

Significance and Setting of the Sermon, 5:1

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord's sermon emphasizes the significance of the Sermon on the Mount as a foundational teaching of Christ's moral principles for His kingdom.

Scripture: Matthew 5:3-48

Topics: "Kingdom Principles", "Christian Ethics"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, emphasizing its significance as a comprehensive statement of moral principles related to the kingdom Jesus proclaimed. The sermon, given priority in Matthew's gospel, aims to counteract earthly views prevalent among the people of Israel. It sets forth the main principles of Christ's teaching, leading to subsequent discourses on the mysteries of the kingdom and the end times. The Sermon on the Mount presents ethical content, focusing on the character and conduct of those belonging to Christ, rather than salvation or justification by faith.

Transcript

The purpose of Matthew to present the truth relating Jesus as the King and the message of the kingdom is the guiding principle in placing the Sermon on the Mount here so early in Matthew's gospel. Many events recorded later in the gospel actually occurred before the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is given priority because it is a comprehensive statement of the moral principles relating to the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed. As Kelly comments, it was designed "to counteract the earthly views of the people of Israel."²⁷

Some, like Tasker, consider this sermon a collection of various sayings of Jesus delivered on different occasions.²⁸ This opinion, although common, is mere conjecture. Preferable is the view that Jesus delivered this sermon as Matthew indicated, although probably He repeated many times the truths in the Sermon on the Mount, or delivered the same sermon more than once to different groups (cf. Lk 6:20-49). Here, however, He spoke directly to His disciples, probably the inner circle. But during the discourse, apparently many others joined the crowd, as there is reference to "the people" in Matthew 7:28, which would imply a large crowd.

In placing this discourse early in Matthew, the intent is plainly to set forth the main principles of Christ's teaching, which are subsequently rejected in Matthew 8-12. This rejection in turn led to the second major discourse in Matthew 13 on the mysteries of the kingdom, or the age intervening between the first and second advents of Christ. Matthew's third major discourse, in Matthew 24-25, dealt with the end time

preceding the second coming. These three major discourses should be contrasted to the fourth discourse found in John's gospel, 13-17, dealing specifically with the spiritual character of the present age in which God would call out His church. Matthew's gospel is, therefore, comprehensive in presenting the three major discourses relating to kingdom truth, and is, as Kelly expresses it, given in "dispensational" order.²⁹

Few passages in the gospel have occasioned more disagreement as to their essential character than the Sermon on the Mount. Some, who regard the Christian message mainly as an ethic, hail it as the summary of the whole gospel. Even Lenski considers the Sermon on the Mount as presenting the gospel in its fundamental content.³⁰ Kelly states the matter correctly: "The sermon on the mount treats not of salvation, but of the character and conduct of those that belong to Christ--the true yet rejected king."³¹

That the Sermon on the Mount presents ethical content all agree. That it delineates the gospel that Jesus Christ died and rose again, that it presents justification by faith, or is suitable to point an unbeliever to salvation in Christ is plainly not the intent of this message.

Others have gone to the other extreme of considering the Sermon on the Mount hypothetical; that is, Jesus is saying, "If you want me as King, these are rules under which I will operate." This would make the entire sermon eschatological, that is, applying to the future millennial kingdom but having no bearing upon the present church age. While it is clear that the epistles are more precise in delineating the particular responsibility and privilege of Christians in the present age, it would hardly be fitting for Matthew, writing this gospel many years after the death of Christ, to introduce material which would be irrelevant to his contemporaries.

