

Are We Taking Jesus Seriously?

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[0 : 0 0] Today we are continuing our study in the Gospel of Matthew and I'd like us to turn back together to the passage that Callum read for us. We've come to the final part of the Sermon on the Mount and we can read again the very last two verses of chapter seven.

When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowd were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority and not as their scribes.

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most important passages in the Bible. In this sermon, Jesus is describing what our lives should be like as his disciples.

Always remember, this sermon is not telling us how to become a Christian. It's telling us how to live as Christians. And whether you're a Christian or not, it's very important to know that, to know how Jesus wants us to live.

The sermon gives amazing teaching. It talks about our character, our obedience, our motivation, our priorities, our reactions, our perspective.

[1 : 0 9] In all of these areas and in many more, Jesus is teaching us how we are to live as his disciples. And you can sum the whole message up with one word.

The great lesson of the Sermon on the Mount is that as Christians, we are to be different. So when the world around us prioritizes strength, power and influence, we are to prioritize being meek, pure and merciful.

When the world around us reacts badly to wrongdoing and retaliates, we are to turn the other cheek. When the world around us hammers people who make mistakes, we are to never judge others.

And when the world around us chases after money, possessions and status, we are to trust our Father in heaven and seek His kingdom first.

In all of these ways and more, people around us should be able to look at us as Christians and say, Wow, they are different.

[2 : 2 0] Not in a weird way, in a really good way. And it all makes perfect sense because to become a Christian, you have to repent and believe in Jesus.

And to repent simply means to turn around and to follow Jesus. And the practical outworking of that repentance is that we are to be different.

So basically it means that if the world is going this way, disciples have repented and are going in a new direction. And that differentness is to work itself out in every part of our lives.

From the secret place of our inner thoughts and our private activities to the outward visible actions of our lives as disciples, we are to be different.

Here in the final section of the sermon, Jesus concludes by giving us three warnings that challenge us to think about everything that he's been saying in this sermon.

[3 : 3 0] He gives us a warning about false teaching. He gives us a warning about false confidence. And he gives us a warning about false foundations.

In each of these, we are being confronted by one of the most important questions we could ever ask. And that question is, are we taking Jesus seriously?

I'd like us to look at these three warnings together today. But before we do, I'd like to read the following paragraph. I have discovered the Christian religion.

This religion is amazing. It's utterly reliable and it works for anyone. But I've also discovered that it's the only religion that actually works. It's the only religion that can rescue us from the threat we face.

Therefore, it is essential that it's kept pure. Any changes to its substance will make it ineffective. It's essential that this religion is shared with as many people as possible.

[4 : 36] Everyone desperately needs this religion in the face of so much fear, suffering and death. The Christian religion gives us hope that nothing else can give us.

Whether you're a Christian or not, what do you think of that paragraph? Does it sound a wee bit overstated?

Does it seem a wee bit heavy? Maybe it's a wee bit offensive. Maybe it's a bit over the top. Many people, including I think even people who would identify themselves as Christians, would be a bit hesitant or uncomfortable about a paragraph like that.

And even if we fully agree with it, we would maybe be a little bit cautious about seeing it. Because we know that a lot of people would not like it at all.

Now I'm going to read the paragraph again. But this time I am going to replace the words Christian and religion with the words COVID-19 and vaccine.

[5 : 53] I have discovered the COVID-19 vaccine. This vaccine is amazing, it is utterly reliable and it works for anyone. But I've also discovered that it's the only vaccine that actually works. It's the only vaccine that can rescue us from the threat we face.

Therefore it's essential that it's kept pure. Any changes to its substance will make it ineffective. It is essential that this vaccine is shared with as many people as possible. Everyone desperately needs this vaccine in the face of so much fear, suffering and death.

The COVID-19 vaccine gives us hope that nothing else can give us. What do you think of the paragraph now?

Is it an offensive paragraph? Is it over the top? Is it awkward? No, it's thrilling. And it's telling us something that everyone longs to hear.

