

# Chapter 12

What Jesus taught and how he was received

I will remember the insistent ring of my telephone during the night. I had to get out of bed to answer it, in the hope that by then I would be sufficiently awake to respond to whatever the call was about. Since then, rules have been introduced to limit (at least officially) the number of hours that most British doctors are on duty, but even now it would seem very odd for someone on call to walk away and go somewhere else.

## Jesus' on call rota

At the start of Mark's Gospel we read how a long queue of people kept Jesus busy until late at night as he miraculously healed them of many and varied diseases. Next morning he got up while it was still dark and went out to pray, presumably needing both renewed strength and much wisdom for the day ahead (and giving us an example to follow in our own busy lives). When he was told that everyone was out looking for him, probably hoping for more miracles, he said, 'Let's go somewhere else.' This was a surprising response from such a caring man, but he explained that his priority was to teach.<sup>1</sup> He still performed miracles but not to the exclusion of the spoken word. Why?

It is important to be clear that the reason Jesus had come was to share wonderfully good news. He lived in an occupied country, with rulers in constant fear of an uprising. Jesus was not the first person to gain a following and then be arrested and silenced. His time for that still lay ahead, but what was it that he needed to tell people so urgently before attracting unwelcome attention? The miracles had shown his great love for others and his special power over disease, but why else had he come?

## Jesus' message

Most of us will know how those hoping to become national leaders set out a manifesto of their aims and how they plan to fulfil them.

They may appear on television or, as election time draws near, climb up on the back of a lorry and use a loud speaker to broadcast their intentions. Jesus had no such political ambitions. In contrast to modern politicians, what has become known as Jesus' manifesto was delivered quietly, during a morning service at the small synagogue in his home town of Nazareth. Perhaps not many would remember the old story of how he had been conceived there by an unmarried girl. They simply knew him now as the local carpenter's son and gave him their full attention when he stood up to read from the book of Isaiah. He had chosen a passage traditionally interpreted as the action plan of the future Messiah, the one anointed by God and expected for centuries:

*'The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom to the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn...'*<sup>2</sup>

Instead of the phrase about release from darkness, Jesus specified 'recovery of sight to the blind' but stopped reading after mentioning the Lord's favour, leaving out the bit about God's coming judgment. He ended by saying, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'. Isaiah's messianic prophecy was being fulfilled in him. He would provide a way of escape from the Lord's vengeance.

His audience already knew that he had been doing some of the merciful deeds foretold by Isaiah and had perhaps started to wonder whether he was a prophet. Yet he went on to give examples of how Gentiles, not Jews, had believed the prophets of old and suggested that his Jewish audience was equally unlikely to listen to him. His point was proved by their reaction. The idea that non-Jews might also be among God's chosen people angered them so much that instead of welcoming Jesus as their Messiah they tried to kill him there and then. He somehow managed to walk through the murderous crowd and get away, although their hostility did not silence him.<sup>3</sup>

## The Sermon on the Mount

This is the name given to one of Jesus' most famous teaching sessions as recorded in Matthew 5-7 with a shorter version in Luke 6. In the sermon he explained how he had not come to get rid of God's laws but to fulfil them. Yes, murder and adultery are wrong, but so are the hostile or lustful thoughts that became intentions and led to the deeds. The mistake of the religious leaders was to think and teach that to keep the commandments to the letter would win them favour with God. But they are not a checklist; they are God's guidance for life at its best. To make an idol of formal religious observance and external show was to miss the heart of the matter, namely humble, obedient and selfless worship of God and self-giving love for others.

The super-religious Jews of Jesus' day were not humble. They made a great show of their religion, praying long prayers at street corners for everyone to see. They had made religion their god instead of truly worshipping God. Jesus' teaching went much deeper than that. He said that prayer was important but should be privately directed to the Father in heaven, not turned into a public display.<sup>4</sup> Giving to charity should be a private matter, not done to impress others.<sup>5</sup> He even said that enemies and oppressors should be forgiven and prayed for.<sup>6</sup> This was revolutionary teaching unheard of before, and even today it is hard to follow.

