

The Beatitudes, Part One: The Sermon On The Mount

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***Forerunner*, "Personal," January 1999**

Certain portions of Scripture seem to be etched more deeply into people's minds than others. Psalm 23 is definitely one of these, as are I Corinthians 13 and Hebrews 11. The Sermon on the Mount, as Matthew 5-7 is commonly called, is another. Its popularity may stem from its position near the beginning of the New Testament, causing it to be read more frequently than other parts. Far more likely, however, people know it well because of its succinct and strikingly clear teachings that form many of the foundational planks of the Christian way of life. Containing Jesus' description of what His followers should be and do, it comes closer to being Christianity's manifesto than any other single portion of the Bible.

Scholars debate whether Jesus actually gave the Sermon as a single discourse, but Matthew presents it as though it was, and the issue is really moot in terms of the powerful instruction it offers. Among other things, it contains the Beatitudes, brief illustrations on the spirit of the law, and advice about the personal and private nature of a relationship with God, including the so-called Lord's Prayer. It teaches us how to avoid the pulls of this world through trusting in God and seeking His Kingdom and righteousness before all other priorities in life. Chapter 7 includes the well-known Golden Rule, a caution against judging, a warning to beware of false prophets and a final admonition to found ourselves on solid ground by not only hearing but doing.

The Sermon in Matthew's Gospel

Matthew breaks a 400-year-long scriptural silence between Malachi and the birth of Jesus Christ. We have no record that God sent any prophets during that period, though undoubtedly a remnant of faithful people awaited the fulfilling of the promises God had so long before given to Abraham. But when God again began speaking, He spoke through His Son, the chief Apostle, the greatest Prophet, Messiah and soon-to-come King. Jesus came

proclaiming a New Covenant and a new way to relate to God, a way independent of the Temple, Jerusalem, Aaronic priesthood or bloody animal sacrifices. As long as it was done decently and in good order, God could be worshipped anytime, anywhere, by those having His Spirit, for God intended His children to worship Him through every avenue of life.

Matthew begins by stating, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham." He refers to Jesus as "the Son of David" seven times in his book, thus connecting Jesus of Nazareth with the throne. His defining theme is Jesus as the promised Messiah, who will save us from our sins and rule over this earth in the Kingdom of God.

The world perceives this book as being the most "Jewish" of New Testament books, but this is only partly correct. Matthew does provide a transition from the Old Covenant to the New, yet the promises made to Abraham—which Matthew presents Jesus as fulfilling—were to Abraham and his seed, which included physical Israel as well. Therefore, it would be more correct to say that Matthew is the most "Israelitish" of New Testament books, including both Israel and Judah. At the time of Christ, the Jews were the only visible part of that far greater body of Abraham's descendants.

Early on, Matthew foreshadows the King's rejection by His own by showing Jesus born *outside* Jerusalem and worshipped by magi who apparently traveled a long distance from the east. Normally, the King would be born in the city of His throne and worshipped by its citizens. In the fourth chapter, after He defeats Satan in a titanic struggle, leaves His hometown of Nazareth, moves to Capernaum and begins His ministry, the reader discovers that those who knew Him in Nazareth violently rejected Him when He preached to them (Luke 4:16-30). Matthew then reports that Jesus went beyond Jordan into Galilee of the Gentiles and preached to the Gentiles there (Matthew 4:12-16).

Not an auspicious beginning for the greatest Teacher this world has ever seen! However, He patiently persisted in preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God and calling people to repentance. His fame began to spread throughout Galilee, aided greatly by His miracles of healing bodies, minds and spirits, until great multitudes followed Him.

The Sermon's Setting

The Sermon's opening is quite brief, but a number of similarities and contrasts with other places, people and events are of interest. The first is the place. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, who held Moses' seat and taught in fine auditoriums, Jesus gave this vital address on an unknown mountain. It was not one of the "holy" mountains like Mount Sinai, Mount Zion, Mount Moriah or the Mount of Olives, but an anonymous, ordinary mount, again outside Jerusalem, with no distinguishing holiness or history.

There are more contrasts than similarities when one compares this event with Moses and Israel at Mount Sinai. Here, Christ goes up the mountain and preaches a sermon that is really an exposition of the law. When the law was given, the Lord came down on the mount. When God spoke the law, it was accompanied by thunder, lightning and earthquake, while the people—ordered to keep their distance—cowered in fear. This time He speaks in a small still voice, and the people are invited to draw near. Small things? Maybe, but significant in that they are recorded.

