

Keys to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5–7

(An excerpt from my self-study course on Matthew)

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The Sermon on the Mount, as found in Matthew 5–7, is a foundation for everything Jesus taught. These keys do not attempt to explain the details of that sermon but merely to suggest a correct approach to it. The study of the sermon, and obedience to it, should last a lifetime.

1. Its position of importance. The Sermon on the Mount is found in its fullest form at the beginning of the Lord's public ministry as told in Matthew. This shows its importance. Matthew is by design the gate to the New Testament. And of the Lord's recorded public discourses in Matthew, it is first and longest. (The Olivet Discourse, Matthew 24–25, was spoken only to the apostles, as was the Farewell Discourse in John 13–17.)

Such discourses mark the ends of sections in Matthew. One recurring pattern in this Gospel is that after each of five narrative sections there is a discourse (chs. 5–7, 10, 13, 18, and 23–25) followed by this expression: "When Jesus had finished..." (KJV, 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). The first such section begins at Matthew 4:17 and quickly moves to this sermon, which is its main emphasis.

2. Its royal Speaker. Matthew presents Jesus as the King. His royal title is *Christ*, that is, Messiah. He is Ruler of the promised kingdom, the "Coming One" anticipated across the centuries. Matthew shows that Jesus fulfills the pictures of the King found in the prophetic Word: He is David's descendant, born of a virgin, born in Bethlehem. Matthew's introductory chapters show Jesus' legal right to rule (ch. 1), Gentile recognition (ch. 2), recognition by the forerunner and by the Father (ch. 3), and His moral right to rule (ch. 4). As recorded by Matthew 4:17–25, the King begins His public ministry before He goes up on the mountain to speak this sermon.

3. Its repetition of history. There is another picture of the King besides the one in prophecy: He can be seen in the sacred history of God's people. For Messiah is the true Israel and—as such—He relives parts of Israel's history. This theme is important in Matthew. It explains why, for example, Matthew 2:15 says that Hosea 11:1 was "fulfilled" when the Father brought Jesus out of Egypt. What happened to God's son, the nation Israel, happened also to His Son, the Messiah.

How does this affect our approach to the Sermon on the Mount? By making us aware of parallels to the Exodus. When God began to redeem Israel (as told in Exodus), Moses led his followers to the mountain to hear the words of God's covenant. In Matthew Israel has a new Prophet and Lawgiver, a greater Moses, who also leads His followers to a mountain. Consider the following statements, which are true for both sets of followers.

- a. They have a leader whom God marvelously preserved as a child and set apart to save them.
- b. They expect God soon to fulfill the promises to their forefather Abraham.
- c. They expect the kingdom of God to begin soon.
- d. They have been seeing God's miracles of deliverance.

- e. They have been washed in anticipation of hearing God's Word. (Cf. Exod. 19:10, 14.)
- f. They have been led to the mountain. (Cf. Exod. 19:2, 3, 20; 24:12.)
- g. At the mountain they will hear God's authoritative laws teaching them how to be righteous.
- h. These laws will be part of a covenant later ratified with blood.

Besides these parallels there are instructive contrasts. For example, in Exodus the people did not dare approach the lawgiver; in Matthew, they follow Him right up the mountain. In Exodus the result was a curse; in Matthew, the blessings expressed in the Beatitudes. In Exodus the covenant was ratified with the blood of animals; in Matthew, with the blood of the Lawgiver. In Exodus the laws are written on stone tablets; those of Matthew, by God's Spirit on human hearts.

4. Its hearers, expecting the kingdom. To whom does the King preach this sermon? Directly, He addresses "disciples" (5:1), those who profess to accept His authority. He repeatedly calls God their Father, whom they should be like (5:48). But to some extent He also takes into account the crowds these disciples come from. These crowds apparently keep arriving during the sermon and are "amazed at his teaching" because of His authority (7:28–29).

Two things have attracted these disciples and crowds. The first is the message constantly preached by John the Baptist and now by Jesus: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near" (Greek, 3:2; 4:17). This means to turn from sin to God because the kingdom is ready and can begin. But what kingdom is this? The Jews used three terms in the same sense: *kingdom of heaven*, *kingdom of God*, and *kingdom*. All these terms referred to the future kingdom pictured by the prophets: the restored Davidic rule, the goal of all history, for Israel and for the world, involving political, material, social, and "spiritual" blessings. It would be the *kingdom of heaven* because it would come from heaven to fill the earth (Dan. 2). Since John and Jesus never define this term, they must want the Jews to understand it in the same way.

