

The Sermon on the Mount

Week 1 - Introduction to the Series – Matthew 4:17-5:3

Scripture Reading: Matthew 4:17-5:3

Introduction

The Sermon on the Mount is the first recorded sermon that Jesus preached and it is also the longest recorded sermon he preached – even though the average person can read through the words of Matthew 5-7 in about 10 minutes

However, what we have recorded for us is only a brief synopsis of what Jesus probably preached on the mountainside that day – kind of the Cliff's Notes version of a sermon that likely lasted for hours

The Sermon on the Mount has been called, “the greatest sermon ever preached by the greatest preacher who ever lived” and it has stirred people for centuries – Christians and non-Christians alike

As a matter of fact, even Gandhi [**Gandhi**], who was certainly not a Christian, said the following – “The Sermon on the Mount went straight to my heart. If I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, ‘O yes, I am a Christian.’”

The real problem with Gandhi's statement is in the second part regarding the interpretation of it – but that has long been the problem with the sermon for many people

While the Sermon on the Mount is recorded for us as a series of sayings and seemingly stand-alone sections that make it seem like the New Testament version of the Ten Commandments, it was never intended to function as a “social gospel” It's not a collection of wise sayings that, if adhered to, would lead to an end of all of society's ills

Of course, this world would be a much better place if everyone followed what is written in Matthew 5-7 but, as I have said before, all that would ultimately be accomplished is that hell would be filled with a nicer group of people

The sermon is not so much a treatise on what to do but a revelation of who and how God is and who and how God wants his people to be

We see this stated in **Matthew 5:48** where Jesus says – “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*”

The Sermon on the Mount, then, describes God's view of a kingdom dweller and not just some set of ideals for people to aspire to yet be frustrated by as they go through life

Oswald Chambers [**Chambers**] put it this way – “[Jesus] came to make us what he teaches us we should be. The Sermon on the Mount is not a set of principles to be obeyed apart from identification with Jesus Christ. The Sermon on the Mount is a statement of the life we will live when the Holy Spirit is getting his way with us.”

In other words, the Sermon on the Mount declares to us what we are when we have accepted Christ and describes for us the expected character and conduct of those who belong to Christ

In order to better understand the sermon, it might help to look at **the background of the sermon**

I. Background of the Sermon

And to do that, we need to back up a bit and consider what took place leading up to the sermon

Jesus' cousin, John, was sent to prepare the way of the Lord as we see in **Matthew 3:3** was prophesied hundreds of years earlier by Isaiah

And John, who we know as John the Baptist, was baptizing at the Jordan and preaching “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” (**Matthew 3:2**)

Then, toward the end of Matthew 3, we read that Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John signaling the beginning of Jesus' public ministry

Since John's baptism was the baptism of repentance we might wonder why Jesus, who was sinless, needed to be baptized by John at all

But by doing so, Jesus paid homage to his predecessor, put his stamp of approval on John's ministry, and identified with the sinners he had come to save

It was also at Jesus' baptism that the Father verbally expressed his pleasure with his Son – thereby declaring Jesus to be the awaited Messiah

But also with the Holy Spirit descending like a dove to rest upon Jesus we see a direct manifestation of the triune nature of God as all three members of the Godhead are involved in the baptism

So, the baptism actually served several purposes beyond signaling the start of Jesus' public life and ministry

Then, immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit where he fasted for 40 days and 40 nights and toward the end of that time he was tempted by Satan – we read about all that in Matthew 4:1-11

And in **Matthew 4:12** we see that Jesus went back to Galilee to begin his preaching ministry after he had heard his cousin had been arrested

And in **Matthew 4:17** where we begin our focus this morning, we read – *From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

The remarkable thing I want you to notice is that the message of Jesus was exactly the same message that John had been preaching that we saw in **Matthew 3:2** – *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

I would have to imagine hearing that would have pleased John if he heard about it in his jail cell

Then, after Jesus enlisted a few more of his core group of disciples, namely Peter and his brother, Andrew and James along with his brother, John we read in **Matthew 4:20** that Jesus, *went all through Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom...*

And Jesus became quite popular during this time

Although from the way Matthew reported these events it seems his popularity may primarily have been less for his message than for the miraculous healings that he was performing

Still, he had many people following him and, as we see in **Matthew 5:1-2** he took the opportunity to teach them

And he went up onto a mountainside, no doubt to give him the advantage of height over his audience so that his voice would carry further, easier and he began to teach his followers

Because that's what the word "disciple" means in this case – it wasn't the twelve or even necessarily those who would prove to be faithful disciples over the long-term

So we don't want to read too much into the term "disciple" and think that Jesus was trying to get away from the crowd although his message is directed primarily to those who would become citizens of the kingdom of heaven

Because the point is that the message that Jesus was proclaiming was that the kingdom of heaven was near and his instruction of the people was focused on the good news of the kingdom and what it would be like

And that's the lens through which we must view and analyze the Sermon on the Mount

The kingdom of heaven is **the business of the sermon**

II. Business of the Sermon

Matthew is the only New Testament author to use the phrase, "the kingdom of heaven" and he does so 32 times in his gospel account and 6 of those usages are found in the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew also includes one quotation each of Jesus saying "kingdom of God" and "your kingdom" for a total of 34 kingdom references in his gospel

