

The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5-7

MY COPY

'The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed.' John Stott¹

Familiarity breeds not contempt but complacency. Sometimes it's the most familiar material that is most taken for granted.

What I'm covering:

1. The context
2. The content
3. The structure
4. The purpose
5. How it might speak to Barneys
6. How to teach it.

The context of the teaching:

The Sermon on the Mount comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry:

- Matthew 4:17 'From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'
- Matthew 4:23 'Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.'
 - Note the theme of the 'kingdom' here. Jesus is proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is inaugurated in his coming and ministry.

Matthew locates Jesus' ministry as a fulfillment of God's purposes for Israel:

- Matthew 1:1-17 Genealogy – from Abraham to the *Messiah*.
- Matthew 1:22 'All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet...'
 - See also: Matthew 2:5, 15, 17, 23; 3:3
- Matthew 4:1-11 Jesus is tested in the wilderness for 40 days, a parallel to Israel's 40 years in the wilderness.
- Matthew 5:1-2 Jesus is pictured like Moses or a rabbi.

¹ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today, Inter-Varsity Press, 2000.

But what kind of kingdom is Jesus ushering in? (And what kind of King will he be?)

- For a kingdom to come, the exile must end.
- Nationalistic movements – taken by force?
- Religious movements - created through holiness?
- A hint that it will be different – the call to repentance, the testing in the wilderness, the usurping of Herod.

The content of the teaching:

The Sermon on the Mount is the repentance and righteousness that belong to the kingdom.

'It describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God.' Stott.

Matthew 6:8 'Do not be like them' (cf. Lev. 18:3)

'There is no single paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount in which this contrast between Christian and non-Christian standards is not drawn.' Stott.

- Matthew 5:1-12 Different character (from the world)
- Matthew 5:13-16 Different influence in the world because of different character to the world
- Matthew 5:17-42 Greater righteousness than that of the Scribes and Pharisees
- Matthew 5:43-48 Greater love for neighbour and enemies than pagans
- Matthew 6:1-19 Different devotion from hypocrites (giving, prayer and fasting).
- Matthew 6:19-34 Different security and ambition from pagans.

'Thus the followers of Jesus are to be different – different from both the nominal church and the secular world, different from both the religious and irreligious.' Stott.

The structure of the teaching: (from Stott)

A. 5:3-12 A Christian's Character

8 marks:

4 – the Christian towards God

4 – the Christian towards other people

8 blessings

B. 5:13-16 A Christian's Influence

Salt – influence solely based on character

- Light – influence solely based on character
- C. 5:17-48 A Christian's Righteousness
Attitude to moral law of God – Jesus came to fulfill, not abolish.
6 illustrations: murder, adultery, divorce, etc..
- D. 6:1-18 A Christian's Piety
Not hypocrites like Pharisees
Nor mechanical formalists like pagans
The reality, sincerity of God's children in the Father's presence
- E. 6:19-34 A Christian's Ambition
Not religious or secular
Different ambition towards wealth and possessions
Not self-centred but directed towards the glory of God
- F. 7:1-20 A Christian's Relationships
Serve rather than judge
Sharing the gospel
Prayer
False prophets
- G. 7:21-27 A Christian's Commitment
The authority of the preacher
'When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.'

The point or purpose of this teaching:

'It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers **to be and to do**.

To my mind no two words sum up its intention better, or indicate more clearly its challenge to the modern world, than the expression "**Christian counterculture**.'" Stott

What response does Jesus want?

Option 1: Shaming – desperation – grace – nothing?

Why not this option? Doesn't cohere with Matthew's emphasis on obedience/responding to Jesus.

Option 2: Obedience – salvation – self-righteousness?

Why not this option? Doesn't cohere with Matthew's decial of religious hypocrisy, and doesn't make sense of Jesus' death.

Option 3: God's heart and standards revealed – humility/ abandonment of self-righteousness – God's standards met by God's sent one - dependence on God's grace – humble, unselfrighteous obedience?

Why this option? Because it coheres with the rest of Matthew and the Bible!

- Matthew 3:8 'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance'
- Matthew 3:15 Jesus is baptized 'to fulfill all righteousness'
- Matthew 4:1-11 Jesus is tested in our place
- Matthew 5:3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'
- Matthew 21:31b-32 'Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.'

So, in a sense we read the Sermon on the Mount twice:

- Firstly, to be humbled and brought to Jesus.
- Secondly, to be exhorted to become like Jesus.
- (Like The Sixth Sense)

Are the standards actually attainable?

Weiss and Schweitzer:

'interim ethic' – Jesus was expecting the end of the age. Teaching is appropriate for a moment of crisis but not for everyday life.

Stott:

'The standards of the Sermon are neither readily attainable by every man, nor totally unattainable by any man.'

'They are attainable all right, but only by those who have experienced the new birth which Jesus told Nicodemus

was the indispensable condition of seeing and entering God's kingdom.'