So why is there such a difference? I think it's because very often we don't really take Jesus that seriously.

[7 : 06] And that's what this passage is getting us to think about. As we said, Jesus gives us three warnings and I'd like us just to very briefly look at each of these in turn.

First of all, he gives a warning about false teaching in verse 15. He says, Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

As you maybe know, a prophet functioned as God's messenger. In the Bible, their role was very important. God used prophets to deliver his message to the people.

In the Old Testament, we see God using many different people, men and women, to serve as his prophets. But here, Jesus is warning that not every prophet is genuine.

And there are people who claim to teach God's truth when in fact their message is false. Jesus therefore warns us about false prophets and about their false teaching.

[8 : 12] And that raises the whole question of whether truth is important. Jesus is forcing us to ask the question, do we take the truth seriously?

And that is an incredibly relevant question to ask our culture today, because we live in an era where there's a very mixed view as to whether truth is serious or not.

So for example, in medicine, truth matters. If I'm going to take a medical test, it's incredibly important that that test is going to tell me the truth. Same for a vaccine or a prescription, even something as simple as the label on a box.

It's crucial that that information is true in the medical world. In criminal justice, it's the same, truth matters. The whole point of a criminal justice system is to find the truth and to make a judgment based on what really happened.

And in relationships, truth matters, in friendship, in marriage, in parenting, it matters that I am who I say I am, and a relationship based on lies is a horrible thought.

[9 : 26] In all these areas, truth matters, but in other areas today, it's not the same. So in the media, does truth matter?

In politics, does truth matter? And in religion, does truth really matter?

A lot of people today would say, doesn't really matter that much. Jesus is telling us that in religion, truth does matter.

And for that reason, false religious teaching is incredibly dangerous. That's why he uses the image of ravenous wolves among sheep. And that makes perfect sense.

To have false teaching about a vaccine is potentially lethal. Jesus is telling us that to have false teaching about religion is lethal too.

[10 : 24] Now, for a lot of people to say that would seem a bit over the top. People don't tend to think that religious truth, especially exclusive religious truth, is that important.

And that would be especially true if your religious opinion is that this life is all that there is. How do we know if this matters?

How do we know if we need to be serious about religion? Well, a good way to measure the seriousness of something is to ask the question, what are the consequences if I get this wrong?

So, if I was a journalist and I wrote a newspaper headline that turns out to be wrong, the consequences are probably not that serious. I mean, they could be hurtful to someone, but probably not that serious most of the time.

If I was following a road map that was inaccurate and I ended up taking a wrong turn down a wrong street, it would be a pest, but it's not that big a deal. But if I'm a doctor or a pharmacist and I get a diagnosis or a dosage wrong, the consequences could be awful.

[11 : 43] If I'm walking on a mountain and an inaccurate map leads me towards a cliff edge, the consequences are huge.

And when it comes to my religious beliefs, if I get my opinion about eternity wrong, then the consequences are massive.

So, do we need to take truth seriously in regard to religion? I think the answer is that there is nothing more serious for us to think about.

And if that's the case, the question you have to ask yourself is, who's teaching am I going to listen to?

Second warning that Jesus gives is a warning about false confidence. We see that in verse 21. He says, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father, who is in heaven.

[12 : 57] In the days of the New Testament, there were certain people who stood out as being very religious. These were the kind of people that Jesus spoke about in chapter 6, who stood on street corners when they were going to pray.

They blew a trumpet when they were giving to the poor, and they made absolutely sure that everybody knew if they were fasting. But throughout his ministry, Jesus again and again said that these outwardly religious people were hypocrites, and they were not part of his kingdom.

And for that reason, Jesus gives this very stark warning that people might be outwardly very religious, but ultimately they will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Here, Jesus is warning of the danger of false confidence in our relationship with God. And at the heart of that false confidence is a dependence on ourselves.

Look at what verse 22 says, On that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? And then I'll declare to them, I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

[14 : 18] These people placed their confidence in themselves. They thought that they would impress God with what they had done. But Jesus responds to that by saying that he will declare to them, I never knew you.