Bible scholars generally believe that the reason Matthew typically used the phrase "kingdom of heaven" was due to his sensitivity to his audience

Matthew wrote his gospel primarily to a Jewish audience

And most devout Jews thought the name of God was too holy to be spoken aloud by sinful men so they avoided even mentioning it so as to not inadvertently violate the third Commandment against taking God's name in vain

So Matthew used the euphemism "heaven" to represent God to thereby avoid offending those he was trying to reach with his message

Still, when you look at parallel passages in the gospels of Mark and Luke, where Matthew mentions the kingdom of heaven, the other disciples use the phrase "kingdom of God" showing that the same kingdom is meant by both terms

There really is no difference between the two phrases

The message of the Sermon on the Mount concerns the kingdom of heaven, or God's kingdom, that is near

It was the same message that was proclaimed by John the Baptist while looking forward to the revealed Messiah now proclaimed and expanded on by the Messiah himself after his revelation

Nature of the kingdom

Most of us, when we think of a kingdom, naturally picture a territory that is ruled over by a king

In our mind's eye we probably see a castle surrounded by lands and villages and some physical boundaries that delineate the extent of the kingdom

But the kingdom of heaven doesn't refer to a kingdom defined by geographical boundaries

The kingdom of heaven refers more to a kingdom of influence over thought and attitude and allegiance – it has more to do with dominion over the inner man than it does with a spatial kingdom

Neither does it refer to the total sphere of God's sovereignty because, in reality, that realm is all-encompassing because God is sovereign over everything

And, as we will see in future sermons, the kingdom Matthew speaks of is more exclusive

Turn with me to Mark 9 and we will look at two verses that will help us understand the idea of what is meant

In the passage we will be considering Jesus is teaching about the danger of the temptation to sin

In **Mark 9:45** Jesus says, "*And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to **enter life** lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell.*"

Then in verse 47 (**Mark 9:47**) Jesus continues, "*And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to **enter the kingdom of God** with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell...*"

Clearly, then, Jesus is saying to enter the kingdom of God is to enter life because he uses the terms synonymously while teaching the same truth

Therefore we can say that the kingdom of heaven has to do with salvation and those who are in the kingdom are those who have been saved because it's those who have been saved who have life

Jesus said in the second half of **John 10:10** – "*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly*" so we can be assured that when a person is saved they are a citizen of the kingdom

But as we look around the church we know that not everyone who is part of a local church is necessarily a true citizen of the kingdom

Jesus makes that clear in passages like the parable of the weeds and the parable of the dragnet found in Matthew 13

Those parables, and our own experience, tell us that there are those who gather together with the church who are not truly a part of the church – they are counterfeit believers or imposters and some are even planted by Satan

So there is also a sense in which the kingdom will not be fully accomplished until Christ comes again

Making the kingdom of heaven one of those “already but not yet” enigmas that we see throughout Scripture that we must accept even if we don’t fully understand them

If a person is truly saved, they are already a citizen of the kingdom of heaven and they can look forward to its final, perfected reality in the future

And a citizen of the kingdom of heaven should live accordingly and that is the subject of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount

However, we need to be careful that we don’t view the sermon in the reverse

What I mean by that is that the Sermon on the Mount isn’t a prescription for how to be saved and therefore become a citizen of the kingdom

It must not be understood in a legalistic sense that says adherence to its standard is how one is saved or even that doing what it says means one is saved

The sermon doesn’t spell out a new system of legalistic morality – it tells of the need for a new life

Nothing in the Sermon on the Mount tells a person how to be saved – it tells how a person should live once they are saved – and that is a very vital distinction

One could live within the realm of the kingdom and by outwardly observing and living according to the sermon, appear to be a true citizen of the kingdom only to be shown to be a counterfeit when Christ returns

Code of conduct for the citizen

It’s been said that citizens of foreign countries can readily tell when a tourist is an American merely by observing their conduct – and that’s not necessarily a positive thing unfortunately because some of our behaviors might be better left at our borders

However, an ambassador is an official representative of a government who retains his national identity and is expected to faithfully represent what his country is and what it stands for while residing in a foreign land

And **2Corinthians 5:20** says that believers are “*ambassadors of Christ*” which means that we should always live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven and faithfully reveal and represent what the kingdom is like

Citizens of the kingdom should faithfully adhere to the Father’s code of conduct and not conform to the standards of this world by taking on its habits, attitudes, values, behaviors, and so forth because this world is not our home

And Jesus reveals that code of conduct in his Sermon on the Mount and it is meant only for the citizens of the kingdom

As we progress through the sermon in the next several weeks we are going to see just how rich it is but let’s take just a few moments to get an overview of the sermon and its **balance and breadth**

III. Balance and Breadth of the Sermon

First, while the sermon doesn’t tell us how to be saved **it reveals just how absolutely necessary it is to be saved**

Many people want to view the sermon as a list of attitudes and behaviors to master in order to make oneself acceptable to God but the sermon doesn’t present a standard by which a person is declared righteous apart from Christ