Yet His going up into the mountain may have an even deeper significance by drawing attention to Matthew's theme. On other occasions he also highlights the place from which Jesus taught. In Matthew 13:36, Jesus speaks "in the house." In chapter 17:1, He is transfigured into glory before the eyes of Peter, James and John "on a high mountain." In chapter 24:3, He delivers the end-time prophecy on the Mount of Olives. Finally, in chapter 28:16, the risen Christ, the Conqueror of death, commissions His apostles from the mountain. In each case, God, by showing Him in an elevated place, subtly draws attention to the Christ's royal authority. As our Lord, He is above.

Another fact, while seemingly small, is not entirely insignificant considering these things: He sat as He proclaimed the laws of His Kingdom. This was the common practice of Jewish teachers: Jesus says in Matthew 23:2, "The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat." However, His sitting intimates something more than merely accommodating the prevailing mode of teaching of that time. Mark 1:22, from a time very early in Christ's ministry, reads, "They were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." In Matthew this comment appears as the concluding remarks of the Sermon (7:28-29). As Jesus declares His

Kingdom's laws, He speaks with an authority that transcended that of the Jewish leaders. Therefore, His posture is better seen as symbolic of the King sitting on His throne and "laying down the law."

To Whom Did He Preach It?

Virtually every picture of this Sermon, whether in a movie or painting, portrays Jesus speaking to a large multitude. Some reason exists to assume this because Matthew 4 ends with great multitudes following Him; chapter 5, as the sermon begins, opens with Him seeing the multitudes; and when chapter 8 begins, great multitudes follow Him again. In Mark and Luke when He was preaching other messages, "great multitudes" and "innumerable multitudes" describe the size of the crowds listening to Him. Undoubtedly, Jesus attracted large numbers of people to hear Him.

However, in this case the stronger evidence lies with the understanding that it was a sermon intended for His disciples. Though others besides the twelve may have been listening, Jesus did not speak to a great multitude. Matthew 5: 1 begins with, "And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain . . .," clearly giving the impression that He went up the mountain to withdraw from the multitudes. Then the verse says, ". . . and when He was seated, His disciples came to Him." The multitudes did not consist of disciples. The disciples were those already committed to Him and His way. It is they who gathered before Him, and at this time in His ministry, it was a very small number. Verse 1 gives the distinct impression that Jesus gave His concentrated instruction to a small group of people. When He came down from the mountain, multitudes again became part of His following.

There is no doubt, though, to whom this message applies. Some parts of its instruction might be considered as of a general nature, yet the overwhelming majority of it applies only to the converted, those having the Spirit of God. Its thrust is not evangelistic—intended to call people into the church—but internal, as it sets standards for those already converted to prepare them for God's Kingdom when it comes in its fullness. The instruction is intensely practical; it deals, not as much with things to be believed, but with things to be done.

The Sermon tells us what our attitudes must become and admonishes us to be lights to the world. We must not lust or allow our anger to be uncontrolled or frivolous. We must turn the other cheek, agree with our adversary quickly, go the extra mile and love our enemy. It tells us how to pray, fast, do charitable deeds, lay up treasure in heaven, be single minded, exercise our faith in trusting God, seek Him before all other things in life and much more. The point is clear. These are all things the converted must actively do to witness for God, glorify Him and be in His Kingdom. They are not intended to be the limit but a summary of the attitudes, thoughts and works of one striving for the Kingdom of God.

An Application for Today

Currently, the membership of God's church has been scattered to the four winds. Unity seems only a distant hope or something wistfully remembered from good times past. The church is in anxiety-producing turmoil and confusion as its members search to make sense of all that has happened while seeking direction for their lives. The Bible contains a model of this in the example of the first-century church. Its strength and unity also dissipated as the apostles died and false doctrine crept in. The church of that era lost its first love.

Jesus prophesies that He would spew the end-time Laodicean church out of His mouth if it did not repent of its ungodly attitudes. It has come to pass. Laodiceanism is nothing more than a lackadaisical worldliness regarding our relationship to God and the application of His way to our lives. Worldliness is simply being like the world. It defines an attitude toward our relationship to God and our failure to reflect His way of life in our lives.

We urgently need not only to see but also to feel the greatness of our separation from God and each other in this scattering. If the church conforms to the world, and the two appear to the outsider to be merely two versions of the same thing, the church is obviously either losing or has lost its God-intended identity.

A major lesson of I Corinthians 12 is that the church is no more than the sum of its individual members as God has placed us in it. Because of this, we

have responsibilities to each other. The church is therefore strengthened or weakened, elevated or depressed, unified or scattered, by the attitudes and conduct of its individual parts. As each member reflects Jesus Christ in his life, the church is strengthened, elevated and unified. As we reflect the world, the opposite occurs. Paul says in I Corinthians 12:26, "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it."

