

Scott Engle's Aug 3 Sermon  
*Training for the 'Impossible'*

Let us pray . . . Merciful and loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Wow . . . this is amazing. I think I better follow Kathryn's lead from two weeks ago and introduce myself. There are so many new faces each week! My name is Scott Engle and I am the Director of the Center for Christian Learning here at St. Andrew. That means I'm responsible for ministries like the adult Sunday Schools and the Bible Academy. It also means that I do a lot of teaching and a lot of writing, like the background studies that are in the bulletin each week. Now, when Robert asked me to preach I was both honored and terrified. You see, I am a teacher, not a preacher. There's a difference! For one thing, I don't even get warmed up in twelve minutes!! But have no fear, I am on the clock . . . literally . . . I even wore a watch and I'm not afraid to use it. Also, teachers typically don't stand in pulpits . . . so we are going to call this a "teaching moment!"

Ok . . . today is the first in a five week series on what we call the Sermon on the Mount. It is my job this morning to give the Sermon, these teachings' of Jesus, some context, to help us see what is going on, to help prepare us for the rest of the series . . . What is Jesus trying to do? Why does he say what he says? So to begin, let's step back.

The Sermon on the Mount is the first and the longest block of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel. It spans three full chapters - five, six, and seven. If you were to sit down and read the Sermon on the Mount in one sitting -as I hope you will several times this month - you would be astonished at what you find. There are lots of things here that are familiar even to those who have never cracked the pages of a Bible: The Lord's prayer, the Beatitudes, the "salt of the earth" and the "light to the world" . . . turn the other cheek . . . go the extra mile . . . do not judge, lest you be judged . . . even "wolves in sheep's clothing"! And frankly, much of it seems so . . . unrealistic. Yes, unrealistic. At one point in his teaching Jesus says this: "You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has committed adultery." Now . . . what do we do with that? Really. Jimmy Carter wasn't sure. Just before the election in 1976, he gave an interview to *Playboy* in which he said that he had committed adultery in his heart many times and it nearly cost him the presidency. He immediately dropped 15 points in the polls. See . . . we just don't know what to do with so much of Jesus' teachings. But, of course, we can't help doing something.

I'll tell you what we usually do with the Sermon on the Mount. We turn it into some sort of "impossible ideal." We hear it and we say, "Wow. Won't it be great when the world is really like that! Wow! . . . Now let me get back to my real life . . . back to the real world." But, truly, this is the one thing we cannot do. The one thing. Jesus is NOT talking about some fantasy world or a place that we can only dream of. Jesus was a realist . . . he understood the way things are. When Jesus said, "love your enemies," he meant it now, not some day. When he said, "do not worry about your life," he meant it now, not some day.

So, if Jesus doesn't mean for the Sermon the Mount to be an "impossible ideal," what is he doing? What is his point?

Jesus was a teacher. Like any good teacher, he taught in various ways. To all who would listen, Jesus proclaimed the Great News that the kingdom of God was at hand, that God's glory was breaking in upon them, for all to see . . . right then . . . right there. But what would this kingdom look like? Jesus knew it sure wouldn't look like what most Jews expected . . . so Jesus set about to teach them.

Isaiah had said that in God's kingdom, there would be no blind, so Jesus made the blind see. In God's kingdom there would be no lame, so Jesus healed the crippled. In God's kingdom everyone would be welcome at the great banquet . . . yes, everyone. So Jesus ate with sinners. He hung out with prostitutes and the despised tax collectors – the very sorts of people that all the "good folk" figured would never be welcome at the Lord's table. You see, Jesus' healings were not merely acts of compassion, they were demonstrations of God's kingdom, they were the kingdom made real and concrete. For nearly 2 1/2 years Jesus trained his disciples in a new way of being God's people, of living in God's kingdom. Much of this was "on-the-job" training. But, sometimes, Jesus would sit and teach them. This teaching – this training in the kingdom – is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about. It is not about some tough new rules or some impossible ideal. It is about the retraining of our hearts.

I come out of a career in business. I know that in business, all effective training is fueled by desire and commitment. This is no less true when it comes to training in the kingdom of God. Frankly, coming here only for an hour of worship each week is better than not coming at all, but it sure won't be much in the way of training. Training in the kingdom requires involvement, all training does.

We are trained . . . that is, we learn . . . in a variety of ways. Some of us learn best by hearing and reading, some of us by doing, some of us by observing, some of us by talking it out. All this is available here at St. Andrew. Are you part of a Sunday School? If not, join one. If you don't know which one, start by coming to my Sunday School class at 9:30. We meet in Piro Hall. We'll offer a variety of Bible Academy classes this fall. Some classes are small and discussion-oriented. Some are larger and more lecture-oriented. Sign up for one . . . you'll be happy you did. Teach the children's classes . . . or the youth. They need us . . .but you know what, we need them. Go on a mission trip. Build a house for Habitat. Sort clothing at the Wilkinson Center. Everything we do – all the inviting and the worshiping and the learning and the loving and the serving – all this, molds, shapes, and transforms us. This is how it is done. There are no short-cuts. This is how we learn to be disciples, to live in the kingdom, to do the seemingly impossible. This is how we learn to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.

In closing, I want to tell you a story, a true story, about what is possible . . . with training! . . . in the kingdom of God.

In 1955, Mabie Mobley and her son Emmett lived in a poor black neighborhood in Chicago. That summer, Emmett, who was 14, went to spend some time with his uncle in Money, Mississippi. One afternoon, Emmett and a few friends went to the neighborhood candy store. Emmett went into the store while his friends waited outside. I guess the lady who ran the store was pretty cute, because when Emmett came out his friends were snickering and asked him what he thought of the woman. Emmett smiled and gave it the old wolf whistle. The woman was white and the story got back to her husband and brother-in-law, who didn't much like what this colored boy had done. At 2:30 am the next Sunday morning, two men burst into the home of Emmett's uncle and carried the boy away. Emmett's body was found a couple of days later, in a pond. He had been brutally beaten and shot. He was unrecognizable. The two men were arrested and tried, and were acquitted in an hour by an all-male, all-white jury.

I want to read to you what Emmett's mother later said about this. I'm going to read it because I want to get it right:

Mabie was asked this "Don't you harbor any bitterness toward the two men . . . It would be unnatural not to." She replied:

"It certainly would be unnatural not to, yet I'd have to say I'm unnatural . . . What they had done was not for me to punish and it was not for me to go around hugging hate to myself, because hate would destroy me. It wouldn't hurt them . . . I did not wish them dead. I did not wish them in jail. If I had to, I could take their four little children - they each had two - and I could raise those children as if they were my own and I could have loved them . . . Now that is a strange thing to say, but I haven't spent one night hating those people. . . I was brought up in the Church of God and Christ. I believe the Lord meant what he said and try to live according to the way I've been taught."

Strange . . . unnatural . . . those are Mabie's words. Yes . . . the kingdom of God can seem strange and unnatural to us . . . that is sort of the point. Mabie found that she had been and was being shaped and molded and renewed and transformed to be a person she never thought she could be. She discovered that she had been trained for the impossible.

In the course of this sermon series, when you are tempted to regard the Sermon on the Mount as some impossible ideal, stop and reflect on Mabie and Emmett. Reconsider what is really possible with God. Jesus spoke truly to his disciples when he said: "nothing will be impossible for you."