The Sermon on the Mount, as a whole, is not church truth precisely. A. W. Pink holds, "Its larger part was a most searching exposition of the spirituality of the Law and the refutation of the false teaching of the elders."³² It falls short of presenting the complete rule of life expounded at a greater length in the epistles, and it is not intended to delineate justification by faith or the gospel of salvation. On the other hand, the Sermon on the Mount is clearly intended to be a definitive statement of Christ's teaching and should not be pushed aside lightly by unnecessary stricture which would relegate it to unimportant truth. If these various limiting approaches are inadequate, what is the true approach?³³

As in every text of Scripture, the truth presented must be first of all seen in its context. In the gospels, Jesus was presenting Himself as the prophesied King, and the kingdom He was offering is the prophesied kingdom. Those who are premillenarian can understand this as referring to the earthly kingdom predicted in the Old Testament. Although Jesus, in His teaching, did not spell out all that was revealed in the Old Testament, He clearly presented Himself as the prophesied King, the Son of David, who had the right to reign on earth. It is quite evident that the Jews, while they wanted deliverance from the Romans and fulfillment of the material blessings promised in the millennium, were quite unprepared to accept the view that the millennial kingdom has spiritual implications. It was to be a rule of righteousness as well as a rule of peace. It demanded much of subjects as well as providing much for them. The political character of the kingdom was not seriously questioned by the Jews, who anticipated that their Messiah would bring deliverance to them. Because of their neglect of the spiritual and moral principles involved, Christ necessarily emphasized these in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon accordingly must be understood in this eschatological context.

A careful reading of what Christ said makes it obvious, however, that the principles of the kingdom are far more than merely rules for a future millennium. Proceeding as they do from the nature of God and nature

of morality and spiritual truth, many of the statements of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount are general in character, and the appeal is that inasmuch as these general truths must be accepted, their particular application to the kingdom may be taken for granted. In the progress of this narrative, Jesus not only proclaimed lofty general principles, but also made particular applications to current situations. This address can hardly be viewed as only prophetic, and it is clear that Jesus expected immediate response from His hearers, not simply acquiescence that He was telling the truth. Accordingly, the study of the Sermon on the Mount yields its treasures to those who analyze each text, determining its general meaning, its present application, and its relation to the future kingdom program. Problems of interpretation in most instances vanish easily when viewed from this prospective.

Chapter 5, after describing the setting as a place in the mountains, presents first the Beatitudes (vv. 3-12), then the spiritual influence of true disciples (vv. 13-16). Beginning with Matthew 5:17, the laws and the principles of the kingdom are unfolded and are related to the Mosaic law, to contemporary problems, and to the future judgment of God as well. The ethical teachings of chapter 5 are summed up in the last verse, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

Beatitudes, 5:2-12

The introductory verses, picturing Jesus seated, imply, as Tasker points out, Christ's role as a Lawgiver or Rabbi.³⁴ The Beatitudes pronounce those blessed, or happy, who fulfill these six standards of the kingdom in character and experience: those poor in spirit, or consciously dependent on God; those who mourn; those who are meek, or humble; those who thirst after righteousness; those who are merciful; pure in spirit; and who are peacemakers, although persecuted for righteousness' sake, are proper disciples and subjects of the kingdom. Through verse 10, these are addressed as "they," in contrast to "ye" in verses 11-12. Here is illustrated present application of general truth. The disciples were to experience persecution and false accusation. They are exhorted to rejoice in that day because they share persecution similar to that of prophets of old and because they will have great reward in heaven. It is of interest that these words addressed to those living in that generation promised them reward in heaven rather than in the future millennial kingdom. This is realistic, of course, because they would ultimately move into the church with its heavenly destiny and reward.

Influence of True Disciples, 5:13-16

In verses 13-16, disciples are compared to salt and a lamp. Salt, which has lost its salty character, is utterly useless. While salt can preserve and flavor almost any food, it is useless to add good salt to bad, and salt without flavor should be thrown away. So disciples, without true moral character and spiritual commitment to the King, are useless in the kingdom of heaven. It also implies the rottenness of the world, which needs the preservative of the salt, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out.³⁵

Likewise, disciples should be like a light or lamp, which, if it is going to fulfill its function, must be on a lampstand and not hidden under a bushel. The disciples were to be like a city set on a hill, and to let their light shine. The result would be that they would not attract men to themselves but would glorify the Father in heaven.

