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5 Blocks of Sermons in Matthew

Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5-7)

Commissioning the Twelve (ch. 10)

Sermon in Parables (ch. 13)

Humility and Forgiveness (ch. 18)

Olivet Discourse (chs. 24-25)

I. Review and Introduction to Additional Material in Matthew

In our previous two lessons we surveyed Mark's account of Jesus' great Galilean ministry, but in so doing we have skipped over material that is found in Matthew, Luke, and John contemporaneous with this same period of time. In this lesson, we want to go back and see what it is that we have skipped in Matthew, focusing primarily on Matthew's distinctive concern to present Jesus as a teacher. We will not comment on everything that Matthew uniquely includes during Jesus' great Galilean ministry, but particularly the blocks of teaching, the sermons if you like, that uniquely punctuate this account of Matthew.

When we introduced the gospel of Matthew, we discovered that there are five such blocks in this gospel: chapters 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount; chapter 10, Jesus commissioning the Twelve to go out on their first missionary travels within Israel; chapter 13, a sermon in parables; chapter 18, a sermon on humility and forgiveness; and Jesus' famous discourse on the Mount of Olives in chapters 24-25. We have already commented briefly on the parables in conjunction with Mark 4, and the Olivet discourse comes at the tail end of Jesus' life and fits more naturally in an upcoming lesson. That leaves three sermons that we want to focus on for this lesson: the Sermon on the Mount, the sermon on mission, and the sermon on humility and forgiveness. Because of its length and because of its fame and importance in the history of Christianity, we will devote considerably more attention to the first of these three sermons, the Sermon on the Mount, and then make much briefer comments about the remaining two.

II. Interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount

There has been a plethora of interpretations to the Sermon on the Mount throughout the history of the church because of the

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

stringent nature of its commands, summarized or epitomized perhaps most poignantly in Matthew 5:48 when Jesus draws the summary that His followers are to be “perfect” as His heavenly Father is perfect. It is possible to translate the Greek word here as “mature” and therefore understanding Jesus is not calling for sinless perfection (something Scripture is clear—it is impossible for disciples in this life). But still, the radical nature of His sermon remains: turning the other cheek; going the extra mile; redefining adultery in terms of lust; murder in terms of hatred; the famous Golden Rule; and many other portions.

A. Historical Overview

If we were to summarize the main approaches to the Sermon throughout history, we might mention six briefly. (1) One approach sees the Sermon primarily as a continuation of Old Testament law, not meant to be something that inspires confidence in the disciples’ of Jesus ability to follow it, but rather which was meant to drive them to their knees. Requesting a Savior, this is certainly a New Testament concept that Paul will elsewhere enunciate, but it is significant that Matthew 5:1-3 places the Sermon on the Mount in the context of teaching first of all for those who are already committed to Him at some level of discipleship. (2) A second approach is one which believes that Christ’s followers, with the help of God’s Spirit, can—through human efforts—build the kingdom of God in this world and transform the world into a considerably better and more moral and even Christian place. But 2,000 years of various efforts to do this, and the dramatic failures that have ensued, have made it a less plausible option today.

(3) Some have seen Jesus’ ethic as an interim ethic; that is, a striking degree of urgency for a period of time that He believed would be very short—namely the generation of His disciples that would culminate in His return. Unfortunately, this view has to believe that Jesus was mistaken about how quickly He would return and how short a period of human history would ensue. (4) Still others have adopted very existentialist approaches to Jesus’ teachings, denying that any of His ethics are meant to be taken as moral absolutes, but merely as examples of how His followers might act in certain instances, even though they might act very different seeking the immediate guidance of the Spirit for authentic Christian living in other contexts. (5) Still others have tried

Main Approaches to the Sermon on the Mount:

1. Continuation of OT Law
2. Guide for Human Effort
3. Interim Ethic
4. Existential Examples
5. Future Ethic
6. **Kingdom Theology**

Kingdom View:

Ideal Expression of God's Will for His People

KINGDOM



The Life of the Church

to explain the serious urgency and stringency of Jesus' sermon by postponing these commands. One popular but probably incorrect view sees Jesus as offering the kingdom to Jews on the terms of the Sermon on the Mount, but when they reject it then postponing entirely these ethics for some coming millennium or perfect eschatological age.

