

How to Preach the Sermon on the Mount to a Christian Audience

Robert L. Thomas

Anaheim Community Church

[Italicized portions and charts are included for discussion after public reading of the rest.]

Sermon's Setting.

In His Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20), part of Jesus' command to His disciples was, “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (28:20). Obeying that command is more complicated than a surface response might indicate. The fact is that some Jesus' commands were contradictory to one another. Varying audiences and circumstances forced Him to alter His commands and His teachings to fit the audience to whom or the people about whom He was speaking.

An obvious example of this surfaces when He in the Great Commission when He told His listeners to make disciples of “all the nations,” which in later NT developments had to include those of a Gentile lineage as well as people of Jewish lineage. Yet earlier, He had specifically commanded disciples, “Do not go in *the* way of *the* Gentiles, and do not enter *any* city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:5–6). Neither of these commands were for His disciples to teach to “all the nations.”¹ In fact, each mention of Gentiles in Matthew's account of the Sermon has a shade of negativity. Also, each mention of “brother” in the Sermon is talking about Jewish brothers, not Christian brothers.

¹Please review my article “The Great Commission—What to Teach,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 21/1 (Spring 2010): 2–3, for further discussion of this point.

Another factor to be borne in mind is that this study in the Gospels will follow the approach of inerrantist Jeffrey A. Gibbs in his commentary on Matthew: “The reader of this introduction should know that this commentary wholeheartedly affirms that Matthew’s Gospel records actual words and deeds of Jesus.”² Such a statement from a New Testament scholar in this day and time is rare when many scholars have gone the route of incorporating what Gibbs calls “authorial embellishments that detract from historical factuality” in the Gospels. Personally, my “take” on such scholars, though they claim to believe the Bible is without error, is that they have left the fold of those who hold the Bible to be free of errors.³

Some have felt that the Sermon originally consisted of isolated segments of various parts of Jesus’ ministry, but since Matthew presents it as a single sermon (Matt 7:28–29), it must be that.⁴ Because of the similarities between this sermon and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, one can rightly assume that both were excerpted from a much longer sermon that Jesus gave on one occasion, though He may have repeated small parts of it later at various junctures of His ministry.⁵

For our consideration today, however, we must limit our discussion to the excerpts that Matthew included in his Gospel. The sermon came during the Galilean Ministry of Jesus at a

²*Matthew 1:1–11:1*, Concordia Commentary [Saint Louis: Concordia, 2006], 3.

³For a detailed discussion of my view, see my paper, “Two Kinds of Inerrancy,” delivered at the Far West Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on April 20, 2012. The paper is available for downloading at the website of Anaheim Community Church.

⁴Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol 23 of The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 96.

⁵*Ibid.*

point when His popularity had peaked, and was directed to His disciples (Matt 5:1–2). Yet the crowds were among those who heard the sermon (Matt 7:28–29; Luke 6:17-18; 7:1). Other listeners must have included the growing constituency of those who opposed Jesus (Luke 6:24–26). Otherwise, the Lord would not have portrayed His enemies in a negative light in Matt 5:20, which is the key verse of the whole sermon in Matthew.

Like other redaction critics, Davies and Allison say the crowd typifies the church. By so doing, they remove the Sermon from its historical context in Jesus' time, and place it in a historical setting several decades later, thereby changing the meaning of various parts. Other contemporary commentators do the same.⁶

To understand the sermon's meaning, one must ask, "What did members of such a varied audience have in common with each other?" Jesus' disciples, the crowds, and Jesus' enemies all had an OT background. At this point in His Galilean Ministry, He had not yet turned attention to a Gentile audience as He was to do later in His ministry. He was still directing words only to the natural olive branches (to borrow wording from the apostle Paul; Rom 11:21, 24). The wild olive branches, who were eventually to comprise the church which Jesus later said He would build (Matt 16:18), did not come into the picture until later in His Ministry Around Galilee. In fact, each mention of Gentiles in Matthew's account of the Sermon has a shade of negativity. Also, each mention of "brother" in the Sermon is talking about Jewish, not Christian brothers.