Can it be said of us that we are no different from any reasonably well-behaved and "good" carnal person? Have we taken the opportunity during this time of distress in the church to examine ourselves so thoroughly that we can truly say that we have brought every thought into obedience to Christ (II Corinthians 10:5)? How do we fare in living by every word of the Sermon on the Mount? If the church is ever to be turned around, each of us must take responsibility for the church's condition and quit pointing fingers of scorn at others, waiting for someone else to do something. We can all do something positive toward unity by changing ourselves.

Now is an excellent time to refresh our minds of a major instruction in Romans 14:7-13:

For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.

These verses give the proper perspective of our relationship and responsibilities to Christ and our brothers and sisters in the church. Paul wrote this to confront a problem, judging and scorn, that was dividing the church. The counsel he gives fits our circumstances, and if used, it can go a

long way toward solving many of our problems. He reminds us first to remember to whom we belong, why we belong to Him and what responsibility this gives us. We belong to Christ because He died for us, rose from the grave, and now sits at the right hand of God, judging those the Father has called into His church.

We should be acutely aware of this, knowing we are being judged according to what we do. We are to strive with all our being to please Him by living as He lived, not to serve ourselves but to serve Him and the church. Judging each other does not fall into our area of responsibility. Living according to the Sermon on the Mount does. If we do this, we will not cause any brother to fall. We appear not to be striving hard enough to please Christ, which is why we continue to split.

Be Holy for I am Holy

The theme of the whole Bible is that God's purpose is to call out for Himself a holy people, set apart from the world to belong to Him and to obey Him. This people's work is to be true to its identity—to be holy or different from this world in outlook, attitude, speech and conduct. To this end He has called us to be "in Christ" and to grow to the measure of the stature of His fullness. Undoubtedly, Jesus lived His life just as He instructed His disciples to live when He spoke from that mountain almost 2,000 years ago. The principles He enunciated are eternal. They apply just as surely to us today as they did to His original audience.

Notice what God tells Israel just after He brought them out of Egypt:

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances. You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I am the LORD your God.'" (Leviticus 18:1-4)

Because He was their God, the covenant God, and they were His special people, they were to be different from everybody else. They were to keep His commandments and not take their lead from those around them.

As Israel journeyed through the wilderness, they encountered Balaam, whom Balak had hired to prophesy against them. However, God intervened: "Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, 'Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak.'" (Numbers 23:5). Verse 9 contains part of what Balaam prophesied about Israel. "For from the top of the rocks I see him [Israel], and from the hills I behold him; there! A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations."

God thus admonishes Israel in Deuteronomy 12:29-30:

When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, "How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise."

But the centuries of history that God records in the Old Testament testify that Israel kept forgetting their God-intended uniqueness. They kept becoming assimilated to the peoples around them. As Psalm 106:34-38 says of them:

They did not destroy the peoples, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them, but they mingled with the Gentiles and learned their works; they served their idols, which became a snare to them. They even sacrificed their sons and daughters to demons, and shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with blood.

Israel did not merely neglectfully drift into worldliness. Some individuals undoubtedly did, but Ezekiel and Samuel make it plain that Israel as a whole greatly desired to be like the nations around them. Ezekiel 20:32 says:

What you have in your mind shall never be, when you say, "We will be like the Gentiles, like the families in other countries, serving wood and stone."

Notice Samuel's experience with this desire:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make for us a king to judge us like all the nations." . . . Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, "No, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles." (I Samuel 8:4-5, 19-20)

God pleaded with them, "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles" (Jeremiah 10:1-2), and through Ezekiel He cried out to the same generation, "Each of you, throw away the abominations which are before his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Ezekiel 20:7).

No matter what area of communal life, whether religion, government, economics, national defense, entertainment, fashions or education, Israel persisted in turning a stubborn neck and deaf ear to God while openly seeking the ways of the nations around. It is no mystery why God allowed His judgment to fall on Israel and Judah:

For so it was that the children of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and they had feared other gods, and walked in the statutes of the nations whom the LORD had cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made. . . . Also Judah did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the statutes of Israel which they made. And the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel, afflicted them and delivered them into the hand of plunderers, until He had cast them from His sight. (II Kings 17:7-8, 19-20)

Israel and Judah, rather than being different by living God's way, had conformed to the world around them. They were worldly. Thus, Israel first and then Judah about 120 years later fell in military campaigns and the people were taken into captivity. Israel remains scattered and virtually unknown among the nations. It has not returned to the land of its birth. Judah has returned a few people to the homeland so it is at least known, but its greater number are likewise scattered among the nations. It is a clear picture but not a pretty sight.

