

A Synopsis of the Sermon on the Mount

In Deuteronomy 18, a future prophet is anticipated (v. 19), whose words the Nation of Israel will have to heed. Israelites, and all of us in the Church by extension, are accountable to God for obedience to Jesus' teachings. So Matthew records for us this Messianic Torah by Jesus, who is a new, second, greater Moses. Let's survey this block of text, Matthew chapters 5 to 7, in an attempt to distill what kind of person we followers of Jesus are to be and how we're to live.

The Sermon is highly organized. There are 9 beatitudes; 6 "antitheses," that is, Jesus' sayings in the format of "You have heard . . . but I say to you . . ."; a model prayer consisting of 6 petitions; 3 teachings on personal (private) righteousness; 3 further teachings in the format of "Do not . . . but do . . ."; and a conclusion consisting of 3 metaphors of the two "ways." And there's a "hook" at the end. These are all presented in the rhetorical format of asyndeton, that is, they are thematically but not syntactically connected. Probably the key verses are 6:33 and 7:12. The context is the promised Messianic Kingdom, which Jesus came to inaugurate.

The **Beatitudes** have to do with the character of a follower of Jesus. These describe Jesus' own character, and we're to emulate Him, be just like Him. That's what Christ-likeness is. So: Humility; disgust with worldly life and a burning desire instead for God's revealed righteousness; being merciful to others; continually having God's will and values in mind, such as holiness and peacefulness; and willingness to suffer at the hand of others because of doing God's will and identifying with Him. The reward for having such a character is welcome into and participation in the Kingdom. There is no greater destiny for anyone, which should fill us with unspeakable joy. These beatitudes are also like a Table of Contents to the Sermon, for whoever evidences these traits lives out the rest of what Jesus teaches and commands here.

First, a few words of explanation. Jesus is fulfilling Scripture. **Salt and light** have to do with covenant and witness. Followers of Jesus are fulfilling the promises that God had made in the Hebrew Bible ("salt"), showing God's faithfulness. And the role of Jesus' followers is to testify about the Kingdom to the world of Gentile nations, in fulfillment of Isaianic prophecy ("light"). Jesus explains further (5:17-20) that this Sermon reveals the true meaning of the Mosaic Law. What Jesus is teaching here really was intended all along in the Hebrew Scriptures, but Jesus' wisdom and insight are now making it explicit for His followers. The Law—and the commands in this Sermon—are God's revealed righteousness, which is enjoined on us. The ultimate goal of the Law is Jesus; it points to Him.

The **antitheses** are as follows: (1) We're to love each other. There's to be no anger, contempt, or being critical of others. There's to be no alienation, but all followers of Jesus are to be in loving relationship. (2) We're to be pure internally. No lustful or adulterous thoughts even. (3) No divorce! People who are divorced and remarry necessarily commit adultery, which is heinous to God. (4) Our speech is to be sincere, truthful. We're to say what's needful, and that's all. (5) We're to show grace to others. Even to evil-doers! Retaliation for offenses is forbidden. (6) We're to be loving, merciful people, just as God is. This makes us morally perfect. In other words, we imitate God.

The 3 sayings on **personal righteousness** have to do with alms-giving, prayer, and fasting. Our gifts to the needy are to please God and not ourselves. We easily deceive ourselves. The lust for self-gain—even when giving charity!—is powerful, but it must be controlled by the awareness that we're here to exalt God. We will all receive rewards: We can receive them in the here-and-now, in this life (for what such a reward is worth) or in the next existence when the reward will be supernal. Similarly, our prayer-life is a private matter between us and God. We're to keep in mind Who God is when we pray. **A model prayer** has 2 sets of 3 petitions: We're to pray for Christ's Return; for God's will to be followed; for the daily provision of our needs; for the forgiveness of sins and offenses; and for protection from temptation and from Satan. The plea for forgiveness is of special importance because sins are horizontal as well as vertical, and we need to have a spirit that forgives others for God to forgive us. I suspect that the petition to trust God for our basic needs is so that our focus can be on practicing righteousness.

