

SERMON ON THE MOUNT - INTRODUCTION

The famous fourth century theologian and philosopher Augustine was the first to call the section of Scripture in Matthew 5-7 the Sermon on the Mount. As a sermon, it would only take about fifteen minutes to read or speak. But these chapters are packed with teaching on some of the great issues in life, and contain some of the most famous words from the lips of Jesus. D. A. Carson, who is probably the most influential theologian of our day said of the Sermon on the Mount, ““The more I read these three chapters, Matthew 5,6 & 7 - the more I am both drawn to them and shamed by them. Their brilliant light draws me like a moth to a spotlight; but the light is so bright it sears and burn.” Look at a few of the most significant phrases from the sermon, phrases with which people are familiar whether they are Christians or not:

- *Blessed are the poor in spirit*
- *Blessed are the peacemakers*
- *You are the salt of the earth, and light of the world*
- *Turn the other cheek*
- *Our Father in heaven*
- *Seek first the Kingdom of God*
- *Judge not, that you won't be judged*
- *Enter by the narrow gate*

It has been said that this sermon is the most quoted and least understood of Jesus teachings. In these short chapters Jesus will address major issues of life, including the culture, persecution, peace, anger, religion, sex, marriage and divorce, giving to the poor, honesty, economics, and spirituality. The Sermon on the Mount has been quoted and studied by people from all walks of life and religious backgrounds, including Mahatma Ghandi and most recently President Barack Obama.

The sermon's place in Scripture - The Gospel of Matthew

Matthew was one of the twelve disciples, the closest companions and followers of Jesus while he was on the earth. Matthew was a Jew living in the region of Galilee. He was also a tax collector, the equivalent of an IRS agent, which meant that he had accepted a lucrative job that aligned him with the Roman government. As a tax collector, he would hunt people down to make sure they would pay their taxes, but he would also shake people down for extra, with which he could line his pockets. Nobody in Jewish life was more despised than tax collectors. In fact, the sentiment is expressed several times in the New Testament as the sinful in the culture are called “sinners and tax-collectors.” It was as if hookers, thieves, murders, and swindlers were all lumped into one category, and just below these there were tax collectors.

But Jesus found Matthew and called out to him, “Follow me.” No religious teacher or good Jew in their right mind would have anything to do with a tax collector, but Jesus went to Matthew's home for dinner, met his friends, and reached into his life. And Matthew was never the same. He left the business, and spent the next three years following Jesus.

After Jesus death and resurrection, Matthew had an incredible desire to reach his people, the Jews. The Gospel of Matthew was written primarily to Jewish people, seeking to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah that they had been promised by the Old Testament prophets and for whom they had been waiting.

The Sermon on the Mount is a long teaching section from the mouth of Jesus in the book

of Matthew. While some have held that Matthew may have pulled from several sermons and teachings, the text seems to indicate that the teaching came from one setting, or gathering of his disciples. The text can be read in about ten to fifteen minutes, but don't be fooled. This doesn't mean Jesus was not long-winded like your preacher. Rather, it probably represents the bullet points from a lengthy time of teaching that Jesus had with his disciples.

The hearers of the sermon

Jesus spoke the words of the Sermon on the Mount to his disciples. This could refer specifically to the twelve, or may infer a bit larger gathering of those who had surrendered themselves to the teaching and mission of Jesus, and embraced his message of the Kingdom of God. The implication is that these people had embraced Jesus as their Messiah, and were following Him as their master teacher or Rabbi.

At the end of the sermon (7:28-29) Matthew lets us know that the crowds were in some way able to interact with the teaching. The idea is that the ideas in the sermon are addressed to his disciples, but he proclaimed it in such a way that the crowds heard, and were amazed.

The central issue for the sermon - the Kingdom of God

For centuries, the Jewish people had been waiting for their Messiah, the promised king who would reign on the throne of their greatest king, David. The people were hoping and waiting for a kingdom on earth. They wanted a ruler who would restore the nation to prominence and restore the national pride and boundaries for the Jews. The story of Jesus is about the ushering of the King, but His Kingdom was not what the Jews wanted. The Kingdom of God would deal with other issues, other needs that God's people had. In fact, in Matthew's Gospel, he uses the term "Kingdom of Heaven" rather than "Kingdom of God" because he knew his countrymen equated God's Kingdom with Israel.