I once visited a wonderful hospital in Jerusalem where the walls were covered in small tiles, each bearing the names of people who had contributed generously to the work. No doubt this was the hospital's way of saying 'Thank you' but was scarcely keeping the gifts private and could have risked excessive pride and self-satisfaction in the givers.

## The two greatest commandments

When a legal expert asked Jesus, 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?' the answer surprised the man. Jesus put first 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind'. Linked with that was the command to 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.<sup>7</sup>

These two commands sum up the whole law. God has said that with the new covenant he would engrave his laws into minds and hearts, not on tablets of stone like the originals.<sup>8</sup> His Spirit would be given to his people, to help them make their first response to any new challenge one prompted by love, not just duty. Someone has said that love stops the 'hardening of the oughteries' that produces a merely dutiful observance of a rule, sometimes with a pat on one's own back for it. Instead Jesus turned on its head the idea that keeping the rules is the way to earn favour with God. That would be the religion of a well-informed head, not of a loving and responsive heart. The head and the heart can be separated by the stiff neck of pride and hypocrisy, including self-deceit. Old attitudes need to be faced and hearts changed if God is really to be pleased.

To hear such new teaching from Jesus was good news to people oppressed by religious leaders who had added a few rules of their own to the hundreds we know about which they were proud to have learned and kept. They despised those who broke them because their own 'oughteries' were particularly hardened. They had turned the intended two-way relationship with God into a formal ritual. Yet Jesus' teaching also challenged his hearers to pray that their own hearts would be made receptive and obedient.

The word 'neighbour' does not simply mean the people who live next door, but includes every other member of the human race, who need our love. The people who listened to Jesus had to rethink (repent of) previous attitudes and learn how to treat others as they themselves would like to be treated. Before them was a living model of someone who practised what he preached. They were used to dry sermons full of even drier quotations from their religious leaders, but Jesus spoke so freshly with the clear authority of God that people were amazed and delighted.

## Jesus, Son of Man and Son of God

A traditional title for the expected Messiah was 'Son of Man' and this is a name Jesus applied to himself 81 times as a reminder of his humanity. He claimed it, for example, after forgiving and healing a

paralysed man,<sup>9</sup> when speaking of his future betrayal and suffering<sup>10</sup> and also of his final return.<sup>11</sup> Child of Mary in his humanity through the Holy Spirit of God, he was also Son of God in his divinity. Difficult as we may find this to grasp, in him his humanity and his deity were indivisible.

We often hear people say about a young child, 'He's just like his father,' or, 'She has her mother's smile'. Because Jesus was divine as well as human he lived on earth to show us what God, his Father, is like and he did not hesitate to say so. He claimed that anyone who saw him had seen the Father.<sup>12</sup> When people doubted this, he appealed to the evidence of his miracles to prove that God was with him.<sup>13</sup> Some of those who heard him said blasphemously that they had been enacted by demonic powers,<sup>14</sup> yet those who had seen or been changed by the miracles could not deny that they must be the works of God.<sup>15</sup> Some even dared to identify Jesus as being truly the Saviour of the world.<sup>16</sup> He accepted this description, saying that anyone who believed in him would know a very different life, life everlasting, whereas unbelievers would not.<sup>17</sup> As God is love,<sup>18</sup> his acts of love, like those we thought of in the last chapter, are truly God's own love in action. Jesus was just like his Father because they were one.

### Bringing in a new kingdom

Traditional Jews, oppressed for centuries, expected the Messiah to come at last to release them. They looked for an obvious conqueror, powerfully riding in to his kingdom to rule over a new and godly regime. In Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, wise men had named him king of the Jews and brought him costly gifts, but Jesus himself spoke quietly of bringing in the kingdom of God by acts of love to the poor and needy, the alien and the prisoner, releasing them as his manifesto had promised.<sup>19</sup> These ideas were foreign to the religious and political leaders of the day who feared that by talking of another kingdom Jesus was going to lead a violent rebellion against them. Instead he said that he was not offering membership of an earthly kingdom.<sup>20</sup> His was a kingdom open to all those who accept him as their Saviour and king. His rule would be marked by loving kindness and peace.