B. Kingdom Theology

Instead of all of these views, and notwithstanding a certain element of truth that each may contain, the view that commands considerable consensus of scholars today may be the view that is often called the "kingdom view." As with Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God more generally, there is one sense in which it is inaugurated; it has arrived with the presence of Jesus and in the life of the church ever since, but there are other significant ways in which it can only fully arrive, only fully be realized in the lives of disciples, in the age to come after His return. It is probably best, therefore, for us to understand Jesus' sermon and indeed His ethics more generally as the ideal expression of God's will for His people—an ideal which can, with some substantial measure, partially be achieved in this life as God's people yield to His Spirit, but which can only fully, in any serious way, be fulfilled in the life to come.

It is also important to remind ourselves that just as the Sermon is addressed to disciples, it is addressed to disciples living in communities; and many of the practices within the Sermon can be much more significantly obeyed and followed as God's people live out their lives together—the life of the church, taking interpersonal relationships quite seriously, rather than the life of some radical, individualist Christian trying to go on his or her own. Again, it is controversial but probably significant to say that this also rules out seeing Jesus' ethic as some kind of model for how governments or states should run themselves, even if in democracies it is important and proper for Christian citizens to promote legislation and ethical policies in keeping with their own personal convictions.

III. Teachings from the Sermon on the Mount

A. Brief Outline

INTRODUCTION (9 Beatitudes)		
A. Jesus Fulfills Torah	B. True vs. Hypocritical Piety	C. Social Issues
6 Antithesis	3 Examples	3 Commands
CONCLUSION (3 Illustrations)		

“Blessed are
the . . . ,
for they . . .”

With this overview we may then sketch a brief outline of the Sermon on the Mount, noting Matthew's predilection for grouping Jesus' teaching together in series of threes or multiples of threes. The introduction to the Sermon begins with the famous Beatitudes. Matthew's account has nine. Luke's account in the Sermon on the Plain is shorter and balances the Beatitudes with woes against those who have the opposite attitude or behavior from those who are blessed. If one was to summarize both versions of the people whom God declares blessed, that is, happy or fortunate, one might speak of it using the contemporary vernacular as everything which is not macho—everything which inverts the world's standards of what is considered powerful and successful, the poor or the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who seek God's righteousness, and so forth, culminating with those who are persecuted for the sake of their discipleship with Jesus.

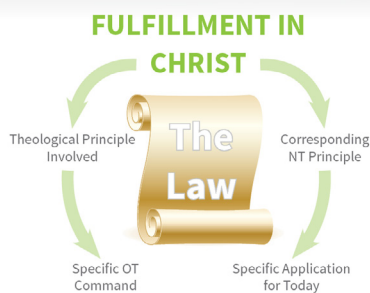
B. Salt and Light

Following the nine Beatitudes are the short little metaphors of salt and light, which balance out the very countercultural call of the Beatitudes with the reminder that this countercultural living nevertheless has to be done in full view of the world so that God's people can act as a preservative, as salt was in first-century times—also as a light, a beacon, a guidance, a way of pointing the way forward according to God's standards for others. With Matthew 5:17 through the end of the chapter, Jesus then addresses, at least in Matthew's account, the question of how all this relates to the Law. As we have seen before, it would not be surprising if, even with these short introductory comments, Jesus' Jewish listeners were already asking the question, “Is Jesus trying to overthrow our laws, or at least our ancestral unwritten traditions?”

