

# The National/Individual Distinction as Pivot Point For Understanding the Applicability of Matthew 5-7

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## INTRODUCTION

The content of Matthew 5-7, commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, is often understood by those who perceive there to be one people of God as a present-tense ethic intended primarily for the church. On the other hand, those who discern multiple peoples of God (via an exegetically derived distinction between Israel and the church), have recognized that these passages are secondarily applicable to the church and not primarily. While the difference in these two models can be easily traced to differences in hermeneutic method (via the presence or absence of certain theological precommitments), there is also a key question of distinction between national and individual promises and expectation.

Thinkers on both sides of the issue (single and multiple peoples of God) tend to underemphasize this vital distinction. For those perceiving one people of God, there seems to be no consequential theological incongruity in equating the national and individual, but for those asserting a literal grammatical historical hermeneutic (LGH), the conflating of the two results in a lack of cogency that can fuel caricatures of those affirming an Israel/church distinction as imprecise or even incoherent.

In this paper some significant concepts of Matthew 5-7 are examined through the lenses of both the Single People of God perspective (hereafter, 1P), which requires a non-LGH hermeneutic and emphasizes theological precommitment, and the Multiple People of God perspective (hereafter, MP), which is rooted in the LGH hermeneutic, and generally eschews theological precommitment. The latter of these two is strengthened by a recognition of a personal/national distinction evident in Matthew 5-7.

In addressing this pivotal issue from an LGH vantage point, and with a textual, rather than theological, focus, we may arrive at a *textually based* understanding of the applicability of the Sermon on the Mount, and thus derive a more cogent perspective than if we fail to give the national/individual distinction its proper attention.

## 1P PERSPECTIVE OF CONCEPTS IN MATTHEW 5-7

The 1P perspective takes a universal audience view, that essentially all of the context of Matthew 5-7 is directly applicable to all believers. Because in 1P there is no expected future blessing for *national* Israel, to interpret the Sermon on the Mount as pertaining to national Israel would violate the theological precommitment that drives the hermeneutic methodology. A formal statement of that precommitment may be understood as follows:

Premise 1: There is no future blessing promised for national Israel.

Premise 2: There are future blessings promised throughout the context of Matthew 5-7.

Conclusion: Therefore, Matthew 5-7 cannot pertain to national Israel.

### Challenges for 1P in Understanding the Applicability of Matthew 5-7

Besides having to justify a departure from normative principles of communication, the 1P perspective understanding of Matthew 5-7 encounters at least two specific challenges. First, at least two of the blessings identified are conditional, and thus are seemingly *not* bestowed by grace through faith. Forgiveness is conditioned upon recipients forgiving people (ἀνθρώποις).<sup>1</sup> Also, the physical blessings pertaining to life and body are presented as conditioned upon seeking first His kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Second, there is a repeated contextual identification of the audience (*them* in 5:2<sup>3</sup>) as Jewish, and contrasted with “the Gentiles.”<sup>4</sup>

### 1P Thinkers Address the Challenges

Ryan McGraw,<sup>5</sup> advocating for the 1P perspective, observes, “The Bible’s covenant theology has something to say about the relationship between Israel and the church... Ultimately, there is one people of God, including the salvation of the nations from the beginning, and Israel has a special place in God’s plan for the church.”<sup>6</sup> McGraw adds that, “‘Covenant’ highlights the breathtaking unity of Scripture, making Je<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 6:14-15.

<sup>2</sup> 6:33.

<sup>3</sup> Referencing either the crowds, the disciples, or both.

<sup>4</sup> As in 5:47, 6:7, and 6:32.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan M. McGraw (PhD, University of the Free State) is professor of systematic theology at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and has pastored in several churches. He has written nearly thirty books, focusing on weaving the Trinity into doctrine and life. (from his bio at Crossway, viewed at <https://www.crossway.org/books/what-is-covenant-theology-tpb/>).

<sup>6</sup> Ryan M. McGraw, “Are Israel and the Church Two Distinct Peoples of God?” at *Crossway.org*, June 2, 2024, viewed at <https://www.crossway.org/articles/are-israel-and-the-church-two-distinct-peoples-of-god/>.

<sup>7</sup> McGraw.

ws and Gentiles one people of God in Christ (Eph 2:15).” McGraw doesn’t address Paul’s affirmations that the unity of Jew and Gentile are specifically in the church,<sup>8</sup> nor Paul’s specific delineation and limits set on Gentile blessing, that they are fellow members *in the body*, and partakers of *the promise* (not the promises) in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.<sup>9</sup>

McGraw further affirms that, “A single covenant of grace envelops both Jews and Gentiles in eternal life in Christ,” appealing to Galatians 3:28-29, which identifies believers as heirs of Abraham according to promise. Again, McGraw fails to recognize distinction in what had said earlier in the context, and between the first six promises of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12:2-3 and the seventh promise. The first six promises all pertained to Abraham and his receiving blessing ultimately in his descendants as a mighty nation, while the seventh was a promise of blessing for those who were not Abraham’s descendants. Paul cites this seventh promise specifically in noting that the Scriptures were proclaiming the gospel beforehand.<sup>10</sup> Nowhere does Paul include the church in *the promises (plural)* – or the first six promises God made to Abraham, and here Paul only includes the church in *the promise (singular)* – which was simply a pronouncement of blessing for the Gentiles. The failure to distinguish between national promises and individual promises in the Abrahamic Covenant makes it easy to reinterpret the explicitly national New Covenant that God would make “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah”<sup>11</sup> as something fulfilled by believers today. McGraw demonstrates this lack of distinction saying, “Whether we consider God’s covenant with Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, or *with believers today under the new covenant in Christ* [emphasis mine], the “blessing of Abraham” (Gal 3:14) comes on all believers, Jew and Gentile, who are “baptized into Christ” (Gal 3:27).”<sup>12</sup> By disregarding (or denying) the distinctions, advocates of covenant theology and the 1P now have a circular case against the MP perspective. McGraw adds that “Teaching that believing Israel and the faithful church are two peoples of God with two separate destinies (so-called Dispensationalism) fractures Scripture, blurring our vision of the single-minded plan of salvation from the Triune God.”<sup>13</sup> It is ironic that dispensational thought particularly is accuse of fracturing Scripture and blurring vision when it is Covenant Theology and the 1P view that ignores key passages and distinctions, affirms single-mindedness where Scripture does not, and redefines terms through the hermeneutic lens of theological precommitment.

