

Meet Jesus of Nazareth, Your New Instructor
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Call to Worship

Wrap yourselves in the healing love of God!

Know that God continually surrounds us with patience and persistence.

Even though we have not produced the “fruits” of hope that God seeks, yet God forgives and heals our weakness.

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised! Rejoice!

Let us turn our lives again to the Lord, to serve and seek God’s presence.

Title

Meet Jesus of Nazareth, Your New Instructor

Matthew 5:21-22; 38-42 NRSV

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

A couple years ago I was given a subscription to MasterClass. MasterClass is a series of video courses taught by some of the most interesting and compelling people of our day, on subjects they know intimately because they have mastered them.

Many of the instructors are household names:

James Patterson teaches writing.

Annie Leibovitz teaches photography.

Then there are courses from people you may never have heard of, but who have done amazing things:

Chris Hadfield, the former commander of the International Space Station teaches you the science of space exploration and what the future holds.

Ron Finley first grew a garden on a curbside dirt strip. He got cited—and then a warrant was issued for his arrest. He fought back, got the laws changed, and started a movement. Now the community activist and self-proclaimed “Gangster Gardener” is teaching you how to grow your own food, keep your plants alive, and find beauty and freedom in gardening no matter the size of your space.

For a person like me, getting a subscription to MasterClass is like a chocoholic getting an allaccess pass to the See's Candy factory. So many cool people! Teaching so much cool stuff! Since I got that subscription, I regularly get emails from MasterClass telling me about new courses that are being offered. The emails always begin the same way: "Meet your new instructor..."

At the beginning of chapter 5, Matthew says, "Now when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them saying..."

This is his way of saying, "Meet your new instructor."

What is Jesus teaching? What is his MasterClass all about? In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard points out something that should be obvious to Christians even though we tend not to think of Jesus this way. He points out that Jesus was in fact the smartest person who ever lived. So if MasterClass sent me an email introducing Jesus as one their new instructors, the re: line would likely be: *Jesus of Nazareth teaches how to live life the way it was always meant to be lived.*

That covers a lot of ground! And the amazing thing is that Jesus didn't need 17 video lessons to break it down. He did it in about 17 minutes... which is about how long it takes to read the Sermon on the Mount out loud.

As much as I love learning from people at the very top of their fields, there is an obvious problem. I know that even if I watch all 17 of her video lessons and take meticulous notes, I am never going to build and market my own fashion brand like Diane von Furstenberg did. I'm never going to direct Academy Award winning feature films like Ron Howard has. And my favorite instructor is also the person I am least likely to emulate: Steph Curry's lessons on shooting, ball-handling, and scoring are never going to get me into the NBA.

I'm sure that I am not very different from most other MasterClass subscribers. *I want to learn how great people do great things even if I have no intention of ever doing them myself.* Or more to the point, I don't believe it is even possible for me to do such things. I don't subscribe to be educated. I subscribe to be entertained.

This, I believe, is the big difference between the church in the first three centuries and the church now: We treat Jesus' teachings like a MasterClass, but the early church treated them like a trade school.

Jesus doesn't teach *what*. Jesus teaches *how*.
Jesus doesn't expect us *believe* it. He expects us to *do* it.

The early church understood this. They trained people up as apprentices in the Way of Jesus and transformed their Greco-Roman world as a result.

Before people could be baptized, join the church, participate in worship and share in the eucharistic meal, they had to get trained and examined. This was called *catechesis* and it took a long time... perhaps as long as three years. We don't know all that went into that training, but documents from that time give us some ideas. It is almost certainly the case that *catechumens* would hear, learn and even memorize the Sermon on the Mount in some form.

By leading people through such a rigorous process, the church was asking would-be Christians: *You may be attracted to our lifestyle, but can you really live it?*

- Can you learn how to never speak or act out of anger?
- Can you respond non-violently to people who do violence to you?
- Can you let others take advantage of you rather than live in constant conflict with them?
- Can you "loan" to others even when you know they will never pay you back?

Last week we learned how the early church saw patience as the highest virtue, the virtue we share with God. Their commitment to cultivating the virtue of patience was one of the four things that enabled them to transform their world. The second thing was their set of reflexive habits that were rooted in patience.

They learned how to bless-instead-of-curse and turn the other cheek reflexively the way we learned how to look both ways before crossing the street. They could do it without even thinking about it.

Last week I challenged you to notice – to just become aware – of the situations in your life when you are most impatient. Me? The Costco parking lot. When I say something snarky about the person in front of me who needs three tries to properly place their minivan in the compact spot, it is pure reflex. It is my ingrained habit. Then the words of my teacher Jesus come to me. If it is your habit to insult people and call them fools, you are placing yourself under judgment. If you call someone a fool, you are playing with fire – and not just any fire. Take a look at Matthew 5:22 again!

I hope you did some noticing too. Until we notice our habits, we won't recognize our need to unlearn them and to learn new ones.

This week, I want to challenge you to read Matthew 5, 6 and 7 with new eyes and ears. Read it like the early church read it: As a training manual in the ways of patience, forbearance, and equanimity. You may choose to skim it in order to choose one section that stands out to you and focus on that for a few minutes.

Ask yourself: To whom is this passage asking me to be patient toward? God, myself, others? How would consciously living this text change me from the inside out? How would it change the lives of those around me?

So often I hear people respond to the Sermon on the Mount with, “Oh I can’t do that. Jesus could. But that is because Jesus is God.”

I think this is why substitutionary atonement theory has such a strong appeal to us. It implies that actually living as Jesus lived was never the goal. It implies that just believing in Jesus and in his work on the cross is the goal. The thinking seems to go like this: Jesus taught the Sermon on the Mount so that we would know what a perfectly lived life would look like. Jesus set the standard. Once we know the standard, we will admit to ourselves that it is impossible, that we’ll never be able to do that. To this we think Jesus says in essence, “Exactly. You will never meet the standard. That is why I have to die on the cross for you.”

There are at least two big problems with this way of thinking. The first is that it makes the core teachings of Jesus basically irrelevant... as irrelevant to real life as Steph Curry’s dribbling lessons are to my fantasies about being a star athlete.

The second is that this is exactly what Jesus warned us against at the end of his teachings!

26 But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Matt 7:26-27 NRSV)

Jesus didn’t expect us to do it in our strength, but he does expect us to do it. That’s why Christ’s very Spirit has been given to us. That’s why we celebrate the Lord’s Supper with the understanding that the Holy Spirit is uniquely present in this meal, empowering us to not only believe in Jesus but do as Jesus does.

With this in mind, on behalf of our Lord and our Host Jesus Christ, I invite you to his table.