Can we see any parallels between Israel's example and what has happened to the church in our time?

The prophets provide instruction about what we should do in times like these:

» Therefore say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations.'" (Ezekiel 14:6)

» Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:7)

But Jeremiah 3:6-10 clearly shows Israel's and Judah's response.

The LORD said also to me in the days of Josiah the king: "Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot. And I said, after she had done all these things, 'Return to Me.' But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also. So it came to pass, through her casual harlotry, that she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense," says the Lord.

In the Context of Our Time

Now is a time of decision for all of us, and the choices are clear. We have allowed the world to squeeze us into its mold through the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (I John 2:15-17). We have neglected our high calling and drifted into such a precarious spiritual condition that God had to scatter us to get our attention! Either we must enthusiastically choose to give evidence of our loyalty to God through whole-hearted repentance and obedient submission to Him, or we will neglectfully or confusedly continue to drift in our relationship with Him, as we have the last decade or so. We cannot wait for somebody to unify the church. We must settle it in our minds that unity begins with each of us individually—and primarily in our devotion to our relationship with Him.

We must see the Sermon on the Mount in this sort of context. It is set in the beginning of the first gospel account just after Jesus began His ministry. It is the first thing our eye falls upon after the introduction sets the stage. Matthew 4:17 says, "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" The very reason Jesus had come was to inaugurate the Kingdom. If it was on the threshold then, almost 2,000 years ago, imagine how close it is now to its fullness! Can we afford to ignore this foundational, concentrated instruction intended for us, His disciples?

The Sermon on the Mount portrays the repentance, the complete change of mind, and the righteousness that belong to the Kingdom. It describes what human life and human community (as in a church) look like when they come under the gracious rule of God. Our scattered, bickering, fault-finding, and disunited condition certainly does not give evidence we are living under His gracious rule.

Do we not look more like what we would ordinarily expect from the world? We are to be holy, different, set apart from the world! We are not to take our cue from the people around us but from Him, and thus prove to be genuine children of our heavenly Father. A key statement of this is Matthew 6:8: "Therefore do not be like them," reminiscent of what God says in Leviticus 18:3, quoted above.

Our character, as described in the Beatitudes, is to be completely distinct from that admired by the world. We are to shine as lights in the darkness of this world. How can we shine if we are just like them? No distinctive difference would exist. Our righteousness in ethical behavior and true devotion to God is to exceed that of the religious folk around us. We are to have love even for our enemies, people whom the world would utterly reject or fight against if put in a similar situation.

There is hardly a verse in the entire Sermon where Jesus is not contrasting what He wants us to be with the way the world was in His day and still is. This is its underlying theme. Human nature never changes, so the same challenges He placed before them face us. Sometimes the contrasts are with the religious Jews and sometimes the Gentiles, but they are always drawn to leave us without excuse about knowing what is expected of us.

The Gentiles love and salute each other, but Christians are to love their enemies. They pray after a fashion, "heaping up empty phrases," but we should pray with the humble thoughtfulness of children to their Father in heaven. They are preoccupied with material necessities, but we are to trust God and seek first His Kingdom and righteousness. The Jews love to proclaim their charity and piety in fasting, but we must give, pray and fast "in secret" by faith, knowing God is aware and looking to Him for response, not the acclaim of others. Thus the Sermon on the Mount teaches us we are to be different—different from both the religious and the irreligious secular world.

The Sermon on the Mount is the most complete, single delineation in the New Testament of what might be called a true Christian counter-culture. In the 1960s the hippie generation dropped out of society to seek a culture that ran counter to the violent, cold and loveless one they found themselves living in. Their efforts ended in utter failure. They had neither a correct conception nor the right spirit. But Christ's Sermon presents us with a true Christian value system, ethical standard, religious devotion, attitude to material things and a network of relationships—all of which are at total variance with this world's.

What has happened to the church is good evidence that God has spewed us out because He found us distasteful, but Revelation 3:19-20 does not leave us in a hopeless state. As He did so many times with ancient Israel, God holds out His hand to us and encourages us to change:

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

The Sermon on the Mount is a trustworthy guide for us. Each of us should urgently examine ourselves against it and with God's help reestablish a strong and loving relationship with Him by humbly submitting to Him in obedience to the Sermon's instructions. We can then be assured we will not be worldly, and God will restore us to a unity far better than we ever had before.

Repentance is the key, and the Sermon gives the direction. God expects His children to submit to it. Living it can only produce good fruit.