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<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 2:16-23.

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 3:6.

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 3:7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah 31:31.

<sup>12</sup> McGraw.

<sup>13</sup> McGraw.

Like McGraw, Keith Mattison<sup>14</sup> advocates for the 1P perspective. Mattison notes a distinction between true Israel and national Israel: “The church is distinct from national Israel, just as the true Israel in the Old Testament was distinct from national Israel even while being part of national Israel.”<sup>15</sup> He explains further:

However, if we are talking about true Israel, there really is no distinction. The true Israel of the Old Testament became the nucleus of the true church on the day of Pentecost...It means that when true Israel was baptized by the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, true Israel became the New Testament church. Thus, there is continuity between true Israel and the church. This is why the Reformed confessions can speak of the church as existing from the beginning of the world (for example, Belgic Confession, Art. 27). Yet there is discontinuity between the church and national Israel as well, just as there was discontinuity between the faithful remnant and apostate Israel in the Old Testament.<sup>16</sup>

Mattison’s defense for the distinction is based on the theological idea that the olive tree is *one people of God*. He concludes that, “The future restoration of the nation of Israel will involve their re-grafting into *the olive tree, the one people of God* [emphasis mine]. The restoration of Israel will mean their becoming part of the “true Israel” by faith in Jesus Christ the Messiah.”<sup>17</sup> Based on Mattison’s clarifications, Israel’s future salvation refers to Jews who become part of the church.

Sam Waldron<sup>18</sup> recognizes that Matthew 5:17-20 has presented a challenge for Reformed thinkers;<sup>19</sup> in particular he critiques the New Covenant Theology and Theonomist responses, suggesting that “they commit the same doctrinal error. Both de<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dr. Keith A. Mathison is professor of systematic theology at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla. He is author of many books, including *The Lord’s Supper: Answers to Common Questions*. (From his bio, viewed at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/the-church-and-israel-in-the-new-testament>).

<sup>15</sup> Keith Mattison, “The Church and Israel in the New Testament” *Ligonier.org*, October 1, 2012, viewed at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/the-church-and-israel-in-the-new-testament>.

<sup>16</sup> Mattison.

<sup>17</sup> Mattison.

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Sam Waldron is the Academic Dean of CBTS and professor of Systematic Theology. He is also one of the pastors of Grace Reformed Baptist Church in Owensboro, KY. Dr. Waldron received a B.A. from Cornerstone University, an M.Div. from Trinity Ministerial Academy, a Th.M. from Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. From 1977 to 2001 he was a pastor of the Reformed Baptist Church of Grand Rapids, MI. Dr. Waldron is the author of numerous books including *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, *The End Times Made Simple*, *Baptist Roots in America, To Be Continued?*, and *MacArthur’s Millennial Manifesto: A Friendly Response*. (From his bio viewed at <https://cibtseminary.org/matthew-5-1/>).

<sup>19</sup> Sam Waldron, “Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law – What Does that Mean?” *Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary*, November 9, 2021, viewed at <https://cibtseminary.org/matthew-5-1/>.

<sup>20</sup> Waldron.

ny the threefold division of the law.” In this case, the 1P perspective is supported by acknowledgment of a distinction, yet, that distinction is not exegetically derived – it is a theological distinction. Martin Lloyd Jones addresses the threefold distinction as a point of emphasis in his handling of Matthew 5-7, and considers the conditional forgiveness issue as well.

As John MacArthur described how pivotal the Matthew 5-7 was for his theology, he recounted the major shift in his thinking that took place during his first series teaching in Matthew:

I came to the book of Matthew, and I was fine until I got to chapter 5, and I got to the Sermon on the Mount, and all my dispensational background reared its ugly head. I had read a couple of commentaries by guys at Dallas Seminary, like Walvoord and others, and I said, "I do not believe this...so I got a copy of Martin Lloyd Jones [Studies in the Sermon on the Mount]... In the process of going through that, I jettisoned virtually all of that sort of dispensational stuff that had been concocted and imposed on the book of Matthew and on the rest of Scripture. It all died in the encounter that I had with Matthew 5 through 7... And the whole Lordship issue came roaring out of that. Some of those bolts were already loose, but they completely came undone. Some of the dispensational bolts came undone under the influence of Martyn Lloyd-Jones.<sup>21</sup>

While MacArthur’s story helps clarify why he has referred to himself as a leaky dispensationalist,<sup>22</sup> his reliance on Lloyd Jones for understanding the Sermon on the Mount provides episodes of origin story for MacArthur’s heavily reformed methodology, soteriology, and ecclesiology.

Lloyd Jones commendably notes that, “There is nothing more important in the Christian life than the way in which we approach the Bible, and the way in which we read it. It is our textbook, it is our only source, it is our only authority. We know nothing about God and about the Christian life in a true sense apart from the Bible.”<sup>23</sup> He adds a caution regarding the ease of falling into error, noting that, “There is nothing so dangerous as to come to the Bible with a theory, with preconceived ideas, with some pet idea of our own, because the moment we do so, we shall be tempted to o<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen Nichols and John MacArthur, “John MacArthur and Lloyd Jones Studies in the Sermon on the Mount” *Ligonier.org*, March 21, 2019, viewed at <https://www.ligonier.org/podcasts/open-book-with-stephen-nichols/john-macarthur-and-lloyd-jones-studies-in-the-sermon-on-the-mountain>.

<sup>22</sup> Justin Taylor, “An Interview with John Piper and John MacArthur” in *Stand: A Call for the Perseverance of the Saints*, John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds. (Crossway, 2008), 129.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Lloyd Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, digital version, (IVP and Eerdmans, 2000), 13.

