

## 5:1 – 7:29 – The Sermon on the Mount

### Popularity and interpretation

This sermon contains some of the most famous teachings of Jesus. It has been revered by many - even unbelievers have been inspired by its ethic.

But with that popularity, has come a lot of confusion and contention. People from all kinds of ideologies and persuasions claim the sermon on the mount for support.

As is often the case in Bible interpretation, many of the explanations that people have rightly highlight some element of truth in the passage but extrapolates it beyond what the text warrants - to the neglect of the other truths that are equally taught in the passage.

We will seek to think carefully about everything the text says and give consideration to the context of Matthew's gospel and the rest of scripture.

### Content and Theme

The major theme of the sermon is true righteousness and the hope of God's kingdom.

The Sermon calls us to consider a higher standard of righteousness than the religious leaders of the day, and it denounces religious hypocrisy. The sermon teaches us how to live righteously, graciously, and godly in relation to others and to God, and emphasises internal and private righteousness as well as external and public.

The sermon gives hope to those who would choose the path of righteousness, by reminding them that in the future, God's kingdom will bring justice - The righteous and unrighteous alike will reap the reward of their deeds. Those who follow righteousness should live for that day and be encouraged in the face of current injustice and persecution.

### Application

This is point on which Christians have widely differed.

Some have seen in the sermon a call to radically transform society in our age - to make political moves to incorporate these standards of righteousness into our governments and institutions.

Others, on the other side of a spectrum, have denounce any relevance of the sermon for Christians today, saying that it describes the righteousness that will fill the world one day when Christ returns.

I believe that the sermon teaches us both things in measure. The sermon does not make any specific claims about political activism, nor does it suggest we should ignore its commands now. Instead, it teaches us to be like "salt" and "light" in the world now, while also praying for the day when "thy kingdom come". Anyone who believes on Christ and receives the spirit will want to "seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness", but they will also recognise how far short they fall, praying "forgive us our debts... lead us not into temptation".

## 5:1 - The setting

The sermon is directed towards the "disciples". This is a broader term than "the twelve" who we often think of. But it is more limited than "the crowds" which often followed Jesus. These are people who have made a decision to follow Jesus. They have heeded the message to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand". But there is nothing to indicate that this is private or secret teaching (as we will encounter later) - The crowds were likely present also.

Having repented (confessed and renounced sin, to turn back to God and his laws), the disciples now needed instruction in that path they have chosen - what does righteousness look like? What does God require?

## 5:2-12 - The Beatitudes

Beatitudes comes from the Latin for "blessing". These eight blessings follow a pattern common in the Bible (see for example Psalm 1:1). They are a statement of fact, and a promise for the future that certain groups of people are/will be happy; they are/will be favoured by God; they are/will receive good things from him.

The eight blessings should not be thought of as describing eight different groups of people, each receiving their own reward. But rather, each one describes a characteristic that is descriptive of the righteous - and especially those who suffer for righteousness, by direct persecution, or by "missing out" on the enjoyments of the wicked.

### The beneficiaries

We should be careful to over-spiritualize the descriptions. But we should also be careful not to reject the gospel's spiritual focus on sin, repentance and forgiveness. It is often true, that one's social status and one's righteousness can be closely intertwined - e.g. those who live in physical poverty can be more perceptive of their spiritual poverty (though this obviously not always true!)

"poor in spirit" - A lowly person. We can see in this one who feels the weight of their own sin.

"those who mourn" - A heavy-hearted person. We might think of someone who feels the weight of the world's evil.

"the meek" - the self-restrained, non-aggressive, and gentle. We might think of those who trust their lot in their life and eternity to the grace of God, rather than trying to seize it in their own power.

"those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" - those who want God's will to be done in themselves and in the world. We might think of those who hate injustice and sin in all its forms, and long for good to triumph over evil.

"the merciful" - We might think of those who are prepared to overlook sins committed against them - They will not hold a grudge or seek vengeance.

"the pure in heart" - those who are sincere, and do not harbour ulterior motives. We might think of those who are sincere in their repentance and faith towards God.

"the peacemakers" - Those who seek for Shalom (wholeness, wellness, peace) in all things. We might think of those who reach out with the gospel, even to their enemies, seeking their salvation.

"those who are persecuted for righteousness sake" - those who suffer the rejection, insult, and assault of people who disdain their preaching and practice of this true righteousness.

### The blessings

"theirs is the kingdom of heaven". Twice over to bookend the section. Who will have a place in this kingdom that Christ announces? Those who have true humility before God, and suffer in this world for righteousness. Christ overturns the arrogant expectations of the proud hypocrites. It is theirs now. Though they wait for it to appear, God has secured the place in it for those who are his.

"shall be comforted" - God will bring joy and end sorrow.

"shall inherit the earth" - The earth which has been warred over for millennia, will be given to those who never fought.

"shall be satisfied" - The longing of the righteous heart will be met when God's kingdom is filled with true righteousness and peace.

"shall receive mercy" - God will not take vengeance, and repay them for their sin. They will know forgiveness.

"shall see God" - God himself will be present with his people in his kingdom.

"called the sons of God" - They shall be associated with him, accepted by him and through grace receive honour and glory as those who display God's image.

### 5:11-12 – The personal touch

The Lord makes the final blessing very personal. "you", "on my account".

He reassures them, that is the path that the righteous have always trod, and it will be recompensed.

### 5:13-16 - Salt and Light

Jesus gives two metaphors, that describe the role of his people in the world.

"salt" was a preservative in a time before mechanised refrigeration. Christian's should (whether actively or passively) restrain evil in the world (compare 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8)

"lost its taste" - literally, become defiled. That is, the salt has become dirty and cannot be used. This is call to maintaining purity in a world that is impure.

"trampled under people's feet" - Christian testimony that is marred by unrighteousness and impurity will be quickly discarded by the world, and the gospel undermined.

"light" shows us what we could not otherwise see. "A city" was a very bright landmark in a time before street lights. A lamp in a house is meant to be seen, not hidden. So the Christian is have a publicly visible show of righteousness (but not hypocritical!) that can be seen by the world.