

An Introduction To The Sermon On The Mount
Matthew 5-7

We come now to Matthew chapters 5-7, The Sermon on the Mount, and we begin a truly magnificent portion of our study through this Gospel.

The Sermon on the Mount, of course, is the central reason why I wanted us to study through this Gospel in the first place. Now some of you may ask, “Why?” And I honestly don’t know if I can explain clearly the compulsion that I have felt in turning to the sermon again and again in my life. Clearly no man should teach unless he has felt that God has given him a message, and it is the business of any man, who tries to teach and expound the scriptures to wait upon God for leading and guidance. I will say this: The Sermon on the Mount as a passage of scripture has been the greatest catalyst and the greatest force in God’s Word for change and spiritual growth in my life personally, for drawing closer to the heart of God. And I hope that it will be the same for you, that God will take this word He has given us and use it to transform your lives and hearts as well.

When I was a senior in College, (my first senior year - that’s what happens when you keep changing your major). I turned my attention for an entire year to studying this Sermon of the Lord Jesus, and I was truly, richly blessed. During that year, this sermon won a dynamic and special place in my heart forever.

Has the Sermon on the Mount ever taken a special place in your life? If so, how? _____

What has been the most meaningful portion of the sermon in your Christian walk (The Beatitudes, The Lord’s Prayer, etc)? Why? _____

There is another reason for turning to the Sermon. Simply this: I don’t think it is a harsh judgment to say that the most obvious feature of the Church in America today is its superficiality. We live in the days of an easy believism, a gospel of cheap grace reigns in this country. All that is desired is a simple profession of faith, and we seem to accept that a person is a believer regardless of his or her lifestyle. Submission to Christ is generally not preached and His Lordship is largely ignored. We live in a time, when many people in the Church are clinging to a false hope and just want teachers, who will tickle their itching ears. We live in the days of “seeker-services,” where churches are trying to make themselves acceptable to non-believers by conforming to the world’s standards.

The last time I checked my Bible, I seem to remember it saying, “There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God.” (Romans 3:11) and “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

The Sermon on the Mount, of course, blows away all superficial notions about the Christian life. Let me say this as a warning at the outset. A person is saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, not by any human works, which you or I can do and not by conforming to the law. But a Christian, if he is true, will long to be obedient to the Lord, and will have a willing heart, a yearning to delight his Lord and master, an obedience driven by Love for who God is and what He has done. As Jesus clearly says in John 14:21, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me.” And as He warns in Matthew 7:23: “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” The proof of your position in Christ is the fruit of your life, your obedience. (Faith without works is dead.) The Sermon on the Mount teaches this truth, and without pulling any punches, the Lord absolutely slaughters all notions of superficial Christianity.

If you are a child of God, then you will understand that there is nothing more important in the Christian life than the way in which we approach the Bible. It should be our textbook for living, our only source, and our only authority. We know nothing about God and about the Christian life in the true sense apart from the Bible. Now we can draw various deductions from nature, for instance, that there is a God, who is the Supreme Creator and He has placed a conscience within us, but we have no authority save this book. We cannot rely on subjective experiences because there are evil spirits and counterfeit experiences. Here, in the Bible, is our sole authority.

And when we turn to the Sermon on the Mount we find the perfect picture of what the Christian Life should be. It is the Lord’s own description of what He wanted His followers to be and to do. And so in response to the question, “Why should we study the Sermon on the Mount,” I will give this answer:

- 1) The Lord Jesus Christ died to enable those that are His Children to live the Sermon on the Mount. He died. Why? Titus 2:14 says, “That He might ... purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” He died in order that you and I might live this Sermon on the Mount. He made this possible for us because He has set us free from slavery to sin and made us His.
- 2) The second reason for studying it, is that nothing will show you the absolute need of the new birth, a new nature, and the need of the Holy Spirit and His work within, so much as the Sermon on the Mount. These Beatitudes crush me to the ground. They show me my utter helplessness in meeting God’s standard. Were it not for the grace of God in providing salvation through Jesus Christ, I am undone. Face yourself in the light of the Sermon on the Mount and it will drive you to see your ultimate need for rebirth through the grace of God.

3) Another reason is this. The more we live and try to practice this sermon, the more we shall experience spiritual blessing. Just scan through the various passages and consider the blessings promised to those who practice it (5:1-10; 6:1-14; 6:19-34; 7:7-11; 7:24-25).