<sup>24</sup> ML Jones, 15.

veremphasize one aspect and under-emphasize another.” In emphasizing the importance of the law in the lives of the believer, Jones laments “a dispensational view of the Sermon on the Mount, saying that it has nothing whatsoever to do with modern Christians.”<sup>25</sup> That representation of dispensational thought as perceiving the Sermon as totally irrelevant is a caricature, yet some dispensational thinkers might agree with Jones that the Sermon was “meant `for the kingdom age'. It was meant for the people to whom He was preaching; it will be meant again in the millennial age. It is the law of that age and of the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>26</sup>

Jones’s critique of what he calls a *dispensational* understanding of the Sermon is rooted in what he perceives to be “a wrong conception of the kingdom.”<sup>27</sup> He argues against a future kingdom inauguration, instead advocating for an already not yet view, noting that “the kingdom of God in one sense has not been established on the earth yet. It is a kingdom which is to come; yes. But it is also a kingdom which has come.”<sup>28</sup> Jones further perceives the kingdom to be “something which is essentially spiritual. The kingdom is primarily something `within you’.”<sup>29</sup>

Though Jones does anticipate a future earthly component of the kingdom, his spiritualization of the kingdom in the modern age demonstrates a consequence of disregarding important textual distinctions. Jones asserts that, “we are not told in the Sermon on the Mount, `Live like this and you will become Christian’; rather we are told, `Because you are Christian live like this.’ This is how Christians ought to live; this is how Christians are meant to live.”<sup>30</sup> Besides the obvious anachronism, Jones seems to ignore that while Jesus is talking to His disciples, Jesus is also clearly addressing the crowds who have gathered. Matthew specifically notes the crowds understood that Jesus was teaching *them*.<sup>31</sup> Jesus is *not* addressing “Christians;” as of yet there was no such thing.<sup>32</sup> Further, if Jesus was addressing His disciples exclusively, then how to account for the conditional forgiveness discussed in 5:14-15? Jones addresses the question in this way:

So the man who does not forgive another does not know forgiveness himself. If my heart has been broken in the presence of God I cannot refuse to forgive; and, therefore, I say to any man who is imagining fondly that his sins are to be forgiven by Christ, though he does not forgive anybody else, Beware, my friend,

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<sup>25</sup> ML Jones, 18.

<sup>26</sup> ML Jones, 18.

<sup>27</sup> ML Jones 19.

<sup>28</sup> ML Jones 19.

<sup>29</sup> ML Jones, 20.

<sup>30</sup> ML Jones, 20.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew 7:28-29.

<sup>32</sup> Acts 11:26.

lest you wake up in eternity and find Him saying to you, 'Depart from me; I never knew you.' You are misinterpreting the doctrine, the glorious doctrine of the grace of God. The man who is truly forgiven and knows it, is a man who forgives. That is the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount at this point.<sup>33</sup>

In order to be forgiven, one must forgive. Yet, Jones later notes that,

If you believe truly on the Lord Jesus Christ, if you believe that on that cross He was dying for you and for your sin, you have been forgiven; you have no need to ask for forgiveness, you have been forgiven. You have to thank God for it, you are filled with that righteousness immediately, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to you.<sup>34</sup>

But how can this be? If 5:14-15 argue for conditional forgiveness, and forgiving others is necessary for *individual forgiveness*, as Jones states earlier, then how can forgiveness and the imputation of righteousness be immediate upon belief?

On this topic of forgiveness and the audience, Jones finds himself in another contradiction. He asserts that,

The Christian is a man who knows he has been forgiven; he knows he is covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and he says, 'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God'. Not, we are hoping to have it. We have it. The Christian has this immediate filling; he is completely satisfied concerning the matter of his standing in the presence of God; he knows that the righteousness of Christ is thus imputed to him and that his sins have been forgiven.<sup>35</sup>

Despite Jones's assertion of an *immediate filling* that makes the Christian aware of total forgiveness, Jones backs away a bit when he adds that, "The Christian, therefore, *should always be* [emphasis mine] a man who knows that his sins are forgiven."<sup>36</sup> There is a difference between *is* and *should always*, but the imprecision in failing to recognize this distinction seems emblematic of the 1P approach. Further, it doesn't square with Peter's response to Jesus's offer to wash His feet – which reflects that Peter *did not fully understand* what Jesus had already accomplished for Him.<sup>37</sup> Also, Jesus later gives directions to the eleven disciples about forgiving *and* retaining sins.<sup>38</sup> If Christianity requires full understanding of forgiveness, or universal forgiveness of sin, the

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<sup>33</sup> ML Jones, 21.

<sup>34</sup> ML Jones, 97.

<sup>35</sup> ML Jones, 103.

<sup>36</sup> ML Jones, 97.

<sup>37</sup> John 13:8-10.

<sup>38</sup> John 20:22-23.

n not only did Peter not qualify, but Jesus’s post-resurrection instructions to the disciples would be contradictory.

Perhaps perceiving the quicksand of inconsistency, Jones offers yet another explanation of the conditional forgiveness aspect:

...the explanation is perfectly simple. Our Lord is really saying that I am only truly forgiven when I am truly repentant. To be truly repentant means that I realize I deserve nothing but punishment, and that if I am forgiven it is to be attributed entirely to the love of God and to His mercy and grace, and to nothing else at all. But I go further; it means this. If I am truly repentant and realize my position before God, and realize that I am only forgiven in that way, then of necessity I shall forgive those who trespass against me.<sup>39</sup>

Now the concept of repentance is injected *and* redefined by Jones. In his later comments it seems that repentance is a condition of individual salvation, and must be accompanied *of necessity*, by forgiving others. One can never truly know they are righteous – they would have to always pass the forgiveness test, otherwise they might not be *truly* saved. The complexity created by not recognizing distinctions grows. To try to resolve that complexity, Jones sums up by saying, “If I am not merciful there is only one explanation; I have never understood the grace and the mercy of God; I am outside Christ; I am yet in my sins, and I am unforgiven.<sup>40</sup> Yet, the vacillation continues as Jones further celebrates that, “we are forgiven only as the result of the grace of God manifested perfectly in the loving, self-giving, self- sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross.”<sup>41</sup>

Jones also addresses law and grace in Matthew 5-7, which he suggests are not antithetical. He notes that “We are not ‘under the law’ but we are still meant to keep it.”<sup>42</sup> Yet before we were in Christ, He “saw the suffering, and, in spite of the law breaking, this was the thing that moved Him to action.”<sup>43</sup> The law breaking was a problem, yet the law had no jurisdiction? How can one be condemned by law if not under law? James reminds us of the all-important principles that if one breaks one point of the Law, he is guilty of all.<sup>44</sup> In seeming disregard of James’s all or nothing approach, Jones asserts that, “the Christian is a man who is always concerned about living and keeping the law of God,”<sup>45</sup> despite Jones’s acknowledgment that Paul “is fully aware<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> ML Jones, 121.