It actually serves to show how far short we all fall in meeting its standard and drives us to the realization that, on our own, we can never hope to achieve its lofty ideal

And anyone who says they are perfectly living up to the standard found in the words of the Sermon on the Mount has never really read and understood it, leaving them misinformed as to what it requires, or they are lying

In **Galatians 3:24** the apostle Paul labeled the Mosaic Law a “guardian” or schoolmaster to guide us to Christ so that we might be justified by faith in him – it was never meant to be accomplished because it’s standard was impossible

And the Old Testament Law was a largely external standard whereas the Sermon on the Mount introduces and calls for a righteousness from inside that can only flow from a regenerated heart

Second, the sermon **brings us closer to Jesus** because, as we study its words, we will see that the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount is actually the Sermon on the Mount because he is the only one who has perfectly embodied it

Third, the Sermon on the Mount shows us how to be truly blessed as Christ-followers

While its principles are diametrically opposed to what our fallen natures and the world around us tells us is true pleasing and honoring God is the way to the Christ-follower's true happiness and contentment

The ways of the world are seductive and they promise happiness and fulfillment but it's a false promise

And while the principles and truths found in the Sermon on the Mount may seem to be impossible ideals, we know that they are the way to please and honor God

The teachings in the sermon strike a sweet balance between positive commands of what to do and negative commands of what not to do as it directs the believer into proper kingdom living

The sermon basically breaks down into three different kinds of discourse:

1. Statements of blessings and how to receive them
2. Ethical pronouncements that warn against what is wrong and encourage what is right
3. Contrasts between the traditional understanding of the Law and the teachings of Jesus

And we will find that the sermon touches on many topics

Topics such as: righteousness, attitudes, conflicts, opposition, enemies, love, flattery, money, materialism, giving, rewards, mercy, revenge, hypocrisy, the inner man, works, discernment, judgmental attitudes, forgiveness, wisdom, reality, true security, wisdom, loyalty, discipleship, obedience, and Christian witness to a watching world

Because, in the sermon, Jesus reveals just what God requires in each of those areas

It is designed to do more than reveal, though; it is designed to lead us to change – to show us what it should look like to live as the citizens of the kingdom that we are in Christ

Like a police description of a suspect on the loose, the Sermon on the Mount gives a description of the kingdom dweller

And to the degree that it doesn't describe us, we should wonder why

Conclusion

Some have described the Sermon on the Mount as “vicious” and “violent” and, in a sense, I suppose it is because it radically opposes what mankind instinctively thinks and believes

A true understanding of the sermon and what one author described as “an exposure to the life-giving logic” of it will result in what he went on to call “fearsome surgery” as things are cut out and replaced in the life of the believer

It’s elective surgery that every person must accept or reject for themselves but it is necessary to be fit for the kingdom

Let me close with an illustration –

In his book, Loving God, Chuck Colson [**Colson**] tells the story of a notorious gangster in Los Angeles by the name of Mickey Cohen [**Cohen**]

It’s interesting that his career and that of the evangelist Billy Graham were rising at the same time because the lives of the two men became intertwined for a while in the 1950’s

See, at the height of his career one of Cohen’s henchmen attended a Billy Graham crusade and accepted Christ and his testimony led Cohen to consider Christianity for himself and he showed surprising interest in it

Hearing of this, several prominent Christian leaders began visiting Cohen and after many presentations of the gospel and much persuasion to open the door of his heart to Christ, Cohen prayed the sinner’s prayer

The man who was evangelizing to Cohen believed he was sincere but there was absolutely no noticeable change in Cohen’s life

So the man who led him to pray the sinner’s prayer convinced Cohen to attend a Billy Graham crusade with him

At that crusade, Mickey Cohen was confronted with the reality that being a Christian meant he would have to give up his friends and his profession and that his life would need to profoundly change

Upon hearing this, Cohen balked

Cohen is quoted as protesting, “You never told me that I had to give up my career. You never told me that I had to give up my friends. There are Christian movie stars, Christian athletes, Christian football players, Christian cowboys, and Christian politicians; why not a Christian gangster?”

Not many people would think that God would be okay with a Christian gangster

But what happened with Mickey Cohen is an extreme example that serves to illustrate what is actually happening with an unknowable number of people today

People who have on the surface “accepted Christ” but are living their lives as they always have

And while there aren’t many who think God would be okay with a Christian gangster there are plenty who think they can be okay with God and dwell in God’s kingdom on their own terms and while living as they want to live

They think God will be okay with a Christian gossip, a Christian liar, a Christian adulterer, a Christian egotist, a Christian narcissist, a Christian rageaholic, a Christian...you fill in the blank

But in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reveals the kind of person who is fit to dwell in the kingdom of heaven and a true understanding of his words shows that there are many who call themselves Christians who are nowhere near the kingdom

Oliver Wendell Holmes [**Holmes**] is quoted as having observed – “Most people are willing to take the Sermon on the Mount as a flag to sail under, but few will use it as a rudder by which to steer.”

The Sermon on the Mount will challenge and it will convict but it also has the power to bless and it is my hope that our study of it will be a blessing to each of you

Let’s pray