

Lessons from Matthew 5

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The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 is the first of Jesus’ five major discourses recorded by Matthew, each of which unfolds different facets of the kingdom of heaven. The first and last discourses act as bookends, describing the kingdom in its present and future dimensions respectively. The Sermon describes in far-reaching yet practical terms the character and practices of those who belong to the kingdom.

From a comparison of the other two Gospels that record this event, Luke 6:17–49 seems to be a shorter, independent report of the same sermon (cf. Matt 4:24–25; 5:1; Mark 3:7–13). Since Luke has the sayings on prayer (Luke 11:1–13) and worry (Luke 12:22–32) being given at other times, it appears that Jesus spoke many of the same or similar sayings on multiple occasions (see DA 488, 495).

Structure of the Sermon on the Mount

Apart from Matthew’s introductory (Matt 4:23–5:2) and concluding material (Matt 7:28–8:1), the sermon itself consists of three main sections:

1. The Beatitudes, which are blessings on citizens of the kingdom (Matt 5:3–12)
2. A More Abundant Righteousness (Matt 5:13–7:12)
 - General Principles (Matt 5:13–20)
 - Instruction on the Law (Matt 5:21–48)
 - Instruction on Worship (Matt 6:1–18)
 - Instruction on Attitudes toward God and Others (Matt 6:19–7:11)
 - Summary Principle: The Golden Rule (Matt 7:12)
3. Warnings of Future Judgment (Matt 7:13–27)

Interpretation of the Chapter

1. Verses 1–12

- Jesus goes up on a mountain (or high hill) with His disciples, apparently due to the size of the crowd. Those who follow Him up the hill include those healed by Him (cf. Matt 4:24–25; Luke 6:19).
- The beatitudes, which could be translated “How blessed are . . . ,” have aptly been described as reflecting the language of heaven (MB vii). They constitute eight promises of the blessings that citizens of the kingdom will receive. Even how these people are described is really an inherent promise of God’s power to restore them into His image.
- The first and last beatitudes assure those who sense their spiritual poverty and who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake that the kingdom of heaven is theirs not only as a future hope but now, as they experience its blessings.
- Though believers mourn over sin, and its impact on themselves and others, they may rest assured that a better day is coming when they will sorrow no more (cf. Zech 12:10; John 16:20–22).
- The meek, like the poor in spirit, rely upon God and entrust their future wellbeing to Him (Ps 37:3, 7, 34). As unlikely as it might seem, it is these who will inherit the earth (it’s a *gift*)—not the strong who would take it by force—and they will inherit not this sin-damaged planet, but a transcendent kingdom of glory over which the Son of Man will reign (Ps 8:11; 16:27; 19:28; 24:30–31; 25:34).

- Those who long for righteousness as they do their daily sustenance of food and water are promised that their hopes will be satisfied, both in terms of a future righteous kingdom (Isa 9:6–7; 11:1–5; 32:1) and of a present reality as the will of God described in His word is fulfilled in their own life and experience (cf. Matt 4:4).
- “The merciful” refer to those who carry out concrete acts of kindness: giving alms (Matt 6:2–4), ministering to “sinners” (Matt 9:13), forgiving others (18:32–35), etc. And kindness comes back upon the giver (Matt 7:2, 12; Prov 11:25). But showing mercy does not come naturally to the selfish human heart. “Whenever one manifests a spirit of mercy and forgiveness, he does it not of himself, but through the influence of the divine Spirit moving upon his heart. ‘We love, because He first loved us.’ 1 John 4:19, R.V.” (MB 21; cf. Matt 10:8).
- Purity of heart can spring only from one that God has cleansed (Ps 51:10; Acts 15:9), through “the washing of water by the word” (Eph 5:26). When the Son of Man comes in His kingdom (Matt 26:64), “we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2–3; cf. Rev 22:4).
- Although many in Israel longed to throw off the Roman yoke of oppression, Jesus labels His people “peacemakers” because they follow the ways of “the Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6; cf. Rom 5:1) and thus can be called God’s children (cf. Matt 5:45).
- Although some people seem to bring persecution upon themselves by their own poor behavior and then mistakenly believe their suffering proves them right, it is those who are persecuted “for righteousness’ sake” and “suffer as a Christian” (1 Pet 4:16) who are promised God’s kingdom. Thus, they need not fear those who may kill the body but are ultimately unable to harm their future destiny (Matt 10:28). In fact, they can rejoice because their witness spreads the gospel further and receiving the reward of seeing people saved in God’s kingdom as a result.

2. Verses 13–20

- Jesus presents three further images of those who compose the kingdom. His followers are called “salt,” “light,” and are to have a “Pharisee-exceeding” righteousness. The permeating character of salt and light suggests there are no boundaries to the kingdom’s influence, while the third image affirms that its citizens will outshine all human attempts at producing righteousness.
 - i. Salt and light are contrasting metaphors. Salt mingles silently to be effective while light must stand apart and be visible to all.
 - ii. Nevertheless, the emphasis is not on the light itself but on the act of letting it shine.
 - iii. Like the reflected light of the moon, this light does not originate with the believers themselves (unlike Pharisaic righteousness), but is that which they receive from Jesus (John 1:9), and is associated with “good works.” It is to direct people’s attention to a greater light—that of the Father who is the source of all light and goodness (Matt 19:17).
- Up to this point, no one would suppose that Jesus was trying to destroy the law, so Jesus’ reassurance that He came to fulfill it acts as an introduction for His ensuing and extensive commentary on the spiritual nature of the law as well as the goal of this teaching: to show how the law is truly to be fulfilled.