<sup>40</sup> ML Jones, 125.

<sup>41</sup> ML Jones, 276.

<sup>42</sup> ML Jones, 31.

<sup>43</sup> ML Jones, 119.

<sup>44</sup> James 2:10.

<sup>45</sup> ML Jones, 31-32.

<sup>46</sup> ML Jones, 67.



e of this conflict between the law in the mind and the law in the members, and all this wretched struggling and striving.”

Jones further assumes the theological threefold division of the Law, recognizing, “that we have to face God, not only in the Ten Commandments and the moral law, but also in the Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>47</sup> He adds that the Law “as given to the children of Israel, consisted of three parts, the moral, the judicial and the ceremonial.”<sup>48</sup> We see in the disregard of James 2:10 and the imposition of the threefold division of the Law a characteristic 1P perspective maneuver of ignoring Biblical distinctions and emphasizing extra-biblical ones. This is precisely what Jones warned against in his first chapter. Still Jones notes that the Ten Commandments were “great moral principles that were laid down once and for ever,”<sup>49</sup> while asserting that the judicial law “means the legislative law given for the nation of Israel in its peculiar circumstances at that time.”<sup>50</sup> Jones has already said Christians are not under the Law, but must keep it, yet embedded in his definition of law is the timelessness of the moral and the temporality of the judicial. Thus, Jones can conclude that “The Christian is not under the law in that respect; his salvation does not depend upon his keeping of it. He has been delivered from the curse of the law; he is no longer under the law as a covenant relationship between himself and God. But that does not release him from it as a rule of life.”<sup>51</sup> Jones seems to recognize the inherent contradiction with this approach to law, and proposes its resolution with theological covenants:

I think the whole trouble tends to arise because we become confused in our minds as to the relationship between law and grace. Let me put it like this. We tend to have a wrong view of law and to think of it as something that is opposed to grace. But it is not. Law is only opposed to grace in the sense that there was once a covenant of law, and we are now under the covenant of grace.<sup>52</sup>

Theological covenants superimposed on passages like Matthew 5-7, and others that speak of law, redefine God’s relationship with Israel – even the textually stated audience of Matthew 5-7 – and superimpose the church over the historical context of the passage. The Biblical distinctions are glossed over, if not ignored entirely, and extra-biblical distinctions are presupposed and read into the interpretive method. Thus the hermeneutic itself – because of the theological precommitments – eliminates the possibility of the passage communicating clear national and individual distinctions. Yet

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<sup>47</sup> ML Jones, 77.

<sup>48</sup> ML Jones, 221.

<sup>49</sup> ML Jones, 221.

<sup>50</sup> ML Jones, 221.

<sup>51</sup> ML Jones, 234.

<sup>52</sup> ML Jones, 234.

this approach cannot absolve itself of vital contradictions and imprecisions, as they are necessitated by the sequence of theological method: theology first, then hermeneutics, then eisegesis under the guise of exegesis.

### MP PERSPECTIVE OF CONCEPTS IN MATTHEW 5-7

In contrast to the 1P perspective, the MP perspective will generally understand that there is significance in the initial audience being Jewish, and conclude from this and other textual and contextual keys that the kingdom promises are for Israel. There are differences among MP thinkers regarding the degree to which the church may participate in these promises (if at all), but there is little dispute – at least among dispensational MP thinkers – that the promised future blessings uniquely pertain to those who are of national Israel, and more specifically that they have direct relevance to believers who are part of national Israel. The essential MP view related to Matthew 5-7 can be formalized as follows:

#### Argument 1:

Premise 1: There are future kingdom blessings promised for the Jewish audience in Matthew 5-7.

Premise 2: Those kingdom blessings are conditioned upon practice.

Premise 3: Individual justification is always by faith alone.

Conclusion: In Matthew 5-7, Jesus is not discussing individual justification.

#### Argument 2:

Premise 1: The kingdom of the heavens that Jesus presented is the same kingdom expression implied by the Abrahamic Covenant and explicitly detailed in the Land, Davidic, and New Covenants.

Premise 2: God asserts those covenants will be fulfilled with national Israel.

Conclusion: Matthew 5-7 is focused on the people of Israel gaining and expressing the righteousness necessary to enter the kingdom of the heavens, which in the future will come upon national Israel.

Conclusion: The national/individual distinction is prominent in Matthew 5-7, and definitive for eschatology and ethics.

### **Challenges for MP in Understanding the Applicability of Matthew 5-7**

The MP perspective will generally recognize that the audience is Jewish, and that the kingdom promises are (at least) first for Israel. While there are differences in

understanding the degree to which these statements are applicable to the church in general, there is little dispute among MP advocates that the audience and the promises are uniquely Jewish and have direct relevance to those believers who are also part of national Israel. But are the kingdom of heaven promises only for the Jews? If so, why does Paul, for example, make it clear that all believers have been transferred to the kingdom of Christ – even if it is not yet an active earthly kingdom?<sup>53</sup> In light of this question, the biggest theological challenge for the MP perspective is the non-Jewish applicability of the kingdom blessings. Because so much of Matthew 5-7 is related to those blessings, Jones (representative of 1P perspective) asserts that it must be inherent to dispensational thinking that the entire Sermon on the Mount is irrelevant to Christians.<sup>54</sup> The assertion is a falsehood, but still must be answered – not to defend a theological system – but to offer a trustworthy explanation of how a Christian should understand the significance of such a pivotal passage of Scripture.