The implication of this passage is that only those who have experienced conversion and transformation by the grace of God can be true citizens of the kingdom of heaven. The same thought was expressed to Nicodemus in John 3, when Jesus said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). What John describes as casual, new birth or new life, Matthew

considers as result, new morality, new character, new witness. Both demand genuineness to be a true subject of the kingdom of heaven.

Laws and Principles of the Kingdom, 5:17-48

In Matthew 5:17-48, the details of the moral principles of the kingdom are outlined, and the following subjects are mentioned: the relation of the law of the kingdom to the Mosaic law and the prophets (vv. 17-19); the righteousness of the kingdom as compared to the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (vv. 20-32); laws relating to perjury (vv. 33-37); laws relating to injustice and unfair advantage (vv. 38-42); and laws relating to enemies (vv. 43-48).

In introducing the laws of the kingdom, Jesus paid full respect to the Mosaic law. He declared that He had not come to destroy it or replace it, but to fulfill it. Although the Mosaic law, as a dispensation, was to end at the cross, its moral and spiritual implications were to be fulfilled in later dispensations, including the kingdom. While it is not accurate to say that the kingdom period when Christ reigns on earth will be under the Mosaic law any more than the present age of grace is, it is obvious that the future kingdom is more legal in its government as directed by an absolute Ruler, who rules with a rod of iron (Rev 19:15). Jesus called, however, for a righteousness which would exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees were attempting to fulfill the letter of the law, but were actually breaking the spirit of the law. They not only fell far short of the Mosaic law but fell even shorter of the law of the kingdom. Just as Jesus was to fulfill the law Himself, so His disciples also would share in the fulfillment of the law of righteousness.

According to Jesus, not one jot, that is, the smallest Hebrew letter, yod, or one tittle, that is, the smallest part of a letter that would change the meaning, would be left unfulfilled. Clearly, Jesus upheld the inerrancy of the Scriptures in their entirety, not simply their moral sense. The kingdom rule which He was presenting had the highest moral standards, and His disciples were expected to obey.

The morality of the kingdom, in many respects, was to exceed that of the Law of Moses. Beginning with Matthew 5:21, He brought up case after case where morality in the kingdom is more precise and exacting than their customary interpretation of the Mosaic law. Whereas Moses said they should not commit murder, in the kingdom it was wrong to be angry with a brother without cause. One who called his brother Raca, or "empty headed" (i.e., a numbskull), would be in danger of the Sanhedrin. Even worse would be to call him a fool, which would place him in danger of eternal punishment, literally, the fire of Gehenna. While this does not necessarily mean that a person who carelessly calls another a fool today is in danger of hell, it involves an attitude of superior wisdom which does not take into consideration the sinful state of everyone who is saved. The order of reference in verse 22 is climactic, but all is contrasted to murder in verse 21.

In keeping with this, if one would bring a gift to the altar of God and would there remember that he had something against a brother, Jesus exhorted him to leave the gift in order to be reconciled to his brother and then to return to offer the gift. The series of exhortations, beginning in verse 20, is addressed to the second person, making it direct exhortation.

Expanding the problem of reconciliation to a brother, in verses 25 and 26, He took up the matter of an honest debt which must be cared for, lest the debtor be hailed into court and imprisoned until the last farthing is paid. The adversary of verse 25 is certainly not the devil, as Morgan suggests, but an ordinary human creditor.³⁶ The point is that God demands perfect righteousness and what we owe a brother, we

owe God.

Proceeding from matters which offend a brother, or debts which are owed a brother, He then took up the matter of adultery and lust and its relationship to divorce. In contrast to the law which forbade adultery, Jesus charged that anyone looking on a woman in lust had already committed adultery. He charged them that if their right eye offend, they should pluck it out, or if their right hand offend, it should be cut off. There is no scriptural support that Jesus meant that lust would be conquered by doing this literally, as there still would be the left eye and the left hand, but rather that the severity of the sin required severe self-judgment. If the choice were to lose a member or to be cast into the eternal damnation of Gehenna, obviously it would be better to be maimed.

