

## 12-Feb-2017 Sermon The New King

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For those of you who heard a sermon by me a few weeks ago, which talked about the good news about the coming of the king, with an extended narration of the life of Virginia O’Hanlon, of the “Yes, Virginia, there *is* a Santa Claus” fame: this is essentially the same sermon, only from the point of the view of the king.

Once upon a time there was a king, a very powerful king, and before he was a king he had been a champion chess player, a grandmaster. As a king, however, he tormented his people. He had his favorites, of course, and they did very well, but most of the people were very poor; they lived in terror; and in the secret times of the night, if you had been in the room and if you listened very carefully, you might hear a person whisper to their husband or to their wife that they were afraid this king would kill everyone. He had that kind of disposition.

This king, however, believed himself to be a benefactor for his people, thinking that he provided them with wealth, with safety, and with liberty. And to prove this, to show to his people that he was not a despot but was willing, under the right circumstances, to give his crown to someone else, he announced a chess match between himself and any other person, and if the other person won, he or she would be the new monarch. So eventually the match was held, and for the first few hours it appeared that the king would be victorious, which just about everyone predicted would be the case. But then the challenger made a bold, unexpected move and then, a few moves later, announced, “Checkmate!” and immediately got up from the table and went out to make his coronation speech. But the old king stayed in place, either out of arrogance or just shock, and many in the room had no idea what would happen next. Was the match over? Would he really give up his crown?

But meanwhile, the new king was giving his speech. And he said, “These will be good times for us. We will mine the gold in our hills and sell it and have food to eat. We will dance our dances: the polonaise, the mazurka and the pavane. And our young people will go abroad and marry and bring back their husbands and their wives and in the evening they’ll regale us with tales of exotic lands.”

And the people look at one another, and the people look at him, and they say, “Are you nuts? First of all, there is no gold in our hills. And second, the polonaise, the mazurka and the pavane are not our dances. And look around—because of a genetic abnormality our young people are particularly stricken with acne, and when they’ve gone abroad to see exotic lands and to find wives and husbands they are ridiculed because of their looks, and they return humiliated and lonely. These ideas of yours—they don’t fit us. We’re *poor* people.”

And it's the same thing when we come to the Sermon on the Mount. Who is Jesus kidding? Either we pick and choose which of the commands we think we can obey, or we desperately hope that Jesus grades on a curve, or we just give up entirely. It just doesn't seem to fit us.

How the Sermon on the Mount does fit us is a mystery. And, unfortunately, modern life is too much void of mystery; so we really don't understand mystery. We think that mystery means distance. The theory of relativity *is* a mystery to me, and it is a distant mystery to me. Not only an intellectual mystery, it's an *emotional* mystery as well. But the Sermon on the Mount, and how it fits us, is a *close* mystery, an intimate mystery, a mystery that lives *inside* us. And the more we get to know the Sermon on the Mount, the more mysterious it becomes.

So the new king answers the people. He says, "I will teach you how to mine the gold. And I will teach you the polonaise, the mazurka and the pavane, because I am the Lord of the dance. And I will shine light upon the faces of your young people to cure their acne, and on you to cure your scars. But you are right when you say that you are poor people." And then he lays the zinger on us. "But blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It's a sweet saying but Jesus doesn't mean it sweetly. A mother is sweet, but when Jesus says it, it's more like a woman who's just given birth, exhausted and sweaty. It's more like a forest fire fighter in the middle of the flames. It's more like a high school student after a basketball game, tired and happy but weary. We hear it as encouragement but he speaks it as labor. He says it to us because He did it for us.

Pay special attention to the verb there: blessed *are* the poor in spirit. For ours *is* the kingdom of heaven. We are blessed, today, for the kingdom *is* the new person in Jesus Christ. The kingdom is the new person in Jesus Christ. And Jesus Himself is the kingdom of the new humanity (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II:2, p. 688). And it's His work that makes the Ten Commandments so different from the Sermon on the Mount. The Ten Commandments are the promise of God while the Sermon on the Mount is the fulfillment of God. The Ten Commandments say how people *should* stand before God, while the Sermon on the Mount says how people *do* stand before God, placed there by God's own deed. And that is *good news*.

The kingdom of heaven *seems* obscure—"Is it in the future? Is it only in our hearts? Is it only after death?"—but that's only because the old king is still at the chessboard. He's been checkmated but he's too stubborn or too arrogant to understand it or to admit defeat. And there are a whole lot of people in the room who *are* confused, but who still show him allegiance. But again, it's the work of Jesus that illuminates the dim landscape. Jesus says that those who weep *shall be* comforted; that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness *shall be* filled. That we *are* the light of the world. It's a matter of certainty. Of objective certainty. A present, scientific, reality.