### **Exegetical Concepts in Matthew 5-7**

#### *The Audience (5:1-2, 7:28:29)*

The audience of Jesus's teaching is identified as the crowds and His disciples.<sup>55</sup> Matthew includes at the conclusion of this narrative the assertion that the crowds recognized that they were indeed the recipients of His teaching.<sup>56</sup> The exegetical data evidences that the audience was not "Christians" (which had not yet been so-called), but was rather likely a mixture of Jewish unbelievers, Jewish believers, and His disciples (who were also Jewish believers).

#### *Conditional Blessings (5:3-12)*

The *Beatitudes*, or promises of blessing are all conditional, and have to do with reward for right attitudes and activities. The recipients are plural, and the rewards future. The blessings of vv. 3-10 begin and end with "theirs is the kingdom of the heavens," and the recipients are referred to in the third person. The blessings of vv. 11-12 are second person plural. The distinctions in person and the rewards' relationship to the kingdom of the heavens begs some definition of the kingdom of the heavens, which is not offered in this or any other context in Matthew. It seems obvious that the reason for lack of definition is because the nature of the kingdom was understood from the Hebrew Scriptures, and there was no "church" concept yet presented,<sup>57</sup> and no m<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Colossians 1:13.

<sup>54</sup> ML Jones, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Matthew 5:1-2.

<sup>56</sup> 7:28:29.

<sup>57</sup> Not prophesied until Matthew 16:18.

<sup>58</sup> As there would be later Jesus's parables (e.g., Matthew 13:11) and in Paul's writings (e.g., Romans 11:25, 16:25, 1 Corinthians 2:7, 4:1, 13:2, 14:2, 15:51, Ephesians 1:9, 3:3-4 and 9, 5:32, 6:19, Colossians 1:26-27, 2:2, 4:3, 2 Thessalonians 2:7, 1 Timothy 3:9, 3:16).

ysteries yet mentioned or explained. The kingdom of the heavens was simply God’s eternal heavenly kingdom which would one day come to earth in a physical form, with the Messiah, in the line of David, sitting on the throne of David in Jerusalem.<sup>59</sup>

*Intended Distinctiveness of the Audience (5:13-16)*

The audience is second person plural, and not specified, though the exhortation in v. 16 is echoed by Peter, and prefaced by, “Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles...”<sup>60</sup> and at the conclusion of an elongated pericope emphasizing the distinctness of Jewish believers from the Gentiles.<sup>61</sup> This is yet another indicator of the distinct Jewishness of the initial audience, and another datapoint reminding us that this is not a general call to Christian ethics.

*The Abiding Validity of the Scriptures and the Righteousness They Demand (5:17-20)*

The Law and the Prophets encompasses the Hebrew Scriptures,<sup>62</sup> and is broader than simply the Mosaic Law, thus the reference to commandments<sup>63</sup> is not simply talking about the Ten Commandments, nor the supposed *moral law*. There is no affirmation here of the abiding validity of the Law of Moses, but rather the abiding validity of the Scriptures. Rather Jesus is referencing all that had been revealed by God to that point. How one handled the word of God would determine one’s rank or position in the kingdom of the heavens.<sup>64</sup> Further, the audience is told that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees or they would not enter the kingdom.<sup>65</sup> This reminds us of the earlier calls for repentance (change of mind),<sup>66</sup> and the expectation that the people would bear fruit that reflected that change of mind.<sup>67</sup> Righteousness, or justification, is only bestowed by faith in God.<sup>68</sup> At this point, Jesus’s audience (at least in general) lacked the righteousness needed to enter the kingdom of the heavens. It may be understood by the second person plural and by the verb (*eiselthete*), that this could be a corporate reference to the kingdom inauguration rather than an individual call to justification. Still, that would be too strong a point to affirm at this

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<sup>59</sup> This idea was especially drawn from Genesis 49:10, 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 89, Jeremiah 31ff, and multiple contexts in Isaiah, etc., and would be ultimately fulfilled beginning in Revelation 19-20.

<sup>60</sup> 1 Peter 2:12.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Peter 2:4-11.

<sup>62</sup> Sometimes referenced by this dual division, and at other times, a tripartite division (e.g., Luke 24:44).

<sup>63</sup> Matthew 5:19.

<sup>64</sup> 5:19.

<sup>65</sup> 5:20.

<sup>66</sup> 3:2, 4:17.

<sup>67</sup> 3:8.

<sup>68</sup> E.g., Genesis 15:6, Habakkuk 2:4, Ephesians 2:8-9.

early juncture of Jesus's teaching, though that affirmation would be supported by the kingdom of the heavens context of the reward in this pericope.

It is worth noting there are three kinds of people discussed in 5:19-20. Those who will be considered the least in the kingdom, those who will be considered great in the kingdom, and those who will be excluded from the kingdom. These are three possible individual relationships to a corporate administration. It is here we see the intersection of the national and individual, still, that intersection here does not eliminate the distinctions, nor does it mean that collective individual blessings constitute the national blessing.

*Clarification of the Standard: God's Perfection (5:21-48)*

The standard of righteousness is not external obedience to the Mosaic Law. This context contrasts authentic and inauthentic righteousness,<sup>69</sup> and ultimately concludes with the ultra-clear statement that the requirement is the perfection of God the Father.<sup>70</sup> External expressions were not enough, internal and total righteousness was necessary. In light of the all or nothing approach that James represents as normative,<sup>71</sup> those who heard and heeded Jesus's teaching would have known that they fell terribly short of this standard. If they wanted to participate in Israel's blessed and promised national future – the kingdom of the heavens come to earth – they must each individually deal with the problem of their personal unrighteousness. They must change their mind about how they could gain entrance into the kingdom and look to their Messiah in faith.