With this as a background, He contrasted divorce in the kingdom to divorce in the Mosaic law. In the Old Testament, it was comparatively easy to secure divorce. According to Deuteronomy 24:1, a woman no longer in favor with her husband could be given a bill of divorcement and sent away. If in the meantime, however, she married another, she was under no circumstances to return to her first husband, indicating that the divorce was real and final. In the kingdom, the only justifiable cause is that of fornication, or unfaithfulness. Although the matter of divorce in the teaching of Jesus is subject to various interpretations, the tenor of this passage is to recognize divorce as real and final when there is fornication after the marriage relationship has been established. This was more strict than the Mosaic law but less strict than an absolute prohibition of divorce.

In the kingdom, it was not only true that they should not perjure themselves by failing to perform their oath, which was prohibited in the Mosaic law (Num 30:2), but in the kingdom they were not to swear at all, especially in view of man's limited ability to fulfill his oath. Accordingly, he could say yes or no, but he could not pledge beyond this. This indicates care should be used in giving solemn promises but should not be construed as completely prohibiting entering into a pledge or a promise in this age.

Again, the kingdom standards are in contrast to the Mosaic law with its demand for an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Those in the kingdom were exhorted not to resist evil, but if smitten on the right cheek, they were to turn the other also. This principle was further expanded by the instruction that if a man be sued at law, he should allow his adversary not only to take his coat or tunic but his cloak or robe also; if compelled to go a mile, he should volunteer to go two; and should give to those that borrow and not turn them away. In the millennial kingdom, such high standards could be literally enforced.

It is not clear whether Jesus expected immediate compliance. Jesus Himself was unresisting as He went to the cross. Paul, however, claimed his rights as a Roman citizen when falsely accused. The principle should probably be construed as being illustrated here but not applicable to every conceivable situation. What might work with the King present in the millennial kingdom might not work in the mystery form of the kingdom with the King absent.

Although some might deduce from the principles of the kingdom expounded here that the Bible supports pacifism, most interpreters would not draw this conclusion. In dealing with publicans, John the Baptist instructed them not to abuse their power (Lk 3:13-14). Jesus here was not trying to give hard and fast principles that are applicable under all circumstances, but was stating the ideals which govern His kingdom.

The principle that our acts should be by unselfish love is clear. This is brought out in the closing passage of Matthew 5, where, in contrast to the law, which exhorted men to love their neighbor but permitted them

to hate their enemy, Jesus laid down the principle that citizens of His kingdom should love their enemies, bless those that curse them, do good to those that hate them, and pray for those who persecute them. In this, they would emulate the love of God, which causes His sun to shine upon both the evil and the good and sends rain both for the just and unjust. He pointed out that even the world, with its tax collectors, rewards those that reward them and greets those that greet them. Morgan notes love is "the principle of life that crowns everything," and that love is the guiding principle of this entire chapter.³⁷ The standard of conduct in all areas should be God's attitude of love.

Chapter 5 concludes with the exhortation to be perfect, as God the Father in heaven is perfect. Perfection here refers to uprightness and sincerity of character with the thought of maturity in godliness or attaining the goal of conformity to the character of God. While sinless perfection is impossible, godliness, in its biblical concept, is attainable.

27 William Kelly, Lectures on the Gospel of Matthew, p. 104.

28 R. V. G. Tasker, The Gospel According to St. Matthew, p. 59.

29 Kelly, p. 7.

30 R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel, p. 180.

31 Kelly, p. 106.

32 Arthur W. Pink, An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, p. 13.

33 Many independent works on the Sermon on the Mount have been published, most of them making spiritual applications of these general truths to Christians living today. Of these, volumes such as Studies in the Sermon on the Mount by David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and The Sermon on the Mount by James Montgomery Boice are helpful, and The Sermon on the Mount by F. B. Meyer is a classic. Most expositions, however, content themselves with spiritual application and present application, and do not consider each verse contextually in its relation to the doctrine of the kingdom. While good application is common, precise interpretation is rare.

34 Tasker, p. 59.

35 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, 1:151-52.

36 G. Campbell Morgan, The Gospel According to Matthew, p. 56.

37 Morgan, p. 58.

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