

The Urgency of Ultimacy

What's the greatest sermon you ever heard? Some might say Martin Luther King's "I had a dream" speech, which was like a sermon. Some might say a Billy Graham sermon. You might think of a sermon by Pastor Breum or Pastor Shields.

I recall a great sermon about 42 years ago by R. C. Sproul preached at College Church in Wheaton. He talked about Martin Luther. And I remember a line something like this: "People tell me that I make the Bible come alive. But actually, the Bible makes me come alive." And R. C. Sproul did come alive. God used him to strengthen us in faith and understanding.

Some sermons stick with us. But nobody could preach a sermon like Jesus did in Matthew 5–7. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. I would like to share a small-s sermon on that capital-S Sermon today.

Jesus' Sermon is three chapters long. So I will talk about just the closing verses, the finale you might say. We just read them in our Gospel reading.

What is the takeaway of the Sermon on the Mount? What impression does Christ Jesus want us to leave with at the end of the greatest sermon ever?

Here's the takeaway: Christ Jesus, that Galilean carpenter but also the Messiah of Old Testament promise and in fact the very Son of God—this Christ Jesus is the ultimate. For every person here today or watching remotely, there is no one finer, no one better, no one greater, no one more important for us to learn about and put our trust in and to follow than Jesus Christ.

That sermon gives us dozens of reasons to hail Jesus as ultimate. Today I will touch on just five.

1. Jesus is ultimate, first of all, because: He is the exclusive entrance into purposeful life. Mt 7:13–14:

Matt 7:13 “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Aren't we all trying to find deeper life, better life, life with real meaning? It's a scandal and tragedy that so many today take their life or sell it cheap by drug overdose as they look for a high or at least an escape. While I was writing this sermon I heard news that last weekend a private pilot jumped out of his own plane. Self-destructive behavior abounds. Jesus' words ring true today: the way to destruction is wide and easy.

How about the destruction of others? Very easy. Until the Supreme Court decision recently, some 4,000 unborn or just born human babies were dying daily in the US, a disproportionate number of them African-American. A vast lobby fought in support. 11,000 die daily by abortion in India. 19,000 die in China. Well over a billion babies have been aborted internationally in the last hundred years.

Wars and genocides claimed about 200 million people in the 20th century. That's over 5,000 a day for a hundred years. Right now, every day, about 247 Christians die from persecution, 90,000 per year.¹

We see destruction of life on all hands. Jesus is a narrow gate and a hard way but he leads to true life. He said: I am the way and the truth and the life. He calls to all. It's amazing how few choose him with the earnestness that his ultimacy calls for, even though no one else has what he offers, which every last person needs.

And Christ means life for both this world and the next, not destruction. He is our wonderful gate into purposeful life.

2. A second reason we hail Jesus as ultimate: He is the true prophet Mt 7:15–20:

Matt 7:15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

In Jesus’ world, as in ours, there are false prophets. At Covenant Seminary we have students from time to time who have left Christian Science, also called The Church of Christ, Scientist. They understand that the founder of that group, Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), was wrong. What she taught about Jesus and the cross was wrong. In some cases people had children or other loved ones die because Mary Baker Eddy taught a view of Christ and healing that said don’t go to a medical doctor. The diseased tree of that religious outlook has born bad fruit.

I’m not saying that this church or any church is flawless. I know that there is a lot of darkness in all churches, because all churches are made up of sinners like me and like every one of us. But Christian churches confess the truth about Jesus. Unlike Christian-ish cults, unlike Muslims, unlike Hindus and Buddhists and other religions, we believe in Jesus Christ God’s only Son our Lord, who was

Conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended into hell;
On the third day he rose again;

He ascended into heaven
And is seated at the right hand of God the
Father Almighty,
From whence he will come to judge the
living and the dead.

I read recently of a man who died after his limbs were chewed up by three dogs. A relative said, “Those dogs basically ate my uncle alive.” Jesus warned against those in sheep’s clothing who devour the unwary like hungry wolves. You will know them by their fruits. With Jesus as our

¹ *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 46.1 (Jan. 2022): 78.

prophet, one who speaks in the power and Spirit of Almighty God, we can choose wisely what we believe about God and life and sin and death. We can hear and heed him.

3. A third reason we hail Jesus as ultimate: He is the ultimate judge of our faith profession. Mt 7:21–23:

Matt 7:21 “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. 22 On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ 23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

Here Jesus’ sermon takes an unexpected turn. All along he has been speaking about the present: don’t be anxious. Be careful how you judge. Ask and it shall be given. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. In these verses Jesus goes future. Notice “*will* enter.” Future tense. “On that day many *will* say.” “And then I *will* declare to them.” What future day is Jesus talking about?

He’s talking about when we stand before him in judgment, at the end of this age, when earthly life as we know it is past. Those who have professed faith in Jesus, who have called him Lord, Lord truly and done the Father’s will, which is to trust him, will enter that future kingdom we call heaven. This is the joyous hope we harbor daily as we serve Christ in a troubled world and cry out, Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

But there are those who called him Lord and have been active in his name who will expect to enter heaven. But there is a glitch. They called Jesus Lord. But on that day he doesn’t recognize them. In his words: “23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

The well known pastor John Piper published a book on this recently called *What Is Saving Faith?* He argues: saving faith is to receive Christ as a treasure. It is not just to claim loyalty and perform moral or religious or humanitarian acts.

