

## Lecture 6 – Ethics of the Kingdom: Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” Matthew 7:24 (NIV)

### Key Terms

Identity of Jesus, presence of conflict, kingdom life, three levels of righteousness

### Objectives

- \*Explore differing interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount (SOM)
- \*Understand the audience, meaning, setting, and structure of the SOM

### Lead Questions

- \*Read the Sermon on the Mount. What feelings does it bring up in you? Why?
- \*How might a “New Age Christian” (one who professes to be Christian and yet is greatly influenced by New Age philosophy and values) be impacted by the Sermon on the Mount? Why? How would you respond?

### Sources

- \*Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Word, 1982.
- \*John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, Eerdmans, 1965
- \*See also works by D.A. Carson and John Stott. Commentary: Morris, Carson.

## Ethics of the Kingdom: Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount

### I. Introduction

- A. Setting: near the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry
  1. “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee” (Matt 4:12).
  2. Two themes already established: the identity of Jesus and the presence of conflict.
- B. The beginnings of the Galilean ministry
 

A ministry of grace to the poor. Matthew 4:12-25 begins with the spiritually poor, in “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Miracles minister to the physically poor, the diseased, the demonized, the paralyzed, the marginalized.
- C. Drawing the crowds to Himself
  1. Jesus’ great public ministry began with miracles. Why? It was a sign of the Messiah. It began the process of presenting Jesus to the public.
  2. Jesus had a large crowd following Him, but not necessarily for the right reasons. Jesus never intended to heal all the sick in Israel. Goal is to make disciples.

### II. Question of Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount: What Is It and Who Is It For?

- A. The problem
 

Sermon on the Mount (SOM) is the most sublime, most penetrating ethic ever recorded. Yet too penetrating. Further, it seems impracticable. Therefore readers struggle to see the whole.

  1. It reads as a series of commands from Jesus, our authoritative teacher and Lord.
  2. But if merely a series of commands, its beauty is a burden, its commands condemn...
  3. This produces interpretations that attempt to retain yet explain or modify its authority.
- B. Views of the sermon
 

See R. Guelich, *Sermon on Mount*; Carson and Morris commentaries; Stanton, DJG; Crump, *Applying the SOM*, Criswell; Stein, *Method and Message*.

  1. Medieval Roman Catholic Church: reading, esp Aquinas: SOM presents a two-tiered ethic. Reasoning: Passages like Matt 19:11-12, “Let those accept it who can.”
  2. Luther distinguished the kingdoms of God and world. Privately disciples must heed the SOM in straightforward way. But life in world may require action which superficially