C. Thesis Paragraph

Matthew 5:17-20 can then be taken as the beginning of the body of the Sermon, even a thesis paragraph of sorts, in which Jesus on the one hand very firmly states that He has not come to abolish the Law. But, He goes on to state, not the natural opposite of that statement—that Jesus has not come to preserve the Law, but rather to fulfill it. As we have seen

**You have
heard that it
was said . . .
but I tell you . . .**



in earlier lessons, the ancient Hebrew and Greek words for “fulfill” can also mean “to fill full,” to bring something to its intended purpose, to a point of completion. The remainder of 5:21-48 gives six antitheses, six examples in which Jesus begins by saying, “you have heard it said of old, but I say unto you . . .” And what comes out most prominently in these antitheses is not the continuity between Jesus’ teaching and the Law or the ways the Law has been interpreted, but the discontinuity.

Even if at the same time Jesus insists He is not abolishing the Law, clearly He is not allowing it to stand in terms of its applications for His followers unchanged. In His teachings about murder, lust, divorce, oaths, and so forth He internalizes the Law, He radicalizes the Law, and at times He even supersedes the Law—as in preventing what was permitted in Old Testament divorce law, Deuteronomy 24. But whatever else He is doing, He is certainly showing Himself to be the Law’s sovereign interpreter—a point that is not lost on His audience when, at the very end of the sermon in 7:28-29, Matthew remarks that the crowds marveled because Jesus spoke as if He had authority and not like the Jewish leaders. This does not mean that the Jewish teachers did not have an authority, as we learn from the voluminous rabbinical writings. It was a derived authority, dependent on their ability to quote Scripture or quote a previous authoritative rabbi. Whereas Jesus speaking, almost as if He were God, says simply, “But I say unto you . . .” It is not an explicit claim for deity, but there are implications there for Jesus’ self-understanding, a very exalted and high view of Himself nevertheless.

D. The Antitheses

The final triad on antitheses in Matthew 5:33 and following particularly call for us to interpret them against their historical background. Turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, giving to him who begs from you, all cry out for interpretation in the context of the small, early first-century Palestinian village. Turning the other cheek, for example, was a way of saying not to trade insults; a slap on the cheek was not a violent bodily assault in first-century Jewish culture but a common way of a superior insulting an inferior. Going the extra mile must be understood in the context of the Roman conscription laws, in which soldiers had the right to



Matthew 5:44

... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ...

Matthew 6:9b-13

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

commandeer Jews or other subjugated people to help carry their luggage on a forced march for a maximum of a mile. Giving to those who ask from you is set in a context of not taking more collateral clothing than is necessary in a court of law and so forth.

We must be careful in interpreting these passages out of context and taking them in ways that actually contradict what the Scripture teaches elsewhere; for example, in a nonresistance to evil, even though elsewhere clearly Jesus resists evil—at times running away from it, at other times directly combating it, even exorcising it, and claiming that in His ministry He is vanquishing Satan. The close of Matthew 5 brings us, as we mentioned earlier, to some of the most stringent and radical claims of the Sermon, including one of the ways in which Jewish scholars are agreed Jesus was quite distinctive from most forms of religion of His day, namely in a call to loving one's enemies— clearly one of the hardest challenges for Jesus' followers in any age.

E. Hypocritical Piety

After chapter 5 and the first main section in the body of the Sermon, there are another three examples that are closely parallel in form, in 6:1-18, concerning true versus hypocritical piety. The three examples Jesus deals with were all well-known in Jewish circles: alms giving, prayer, and fasting. In each case Jesus is commanding His followers not to parade their piety in public so as to receive merely the praise of humans, but rather to do what they can as inconspicuously as possible so that God will reward them instead.

