

Gospel on the Mount—Surprising Initiative

Genesis 22:9-14; Luke 6:27-36; 1st Peter 3:14-17



We speak of the Sermon on the Mount, understanding that it was the centerpiece of Jesus teaching. Even so, it does not generally become the centerpiece of our own teaching, preaching, or evangelism. There doesn't seem to be much connection between this all-important sermon and God's offer of eternal life. As a result, we have pretty much decided that we have a choice to make. We should choose whether to preach the Sermon on the Mount, or preach eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. We don't come right out and say it, but as Christians, we have taken the tack that it is an either or proposition. Is there a relationship between Jesus' centerpiece sermon and Jesus' message of eternal life? Is the gospel a message of morality, or is it eternal salvation? Does the Sermon on the Mount have anything to do with evangelism and proclaiming Jesus Christ?

Glen Stassen, one of my seminary professors, categorized the essence of the Sermon on the Mount as teaching the principle of acting on "surprising, transforming initiatives."¹ In response to evil, anger, and violence, Jesus preached acting in unexpected love. This is not to say that Jesus did not confront anyone with the reality of their sin and attitude of rebellion towards God. What Jesus taught and displayed was an attitude that displayed God's love in surprising ways to people. He did this through stories like The Good Samaritan. He did this through preaching. He did this by taking the trip through Samaria and sitting at the well in Sychar.

Jesus talked about loving one's enemies. He talked about turning a cheek. He talked about overcoming evil with good. He also lived it. The incarnation was God's "surprising, transforming initiative" to interrupt our lives and our power struggles with God. God created flesh in Jesus Christ to live among us and offer us love in the midst of our rebellion against God's authority. John records how Jesus came to live "among His own, but His own received Him not." We should expect that God would have acted in the manner of the disciples who begged Jesus to have them call fire out of heaven upon those who rejected Jesus as Lord. Instead, "to all who received Him, he granted the authority to become the children of God."

In Genesis 22, we find a powerful word picture describing the quality of Abraham's faith. We see Abraham taking his son Isaac, preparing to slay him to demonstrate his obedience to God. As we wrestle with the tumult of emotions raging inside Abraham, we find him at last raising his knife to slay the son he loves in order that he might prove his allegiance to *Yahweh*. Many of the other peoples offered their firstborn sons to their gods. How could he proclaim his own righteousness if he were unwilling to sacrifice the son he held so dear?

The people believed that the life of a slain animal was released in its bleeding and would then return to the gods. They thought they could gain audience before their gods by sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice upon themselves, thereby being introduced into the presence of the gods. What better manner to gain the ear of the gods than by sending one's own son into the gods' presence, there to intercede on one's behalf?

¹ Stassen, Glen. *Journey into Peacemaking*. Brotherhood Commission, 1983, 1987, p. 10.

As Abraham raised his knife, *Yahweh* intervened. *Yahweh* surprised Abraham by taking the initiative to transform that pleading for audience with God by providing a sacrifice in Isaac's stead. We might be too focused on Isaac's rescue to catch the importance of that surprising initiative. It is not Abraham's initiative to seek audience with *Yahweh* that is so successful. We want to forget that it was *Yahweh* who told Abraham to take Isaac to offer him in sacrifice. It was *Yahweh* who took the initiative to call Abraham into the very presence of *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* called, *Yahweh* provided the means, *Yahweh* did all that was necessary to bridge the gap and bring Abraham into the presence of the Almighty.

This was an absolutely surprising initiative. It was God's initiative that greatly transformed Abraham's life, as well as the religious practice of millions of people. In this event, God taught the people that they could come before *Yahweh* in confidence! They could have confidence that *Yahweh* was willing to listen. They could recognize that it was God's own initiative that called them before the throne of the universe to grant them audience! The message was so surprising that many never managed to understand it. Many decided that this was *Yahweh's* acceptance of Abraham, but not of themselves. It was too good to be true, so they shrugged it off.

So *Yahweh* intervened again in an even more surprising initiative. Oh, we have become numb to the reality, but it was a novel concept so revolutionary that the people felt obligated to reject it completely. God created flesh and dwelt in our midst, allowing humanity to have personal, immediate contact with the Most High! It was unimaginable! How could anyone have the audacity to claim that *Yahweh*, Creator of the Universe, would stoop so low as to take on human form and live among the outcasts of society?!

God's initiative was very surprising. For the majority, it was just too unexpected to accept in any way at all. After all, why should God care about them? Why would *Yahweh* want to have any dealings with depraved humanity? They were struggling to be good enough to scrape by and gain entrance into heaven. They wouldn't dare think so highly of themselves that they might really have full access to God!

In the midst of our rebellion, God created flesh. *Yahweh* lived among us. Jesus preached that we are to respond to rebellion against God by surprising people with the unexpected initiative of love. Love transforms. Love overcomes evil, because it cannot be ruled out by violence. Violence and anger do not erase love. They simply contrast themselves to love's initiative.

Peter put it this way, "Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated." He reminded us to keep Christ Jesus as Lord of our lives, remembering that Jesus suffered once and for all because of sin, in order to bring us to God. Jesus' initiative of love did not end in the Sermon on the Mount. It did not end with the glorious message of the Incarnation. Jesus' initiative led Him to the cross from which He told the disciples, "Do not fear, for I have overcome the world."

Oh, Jesus did not overcome the world with the power of anger and violence. He overcame with the surprising initiative of love freely offered. May the gospel is about living the Sermon on the Mount, after all. Maybe it is about preaching overcoming love—a love that takes the surprising initiative to call us into God's presence. Jesus didn't just preach it. He lived it. Maybe it was the Gospel on the Mount, after all. What message shall we preach? Shall we live it as well?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*