

# Overview of the Sermon on the Mount

## I. REVIEW

- A. The Sermon on the Mount is the most comprehensive teaching from Jesus on the role of the believer in cooperating with the grace of God. To pursue a life built around obedience to the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is to build a life that has sure and sturdy foundations that will not be shaken in times of trial and testing.
- B. The Sermon on the Mount provides a picture of a life in partnership with God's grace that is oriented around the things that God defines as valuable ("blessed"). It also portrays the things that stand in the way of that pursuit (Matt 5.21-48) and practices that facilitate and promote growth toward those values in our hearts (Matt 6).
- C. Jesus calls us to purposefully order our lives around these teachings. We are to intentionally seek to cultivate these values, to actively resist these sins/temptations, and to faithfully pursue the practices (the *means*) laid out by Jesus in order to see our lives come into greater conformity with his character and his kingdom.
- D. The centerpiece of the Sermon is an invitation to a "perfect" life — one that is singly ordered and oriented around pursuing complete and whole obedience to God in every season of our lives.

<sup>48</sup>You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5.48)

- E. It is important to understand that Jesus here is not outlining a call for moral perfection (this is an unfortunate result of using the English word 'perfect' in translation). Rather, he is outlining and calling for a wholehearted devotion to God and his ways throughout every stage of our maturity in the Christian life.<sup>1</sup> The foundational aspect of the sermon is a call to pursue *wholehearted obedience to Jesus* in complete partnership with his grace.
- F. Jesus declares that this will be difficult and costly (Matt 7.13-14) and must be something we commit our whole selves to in partnership with the grace of God (Matt 7.9-12).

## II. THE MAN OF THE SERMON (MATT 1.18-4.11)

- A. To rightly understand the Sermon on the Mount, we must understand the context within the Gospel of Matthew in which it is placed.
- B. Matthew has intentionally ordered his gospel to highlight the *teaching* ministry of Jesus (arranged around five discourses).<sup>2</sup>
- C. Prior to this first teaching section, Matthew has introduced the *man* who is about to open his mouth on the mountain and speak these words. In order to understand the Sermon, we must understand what Matthew wants us to see about the man teaching the sermon.
- D. The most important theme of the material in Matthew's Gospel leading up to the Sermon on the Mount is the idea of *fulfillment*. Seven times in Matthew 1-4 Matthew highlights how events from the life and ministry of Jesus happened in order to *fulfill* the Old Testament expectation (Matt 1.22-23; 2.15, 17-18, 23; 3.3, 15; 4.14-16).

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<sup>1</sup>The Greek word *teleios* (here translated 'perfect') does not carry the idea of moral perfection, but of "wholeness", "devotion", or "orderliness".

<sup>2</sup>The discourses are found in Matt 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 23-25.

- E. In Matthew's Gospel, there are three aspects contained within the idea of fulfillment. Lacking any of these would lead to a truncated understanding of what is meant by Jesus *fulfilling* the Scripture.
1. Jesus came to **fulfill the requirements of God's holy standard** by living his life in perfect obedience to God's character (*righteousness*) and his ways (*justice*). In doing so, he fulfilled what the people of God were always called to be and were always unable to do (i.e., Adam, Israel).
  2. Jesus **fulfilled specific promises** that God made concerning the Messiah and his work of salvation (e.g., Isaiah 53).
  3. Jesus **brought to its full understanding and purpose all that the Old Testament pointed toward**. Much of what Matthew says Jesus "fulfilled" is not predictive in nature, but typological (example: top of a puzzle box; or an unforeseen, but necessary, 'twist' in the plot of a story).
- F. At the heart of Matthew's portrait of Jesus is the declaration that he is **Immanuel** — God with us. This identity drives all of how we are to see Jesus throughout the whole of the Gospel.
- <sup>20</sup>an angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: <sup>23</sup>"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). (Matt 1.20-23)
- G. As Jesus ascends the mountain, draws his disciples near, and opens his mouth to teach them, we must remember the greatest reality that this is **God in the flesh** addressing those who had responded to his call to follow him (Matt 5.1).
- H. To rightly situate and understand the words of Jesus in the Sermon, we must remember that he is the one who *fulfills* the Old Testament expectation of a time when God would work a great redemption and salvation for his people through the Messiah. Jesus' teachings cannot be separated from Jesus' **identity** (God with us) or Jesus' **work** (redemption through his life, death, and resurrection).
- I. Rightly understanding his identity allows us to remember that these words are portraits of life in the kingdom given to those who have *responded* to the call of the Messiah by faith.

### III. THE INBREAKING OF THE KINGDOM (MATT 4.12-25)

- A. The second thing we need to understand when coming to the Sermon on the Mount is how Matthew presents the **ministry** of Jesus in summary form prior to this sermon. In the previous section, Matthew provides two summary statements of Jesus' ministry that help us orient how to interpret and apply the teachings of Matthew 5-7.
- B. In the first summary statement, Matthew gives us the focus of the message that Jesus was proclaiming as he began ministering in Galilee.
- <sup>17</sup>From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt 4.17)
- C. The purpose of Jesus' ministry, as the one who is *fulfilling* God's purposes that had been promised to his people, is to call people into repentance.
1. The call to repentance is a call to change directions. Repentance in the Scripture is not simply about experiencing sorrow or confessing something as sin (those are both essential parts of repentance). Repentance is about exchanging a way of seeing/acting/living for a different way.