The block of text from 6:19 to 7:11 consists essentially of three commands that have to do with **our attitude**, and then a final plea. Each has the pattern of "Do not/Do." The first command is in 6:19-24. We're to be always conscious of God and His will that we orient all of our life towards Him, exclusively. The second is in 6:29-34. We're not to be anxious or concerned about things in this life but trusting in God for everything in life. Our obsession is to be faithful in practicing

Kingdom righteousness. The third is 7:1-5, having to do with our attitude toward others. We're to not be critical of others but forgiving. If we're critical of others, God will be equally critical of us – and God will find much in us to hold us accountable for. The final set, a plea, is 7:6-11. (Verse 6 was probably a secular, familiar or common proverb at the time that Jesus employed here.) We're not to waste what's precious on those who are unworthy or undeserving, but instead seek the good things that God in wisdom and goodness generously wants to give us, His children. What specifically is in mind here? The Kingdom! The final verse in this block, v. 12, concludes the internal matter of the Sermon, reiterating that Jesus has made explicit what was already there, implicit, in the Old Testament.

The **Conclusion** to the Sermon is compelling beyond anyone's imagination. Jesus emphatically states that there are two ways – and *only* two ways – to respond to what He has just instructed. One way is to ignore His teachings and commands, or for whatever reason fail to do them, and that leads to personal destruction. The other way is to obey His words, and that is the way to life. He uses three metaphors in this powerful ending: two kinds of gate and path; two kinds of tree and its fruit; and two builders of houses. This dichotomy follows the ending of Deuteronomy in which there are two and only two ways for the Nation of Israel to go: In the way of life, thru obedience, which leads to blessing; or the way of death thru disobedience, which results in cursing. The kind of fruit we bear demonstrates what kind of "tree" (person) we are. The person who obeys Jesus is wise, the one who doesn't obey Jesus is . . . a fool.

All good conclusions have a **hook** at the end. Thus in the middle of this Conclusion appears a sharp barb, vv.21-23. Jesus here states that His instruction is the will of God and that we're obliged to obey it. AND, even more compelling, is the clear statement that we're to be in personal relationship with Him. Those who are disobedient to His words are "lawless." In other words, Christians are under law, the Law of Christ. The notion that Christians are free from law, or are under grace instead of law, is nonsense. People who reject Christ's will as propounded in this Sermon do so because of self-exaltation. Such people are "evil-doers." How are we in personal relationship with Jesus? By obeying Him!

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Jesus came to establish the promised Messianic Kingdom. He spoke this sermon in ±31 A.D. to His disciples and a crowd of Galilean Jews, revealing the kind of person that would be in His Kingdom. Matthew wrote this Gospel to and for the Church in ±50 A.D. to explain why the Messianic Kingdom didn't happen and how followers of Jesus should live in this present (prophetically unforeseen) era. In Chapter 12 of Matthew's narrative, the Jews appallingly (and irrationally) alleged that Jesus was working miracles in the power of Satan, essentially rejecting Him as their promised Messiah and King. At that point in the narrative a transition occurs. The Kingdom will have to be postponed until some time in the future. The parables of Chapter 13 reveal a new, interposed era that we call the Church Age.

The Church is not the Messianic Kingdom. The promised Kingdom will be coercive, and Christ does not rule coercively today. The Kingdom is yet future, when Jesus returns to earth. The Church Age is a unique interim era between these two advents. It both fulfills the role Israel was given (but failed to do) of evangelizing the Gentile nations and it anticipates the coming Kingdom. Disciples of Jesus are to continue the work of Jesus calling people to, and preparing them for, the future Kingdom. Those who faithfully follow Jesus in this present Church Age will also be in the Kingdom.

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So let's be clear about this. Matthew didn't simply write biography. This Sermon isn't here to demonstrate what a masterful teacher Jesus was. And it's not here only for a future generation of Jews at the return of Christ. Matthew wrote so that we in the Church can be prepared and faithful followers (disciples) of Messiah/King Jesus. In our evangelical churches, we tend to focus mostly on Paul's letters, but this Sermon is explicitly here *for us*. Let's study it, absorb it into our lives, and in the power of the Holy Spirit who has been given to us, put it into practice. Why? To exalt Jesus and to glorify God. And for our reward, which is infinitely wonderful blessing in the presence of the living God.