- i. The word “fulfill” is used most often in Matthew with regard to the fulfillment of prophecy (e.g., Matt 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23), which is also pointed to here, but it can also refer to fulfilling or obeying the righteous requirements of the law (Matt 3:15).
- ii. Every aspect of the law is to remain in force “till all is fulfilled,” which suggests that some elements, namely those which are ceremonial or typological, point forward to and will meet their fulfillment in future events.
- iii. Jesus’ reference to the commandments shows He has the moral law in mind as His subsequent quotations of the Ten Commandments confirm (e.g., Matt 5:21, 27, 33; cf. Matt 19:17–29).
- Jesus’ articulation of an impossibly high standard of righteousness as the “low bar” for entering the kingdom shows the insufficiency of all human strivings. Accepting anything less than “kingdom-of-heaven righteousness” would, in fact, only serve to immortalize evil in the universe.

3. Verses 21–48

- Jesus explains this more abundant righteousness using six overarching propositions divided into groups of three. The first group dealing with murder, adultery, and divorce amplifies the sixth and seventh commandments (Matt 5:21–32), while the second group plumbs the depths of the third commandment, forbids retaliation, and commands loving one’s enemies (Matt 5:33–48).
- Although Jesus’ six alternative propositions are normally translated in English with strong contrasting statements (“but . . .”), the softer Greek connective conjunction *de* suggests that each proposition elaborates on what precedes it (“Yet I say to you . . .”).
- The emphasis of Jesus is on the inward thoughts of the heart. Virtually all outward acts of sin begin with inward thoughts: murder begins with anger (cf. 1 John 3:15), adultery begins with lust, and stealing begins with covetousness. Nevertheless, the entrance of evil desires or lustful thoughts are not themselves sin but temptation—unless they are cherished rather than immediately repulsed as evil (Jas 1:14–15). Rather than trying to eliminate evil thoughts, we are urged to train our minds on the good (Phil 4:8; cf. Prov 16:3).
- The references to plucking out one’s eye or cutting off one’s hand should be taken metaphorically, not literally. They are avenues of temptation and may be the means by which sinful choices are made. Better even to lose a part of the body than for soul and body to be cast into hell. The Greek word translated “hell” (*geenna*) refers to God’s judgment on the wicked, destroying “both soul and body” with unquenchable fire (Matt 10:28). This fiery destruction is referred to by both Jesus (Matt 7:19; 13:40–42, 49–50; 18:8–9; cf. 25:41) and John the Baptist (Matt 3:10, 12).
- The only basis given by Jesus as legitimate grounds for divorce is sexual infidelity. The word used here for sexual immorality (*porneia*) is broader than adultery. It refers to any sexual activity outside of a biblically legitimate marriage (cf. Matt 15:19), including same-sex relationships. Divorce and remarriage for any other reason is a form of adultery.
- Vows or oaths were often carefully formulated to sound binding by calling on God indirectly as witness to their truthfulness (cf. Matt 23:16–22), but actually made to be broken and thus violate the third commandment (Exod 20:7; cf. Lev 19:12). Jesus’ blanket prohibition of oaths (except when placed under court oath, Matt 26:63–64) is

stricter even than the teachings of the Qumran community. A believer's word should always be trustworthy without the need for any additional assurances (Jas 5:12).

- The negative command forbidding retaliation (quoting Exod 21:24 et al.) is paired with the positive command to love one's enemies. Not insisting on one's rights or property shows a radical unselfishness and concern for the other person. The admonitions to turn the other cheek, give one's valuable outer cloak, go the extra mile, and not refuse requests to borrow money are simply examples of the principle to which others could easily be added, though challenging to fulfill.
- The final proposition to love one's enemies, a principle illustrated already by Elisha (2 Kgs 6:21–23), who is a type of Christ, is the most challenging of all. Yet, as Jesus points out, the Father shows kindness to all, even His enemies, providing for their needs with sunshine and rain. "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and so, by such actions, believers show their genuine connection to God as His spiritual children. Jesus "tells us to be perfect as He is, in the same manner. We are to be centers of light and blessing to our little circle, even as He is to the universe" (MB 77).

Application of the Chapter

Important lessons contained in this chapter include:

1. Regardless of how difficult life might be now, those who are truly blessed have the principles of heaven in their hearts.
2. To be truly whole and truly healthy in every way includes having healthy thoughts.
3. It is humanly impossible to achieve the righteousness that God requires of all who will enter heaven. Only a miracle of God's forgiving grace that transforms willing believers more and more into His image by the Holy Spirit can make it possible.
4. Putting these principles into practice in daily life will help us not only to be more like Jesus but to understand Him better and to love Him more. "God's ideal for His children is higher than the highest human thought can reach" (DA 311).

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