2. Jesus goes throughout the region calling people to *exchange* their way of being in the world (their thinking, their values, their pursuits, etc.) for a different way of being in the world.
  3. This is uniquely and specifically tied to *following him* as a disciple (cf. Matt 4.18-22).
- D. The reason that Jesus is calling people to repent is that the *kingdom of heaven is at hand*. In the Gospels, it is clear that Jesus (and John the Baptist before him) understood that in his life and ministry a pivotal turning point in redemption was occurring. The promised kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God) was breaking into the world.
- E. Matthew further summarizes the beginning stage of Jesus' ministry in 4.23-25.
- <sup>23</sup>And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. <sup>24</sup>So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. <sup>25</sup>And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. (Matt 4.23-25)
- F. **Teaching:** Jesus is functioning as a Rabbi, going through the land gathering disciples to follow him. The concept of discipleship in the ancient world was a call to join yourself to a teacher in order to learn from him — not only *information* (what to believe), but to *emulate* his lifestyle (how to live in the world).
- G. **Proclaiming:** Jesus is also going through the region declaring the gospel of the kingdom of heaven to all who would hear. Jesus possessed a unique anointing of the Spirit to proclaim good news to the poor and downcast (Luke 4.18). This itself was a specific fulfillment of God's purposes and promises for the day when the Messiah would come (Isa 61.1ff.).
- H. **Gospel of the kingdom:** The summary of what Jesus was proclaiming is the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. This is the most concise statement of the heart of Jesus' message.
1. *Gospel* — simply means the “good news”. The gospel message was a proclamation of the activity or the declaration of a ruler/sovereign over all things.
  2. *Kingdom* — here we see that Matthew is concerned to show us that the kingdom of heaven is the primary content of Jesus' proclamation.
  3. As seen earlier in verse 17, Jesus understood that in his ministry the kingdom of heaven was *breaking into* the world. The kingdom of heaven is shorthand for both the sovereign rule of God *and* the realm in which his rule is manifest.
    - a. The kingdom of heaven is to be fully realized in the age to come
    - b. The kingdom of heaven has broken into the world now
  4. In the ministry of Jesus the future power of the age to come expressed in the kingdom of God has broken into this world. Jesus calls to any and all who will hear to **repent** and participate in the realm of God's reign here and now by joining themselves to him in discipleship.
  5. The gospel of the kingdom is one of the underrepresented aspects of the message of the gospel in the modern church. We are often familiar with the gospel of grace but are less familiar with the glorious truth of the good news of the inbreaking kingdom of God.

- I. **Healing every disease and every affliction:** This is a summary statement to *show* the reality of what Jesus has proclaimed in his message. The remaking of the created order was a marker of the age of the Messiah (the Day of the Lord) when God would act to renew all things. Jesus' power and authority over sickness, disease, demons, and even creation itself (cf. Matt 8-9) *demonstrates* the reality that the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
- J. If we understand these two things from the context of Matthew (the *man* who speaks the sermon and the importance of the *ministry* of the one speaking the sermon), it better helps us situate how to interpret and apply the words of the Sermon.
- K. Rather than being lofty, potentially unattainable ethical ideals that are laid out for us to grapple with, these words (spoken primarily to those who had responded to his call and were his disciples) are the description of what life in the kingdom of heaven will look like for those who have responded to the call of discipleship by faith in Jesus, God with us.

#### IV. AN OVERVIEW OF THE SERMON

- A. The Sermon on the Mount begins with Jesus' exposition of the value-system of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5.3-12). The eight beatitudes operate as invitations into holding and embodying the things that are truly great in God's economy and kingdom. These are like fruits that we must cultivate by the grace of God in partnership with the Spirit's activity in our lives. They are supernatural gifts that are given and grown.
- B. Jesus demonstrates that the presence of these eight virtues are the essence of Christian discipleship. To not have these realities developing and growing in our lives would be akin to salt losing its flavor, or light being hidden under a bushel (Matt 5.13-15). In other words, salt that is not salty is not salt; and light that is hidden under a basket is not light. Similarly, a disciple of Jesus who does not possess these realities (in part; growing; pursuing; etc.) is not a disciple of Jesus.
- C. Jesus outlines that the ways of the kingdom as he defines them (outlined in this teaching) are the way to true greatness in his kingdom (cf. Matt 5.17-20). He did not come to loosen the demands of the law, but to fulfill them and promote a way for his disciples (by his grace) to walk in obedience to his commandments. To do (and teach) these things is the true mark of greatness — not the size or the scope of our assignment in this age.
- D. The next sections deal with what it means to embody a greater righteousness as those joined to Jesus Christ.
  - 1. First, Jesus teaches about six particular strongholds in the human heart that stand in the way of these values being cultivated and manifest (Matt 5.21-48). These are **anger** (the spirit of murder), **lust** (spirit of immorality), **disregard for the marriage covenant** (divorce), **false commitment** (spirit of manipulation and self-promotion), **retaliation** (spirit of revenge), and **inactivity** (refusing active love).
  - 2. Jesus then teaches on several practices to be done **before his eyes** that partner with his grace in cultivating these eight virtues in our hearts (Matt 6.1-34). They are **giving, prayer, forgiveness, fasting**, and actively pursuing to **live in restful confidence of his sovereignty**.
- E. The final section of the Sermon on the Mount deals with the difficulties that will arise among those who respond to the call of Jesus and seek to orient their lives around his values and his ways. These people are invited to not participate in **judgment** (7.1-6); to **not give up in dependent pursuit** (7.7-11); understanding that this pursuit will be **costly** throughout every season of their lives (7.12-23).
- F. The close of the Sermon is a parable in which Jesus likens those who **hear** and **obey** these teachings to a person who has built their house on sure and lasting foundations that cannot be shaken (7.24-27).