And we can fall into that same trap of placing all our confidence in ourselves. So we can place our confidence in our actions, and we can just as easily think that we can say to Jesus, I've done this, I've done that, I've done all this stuff.

But perhaps even more easily, we can place our confidence in our own opinion, and we can tell ourselves that everything will be fine.

And that's a very common mindset in our culture today. I have not met many people who are so materialistic that they believe in absolutely nothing after death.

I know that there are some people who would hold that view, but I don't think that there's as many as people think. Most people tend to believe in something, but everybody seems to just have this huge confidence in their own opinion.

[15 : 36] I saw that, I saw a very clear illustration of that on the news not that long ago, where there was an interview with Billy Connolly, who, as I'm sure you know, after an amazingly successful career, is having to pull back because he has ill health.

And he said in the interview that he wasn't afraid of dying, and he was looking forward to the next chapter in the spiritual realm. And I couldn't help thinking to myself, how does he know what that realm is going to look like?

How does he know he's going to be there? It seemed to me as though he was just staking his whole life on a guess.

And that kind of confidence in our own opinion seems to be all over the place. And the seriousness of all this is brought home to us by the phrase that Jesus uses at the beginning of verse 22.

He says, on that day, that day, the day when we face the reality of eternity, that day is coming, that day is in every single one of our diaries.

[16 : 49] It is inevitable. But what's going to happen? Nothing? Something? Something bad? Something good?

What is going to happen? And if we push Jesus aside, and if we think, well, we don't need to take Jesus seriously, then you have to ask the question, what does give you confidence for that day?

The third warning that Jesus gives us is a warning about false foundations. And that's set before us in the parable of the wise and foolish builder with which Jesus brings the Sermon on the Mount to a conclusion.

Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat on that house. But it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock.

And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house in the sand. And the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house.

[18 : 05] And it fell and great was the fall of it. This is a parable all about listening. And of course, that makes perfect sense. Jesus has just given us crucial teaching in the Sermon, and he ends it with a parable all about listening.

He compares two builders. One builds his house on a rock and he represents the person who hears Jesus's words and who does what he says. The other builds his house on sand.

He represents the person who hears the same words but does not put them into practice. And the result is that when the storm comes, one house stays standing, but the other falls down.

And that image sums up everything that we've been trying to say about taking Jesus seriously. The test as to whether we take Jesus seriously is not whether or not we hear what he says.

The test is whether we act upon what we hear. If we are taking Jesus seriously, then we will build our lives on the foundation that he gives us.

[19 : 23] What he says will be the foundation for our lives. And the key point that this parable is presenting us with is that if we don't build our lives on the foundation of Jesus, then we will build our lives on the foundation of something else.

In other words, if we don't take Jesus seriously, then we will take something else seriously instead. The big question is what?

What are you really serious about? What is foundational in your life? Work, family, politics, social media, sport, your house, fitness?

Whatever it may be, the key question is, the key question is not just whether that foundation will stand. So by that I mean the question is not whether when a storm comes, will your job still be there, or will social media still be there, or will football still be there.

The key question is not whether your foundation will stand. The key question is whether these things will keep you standing.

[20 : 47] Because the house in the parable that Jesus tells is not your job, or the Sermon on the Mount, or whatever that's foundational in your lives.

The house in the parable is you. And if Jesus is not the foundation of your life, you have to ask two questions.

One, what is foundational in your life? And two, will that foundation keep you standing?

So Jesus is warning us about false teaching, false confidence, and false foundations. These are serious warnings. These are things that we must think about.

And in all of these areas we need to ask, are we taking Jesus seriously? But the last question I want to ask is, why is Jesus giving us these warnings?

[21 : 51] All of this can sometimes feel a wee bit heavy. There is a kind of gravity and solemnity about what Jesus is saying. We have to ask, well, why is he being so serious?

Well, maybe it's helpful to ask yourself the question, what are you most serious about? And I think the answer to that question for us all is that the things that we are most serious about are the things that we really, really love.