What is the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God? Simply put, a kingdom is the domain of a king, where he reigns. Great Britain is also called the United Kingdom, because England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland are all theoretically under the reign of the royal ruler (right now Queen Elizabeth). When we talk about the Kingdom of God or heaven, the implication is that we are speaking of God's reign and rule. Now, on one level, God reigns and rules over all. He is Creator and owner of the universe, and there is not one rogue molecule that is outside of his domain. Yet, Satan entered this sphere and led humankind into sinfulness. Adam and Eve bowed their knee to a different ruler, and sin reigned in their hearts and in the lives of their offspring.

The mission of Jesus was not about reclaiming the borders of Israel, it was a mission of reclaiming the king's subjects, and free them to bow their knee to the rightful king, and to live for His glory. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis says, "Enemy occupied territory --- that is what the world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed...and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage."

The coming of Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God in a new way, and this was demonstrated on multiple levels. First, the miracles of Jesus testify to the restoration of the Kingdom brought about by his ministry. Specifically, Jesus heals broken and hurting people, and delivers people from demonic possession and oppression. Second, the teaching of Jesus focuses on the reality of God's rule. With the majority of his parables (short, pointed stories used to teach), Jesus begins the story by saying, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." This text states

clearly that Jesus went from town to town, and preached the Gospel of the Kingdom in each synagogue. Then Jesus died and rose again, defeating the reign of Satan, and demonstrating Himself to the King of Kings.

The teaching of Jesus focuses on issues of the Kingdom. The issue is the reign of God, specifically in the hearts of people. This is clue to understanding the Sermon on the Mount. The teaching here is not about how a person comes to Jesus, or how they can know God. It is an address to people who are already his subject, those who have bowed the knee, submitted the will, and surrendered control to the King! The Gospel of the Kingdom is the good news that the King has come, and people can live for the purposes for which they were created if they will submit to the reign of the King. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his disciples to him. These are men who have left everything to follow Jesus, to live for the Glory of the King. Now, Jesus is going to instruct them on what life in the Kingdom looks like. In other words, the first step is to bow, repent, and receive the grace of the King. But once that has happened, we need to learn what it means to live as subjects in the Kingdom.

As we study this great message delivered by Jesus, this is the focus, living as kingdom people in a culture and world that is under the domain of a different rule.

COMMENTARY AND NOTES ON MATTHEW 4:23-5:2, & 7:28-29

The final verses of chapter 4 serve as a bridge from the initial ministry of Jesus to this great sermon. Matthew 3 tells us about the ministry of John the Baptists, Jesus cousin, as he prepares the way for the coming of Jesus. He then baptizes Jesus, which is the initiation of Jesus public ministry. Immediately after baptism, Jesus spends forty days fasting in the wilderness, where he is tempted face to face by Satan. After defeating Satan's temptation, Jesus begins preaching, with his core message being, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 4:17). He then calls the first of his followers, which in the text is representative of him calling out those who will follow Jesus. Jesus calls to Andrew, Peter, James, and John and asks them to leave their business and families to follow him. They immediately leave their family fishing business and become disciples of Jesus. The text here tells of the next steps in Jesus' ministry.

Matthew 4:23-25

The ministry of Jesus is in the region of Galilee. This is a hilly region in the northern end of Palestine. The region is on the west side of the Sea of Galilee, which is a lake known for fishing. Jesus' hometown of Nazareth was in the region, and this is the location of Jesus initial ministry. The bulk of the twelve disciples were also from this region. The text tells us that Jesus went throughout Galilee. The region had about 200 small towns, meaning that Jesus was going from town to town. He would go into the synagogue, which was the place of corporate worship for the Jewish people, and he would do three things. He would teach, meaning that Jesus would open Old Testament scrolls, read from them, and explain their meaning. He also proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom. The Gospel is the good news. As a herald, Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom of God, and called people to repent and believe in him. Third, Jesus healed diseases.