- conflicts with the sermon. Christian soldiers or judges need not turn the other cheek. They may fight and punish, so long as they have inward love. Reason: appeal to whole Bible.
3. Anabaptists of Reformation and Ancient Church both favored plain reading. Since commands require action contrary to civil office, Christians should withdraw from public.
  4. Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxy (17th century) “Paulinized” the SOM. It is an impossible ideal, an intensification of Mosaic law, whose demands drive men to pre-evangelistic despair.
  5. Liberal interpretations abound, remaking the sermon in the image of their own theology. Harnack: Fatherhood of God, brotherhood and love for fellow man. Existentialists: guide to authentic, radical living. Not a law, a model. Schweitzer says it is an interim ethic.
  6. Most of these views make Jesus a teacher of law.
- C. Context shows SOM is primarily for those who are already disciples.
1. Context of Matthew 4:12-5:1 shows Jesus addressed disciples.
    - a. Jesus proclaims the kingdom (K), but needs to flesh that out, 4:17, 23.
    - b. Jesus is gathering disciples, 4:18-22 .
    - c. In immediate context, He sees crowds and call disciples to Himself, 5:1.
  2. The text itself is full of indications that it addresses those who have already entered K.
    - a. It begins with pronouncement of blessing on those who know their need of grace, 5:3.
    - b. They already share in K benefits: Theirs is the K (5:3,10); They are salt, 5:13-16.
    - c. Audience will face persecution for Jesus’ sake and should expect it, 5:11-12.
    - d. Hearers know God as king and father, 5:16, 48, 6:1 etc.
  3. Disciples listen so as to live their lives under the reign of the king.
  4. Does the SOM therefore apply to unbelievers? Yes and No. No, for unbelievers are incapable of obedience. God is not their Father. By definition, they are not poor in spirit or meek. But yes, the close of the sermon (7:28, “the crowds were amazed”) shows that unbelievers are invited to listen in. Jesus even turned His attention to them with four warnings requiring a decision.
- D. The SOM describes kingdom life
1. Matthew brackets the SOM with a description of Jesus’ threefold ministry, in 4:23, 9:35; He taught in synagogues, preached the good news of the kingdom and healed the sick. Matthew 8 - 9 show the healing. The SOM shows what He preached and taught.
  2. Not only is kingdom the context, it is mentioned 8 times in the sermon.
  3. The first and last beatitudes declare that those whom God blesses possess the kingdom (5:3, 10).
    - a. Those who relax the requirements of the law will be called least in the kingdom; those who do the law and teach its contents will be called great (5:19).
    - b. Hearers must be righteous to enter the kingdom (5:20).
    - c. Disciples pray that the kingdom would come (6:10).
    - d. Seek first the kingdom... (6:33).
    - e. Not everyone who calls Jesus “Lord” will enter the kingdom (7:21).
  4. Thus SOM fleshes out Jesus’ mission of announcing the kingdom. The K of God dawns! God reigns over His disciples. These are the principles of the king. This is K life.
- E. The SOM asks disciples to pattern their lives after their king (cf Matt 10:24-25)
1. Jesus mourned over Israel’s needs (9:36, “They are like sheep without a shepherd”; 23:37).
  2. He is meek and humble (11:29), laying an easy yoke on His people.
  3. He fulfilled the righteousness of the OT (5:17). He received baptism for this (3:15).
  4. He was merciful; compassion, not necessarily a plan to perform a revelatory sign, moved Him to perform some of His miracles (14:14-21, 20:34; also 9:36).
  5. He was pure, beyond just accusation, even by His enemies (26:59-60).

6. He was persecuted (26-27) and told His disciples to expect the same.

## II. Setting and Structure of the SOM

### A. The sermon in Matthew

1. The phases of Jesus' life offer the basic structure for Matthew. To this Matthew adds second structure of five discourses. Each begins with the description of an audience ready to listen and ends with the phrase, "When Jesus had finished saying these things..."
2. Do five discourses make Jesus a second Moses, delivering five "books" of law? Like Moses, Jesus gave His disciples guidance needed to live and teach the life of discipleship. The first sermon is something like the basic 10 Commandments.

### B. The unity of the sermon

Issue: the sermon is brief; it can be read aloud in under 20 minutes. Yet it teaches on a great number of topics. Among evangelical expositors, there are two views:

1. The sermon gathers teaching presented on more than one occasion. Reasoning: The sermon's teaching is scattered through Luke, with but one large cluster of 30 similar verses (Luke 6). Further, Matthew 10 seems to have gathered disparate teachings on mission.
2. The sermon condenses a much longer message. Reasoning: speeches commonly lasted long in antiquity. Gospels give strong sense that crowds often listened and/or received healing from Jesus for hours on end (e.g. 14:15, 15:32).

### C. The structure of the SOM

Theme is kingdom righteousness. The term righteousness appears 5 times, yet three are pivotal. Climax of the Godward beatitudes (5:6). Disciples' righteousness must exceed scribes and Pharisees (5:20), leading into a discussion of standards of righteousness. 6:33 sums the great ethical section.

1. Prologue, 5:3-16, The beatitudes are overture: disciples' character, vision, aspirations.
2. 5:17-20 opens, 7:12 closes the main section. Jesus comes to fulfill all righteousness, to present a higher righteousness. Matt 5:17-20 says there are three levels of righteousness
  - a. Scribes (5:21-48), the error of superficial knowledge of the letter without spirit
  - b. Pharisees (6:1-18), practice of righteousness, but without the proper motives
  - c. Disciples (6:19-34.), don't seek treasures, do seek righteousness.
3. Matthew 7:1-12 describes disciples' proper response to all the teaching. Then 7:13-24 invites the crowds to respond positively, choosing the better road, confession, and foundation.

*In what ways are you or your church reaching out to the poor? How should the church strive to better serve the poor? Why?*