*Practical Application of Righteousness and Associated Rewards (6:1-6)*

Unlike the previous context, this section assumes positional righteousness and prescribes the *practice* of righteousness, and considers the rewards that can be gained or lost.<sup>72</sup> The caution is against external *practice* motivated by pride, which causes loss of reward (not loss of justification) *in the kingdom*. Five times in this pericope, Jesus notes that the outcome is reward (or loss thereof).<sup>73</sup> This is neither about justification nor sanctification (which is also not by works). This is about the practice of righteousness for Jews<sup>74</sup> who have attained positional righteousness (namely, the perfection of the Father) by grace through belief in the Messiah, and their legitimate expectation of rewards in the coming kingdom. Notice that the prescriptions and exhortations are often in the present tense (there are some aorists as well). Jesus exp

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<sup>69</sup> Matthew 5:21-47.

<sup>70</sup> 5:48.

<sup>71</sup> James 2:10.

<sup>72</sup> Matthew 6:1.

<sup>73</sup> 6:1,2,4,5,6.

<sup>74</sup> 6:7.

ected that audience to do what He was instructing *then*, with the understanding that they would be rewarded *in the future kingdom*.

The primary application of these passages was clear, and the expectation of the initial audience obvious from the text. It should also be obvious that there is secondary applicability to any who have received positional righteousness by grace through faith. If these activities and practiced humilities are applications of righteousness, and church-age believers are also positionally righteous in the same way, then wouldn't walking in a manner worthy of the calling<sup>75</sup> look similar, if not identical? Spiritual humility and focus on glorifying God rather than self is at the heart of these prescriptions. These are important aspects of practice for *all children of God*, yet the shared righteousness and shared practice does not mean that there are no distinctions among the children of God. Sharing does not mean sameness.

*Practical Application of Righteousness in Prayer and Fasting  
And Associated Eternal vs. Temporal Rewards (6:7-24)*

In this section Jesus contrasts the extensive and repetitious prayers of the Gentiles with the simplicity of communication He expects His (Jewish) audience to engage.<sup>76</sup> He provides a formula for prayer, prioritizing in sequence the glory and worship of God, the desire for God's kingdom to come to earth, basic provisions, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil.<sup>77</sup> God's glory comes first, always. Then, for the kingdom to come to earth Israel must accept her Messiah,<sup>78</sup> thus this is a prayer for the nation to accept the Messiah.

These concepts are clear enough, but it is the conditional forgiveness in vv. 12, 14-15 that create confusion. If these are references to individual personal justification and/or sanctification, then the only way they can be made compatible with the many firm assertions of unconditional justification by faith and assured sanctification is by allegorizing the audience and the conditions themselves.<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, if these are to be understood within the context of a Jewish audience being prepared for the prophetic future arrival of the kingdom of the heavens to earth as part of covenanted blessing for national Israel, then we can understand here especially that the national/individual distinction evident here differentiates these statements from individual justification and sanctification. Conditional rewards for the people of national Israel are in play in this context. We see that terminology extended into the discussion of fasting as well.<sup>80</sup> Further, the principle explicated in the subsequent pericope of serving only one master – while addressed to this immediate Jewish au

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<sup>75</sup> Ephesians 4:1.

<sup>76</sup> Matthew 6:7-8.

<sup>77</sup> 6:9-13.

<sup>78</sup> Zechariah 12:10, cf. Matthew 11:14.

<sup>79</sup> As Jones, for example has modeled in several contradictory handlings of these passages.

<sup>80</sup> Matthew 6:18.

dience – is broadly applicable (including to the church today), because Jesus adds that *no one* can serve two masters.<sup>81</sup> This is a universal, broadly applicable truth. For Jones or others to assert that the MP perspective (and dispensationalism in particular) sees these passages as totally irrelevant to Christians, is not at all compatible with the consistent application of LGH to these teachings of Jesus.

*Practical Implications of Right Standing with God the Father (6:25-34)*

As our Heavenly Father cares for His creation,<sup>82</sup> He will care for His children. Remember, the audience are Jewish people, part of a nation that God Himself named.<sup>83</sup> Jesus refers to His Father as *their* Father, so it is evident that they are children of God. Church age believers – both Jew and Gentile – are likewise called children of God.<sup>84</sup> Being children of God does not equate to one people of God. There are still distinctions within distinctions. In the body of Christ *specifically* there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile.<sup>85</sup> This does not eliminate ethnicity, nor invalidate national promises and covenants. Israel and the church are distinct (though of course there are Jews in the church). Similarly, the future national blessings of Israel are not the same as individual blessings for Jewish believers. Still as children of God, He takes care of them, thus there is no need for worry nor anxiety.<sup>86</sup> Instead, the audience are encouraged to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (in contrast to that of the scribes and Pharisees, which Jesus already condemned).<sup>87</sup>

*General Practical Righteousness: Fulfilling the Scriptures (7:1-12)*

While chapter 5 dealt with the need for positional righteousness, and chapter 6 discussed the practice of righteousness and its relation to reward in the future kingdom of the heavens which would come to earth as part of national Israel's blessing, in chapter 7 Jesus addresses basic principles of ethics, warning against hypocrisy,<sup>88</sup> asking expectantly of the Father,<sup>89</sup> and treating others in a manner that represents the ethical core of the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>90</sup> These are general principles, presented with a present (at the time) expectation that they would be upheld, and with no specification of reward or national aspects. Thus these are readily applicable with little complexity in any age for those who are related as children to their heavenly Father.

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<sup>81</sup> 6:24.

<sup>82</sup> 6:26,28,30.

<sup>83</sup> Genesis 32:28.

<sup>84</sup> E.g., Ephesians 1:5-6, 1 John 3:1.

<sup>85</sup> Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11, and note Paul's lengthy explanation and retention of distinctions in Ephesians 2:11-3:6, with explicit statement that the unity and equality is *in the body of Christ*.

<sup>86</sup> Matthew 6:31-32, 34.

<sup>87</sup> 6:33.

<sup>88</sup> 7:1-6.

<sup>89</sup> 7:7-11.

<sup>90</sup> 7:12.