So after he finishes his speech he goes to the Supreme Court building. Now it just so happens that the judicial system in this kingdom is very similar to our own, and on this day the Supreme Court is hearing a case pertaining to the eleventh amendment. And the new king walks in and says, "I

understand that this case has to do with the eleventh amendment. But I say to you, the eleventh amendment needs to undergo some radical re-interpretation.” *But I say to you*. Can you imagine if a lawyer were to use that language in arguing before the Supreme Court. “Your honors, I know the amendment that this case pertains to. *But I say to you*, that amendment needs to be radically re-interpreted.” Can’t you just hear the conversation in the car on the way home? “Hey, way to go, Fred, on how you ‘argued’ that case back there. You not only lost the case; you lost your job—you’re fired by the way—and it’s likely that we’ve all lost our jobs because now our firm is the laughingstock of the city. Who gave you the authority to argue the case like that? Who authorized you to say, *But I say to you?*”

And now we’re at the second half of Matthew chapter 5. Six times in this chapter Jesus takes the Torah, the Jewish law, the core of Jewish theology, the core of the Jewish tradition, the core of Jewish life, and radically turns it, based entirely on “*But I say to you.*” And He is able to say it because for the first time, the Commander and the command are one. Righteousness is not an idea, not an ideal—not an ideal in justice—but a person and a deed and an action.

Let’s face it: we are *not* the people who have fulfilled the Sermon on the Mount. I’m not. But as I said, we *are* the new humanity, a new reality introduced not by us, but for us. Our very different lives, our very murky lives, are illuminated by Jesus, and our part is to see our lives in this new light. We say, “Jesus, when we come to the Sermon on the Mount we feel like hypocrites,” and He nods and says, “that’s because you *are* hypocrites. But by the word I speak to you, you hypocrites are sincere. You who are prisoners of lust, of worry, of anger—you are free.” That’s the new light of the new king. He says it to us because He did it for us.

About 20 years ago I got divorced. And every time I come to this passage in the Gospel I was reminded of the poverty of my obedience; I am reminded of how poorly I fit this passage; and therefore I’m reminded of the mystery of Christ’s demands in the Sermon on the Mount. But I’m learning that it’s a close mystery, not a distant mystery, that’s it’s a personal mystery and not a legal mystery, that it’s a mystery of love and not a mystery of disobedience. The command and the Commander are finally one, and He lives in me.

Now the demands of the Sermon on the Mount are just that—demands. They are severe because the God we serve is so holy. They are severe because the God we serve is so holy. And we don’t have the luxury of choosing the demands that we’re going to get serious about. It’s not like we can say, “‘Don’t break your oath’—yeah, I can do that one, but ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you....’ No thanks. I mean, who does that, right? Love your enemies? C’mon, get real.”

Last week Dale was talking about the demand of God to show hospitality to strangers and foreigners. It’s not a thing we can say, “Oh.... I don’t think so. I’ll let someone else do that, maybe someone with a real gift for it. Not today. But I’ll be ready to help soon, I’m sure.” Think of the Magi at the birth of Jesus—they were not Jews. They were Zoroastrians. They worshipped in a fire temple. They were from Media, from Persia, and the Persians were the enemies of the

Romans. It's not too much of a stretch to think of the Magi as potential terrorists in the eyes of the Romans. And here they were, worshipping Jesus and eating Mary's tater tot casserole. Jesus will not be denied: "welcome the strangers and welcome the foreigners," He says.

We go to the Sermon on the Mount thinking we're tired of arguing about theology and it's time to get some instruction on how to live! But the Bible is not an answer book on how to live—if you want answers, go to Dr. Phil; I guarantee you'll like his answers a lot more. But this is not Dr. Phil politely offering advice while sipping tea in your living room! This is Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man! He's like a freight train bearing down on you. He's like a forest fire that makes its own weather and pushes its own agenda. He's like a million woman march on Washington that says, "We have our demands and we will not be denied." The demands of the Sermon on the Mount *are* demands, despite our poverty, despite our hypocrisy, despite the fact that they seem not to fit us. And we may dare to live in the strength of it.

On Sinai God told the people to stay away, to stay at the foot at the mountain, that only Moses could come and hear of the promises to the people. But at the Mount Jesus says, "Come up; there's room for everyone." That's good news. We have found the king. And through it all He tells the people that the promise of Sinai has now been fulfilled; and through it all He says that the Law will not in the least part disappear but that the righteous demands of God will continue forever and to His own glory; and through it all He proclaims, "But I say to you..." and thereby proclaims Himself to be the authority over the Law; and through it all He declares, through grime and sweat and triumph and labor, "Blessed *are* the poor in spirit—you, and you, and you--for yours *is* the kingdom of heaven." The mystery of the Sermon on the Mount is inside us. He says it *to* us because He did it *for* us.