Saving faith opens the heart to Christ. Saving faith undergoes his transformation. Saving faith enters into a personal interchange with him, lasting and growing. Saving faith pursues Christ as its highest aim and ideal as life unfolds.

Saving faith knows and accepts that there is not only a crown to be gained but a cross to be carried when we follow Christ.

And since in saving faith we are, already, day by day, knowing him here and now in daily life, he will know us on that last day. He will not say depart from me, evildoer. He will rather exclaim, “Enter the heavenly kingdom, well done, good and faithful servant!”

But notice Jesus is the judge on the last day. Our savior who died for us will also exonerate us of guilt and welcome us into God's eternal kingdom. He is the ultimate gatekeeper of every human future.

4. A fourth reason we hail Jesus as ultimate: He is the only firm foundation for our future. Mt 7:24–27

Matt 7:24 “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 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. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

In 2010 my wife and I sadly left St. Mark and moved back near where we grew up to take care of my parents. Next door to my mother's house was my grandparents' house. It had stood empty for 14 years. We decided to move in there. But first that house needed a lot of work.

Moving down from Chicago like we did and living out of suitcases for seven months, we were in a hurry for the construction to begin. But it took over two months even to start. Even once they broke ground, things seemed to stand still. The excavator hit rock. They had to use a breaker. I thought the footings would never get poured.

Why didn't they just level things up quickly and build? Because in building, if a foundation is not right, nothing else matters. If you build on the surface, storm winds and rain will undermine the house. Maybe you saw the footage of the buildings washing away in Yellowstone back in June due to heavy rains and snowmelt. The foundations were undermined.

Jesus' point is obvious. He is foundational. He is the narrow gate. He is the living way. He is the true prophet. He will ID everyone at the portal into eternal life. Call it face recognition, but it's not artificial intelligence. It is the omniscient Christ.

So now at the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus commends those who hear these words of his, his whole sermon, and who does them. And he warns against hearing his words and not doing them.

I wonder how many people God sees listening to sermons on the Sermon on the Mount but not making adjustments based on what the Sermon says. My guess is God sees some wise doers and many not so wise who at most hear but still build on the sand of doing nothing.

5. A fifth and final reason we hail Jesus as ultimate: He is the supreme authority for all of life Mt 7:28–29

Matt 7:28 And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, 29 for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

The word translated “astonished” could be rendered “freaked out.” Scribes were authoritative interpreters of Moses and the prophets. That society was like Iran or Afghanistan today. Religious leaders were in charge. Scribes were highly trained. They were guardians of legal and sacred tradition. No one knew more or better about God and right and wrong than the scribes.

But Jesus did not defer to the scribes. He does not really debate the scribes. He either questions them, tries to teach them, defeats their attempts to make him look foolish, or pronounces woe on their hypocritical pretensions.

No wonder people found it hard to process Jesus. We read these verses as praise of Jesus. In that setting, his self-confident style looked like a fatal tactical error. Jesus was going against the science, we might say. You can’t be smarter than the scribes! They are rabbinically trained. Jesus was not.

But Jesus perfectly fulfilled what the Psalmist says to God in Psalm 119:99: “I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.” Jesus had more understanding than all the scribes put together, for he knew God’s word. He embodied it faithfully. He proclaimed it flawlessly. He died for our sins and rose in victory, all according to the Scriptures.

No wonder the Sermon on the Mount is greater than any sermon preached in history outside of the Bible. The supreme authority speaks with supreme clarity.

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We have seen that Jesus is ultimate for five reasons. Now let me explain the title of this sermon: The Urgency of Ultimacy.

Because Jesus is ultimate, we should not be like the foolish man who builds on sand. But aren’t we tempted to make something besides Jesus and our tie to him the ultimate thing in our life?

Many things are important, good, and necessary, like our jobs, our friends, our kids and grandkids, our marriage, our health, our community, our nation, our world.

But as Jesus told a woman long ago: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary” (Luke 10). Jesus is that one thing. He should be at the center of our lives, not to displace our daily priorities but to center him in whatever we do.

What is most urgent in your life? What was nagging at your mind when this sermon lagged?

The political scene? Your upcoming vacation? Your profession? Your love life? Your lack of love life? College this fall, or school starting soon? The stock market? Your vanishing retirement account? The Cubs, Sox, or Brewers? The Bears camp now underway? CRT and drag queens in our schools and libraries? Abortion? Gasoline and grocery prices? Ukraine and Taiwan? Climate change? Electric cars? Your social media?

All of us here have something in common. We plot out our lives to deal with the urgent. In that mix, don't overlook what is ultimate. There are ways to be as urgent about Christ as we are about all life's less ultimate pursuits. Seek first his kingdom—seek him—and all other matters will find their rightful place. Amen and amen.