F. The Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:9-13)

The most famous of the three examples Jesus uses here is clearly His teaching on prayer, because into this context He inserts what has come to be known as the Lord's Prayer. Although interestingly, particularly with the statement to deliver us from evil and to forgive our sins, this is one prayer which Jesus Himself never actually prayed and from one point of view could not pray, since Christians believed He was sinless. Many have suggested that it might better have been entitled the Disciples' Prayer or the Model Prayer, but

The Disciples' Model Prayer

- I. Focus on God (vv. 9-10)
 - A. Recognize Him as intimate
 - B. Recognize Him as holy
 - C. Pray for His kingship
 - D. Pray for His will
- II. Focus on People (vv. 11-13)
 - A. Basic physical needs
 - B. Spiritual needs
 - 1. Forgiveness (conditional)
 - 2. Preservation

Matthew 6:2m

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Matthew 7:1

Do not judge or you, too, will be judged.

unfortunately 2,000 years of church history have stuck us with the other term, and it is not likely to change.

Interestingly, the Lord's Prayer divides into two halves—the first one focusing on God, who He is and what His will is: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Then after we have our perspective on God and His will and focus, we can move on to the second half of the prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” That is where the prayer originally ended. We mentioned in an earlier lesson that an early Christian scribe then added the very pious and perhaps from his point of view more appropriate conclusion, in fact echoing scriptural language from Chronicles: “For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

G. Wealth and Worry

After this short section, the Sermon continues with three examples of Jesus teaching about wealth and about worry (6:19-34), in which He contrasts two masters that ultimately compete for human allegiance: God and mammon, that is, material resources or possessions more generally. In our modern affluent society, it is a significant question how many people, even who profess Christianity, are really serving money or material resources rather than Jesus.

H. Decisions

Chapter 7:1-6 proceed to give three teachings about true and false judgment, how to treat others. Matthew 7:1, “Judge not, lest ye be judged,” is often misapplied and taken out of context. Even by the time we get to Matthew 7:5-6, Jesus is commanding a certain form of right judgment. Rather, the term that is translated “judge” can also in appropriate context be translated “do not be judgmental,” “do not be overly censorious or condemning in your judgment.” The Old Testament knows well the command to leave vindication or vengeance to God; God will ultimately justly judge all people. We will almost certainly get it wrong and be unjust at some point if we try taking it into our hands prematurely.

Matthew 7:7

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Matthew 7:12

“The Golden Rule: ” . . . do to others what you would have them do to you . . .”

Matthew 7:7-11 continue with the theme of prayers and their answers, the famous verses to ask, seek and knock, which at first glance sound like a *carte blanche* until we remember that Matthew 7 is to be read after Matthew 6 with the famous Lord's Prayer, in which one of the caveats that must enter into all of our praying is “thy will (that is, God's will) be done.” Matthew 7:12 brings the body of the Sermon to a conclusion with the famous Golden Rule— do unto others as we would have them do unto us. And despite our, at times over-familiarity or even parodies of this principle, it remains a remarkably comprehensive and successful summary effectively guiding our ethical decisions in areas in which Scripture does not explicitly address.

The conclusion of the Sermon then, Matthew 7:13-27 presents three different illustrations for the two choices or the choice of two ways that faces all people who hear Jesus' response. Will they simply hear Him and go away or will they hear and obey, becoming His followers and beginning, with His help, to put their principles into practice?

IV. Additional Teachings

A. Missionary Discourse

From the Sermon on the Mount we now turn much more briefly to the sermon on mission, beginning with Matthew 9:35 and ending in 11:1, for the most part occupying the whole of chapter 10 as he sends the Twelve out (Mark tells us, in a shorter parallel, two by two) to replicate Jesus' ministry both the preaching and teaching and also the healings and exorcising. This sermon breaks into two distinct sections: 10:1-16, which include a variety of instructions that clearly apply only in the context of this specific ministry of the Twelve— their call to travel light, to depend on the hospitality of others and so forth, particularly to go nowhere among the Samaritans and the Gentiles. All of that is explicitly rescinded by Jesus later in His Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel and in His teaching on the last night of His life in Luke 22:35-38, as He tells them now not to go out so vulnerable but to be prepared for hostility.