'For the righteousness he describes in the Sermon is an inner righteousness. Although it manifests itself outwardly and visibly in words, deeds and relationships, yet it remains essentially a righteousness of the heart. It is what a man thinks in his heart and where he fixes his heart that really matter.

It is the here that the problem lies. For men are in their nature "evil" ...

So there is but one solution: 'Make the tree good, and its fruit good.' A new birth is essential.' (Matthew 7:16; 12:33-37).

'Only a belief in the necessity and the possibility of a new birth can keep us from the Sermon on the Mount with either foolish optimism or hopeless despair. **Jesus spoke the Sermon to those who were already his disciples and thereby also the citizens of God's kingdom and the children of God's family.** The high standards he set are appropriate only to such.'

How does this teaching cohere with the gospel?

Jesus is the one who both fulfills God's requirements and provides us with an example to follow:

'Jesus, as the one who reveals the full intention of the Mosaic Law, is the reliable guide for these new ways, but more than that, he is the one who first and foremost lives them out, and he is the one to whom ultimate loyalty belongs. The paradigm for discipleship is following Jesus at whatever cost.

Running through the Gospel is a major critique of how the world works: its typical values and priorities. ...

In the disciple community the behavior patterns that mark aspiration to greatness are those of service and not those of control.' Nolland²

² John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew, The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, The Paternoster Press, 2005.

'what [Jesus] is opposing is essentially an attitude which sees [the law's] function as the mere provision of regulations to be observed to the letter – and no more! Even when his prescriptions are such as the scribes might have regarded as a weakening of the law's literal application, the effect is to make a far more searching ethical demand. In all this, there is a sovereign freedom in Jesus' willingness to penetrate to the true will of God which lies behind the law's regulations. The primary impact of the passage [5:17-48] is not in terms of a new understanding of the law, but in terms of the significance of Jesus.'³

Jesus' death expresses all the qualities that the Sermon on the Mount exhorts its hearers to possess and express.

'The values of the world are overturned by the one who exhibits his preeminence precisely by serving rather than by being served, by giving up his life rather than by preserving it at all costs. Jesus' readiness to go to the cross becomes the supreme example of the value system he stood for.' Nolland

Jesus is the one whose death is the ultimate saving event – freeing us in an even greater way than the Exodus, bringing us back from an even greater exile, giving us membership and participation in a greater kingdom.

Christ's righteousness makes him a sufficient sacrifice in our place, and is given to us too (2 Corinthians 5:21).

How does this fit with a biblical theology?

God making a people for himself – holy, set apart, shaped after him, not the nations.

What do we do with the fact that Luke has a slightly different version?

- Luke's version is 30 verses, and Matthew's is 107.
- Recognise the differences but don't play them off against one another. The Gospel writers would not have made Jesus inconsistent.

³ R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press, 1985.

- Probably best to recognise that this was probably a longer teaching session, which Matthew and Luke both recorded.

What it might speak to for Barneys:

- Exodus tie-ins
- Gospel as re-grounding, or foundation-setting for newbies
- The call to be like Jesus, instead of like our world is as relevant as ever
- YA relevance – idealism and disillusionment as ‘twin sisters’
- Confronting ‘cheap grace’ that is really nothingness – the place of obedience
 - ‘If you think legalism is simply too much emphasis on the law, then you will think the antidote is to talk less about obedience and more about acceptance and forgiveness. If you think that antinomianism is simply too loose an attitude toward morality and law, you will assume the remedy is to talk less about mercy and acceptance and more about God’s righteousness and holy commands. In short, you will try to cure one with a dose of the other. That will be a disaster, because both of them have the same root cause.’⁴
- Confronting messiahless moralism – the sermon concludes with an emphasis on Jesus’ authority.
 - ‘These teachings do not represent an ethical outline for humanity... but for Jesus’ disciples alone, for citizens of the future kingdom.’⁵

Personal reflections:

CG work – I’ve found that I keep coming back to the Beatitudes to be encouraged to keep going – to see the value of this work through God’s eyes, and to be shaped in *how* I do it.

In particular, it challenges me in my self-righteousness. When you call out injustice, you implicitly place yourself on the side of the just, and not on the side of the unjust. And that opens the door for self-righteousness to creep in.

The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount don’t give me any room for that.

⁴ Tim Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Scepticism*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2015.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999.

(The armrest hypocrite).

How to teach it:

We'll be giving you studies, but as always, we encourage you to do your own work on these.

Particularly think about giving people time and space to reflect, to repent and commit themselves.

Beware of undermining the thrust, emphasis of the passage because it's confronting by simply 'resorting' to grace – 'Jesus did this so we don't have to.'

Instead, hear the challenge, then go to grace – see how Jesus' life, death and resurrection does what we have not done, and then go *back* to the challenge and see how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection *enable* us to live like this.