Though the Sermon was not addressed to us as Gentiles or members of the body of Christ, certain righteous principles can be derived from it that are applicable to any people at any time. Human depravity expresses itself in many ways, but divine correction to such a variety

⁶Thomas, "What to Teach," 7.

remains constant throughout all periods of human history. Principles of application are subjectively derived and can be good or bad. But application must be kept separate from interpretation. In other words, application is not an integral part of hermeneutics. My suggested applications throughout this sermon may be good or bad, but my effort has been to align them with interpretive decisions derived from the Sermon. They offer correlative passages addressed to the body of Christ and stem from some years of experience, living in a real world with real people and trying to keep a finger on the pulse of contemporary evangelicalism.

At this point Jesus was proclaiming the near approach of the Kingdom mentioned in Matt 4:17 and what the repentance called for there would entail.⁷ Noland advocates a study of the sermon in light of Jesus' mention of "the gospel of the Kingdom" in Matt 4:32, but he does not clarify the nature of this Kingdom spoken of by John the Baptist (Matt 3:2) and Jesus (Matt 4:17, 23).⁸

Noland does not specify which Kingdom, but among listeners to the Sermon on the Mount, God's covenants with Abraham (cf. Matt 3:9) and David (cf. Matt 1:1, 6, 17, 20) were in mind. God's promise of a Kingdom to David (2 Sam 7:8–17) stood out in the memory of disciples, crowds, and enemies of Jesus. That must have been the Kingdom referred to by John the Baptist and Jesus in Matthew's introduction to the sermon, and therefore the Kingdom referred to throughout the sermon by Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount was therefore an elaboration on what the repentance of

⁷John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, in the NIGTC, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 193.

⁸Ibid.

Israelites (cf. Matt 3:2, 7, 8; 4:17) would entail if they wanted to qualify to enter that promised Kingdom. How then did Jesus go about setting forth the prerequisites for entering the promised Messianic Kingdom?

Sermon’s Outline: Identification, Obligation, Correlation, Motivation, Application

I. The Right Identification of the Kingdom about which Jesus was talking (5:3–12)

It was the Kingdom of peace and prosperity predicted in the Old Testament. When that Kingdom on earth arrives, the faithful remnant of people in Israel will be “blessed” with all the benefits promised in the Scriptures (compare Matt 5:3 with Isa 61:1; 5:4 with Isa 61:2; 5:5 with Ps 37:11; 5:6 with Jer. 31:25; 5:7 with Ps 112:4; 5:8 with Ps. 24:3–4; 5:9 with Isa. 9:6–7).⁹

<i>Beatitude</i>	<i>OT Promise</i>
3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	Isa 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted [i.e., the poor]; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners;
4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.	Isa 61:2 To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn,
5 Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth [i.e., land].	Ps 37:11 But the humble will inherit the land, and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

⁹Thomas, “What to Teach,” 9–10.

<i>Beatitude</i>	<i>OT Promise</i>
6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.	Jer 31:25 For I satisfy the weary ones and refresh everyone who languishes. Isa 55:1 Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Ps 107:9 For He has satisfied the thirsty soul, and the hungry soul He has filled with what is good.
7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.	Ps 112:4 Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for the gracious and compassionate and righteous man. Ps 18:25a With the kind You show Yourself kind. Prov 14:21b But happy is he who is gracious to the poor.
8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.	Ps 24:3–4 Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood, and has not sworn deceitfully.
9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.	Isa 9:6–7 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of <i>His</i> government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

<i>Beatitude</i>	<i>OT Promise</i>
10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	Ps 69:4, 7, 9 Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. I am forced to restore what I did not steal. . . . For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. . . . for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.

One beatitude can be used to illustrate how the whole series of beatitudes would have triggered the memory of first-century Israelites: Matt 5:5—“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth [i.e., land].” A better translation of “earth” is “land” since Ps 37:11 to which it alludes reads, “But the humble will inherit the land, and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” This beatitude is simply a restatement of God’s promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit a stipulated portion of earth’s service (Gen 12:7; 15:18) when the promised Kingdom arrives. Most, if not all, English translations have missed this point by translating the Greek noun τὴν γῆν by “earth” instead of “land” as the word is rendered by the LXX of that psalm.¹⁰

The remainder of the beatitudes fall into the same pattern of alluding to various OT prosperities that God in His covenants with Israel had promised would prevail upon the arrival of the Kingdom that He had promised to David. By the time Jesus finished this opening portion of the Sermon on the Mount, His listeners with various backgrounds knew which Kingdom He was talking about.

¹⁰Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* 202.