Everything Jesus says about the kingdom in the sermon will fit this meaning. First, consider the times He mentions it by name:

- At the beginning and end of the Beatitudes (5:3, 10), He refers to the kingdom as the disciples' great prize.
 - In the thematic statement (5:19, 20), it is their goal.
 - In the model prayer (6:10), it is what they ask the Father to bring.
 - Again in the body of the sermon (6:33), it is their greatest concern.
 - In the epilogue (7:21–23), it is the destiny to which the King will admit some and not others.
- Often He refers to the kingdom without naming it. For example, it is (a) inheriting the earth (5:5) and (b) the "life" awaiting those who enter the narrow gate and travel the narrow road (7:14).

5. Its hearers, impressed by the King. The disciples and crowds are also attracted by Jesus' authority and power, in two aspects. (a) He has taught in the synagogues (4:23). This sermon demonstrates His authority in teaching (7:28–29). (b) He has also healed "every disease and sickness" (4:23), and many have come to Him for healing (4:24–25). That aspect of His

authority will be emphasized right after the sermon, in Matthew 8–10. Thus, Jesus shows both by His words and His works that He can bring the predicted kingdom.

To summarize keys 4 and 5: this sermon is primarily for Jesus' disciples but has some features designed for the interested crowds. Both groups are attracted to Him by His message and authority. The disciples are repentant in expectation of the coming kingdom.

Does this sermon speak directly to non-Jews in the twenty-first century? Yes, for at the end of the same book He sends the disciples to “all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). Do we dare to exclude this sermon from our teaching?

6. Its prologue (5:3–16). The sermon begins with the Beatitudes (5:3–12) and the Similitudes (5:13–16), describing the disciples and sketching their future. The Beatitudes include repeated promises of blessing. These constitute the blessing promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:3), whose Son and Heir is the Speaker (Matt. 1:1).

Whom are these blessings for? For these disciples who are listening to the King. They have responded to His call to repent in preparation for the coming kingdom. Since they are repentant, He describes them as poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness. This description shows that they do not deserve the blessings but will nevertheless obtain them.

What are the promised blessings?¹ They are future blessings: these disciples “will be comforted,” “will inherit the earth,” “will be filled,” “will be shown mercy,” etc. They are the blessings of the kingdom: “theirs is the kingdom” (vv. 3, 10).² This summary promise is found at the beginning and end of the Beatitudes.³ It cannot mean that the kingdom has begun by the time of the sermon, for the kingdom is being preached as near (4:17). Nor does it reinterpret the kingdom, changing its predicted character. Instead, the Lord is telling who will enter the kingdom and inherit it. When the kingdom does come, it is theirs.

Would Jesus use the present tense (“is”) to speak of something future (the kingdom)? Why not? We do it often. For example, we can say, “This **is** an important election” long before it takes place. Notice in Luke 20:36 how Jesus speaks about the future resurrection as present (“they **can** no longer die...they **are**...”). Similarly, Paul says, “All things **are** yours,” including even “the

¹ Nearly all the descriptions and promises in the Beatitudes come from the Old Testament and should be studied there. For example, the Lord will comfort those that mourn (5:4), as promised in Isaiah 61:2. Psalm 37:11 also said that “the meek will inherit the land” (5:5). The promise to satisfy the thirsty (5:6) recalls Isaiah 55:1. The blessing on the merciful (5:7) comes from Psalm 44:1–3. That on the pure of heart (5:8) comes from Psalm 24:4 and 73:1.

² “Theirs is the kingdom” means the same as the promise in Revelation 11:18. When the kingdom is about to begin, the heavenly elders give thanks to God that “the time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great—and for destroying those who destroy the earth.” See also 1 Peter 1:4–6.

³ The summary promise is identical in verses 3 and 10. Then it is expanded in verses 11–12—those persecuted for Messiah’s sake have great reward now kept in heaven but to be given in the coming kingdom. See the two previous footnotes and their references.

future” (1 Cor. 3:21–23). When we know that something is future, it is often not confusing to speak of it as present.

7. Its body (5:17 to 7:12). What is the main theme of Jesus’ sermon, developed in the body of the sermon? It is true righteousness as the requirement for entering the kingdom.

The body of Jesus’ sermon begins with a thematic statement (5:17–20) and ends with a summary (7:12). In both places He refers to “the Law and the Prophets.” This expression does not refer just to the law of Moses but to all of God’s previous written revelation. “Not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen” of God’s demands, He says, can be set aside as unimportant (“breaks” in 5:19 means “annuls”⁴). Every part demands a response (“practices and teaches,” 5:19) from man. Such response will make one’s name great in the coming kingdom.