*Two Contrasting Paths: Their Implications, Recognition, and Outcomes (7:13-29)*

Continuing in the communication general wisdom principles, Jesus contrasts the narrow gate leading to life and the broad gate leading to destruction.<sup>91</sup> It is notable that Jesus references *life* and not the kingdom here. He further warns of false prophets who will be evident by their fruit.<sup>92</sup> These false prophets may claim to represent the Lord, but they it is not those who use His name, but those who do His will that will enter the kingdom.<sup>93</sup> With those words, Jesus returns to the kingdom theme and reminds that entrance in the kingdom is based on doing the Father's will.<sup>94</sup> What was the Father's will? Jesus says it is to behold and believe in the Son, and consequently receive eternal life.<sup>95</sup>

Jesus concludes this teaching with an illustration of the two contrasting paths.<sup>96</sup> The one who hears and heeds His word is like one who built their house on the rock – the house that survives storms.<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, the one who hears but does not heed His word is like the fool who built their house on the sand. That house will not withstand the storm.<sup>98</sup> Jesus authoritatively presented two paths to His Jewish audience (who Matthew acknowledged they recognized they were the recipients of His teaching)<sup>99</sup> – the guaranteed failure of pursuing righteousness by external works of law, or the guaranteed blessing of receiving righteousness not by works, but by belief. Those of His (Jewish) audience who believe in Him, receive righteousness and will enter the kingdom of the heavens. Those that practice that righteousness as Jesus prescribes will receive reward in that kingdom. While later in Biblical revelation we are introduced to the concept that church age believers of any ethnicity are transferred to that kingdom,<sup>100</sup> it is evident from later contexts that participation in that kingdom does not negate national Israel's role as central in that kingdom.

The MP perspective has the advantage of being drawn from an LGH method and exegesis of key passages, and thus it offers a higher degree of textual fidelity. Further, it provides theological cogency doesn't rely on artificially altered methods to resolve perceived interpretive difficulties.

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<sup>91</sup> 7:13-14

<sup>92</sup> 7:15-20.

<sup>93</sup> 7:21-23.

<sup>94</sup> 7:21.

<sup>95</sup> John 6:40.

<sup>96</sup> Matthew 7:24-27.

<sup>97</sup> 7:24-25.

<sup>98</sup> 7:26-27.

<sup>99</sup> 7:28-29.

<sup>100</sup> Colossians 1:13.



THE NATIONAL/INDIVIDUAL DISTINCTION  
AFFIRMED BY PAUL AND PETER

In his remarkable apologetic for God's faithfulness to Israel (and thus His worthiness of believers' trust) in Romans 9-11, Paul evidences the significance of the national/individual distinction. He acknowledges the subject matter as his "kinsmen according to the flesh,"<sup>101</sup> and specifies that he is talking about ethnic Israelites.<sup>102</sup> Paul makes an important clarification in affirming that God has the right to make distinctions within distinctions: *God does not count all of Israel as Israel*. The Israelites would be counted through the line of Isaac, and ultimately through the details and specifications of God's promise specifically, rather than simply being counted as descendants of Abraham in a general sense.<sup>103</sup> Paul shows that this key distinction within a distinction is in accordance with God's purpose of His own choice.<sup>104</sup> God has the sovereign right as the Creator to draw such distinctions, and His exercising of that sovereign is no injustice.<sup>105</sup> If God's own choosing trumps human determinations, then it is not entirely unexpected that one might wonder how God can find fault with those human determinations.<sup>106</sup> Remarkably at this point, Paul appeals to God's sovereignty and dismisses any sense at all in which God's total sovereignty might be viewed as limited in any way – and thus the question is a nonsense question.<sup>107</sup>

In this context Paul recognizes another distinction: Jews and Gentiles (in the church context) are both called sons of the living God.<sup>108</sup> This is a theme Paul likewise emphasizes in Ephesians 1:5 and is no small point in Paul's ecclesiological teaching.

Earlier in the Romans 9 apologetic Paul focuses on Israelites and his desire for their salvation, recognizing an important distinction that helps clarify for us how God will keep His promise of national salvation.<sup>109</sup> At this point in the apologetic, Paul is addressing how Jews in the church are sons of God, along with Gentiles. It is notable that in this present era, the prophecy of national salvation that grounds the New Covenant<sup>110</sup> *is not being fulfilled*. The present situation simply shows how present-day Jews of Paul's day were able to receive salvation blessings, and thus God's faithfulness to the Jews during the church age.

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<sup>101</sup> Romans 9:3.

<sup>102</sup> 9:4-5.

<sup>103</sup> 9:6-8.

<sup>104</sup> 9:11.

<sup>105</sup> 9:14-18.

<sup>106</sup> 9:19.

<sup>107</sup> 9:23.

<sup>108</sup> 9:24-26.

<sup>109</sup> 9:27.

<sup>110</sup> Jeremiah 31:31ff.

Despite that present-age blessing, there is a significant prophecy of Israelite national salvation still yet unfulfilled. It would be fulfilled in a future time, and only by a remnant whom God would count as *Israel*.<sup>111</sup>

While the Gentiles hadn't pursued righteousness by law (because they weren't under the Law),<sup>112</sup> Israel had pursued righteousness by law, they had failed to achieve it because they pursued it through works.<sup>113</sup> This diagnosis is consistent with John's message to the Judeans,<sup>114</sup> Jesus's call *to the Jewish people* that they needed to repent because the kingdom of the heavens was at hand (or near),<sup>115</sup> and Jesus's condemnation of the Jewish cities because of their failure to repent.<sup>116</sup> They needed to change their mind (repent) because they thought they would enter the kingdom of the heavens by their outward obedience to the Law. Yet Jesus was adamant in His Sermon on the Mount that outward obedience to the Law was not enough,<sup>117</sup> that their righteousness had to exceed the outward expressions so beloved by the scribes and Pharisees,<sup>118</sup> and that the standard was not obedience to the Law, but rather the very perfection of the Father.<sup>119</sup>

Paul recognizes that the call for repentance related to salvation is *for the Jews*,<sup>120</sup> much like Matthew recorded that John and Jesus recognized the same in each of the first six mentions of repentance in Matthew's Gospel.<sup>121</sup> It is notable that the seventh and final reference to *repentance* in Matthew reminds unrepentant Israel of Nineveh's repentance,<sup>122</sup> particularly because God's call for Nineveh's repentance was also for a *conditional, corporate* deliverance from God's wrath. Jonah's preaching, at God's direction, was *to the city*.<sup>123</sup> The people (plural) responded by believing in God.<sup>124</sup> The city was delivered corporately from the wrath of which it had been warned, and Jesus later affirmed that the *people of the city* had repented.<sup>125</sup> In Nineveh we see an example of a national (or corporate) call and many individual responses. The individual responses would have resulted in individual justification,<sup>126</sup> while collectively they also brought a corporate deliverance (salvation) from judgment. While certainly the individ<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Romans 9:27-29.