The result was that the fame of Jesus spread like wildfire. Several regions are mentioned in these verses. Syria was representative of a huge area that encompassed Galilee (kind of like saying West County is a part of the Metropolitan St. Louis area). Verse 25 mentions Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea. This is pretty much all of Israel. People from all over came to see Jesus, to hear his teaching, to see his miracles. In the Gospels, these crowds grow to several

thousand people. The text calls this throng “great crowds”, which is generic term Matthew uses over 50 times in relation to the people who are around Jesus. Here, the crowds come to Jesus. We will find that Jesus is compelled and has compassion on the crowds. They follow him for a time, but also leave when the teaching gets difficult. And in the end, it is these crowds that side with the Jewish religious rulers at the trial of Jesus, and cry out that they want Barabbas to be released and Jesus to be crucified.

In his ministry, people with all kinds of issue were brought to Jesus. Jesus healed the sick, those with incredible pain, people who experience seizures, and those who were paralyzed. Jesus delivered those who were oppressed by demons, and delivered people from the domain of darkness.

Matthew 5:1-2

“Seeing the crowds, he (Jesus) went up on the mountain...” This is an interesting phrase. Matthew tells us that Jesus was seeing the crowds, but this is a statement that is so much more than the fact that he was eyeballing them! The Greek term means to “see with perception.” In other words, Jesus saw past the crowd and into the life of each individual. It reminds me of several passages where Jesus knows the thoughts of people in the crowd. But in this instance, it is his perception of the crowd that leads him to step away from them. He went up on the mountain. The text does not tell us what mountain, that is not the issue. But he is not in a place where he can look down and see cities, and valleys, and rivers, and the sea, and people. It is from this location, and with this motivation that Jesus teaches his disciples.

It says that Jesus sat down. Official Jewish teachers were called Rabbis, and in Rabbinic teaching culture, the official teaching position was to sit. A Rabbi would teach his followers in informal ways all the time, but when he wanted them to listen deeply, he would gather his crew and sit.

What is happening here is significant. This teaching is addressed to those who are in, who believe the Kingdom. Yet, everything he teaches comes from his compassion for the crowds. It is as if Jesus were to say, “Because I am your King, and you are to live for my values, my cares, and my passions, and because the crowds are hurting, broken, and in need, you need to live your lives this way.” They are to be a different type of people, whose values, beliefs, and lifestyles are different than those in the culture. They are not to be like the religious people who live as hypocrites, or those live in open rebellion to God. But the difference in their lives was not to demonstrate that they were superior to the crowds. The disciples were broken people in need of a Savior as well. The difference in their lives was an extension of Jesus mission, and a significant part. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is going to call his followers to an impossible standard, and then empower them as king to be transformed. It will be this transformation that becomes the tool for the crowds.

7:28-29

I am including these verses in the opening message because they bookend the section in the Gospel. Matthew lets us know that the crowds were astonished (a very strong Greek word for amazement, which literally meant to be knocked out of one’s senses) at the teaching of Jesus. It’s not just that he is a phenomenal orator. There is something different about Jesus. He teaches as one who has authority. Interesting term. This is different than the scribes. The scribes were the experts in the Old Testament Scriptures, the seminary professors with PHD’s in Biblical

studies. They not only knew the text of Scripture backwards and forwards, but they knew what every Rabbi had taught about the Scriptures. When they spoke they would quote one teacher after another to support their message. They did not have any authority on their own. Any time a preacher stands in front of a crowd, he is no better than the scribes. When I preach, all I got is the authority of the Scriptures, and my job is to let you know what God has said. But when Jesus spoke, he didn't rely on other human voices and interpretations. When he spoke, God was speaking! Over and over in this sermon he uses the phrase, "You have heard it said..." and then he quotes an Old Testament text, and then follows it with, "But I say to you..." His words are equal with the Old Testament, the very word of God! His authority comes from who He is, the Divine and eternal Son of God.