In fact, no one will get into the kingdom without the righteousness of such response (5:20). Even “the Pharisees and the teachers of the law” do not qualify. They perform certain religious actions but harbor unworthy attitudes. Jesus describes this true righteousness from 5:21 to 7:12 and summarizes it at 7:12 by the Golden Rule (“this sums up the Law and the Prophets”). True righteousness is neither selfish nor superficial. It relates correctly to men (the emphasis in 5:21–48) and to God (ch. 6) with proper motives (7:1–12). In this sermon the King proclaims only a few of His “laws” (“I tell you”); the rest of His laws are like these and are found in all the Scriptures. In fact, the standard He requires is perfection, measured by God’s own character (5:48).⁵

8. Its epilogue (7:13–27). The conclusion to the sermon makes use of three principal contrasts: two gates (opening to two roads), two trees (bearing two kinds of fruit), and two houses (built on two foundations). These illustrate the Lord’s exhortations, especially for the crowds, to find the narrow way to life (that is, to the kingdom), not to follow false teachers (nor depend on false profession), but to build strong lives by obeying His teachings. Hearing His teachings is not enough; only by obeying can one withstand the storms of life (7:24–25).

9. Its purpose. The thematic statement (5:17–20) and epilogue (7:13–27) make it clear that these are laws to be obeyed to enter the kingdom. Someone might object that (a) obeying such a perfect standard is impossible and (b) we are not saved by our works but by grace (Eph. 2:8–9). Because of these objections, some believe that the sermon is not really our standard but is only designed to make us repent. They think that by trying to keep it we come to realize our sin—the same result as under the law of Sinai (Rom. 3:19–20; 7:7–13).

It is true that Messiah’s law can convict, but that is not its purpose. His law does not point to something better, as the Sinai law did, but is eternal. The Sinai law was weak (Rom. 8:3) and could not survive; it was to cease at Messiah’s cross (Rom. 7:7–13; Col. 2:14). The law Messiah proclaims in His sermon is far better, not merely repeating the Sinai law but replacing and fulfill-

⁴ Though sometimes translated “break,” the Greek word *luo* does not mean “disobey” but “annul,” “destroy,” or even “free” (release). For example, NIV translates it “broke down” in Ephesians 2:14 and “destroy” in John 2:19 and 1 John 3:8. It has the same meaning in John 5:18, 7:23, 10:35, and here in Matthew 5:19.

⁵ The Greek word twice translated “perfect” in 5:48 can also mean “mature.” But “perfect” fits both uses here.

ing it (Heb. 7:18–19; Gal. 3:10–24; Rom. 3:31). His law will do what the Sinai law “was powerless to do” (Rom. 8:3–4).

Others believe that this sermon is a “constitution” for the kingdom, to take effect only when the kingdom comes. That view is inadequate. The sermon does not describe kingdom conditions but pre-kingdom conditions and those who hope to enter the kingdom. Its hearers mourn, hunger for righteousness, suffer for righteousness’ sake, are a light in the dark, must love their enemies and not worry over material needs. They need to fast, persevere in prayer, and watch out for false teachers. They are not in the kingdom yet but eagerly look for it.

Still others believe that this sermon was only for Jews: either those first hearers who were looking for the “Jewish” kingdom—or other Jews in the future Tribulation. But that view wrongly restricts the kingdom, which is not just Jewish but is the goal of the entire worldwide church (Acts 14:21; Gal. 5:21; 1 Cor. 6:9, 10).

To reiterate, Messiah still expects us to hear His words and “put them into practice” (Matt. 7:24–27). As His “disciples” from “all nations,” we are taught to “obey everything I have commanded” (Matt. 28:19–20). We should follow the example of the apostles, who referred to the Lord’s commands as still in force (1 Cor. 7:10; 1 Tim. 6:3). We are still on the way to the kingdom (Acts 14:22; James 2:5) and confess that Jesus is the King (Acts 17:7). We have repented toward God and trusted in the Lord Jesus (Acts 20:21). We still hunger and thirst for righteousness. And not only have we been declared righteous (justified); God has also begun a process in us that He will eventually complete. We shall attain that “holiness without which no man shall see the Lord” (KJV, Heb. 12:14), the perfect standard of the Sermon on the Mount.

10. Its fulfillment. How will we obey this sermon? How are we guaranteed the perfect holiness it requires? Not by our own power but by the Holy Spirit. As promised, the Lord has baptized us in the Spirit (Matt. 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:13), who has begun to write God’s laws into our hearts (Heb. 8:10; 2 Cor. 3:3). This is a new arrangement with God, called the New Covenant and inaugurated by Messiah’s death (Matt. 26:28). As we behold the Lord’s image (listen to His “laws” in all of Scripture), the Spirit transforms us into the same image (2 Cor. 3:18). Thus, the “laws” being made part of us are the very ones Messiah announced. But even as we become righteous, we are still poor in spirit; we still mourn—and hunger and thirst for righteousness. The glory can never be ours. Both now and when He finishes transforming us, the glory is His.

His New Covenant is much bigger than we are. It extends to heavenly things (Heb. 9:23), to the future (“promises” in Heb. 8:6), to converted Israel (Heb. 8:10), in fact, to the whole eternal kingdom. But that which really belongs to “the future” (1 Cor. 3:21–23) has begun with us in this age, as first described in the Sermon on the Mount.