## True or false?

Some modern liberal theologians may (and do) suggest that some of the reports about Jesus are inaccurate. They have even colour-coded different sayings of his according to whether they think them true, probably true, doubtful or never said by Jesus at all. Other scholars still hold firmly to the inspired nature of the biblical record as do I, and academic debate is best left to those trained in that field. It is worth noting, though, that archaeologists have found many thousands of ancient fragments and complete copies of the biblical documents. Carbon-dating of these manuscripts shows great textual agreement over many years, indicating they have been reliably carried down to us through the centuries.

Memory can be remarkably accurate in cultures where not everyone can read or keep records, yet verbal messages can still be safely delivered and notable events in national history repeated in songs and stories, fixing them in mind and memory for future generations. My own observations of simple, uneducated people have shown how they can readily commit to memory detailed facts and significant conversations. Although the biblical authors were by no means without learning, this might have been true for some who gave them their information, but in our computer age we forget about earlier ways of remembering things. When I lived in Africa I only had to repeat my shopping list once to someone who could scarcely write his own name and spoke very little English. Yet after repeating what I had said, the faithful Joseph would come back triumphantly from the market with everything on the list. There are, of course, better reasons than that for believing the biblical records, without sharing the doubt and prejudice so often evident in such discussions.

Apart from Luke and Paul, the New Testament reporters had probably not had much higher education, but they had all developed godly wisdom. Jesus' remarkable impact on those who knew him would have burnt into their memories so many details of his unique life and death, words and works. Most important of all, he had assured them that, when he left them, his Spirit would bring all things to their remembrance.<sup>21</sup> The amazing events of the resurrection and the weeks

following are faithfully recalled for us by those who shared them, and John's Gospel finishes with the solemn assurance that his record is reliable.<sup>22</sup> As the disciple thought to be closest to Jesus, John would have treasured all his recollections and recorded them accurately. As he says, this was so 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'<sup>23</sup> It would therefore be a great loss not to read what he has written.

The other biblical authors give the same sense of offering true records. Meeting Jesus, either in the flesh or through his Spirit, had profoundly changed their lives, and they were eager to share their good news with all who would read their stories.

If someone today made the claims that Jesus made, we would think him mad, misled, or up to no good. This is what some people did think about Jesus at the time. Others believed him enough to follow him, especially those who could see how wonderfully he was meeting people's needs. Many others just liked to listen to him because he spoke so graciously and what he said was so very unlike the kind of talk they were used to from their religious leaders. Their endless lists of rules and regulations were slowly weighing others down.<sup>24</sup> Yet this man said that if they came to him they would find only a light load, for he would lift their burdens. It is as if someone with a loaded backpack were to meet a very strong and understanding person who said, 'Let me take that from you'. What a relief – Jesus called it 'rest for the soul'.<sup>25</sup> Freedom from bondage at last!<sup>26</sup>

### For further thought

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- Why would the Jews (and others) fail to accept Jesus' words about who he was?
- Had you realised that Jesus was truly God-made-man?
- Do you live by a set of rules, even by self-rule?

## Further resources

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- Lloyd-Jones M. *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (2 vols): Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1959-1960
- Packer JI. *Freedom, Authority and Scripture*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982
- McGrath A. *Jesus: Who he is and why he matters*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994

## References

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|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Mark 1:33-38      | 14. John 8:48-49     |
| 2. Isaiah 61:1-2     | 15. John 9:30-38     |
| 3. Luke 4:16-30      | 16. John 4:42        |
| 4. Matthew 6:5-8     | 17. John 3:16-18     |
| 5. Matthew 6:1-4     | 18. 1 John 4:8       |
| 6. Matthew 5:43-44   | 19. Matthew 25:31-40 |
| 7. Matthew 22:34-40  | 20. John 18:36       |
| 8. Jeremiah 31:33    | 21. John 14:26       |
| 9. Mark 2:9-12       | 22. John 21:24       |
| 10. Matthew 20:17-19 | 23. John 20:31       |
| 11. Matthew 24:30-31 | 24. Matthew 23:1-4   |
| 12. John 14:8-11     | 25. Matthew 11:28-30 |
| 13. John 10:34-38    | 26. John 8:36        |