

"Am I Astounded?" – July 23, 2017
by Wayne J. Schneider – Cum Sancto Spiritu

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St. Matthew 7:24-28

In the year 1173, in the city of Pisa, Italy, a 179-foot tower was built. Even before it was completed, it began its inch by inch yearly leaning. To date, the tower is 17 feet out of plumb. The word "Pisa" means "marshy land." It is entirely understandable why the tower is leaning.

At the center of Jesus' teaching is his countercultural vision of life. For many "Followers of the Way," for believers, 'countercultural' may carry some negative baggage. But, if St. Matthew's depiction of Jesus was not preaching 'against the grain,' he would not have introduced his new commandments with "*you have heard it said ... but I say*" (5:21-22). It is not surprising then, at the conclusion of this Jesus' sermon, that those who heard it were 'astounded' at Jesus teaching (7:28).

If Jesus was preaching today, our behavior might merit the use of the word "astonished." People and nations repeatedly use violence rather than peaceful means to get what they want. The craving for more wealth wins out over seeking to be 'poor in spirit.' Even among the nonviolent, and those who are not actively pursuing greed, discover that sin has not changed over the last two thousand years. The only thing that changes, are the faces of those who stand in need of God's grace.

The Holy Scriptures state that we are called to be completely human; then our penchant to sin is not the only thing that defines us. Certainly, the church universal has announced that the call of God is to surpass sinfulness, to be in a full relationship with God now and forever.

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus demonstrates that we are to seek God's forgiveness continually but also to forgive those who have done us wrong. In the

Sermon on the Mount, forgiveness is not only a spiritual function but a physical act too. Jesus calls us to "*turn the other cheek*" rather than turn to violence, and to "*do good to them that hate you.*" (St. Matthew 5:44).

In everything we do with either exemplify God's forgiveness, or we symbolize the world's ethic of selfishness. We either give in to the perfect will of God or our own, damaged egos, because we cannot serve two masters.

If you look closely at the Sermon Jesus is preaching, you may see a bit of ambiguity. In the 5th chapter, Jesus appears to be intent on having us aspire to, and behave, publically: "*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*" (Matthew 5:16 NRSV).

But, in his teaching on fasting, prayer, and giving, Jesus highlights that a lot of what we do as, "Followers of the Way," is done in private. This is not either or, but both and. Powered by the Holy Spirit, we live in a quiet, countercultural fashion as lined out in the Beatitudes, or to line up our desires with our actions, as Jesus teaches on the Commandments.

Our prayer, our devotion, for example, is not focused on ourselves, but on God. We "*let our light shine*" for God's glory. Likewise, our private prayer, as in the Lord's Prayer, we pray: "*Thine is the . . . Glory forever.*"

When we speak of the "incarnation", our minds are stretched. One of our ministries as believers is to proclaim Jesus to be fully God and fully human. He is the only person ever to be fully human and fully God precisely because his ministry is to glorify God.

This is the life Christ the King call us to. A life that displays the desire, prayer, and action for the goal of bringing God glory. A good question to ask ourselves daily is: "Do I take this vocation seriously?" St. Matthew writes that "*when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine*" (St. Matthew 7:28 KJV).

And so it should be. Here Jesus was preaching about Old Testament godliness as no one ever had. This astonishment did not end with this sermon. There were more Beatitudes to come, more healing, more miracles, more unusual actions because they seemed to defy the laws of Judaism, and the natural law. But, all of this and more, was bewildering ultimately because of the quality of the Love of Jesus that prompted them.

Think about your house. If someone asked you to describe what it looks like, you might tell them the exterior color, how many square feet, the size of the lot, the number of bed and bath rooms, and so on. I'd hazard the thought that, if you are like me, you would not mention the foundation, because I don't know a thing about house foundations! The foundation of a house makes all the difference. Listen to Proverbs 24:3 "*By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established.*" Valid for a house, true also for your life.

Imagine, if you will, the astonishment of our society should we choose to enact the words of the Sermon on the Mount. What might God do in and through us? Alleluia. Amen.