The second half of the sermon, that which is more directly transferable over to Christian living in all other times and

Matthew 10:23

When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

Sermon on Humility and Forgiveness:

- I. On Humility (18:1-14)
 - A. Disciples' Humility (vv. 1-9)
 - 1. Illustrated positively (vv. 1-5)
 - 2. Illustrated negatively (vv. 6-9)
 - B. On God's Humility (vv. 10-14)

Sermon on Humility and Forgiveness:

- II. On Forgiveness (18:15-35)
 - A. Withheld if no repentance (vv. 15-20)
 - 1. Process of confrontation (vv. 15-17)
 - 2. Process of ratification (vv. 18-20)

places, therefore, is found in 10:17-42. Here Jesus prophesied that coming hostility, the persecution, being dragged before the rulers of both Jews and Gentiles, things that clearly did not happen to the disciples during Jesus' earthly lifetime but did happen tragically over and over again in the years and generations that followed. Understanding these kinds of distinctions not only helps us to avoid applying passages in the first part of the sermon that were only meant for a short period of time to other situations, but it also helps us make sense of one of the strangest teachings of Jesus in all the Gospels—Matthew 10:23, in which He says they will not have finished going through the cities of Israel before He, the Son of man, would return. When we understand that as referring beyond Jesus' death and resurrection to the time in the age of the church, we can probably interpret His words as meaning the mission to the Jews which will perennially be incomplete. There will never be a completely positive response from the Jewish people, even as it remains a priority of God's people to witness to them throughout history.

B. Sermon on Humility and Forgiveness

The final sermon on which we will briefly comment is that which comprises the whole of Matthew 18, the sermon on humility and forgiveness. It too breaks neatly into two parts according to those two themes that we have just mentioned: 18:1-14 dealing with the theme of humility—first the need of humility for disciples (they are to have a childlike attitude, understanding that they are entirely dependent on God and Christ), and also focusing on, in a sense, the humility that God Himself exhibits in the extent to which He goes to seek to save those who are lost (here we have the famous parable of the lost sheep in verses 10-14).

Verses 15-35 turn to the closely related topic of forgiveness and they too subdivide into two subsections that must be taken together. Verses 15-20 deal with what happens with respect to forgiveness when there is no evidence of repentance. This caveat is not immediately obvious just from the text of Matthew, but is explicitly present in the parallel brief account in Luke 17:3. And it seems to be a necessary interpretive conclusion even from reading the text of Matthew 18 alone, because the following verses, 21-35, very clearly teach that there is to be lavish, even unlimited, forgiveness where there is repentance. The procedures then

Sermon on Humility and Forgiveness:

- II. On Forgiveness (18:15-35)
 - B. Unlimited if repentance (vv. 21-35)
 - 1. Illustrated positively (vv. 21-22)
 - 2. Illustrated negatively (vv. 23-35)

**If your brother
sins against
you. . .**

of 15-20, even if not explicitly stated, must come into play only when there is no repentance.

And it is these verses, 15-18 in particular, that provide the famous basis in the teaching of Jesus for the practice of church discipline. If a brother or sister has something against someone, we are to try to deal with that problem first of all privately. How rarely is this followed when often such a person is the last one to know of our offense, after all of our friends have heard our gossip; but these are Jesus' words. If this proves ineffective, if it does not solve the situation, then one or two others are to be brought together to still try to deal with the situation relatively privately. Only if that fails is the entire church to be involved in the process, and only if that step fails is something like what the church has come to call excommunication put into play.

It is interesting that the phrase Jesus uses here is simply let such a person be to you as a tax collector or sinner or Gentile, if you like. These are the very people that Jesus bent over backwards to try to win to His side and to show love for. In essence, what Jesus is saying then is that even the most serious and severe step in this process of church discipline treats a person as a non-Christian. That may mean he or she is not permitted in certain assemblies that are for Christians only, but it does not mean that one should break off all contact with that person. As long as they are alive, as long as the possibility of repentance is there, Jesus seeks to win them back.