4) There is no single paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount in which a contrast between the Christian and the Non-Christian is not drawn. This is one of the uniting and underlying themes of the Lord's Sermon. Sometimes it is with the Gentiles or pagan nations with whom Jesus contrasts His followers. At other times He contrasts them with Jews. But the contrast runs throughout.

At all times, Jesus teaches that His followers are to be different – different from both the nominal church and the secular world, different from those who believe themselves to be religious because of their forms of worship, rituals and traditions, different from the irreligious. The Sermon on the Mount is the most complete delineation anywhere in the New Testament of the difference between the Christian life and the other ways that people live in the world. Here in this sermon we find our value system, our ethical standard, guidance with regard to religious devotion, our attitude toward money, ambition, lifestyle and relationships – all of which are totally different from the non-believing world. The Sermon presents life lived in the kingdom of God. Life lived under His authority and reign.

Sound exciting? It is exciting.

Before we get into the nitty gritty of the Sermon, though, we need to spend time going over some general principles that will help our understanding as we move through it. (1) The Sermon on the Mount is like a great symphony with all of the parts working together. The whole of the context is greater than a collection of the parts. We must not lose sight of the wholeness, and unless we understand the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, we cannot properly understand any one of its particular injunctions. It is futile to confront anyone with a particular teaching in the Sermon unless that person has already believed and accepted, and is already conformed to and living the beatitudes. They are bound up in each other.

(2) The order in which statements come in the Sermon is of great importance to understanding what is being said. There is a logical sequence to the Sermon. Not only that, there is a spiritual order and sequence. Our Lord does not say teach the way He does accidentally, but His whole message is as deliberate and ordered as His creation, His life and His word. Certain postulates are laid down, and upon that basis other things follow. For instance, you will find that the very first statement, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," is the foundation, bedrock and cornerstone for everything else that is said.

Did you know that God doesn't speak in stream of consciousness? His word is perfect, pure, inerrant, and infallible. Every jot and tittle was set in the heart and mind of God from eternity past. Heaven and Earth shall pass away, but this perfect word of God will stand forever. And the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount sit perfectly in this order.

Next, I want you to have a general overview of the Sermon. In Chapter 5:3-10 you have the character of the Christian described. The Beatitudes are a description of the general character of a Christian. Verses 11 and 12 show us the character of the Christian as proved by the reaction of the world to him. We are told “Blessed are you when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” In other words, at first we are told what sort of person the Christian is and then we are told what will happen to him because he is that way. Then verses 13-16 gives an account of the relationship of the Christian to the world, or a description of the Christian’s function in society.

There, then, is a general account of the Christian life. From that point on we come to particular examples and illustrations of how such a person lives. We can divide it like this: In Chapter 5:17-48 we have the Christian facing the law of God and its demands. You will remember the various parts. A description of his righteousness is given. Then, we are told of his relationship towards such things as murder, adultery and divorce; then how he should speak and his position with regard to the question of retaliation and self-defense, and his attitude toward his neighbor. The great principle involved throughout is that the Christian is primarily concerned about the spirit rather than the letter of the law. This does not mean that he ignores the letter, but he is more concerned about the spirit, and is interested in the details as they are an expression of the spirit. That is worked out by the Lord in a number of examples and illustrations.

The Christian is a person who of necessity must be concerned about keeping God’s law. As I mentioned earlier, we are not concerned about this because it is the path to salvation. No. Trying to keep the law will never result in your salvation. We are saved by grace, through faith, and not by works. In fact the Bible tells us in Galatians that the law is meant to be a teacher, which reveals our utter hopelessness and inability to meet God’s standard of holiness. (Galatians 3:24: “Therefore, the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”) All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is none righteous, no not one. Therefore, if you are hoping that you will one day be saved and get to heaven because you are a basically good person, you are sadly mistaken and bound for hell. None of us will be declared holy because of what we’ve done and without holiness no one will see the Lord. That is why Christ came and died on the cross: to pay for our sin, so that those who trust in him can be given His holiness and righteousness. If you are saved, then you are saved by grace because you have trusted in Christ. You are saved because of what he did on the cross.

Nevertheless, Christ calls us to begin right now in striving to live a holy life, an obedient life and a life that is pleasing and delightful to the Lord. Not because that will save us, but because of love and gratitude for what He has done for us (John 15:13: “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” John 8:31: “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.’”). The test of true discipleship is abiding in the word of the Lord.

We are not under the law but grace. However, we are still meant to keep the law. In fact, the

righteousness of the law is meant to be fulfilled in us, says the apostle Paul, writing in Romans. “Christ coming in the likeness of sinful flesh, ... condemned sin in the flesh.” Why? “that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit” (Romans 8:3,4). So the believer is a person who is always concerned about living and keeping the law of God. Here, in the Sermon on the Mount he is reminded of how that is to be done.

