

JESUS' MESSAGE---A SERMON OF OFFENSE

1. Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount amid a background of chaos, vengeance, violence.
2. Roman soldiers have invaded Jerusalem and surrounding areas and are demanding taxes and causing great distress to the Jews.
3. Jesus comes along and tells you to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Can you imagine the villagers' response to this message?
4. Jesus made the law impossible for anyone to keep and then charged us to keep it.
5. How can anyone translate such ethical ideals into everyday life?

Church history reveals that people have found sneaky ways to reconcile Jesus' absolute demands with the reality of human sinfulness.

1. Thomas Aquinas: divided his sermon into Precepts (requirements) and Counsels (suggestions).
2. The Roman Catholic Church codified Aquinas' distinctions into lists of "mortal" and "venial" sins.
3. Martin Luther: 2 kingdoms, one of Christ and one of the world, so "love your enemies" does not apply to the government, just the person. In WWII many Lutheran Christians served in Hitler's army with a clear conscience: "just following orders," they carried out the office of the state while maintaining an inner allegiance to Christ.

Tolstoy –absolute ideals

1. Tolstoy strove to follow the Sermon on the Mount literally and in an attempt to reach perfection he kept devising new list of rules.
2. He could never achieve the self-discipline necessary to keep the rules.
3. Tolstoy's ardent strides toward perfection never brought any semblance of peace or serenity and at one point he fled from his family, his identity, and died like a vagrant.
4. Tolstoy begged his critics to not judge God by his inability to meet his lofty ideas, don't Jesus by those of us who imperfectly bear his name.
5. Reading Tolstoy's religious writings, one discovers he had x-ray vision into the human heart that made him a great novelist but also made him a tortured Christian.
6. He so perfectly saw the huge gap between the ideals of the gospel and the flaws of its followers.

7. His religion was a thing of Law rather than Grace, a scheme for human betterment without a vision of the God that penetrated a fallen world.
8. He could never trust God's grace to overcome his inadequacy to attain the divine ideals.

Dostoevsky—absolute grace

1. He wrote dark and brooding novels in contrast to Tolstoy but he often squandered his health and fortune on alcohol and drinking BUT he got one thing right: his novels communicate grace and forgiveness.
2. He was imprisoned and there he was forced to live in close quarters with thieves, murderers, and drunken peasants and over time he came to believe that only through being loved is a human being capable of love.
3. Crime and Punishment portrays a despicable human being who commits a despicable crime but grace enters his life and leads him to redemption.
4. The Brothers Karamazov draws a contrast between Ivan the brilliant agnostic and his devout brother Alyosha. Ivan critiques the failures of human kind but can offer no solutions. Alyosha has no solutions either but he has one for humanity: "I do not know the answer to the problem of evil, but I do know love."

ONE WAY TO RESOLVE THE TENSION BETWEEN THE HIGH IDEALS OF THE GOSPEL AND THE GRIM REALITY OF OURSELVES: to accept that we will never measure up but we do not have to for "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," a message Leo Tolstoy never fully grasped.

The Sermon on the Mount

1. Jesus gave us these words not to make it impossible for us but to tell us what God is like.
2. The Sermon forces us to recognize the great distance between God and us and why we need divine grace and forgiveness.