And that is reminding us that Jesus is not giving us these warnings to be a tyrant or to whip us into shape, or because he likes to tell us what to do. Jesus gives you these warnings because he loves you so, so much.

And the reason he calls us to be serious about him is because first and foremost, Jesus is so utterly serious about you.

In Matthew 7, Jesus is sitting on this mountain giving us this sermon, giving these warnings because he is so serious about you. And the proof of that, the proof of the fact that he is serious about you is demonstrated in where he's come from and where he's going.

[23 : 20] So if you imagine Jesus sitting on that mountain, I want you to think about where he's come from and where he's going. Jesus has come from heaven. Now that is such a simple sentence, but it is such a massive step.

God the Son, who from all eternity has been with God the Father, the one through whom the whole universe was created, the one in whom all wisdom lies, he has become one of us.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has not held on to the glory of heaven. Instead, he's come to identify himself with you and with me.

And he did it because he is so serious about you. That's where he came from, but where he's going is even more astonishing.

From the sermon on the mountain, he's not going on to find a publisher or to a conference or to a life of fame and admiration. He is going to the cross.

[24 : 21] He's going to a place of suffering. He's going to be put to death and it's all because he is so serious about you.

Every step that Jesus took from his first steps as a toddler to his final steps towards the cross were all steps that he took because of you.

He did it all to save you. And all of this is showing us that the reason Jesus is serious with you in his warnings is because he is so serious about you.

Now, when someone is serious with you, it can be quite hard. That's true in any part of life, in work or in family. If someone speaks to us about something serious, it can be hard.

And that is absolutely true of the gospel too. It is hard to think about these things. It's hard to think about truth and life and death and eternity. When Jesus is serious with us, it is hard.

[25 : 34] But please, please recognize that the only reason Jesus is serious with you is because he is serious about you.

Now, when someone is serious about you, it's not hard and intimidating. It is incredibly reassuring. If you just think about it, so imagine you have a sports coach who is serious about you as a player.

That's brilliant. If you find out that your employer is serious about you as a future prospect, that's amazingly encouraging.

If you find out that a girl you really like is serious about you, then that is really brilliant. But when you discover that the infinite, almighty, everlasting God is serious about you, and that is just utterly amazing.

The question is, are you serious about him? I'd like us to close by going back to our two paragraphs that we started with.

[26 : 54] But this time, I've added a final clause to the end of each one. I have discovered the COVID-19 vaccine.

This vaccine is amazing, it's utterly reliable, and it works for anyone. But I've also discovered that it's the only vaccine that actually works. It's the only vaccine that can rescue us from the threat we face.

Therefore, it's essential that it's kept pure. Any changes to its substance will make it ineffective. It's essential that this vaccine is shared with as many people as possible. Everyone desperately needs this vaccine in the face of so much fear, suffering, and death.

The COVID-19 vaccine gives us hope that nothing else can give us, because it means that we can preserve our short lives for a little longer before something else kills us.

That's the truth, isn't it? That's the reality of our situation. But the other paragraph says this.

[28 : 00] I've discovered the Christian religion. It's amazing, it's reliable, it works for anyone. It's the only religion that actually works. It can rescue us from the threat we face. It's essential it's kept pure.

Any changes will make it ineffective. It's essential that it's shared. Everyone desperately needs this religion in the face of so much fear, suffering, and death. The Christian religion gives us hope that nothing else can give us, because it means that if we trust in Jesus when we die, we go to be with Him, and He will love us forever, and we can be with Him and be together in heaven, and it will never, ever end.

Now tell me, which one of these paragraphs now is the thrilling one? Amen. Let us pray.

Father, we thank you so much that you are serious about us. So serious that you sent your son to identify himself with us, to speak the truth to us, and to die for us.

Father, thank you so much for all that you've done for us in Jesus. And we pray that every one of us would see how serious it is, and how amazing it is.

[29 : 38] In Jesus' name, amen.