The whole of Chapter 6, relates to the Christian living his life in the presence of God, living in active submission to Him and entire dependence upon Him. If you simply read in Chapter 6 at your leisure, I think you will see this. It is all along concerned with the believer and his relationship to the Father. Take, for instance, the first verse: “Take heed that you do not your alms before men, to be seen of them. Otherwise you have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.” It continues like that from beginning to end, and at the end we are told practically the same thing: “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” That is a description of a person that knows he is always in the presence of God, so that what he is interested in is not the impression he makes on other men, but his relationship to God. When he prays, he is not interested in what other people are thinking, whether they are praising his prayers or criticizing them; he knows he is in the presence of the Father, and he is praying to God. Also, when he does his alms, it is God he has in mind all along. As he meets problems in life, his need of food and clothing, his reaction to external events, all are viewed in the light of this relationship, which he bears to the Father. This is a critical principle with regard to the Christian life.

A believer should always live, realizing that he is in the presence of God. The world does not live in this way. The average person on the street doesn't care one whit about whether or not God is watching him or with him seeing everything he says and does. But a believer is a person whose every action should be performed in the light of this intimate relationship to God. He is not, as it were, a free agent. He is a child of God, so that everything he does, he does from this standpoint of trying to be well pleasing in His sight. That is why the believer should view everything that happens to him in this world entirely differently from everybody else. The New Testament emphasizes that the believer is not worried about food and drink and housing and clothing. It is not that he says these things do not matter, but they are not his main concern. They are not the things for which he lives. The believer sits loosely in this world and its affairs. Why? Because he belongs to another kingdom and another way. He does not get out of the world and life, but his attitude is entirely different from the unbeliever, because of his relationship to God and because of his utter dependence upon him. A believer lives his life realizing that he is in the presence of God..

Do you realize that I've just told you the definition of Godliness? A lot of people will say, so and so is Godly because they see that person conforming to certain moral standards. Well, if that's your definition of godliness then you've just described the Pharisees, who were some of the most ungodly people that ever lived.

The Greek word for godliness in the New Testament is eusebeia. And eusebeia is best defined as a practical awareness of God in every area of your life – a God consciousness, an awareness of Him with you right here, right now, all the time and a longing to please Him. It's an internal matter, a matter of the heart. When a person is godly, then that person will necessarily reveal that attitude by their conduct. The difference, though, between the Godly person and the Pharisee is the motive, the position of the heart.

In Matthew 23:25-27, Jesus says, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.”

True godliness, true worship, is an internal heart righteousness, and that is what Chapter 6 of the Sermon on the Mount will teach us about.

Then, chapter 7 can be seen as an account of the believer as one who lives always under the judgment of God and in the fear of God. “Judge not that you be judged.” “Enter by the narrow gate.” “Beware of false prophets.” “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven.” Moreover, the Christian is likened to a man who builds a house which he knows is going to be tested. A man who knows he must give an account to God.

I am not talking about living in craven fear, because “perfect love” casts out that fear. I am talking about reverence, godly fear. The believer is the only person in the world that lives always with this sense of judgment and with this reverence. He must do so because he knows that his building is going to be judged, the test of life is going to come. Did you know that God will call you to give an account of your life after you die? In fact, Matthew 12:36 says, “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.”

The believer knows that judgment is coming, and knows that it is a judgment by One who sees the heart. The believer is a person who always remembers that. I said earlier that one of the greatest problem in today's American churches is superficiality and glibness. The modern church goer does not like to think of giving an account or facing judgment, but that is the teaching of the Apostle Paul as it is the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” says the Bible. Judgment is coming and it is going to begin at the house of God, where it should begin, because of the claims we make. It is all impressed upon us here in the final section of the Sermon on the Mount.

We should always be living and walking distrustful of the flesh, distrustful of ourselves, knowing we have to appear before God and be judged by Him. It is a strait gate, it is a narrow way, this way that leads to life.

So that is the road map, that is the journey we will begin to take together. It is great journey into the heart of God's word. It is a fearful journey: one we should embark on prayerfully and with reverence before God.

My final thought for you is this: knowing that you must some day soon face the Lord in judgment, are you ready? You may only approach Him in peace, if you have received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, if He has forgiven you of your sin and washed you clean, if He has clothed you with His righteousness. If you have not received Him then you will face the wrath of God, and suffer for all eternity.