise and those who are foolish:

*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell--and great was its fall!*  
Matthew 7:24-27 (NRSV)

What is the crucial difference between the one who is wise and the one who is foolish?

It has nothing to do with what we usually associate with wisdom: knowledge, many years of experience, perspective, intelligence, insight, etc.

Nor does it have to do with **HEARING** what Jesus has said. Both cases begin - "Everyone who hears these words of mine ..."

The difference between being either wise or foolish is in **ACTING** or **NOT** acting.

It is not enough for us to hear these words of Jesus; to study them; to be inspired by them; to have hopes / aspirations / dreams based on them. We must **ACT** on them; practice them; live them in our everyday lives.

Let's quickly review what "these words of mine" are. Just what is it that Jesus has been saying in the Sermon on the Mount?

- The Beatitudes: Blessed are those ... who are poor in spirit ... who mourn ... who are meek ... who hunger and thirst for righteousness ... who are merciful ... who are peacemakers ... who are persecuted for Jesus' sake. (5:1-12)
- Live so that you are salt of the earth; light of the world. (5:13-16)
- Don't even think that freedom lets you off the hook of responsibility for knowing and doing in detail what God desires of you. (5:17-20)
- It's not just your actions that matter. Your inner thoughts, feelings, and impulses must also align themselves with what please God. (5:21-22)
- Do everything you can to be reconciled with those you have offended. (5:23-26)
- Don't even think about betraying the promises you have made to your wife or husband. (5:27-30)
- Let your own integrity be sufficient for your, "Yes," to be a "Yes," and your, "No," to be a "No." (5:31-37)
- Publicly expose unjust abuse (5:38-41) (*See Footnote below.*)
- When it comes to money, treat everyone like your closest friends and family. (5:42)
- Love your enemies. (5:43-48)

- Give alms, but don't make a show of it. (6:1-4)
- Pray, but don't make a show of it. (6:5-15)
- Grieve about sin and cleanse yourself for a new beginning, but don't make a show of it. (6:16-18)
- Value what really lasts, and don't waste your life on what passes away. (6:19-21)
- Make sure your inner light is healthy - and let it shine! (6:22-23)
- Don't get distracted or divided by conflicting loyalties and desires. Stay focused and loyal to God and what is pleasing to God. (6:24)
- Don't fret, fuss, worry, or be anxious about things you have no control over. Stay focused and loyal to God and what is pleasing to God and your needs will be taken of. (6:25-34)
- Don't be judgmental of others, but work first on your own flaws. (7:1-5)
- Give everything the honour proper to it. (7:6)
- Don't be helpless or hapless. You have needs; get out there; ask, search, knock on doors. (7:7-11)
- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. (7:12)
- Don't follow the crowd - you'll lose your way. Follow my way - you'll find real life. (7:13-14)
- Don't be stupid or naive about flashy promises of quick riches and painless fixes. Shrewdly observe actual results and then make your choices. (7:15-20)
- And especially don't be stupid or naive about those who do flashy things in my name. I don't know them. Instead, shrewdly discern what is actually pleasing to God, and then make your choices. (7:21-23)

Whew! Those are some words.

And Jesus says that if we act on them - practice them, every moment of every day - then our life will be like a house built on a solid foundation. A foundation so strong that not even the worst circumstances will destroy us - batter us, yes; but not flatten us.

It seems to me that there is indeed much wisdom in Jesus' words.

And over the years I have learned that - as I said to the children this morning - you can't learn to dance or play baseball just by hearing someone tell you about it; you have to PRACTICE. So it is with being a follower of Jesus. Listening to someone tell us about it isn't enough. We have to practice actually **DOING** it. Every moment of every day.

I am so grateful that we have these teachings of Jesus recorded in the Bible for us, so that we do get to hear his words. And I'm also grateful that we have this group of people - this church - who are committed to practicing what we hear.

Because practicing following these words of Jesus is not always easy. We forget, make mistakes, get distracted. Sometimes we are uncertain, confused, or afraid. Sometimes we're just plain weak, lazy, and cowardly. But that is all part of what "practicing" means. "Practicing" means "not perfect." So we help one another in our weakness and failures. We encourage, correct, support, and learn and grow together.

I wonder what our neighbours see in us; say about us? What's the gossip about us? What does Jesus think about us? I pray that they will see in us those who have heard these words of Jesus and are acting on them.

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**Footnote.** Matthew 5:38-41 has a tragic history of poor translations and even worse interpretations.

*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.*

This passage is **NOT** recommending becoming a doormat; nor does it tolerate domestic violence.

First of all, the translation, "Do not resist an evildoer" fails to convey the full meaning of the underlying Greek. It would be better translated as, "Do not **violently** resist an evildoer." Thus the teaching is primarily about non-violence. It is not about acquiescing to evil.

Jesus then goes on to offer three quick examples of how to non-violently resist an evildoer - in fact, of how to publicly shame and mock an evildoer.

These passages are tragically mis-interpreted because we have forgotten the original society in which Jesus gave these teachings. When Jesus says, "If anyone ..." he and his listeners knew instantly and exactly who that "anyone" was. The behaviours Jesus describes - slapping the right cheek; suing; forcing to go a mile - were not the kind of things "anyone" could do. They were the kind of things only a privileged few could do - and did - to the crowds who were listening to Jesus.

- **Slapping the right cheek.** This was done by Masters to their servants and slaves. It was always done by hitting with the back of the right hand across the right cheek. The blow was about asserting status and power over the other. This is not about random violence or fighting among friends or enemies. It is about rank, privilege and power. And to preserve one's honour - one's public standing - it is crucial everything must be done according to the socially accepted protocols. The slave must obediently stand facing you without external coercion. You must strike only the right cheek; and only with the back of the right hand. Any variation on this would demonstrate that you were not in control; would be a public loss of face. Now imagine your overlord has just slapped you on your right cheek, and without saying a word you silently turn your head to expose your left cheek. It appears that you are becoming doubly subservient; doubly accepting your master's authority over you. But you are actually rendering your master powerless! Turning your head hides your right cheek and presents your left cheek. But the angle of your head will be such that the master can see, but cannot strike your left cheek *with the back of his right hand*. Try this with a friend and you'll see what happens. Doing this would publicly expose the master to shame and ridicule. You would appear to be meek and servile; obediently waiting for a second blow. But the Master would be totally helpless. His only options would be to hit you with the *palm* of his right hand, or use his left hand, or walk away. All three would cause him to lose face.
- **Sue you.** Peasants did not sue one another. Again this is about the privileged abusing the poor. Since peasants quite literally only owned the clothes on their backs, being sued for your coat was being sued for the only thing you owned - except for your underwear! Which is what a "cloak" means. Being seen in your underwear is shameful for you. So why not publicly expose the shame which allows someone with wealth and privilege to take away the only thing a poor person owns by going naked! Give him your underwear. Let him explain why you are naked.

- **Forced to go a mile.** Soldiers were allowed to conscript civilians to carry their packs, but only for a mile. However, this was no minor inconvenience for anyone who worked and fed their family day by day. Walking a mile with a heavy pack and then back again would mean missing that day's labour, and therefore that day's food for the family. Offering to go a second mile publicly exposes the unjust hardship of being forced to go even one mile, but does so in a way that seems to cooperate while at the same time brings shame and ridicule on the ones doing the forcing.