<sup>112</sup> 9:30.

<sup>113</sup> 9:31-32.

<sup>114</sup> Matthew 3:2.

<sup>115</sup> 4:17.

<sup>116</sup> 11:20.

<sup>117</sup> 5:21-47.

<sup>118</sup> 5:20.

<sup>119</sup> 5:48.

<sup>120</sup> Romans 2:4-20, cf. 2:4 and 2:17.

<sup>121</sup> Matthew 3:2, 3:8, 3:11, 4:17, 11:20-21.

<sup>122</sup> 12:41.

<sup>123</sup> Jonah 3:2-4.

<sup>124</sup> 3:5.

<sup>125</sup> Matthew 12:41.

<sup>126</sup> As was the case in Genesis 15:6.

<sup>127</sup> Nahum 1:3, Zephaniah 2:13-15.

ual justification of those who believed was never reversed, but the city of Nineveh (and the nation of Assyria) ultimately lost its deliverance, and after being warned, rebuked, and condemned by God through Nahum and Zephaniah, was destroyed at the hands of the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians in 612 BC. While individual justification by faith is not reversible, corporate deliverance associated with repentance can be.

Concluding the apologetic context in Romans 9, Paul recognizes that Israel stumbled over the stumbling stone.<sup>128</sup> Not only is Paul's statement reminiscent of Isaiah 8:14, but it also echoes Jesus's prophecy that He would build His church upon the Rock.<sup>129</sup> If there is any lack of certainty in those two statements that Jesus was claiming to be the stone of stumbling and rock of offense, Peter made certain that his readers understand that indeed, Jesus's prophecy of His church built on the rock of offense was not suggesting the church would be built on Peter, nor Peter's confession, nor on anything other than Jesus Christ Himself – Peter explains with specific and thoughtful appeal to the context of Isaiah 8 that Jesus is indeed that stone of stumbling and rock of offense.<sup>130</sup> Israel stumbled over their Messiah. Subsequently, that Messiah launched His assembly (church), built on Himself. That assembly includes Jews and Gentiles. Paul explains in his Romans 9-11 apologetic there is *national* significance to the distinction between Israel and the church.

Peter draws a national/individual distinction, and recognizes that God has made distinctions within distinctions. Peter reminds his Jewish audience<sup>131</sup> that they are a chosen race, royal priesthood, and a holy nation, and that they should keep their behavior holy among *the Gentiles*.<sup>132</sup> In his Second Letter – written to the same audience,<sup>133</sup> Peter reminds his readers that by demonstrating fruit they will abundantly be granted entrance into His eternal kingdom.<sup>134</sup> Earlier in his First Letter, Peter affirmed eleven times the eternal security of the believer through faith.<sup>135</sup> It is significant that Peter emphasizes abundant entrance into the kingdom – participation in a corporate aspect of blessing – as a result of practice, while eternal life – an individual blessing – is exclusively through faith.

While these discussions of Pauline and Petrine theology only scratch the surface of their respective depth in representing the national/individual distinction, these contexts are nonetheless informative and helpful as an affirmation and even

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<sup>128</sup> Romans 9:32.

<sup>129</sup> Matthew 16:18.

<sup>130</sup> 1 Peter 2:4-8.

<sup>131</sup> 1:1.

<sup>132</sup> 1:1, 2:9-12.

<sup>133</sup> 2 Peter 3:1.

<sup>134</sup> 1:10-11.

<sup>135</sup> 1 Peter 1:3-5.

commentary that the national/individual distinctions evident in Matthew's writing and Jesus's teaching are indeed foundational and pivotal for understanding other key Biblical distinctions.

## CONCLUSION

Employing the LGH hermeneutic when approaching Scripture, one understands the priority of exegesis in sequence before deriving theology. Sound theology is the earned outcome diligence and faithfulness in consistently applying the LGH to the text, exegeting with precision and humility, and then drawing worldview, philosophical, theological, and ethical outcomes. Though no Scripture is written to us as the initial audience, all Scripture is for our instruction,<sup>136</sup> and all Scripture is God-breathed, and written for our equipping and adequacy.<sup>137</sup> All Scripture is the product of the Holy Spirit, moving men who spoke from God, and who communicated God's prophecy, the meaning of which only He has the right to determine.<sup>138</sup> In light of these principles, it is evident that some passages emphasize distinctions between God's program for national Israel and His program for individual believers. In Matthew 5-7 we see within the context of the presentation of the kingdom of the heavens by word of the Messiah Himself, a cogent and consistent callback to the covenant promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David, for example – promises of national blessing for Israel and a national future of blessing. As that kingdom is presented to the people of Israel, Jesus provides them truth regarding their individual responsibility in hearing and heeding Jesus's words. The primary application is evident within the context itself: that the people would hear and heed Jesus's words and believe in Him (receiving positional righteousness), and put that righteousness into practice to receive reward in the coming kingdom. They did hear, and some of them did heed.

In light of the value of God's word for all believers, Matthew 5-7 is incredibly rich with epistemological and metaphysical truth upon which we recognize the Biblical worldview is grounded, and much ethical and socio-political relevance for every believer, regardless of chronology, geography, or cultural context. The MP perspective finds no exegetical warrant nor theological benefit in theological precommitments nor hermeneutic redefinitions. On the other hand, the 1P perspective can only seem to draw relevance from the passage with theological precommitments and hermeneutic redefinitions. In approaching Matthew 5-7 the MP conclusion is far superior from the 1P precommitment as it is Biblical. As such, the MP conclusion enjoys a richness and cogency not found in the 1P precommitment and its expressions.

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<sup>136</sup> Romans 15:4.

<sup>137</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

<sup>138</sup> 2 Peter 1:20-21.