Possible Application: Resurrected members of the body of Christ will have a part in this Kingdom as the bride of Christ, but not as mortal Israelites (2 Cor 11:2, “For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin”; Eph 5:29, “for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church”; Rev 19:7–8, “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.” It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.”).

II. The Right Obligation of Jesus’ Disciples (5:13–16)

Peacemakers (Matt 5:9) and those who are to experience opposition for Christ’s sake (Matt 5:10–12) are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. During the Galilean Ministry they had already experienced a series of Sabbath controversies between Jesus and His enemies. They could not let opposition deter them from their responsibility. In anticipation of the coming Kingdom, the responsibility for testifying about the Prince of Peace and the King and His Kingdom belongs to them. Such people were only one of the three groups, but the crowds and Jesus’ enemies also heard the commission that He gave to His followers.

Possible application: Members of the body of Christ as peace makers must spread the good news too, but a different good news, that of the gospel of the grace of God; Rom 12:18: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”).

III. The Right Correlation with the Old Testament (5:17–20)

Jesus came to fulfil the OT by furnishing the deeper meaning of the law and prophets, a meaning that scribal tradition had missed completely. The reason why the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was insufficient for entering the kingdom of heaven was that it rested on a system of external, superficial behavior rather than meaningful human intention. Entering the Kingdom required not only right outward behavior which could have been generated by selfish motives, but also an inner motivation that complies with God's law. "It is not just what you do, but why you do it that matters with God."

As Jesus said later to the scribes and Pharisees in Matt 23:23, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others." In other words, outward compliance is the right thing to do, but it must stem from unselfish motives, not from selfish concerns.

Possible application: Jude 1:12–13, "These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever."

IV. The Right Motivation of the Sermon's Listeners (5:21–7:6)

A. Six contrasts of scribal teaching with that of Jesus (5:21–48)

1. Murder (5:21–26)

Hatred is a violation of the sixth commandment which prohibits murder.

Possible application to the body of Christ: compliance must be inward, not just outward. (1 John 4:20–21, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.”).

2. Adultery (5:27–30)

Lustful thoughts violate the seventh commandment which prohibits adultery.

Possible application to the body of Christ: compliance must be inward, not just outward (1 Thess 4:3–5, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God”).

3. Divorce (5:31–32)

Divorce for any reason is in violation of the intent of the law. Use of the law (Deut 24:1–4) to permit it is a misinterpretation of that law.

Possible application to the body of Christ: compliance must be inward, not just outward (Eph 5:22–25: “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her”).

4. Swearing (5:33–37)

No oaths are trivial. Leviticus 19:12 means that all oaths are binding and should

not be used for selfish reasons or taken lightly.

Possible application to the body of Christ: compliance must be inward, not just outward (Jas 5:12, “But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.”).

5. Revenge (5:38–42)

Exodus 21:23–25 was not intended to permit revenge on a personal basis, but was designed to restrict revenge on a corporate basis. A desire to retaliate against another individual for a wrong done by him is wrong. Retaliation among individuals is a wrong motive.

Possible application to the body of Christ: compliance must be inward, not just outward (Rom 12:19–21, “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord.”).

6. Enemies (5:43–48)

Leviticus 19:18 which speaks of love for fellow Israelites. To interpret it as implying hatred toward a non-Israelite is completely erroneous. The truth is that we should love our enemies in imitation of our heavenly Father’s love for all people.

Possible application to the body of Christ: compliance must be inward, not just outward (1 John 4:19, “We love, because He first loved us.”)

B. Three Pharisaic practices to be avoided (6:1–18)

1. General principle of not seeking the praise of men (6:1)

Performing righteous deeds for the sake of receiving human congratulations means that one has forfeited his opportunity of receiving a reward from the heavenly Father.

Possible application to the body of Christ: compliance must be inward, not just outward
(Gal 1:10, “For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.”).

2. Giving to the poor (6:2–4)

The righteous deed of giving to help those in need should be done privately so as to insure a heavenly reward.

Possible application to the body of Christ: compliance must be inward, not just outward
(2 Cor 9:7, “Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”)

3. Prayer (6:5–15)

The righteous deed of prayer should be done in a secret place rather than in the view of other people. Otherwise, the Father in heaven will not supply a reward.

Possible application to the body of Christ: compliance must be inward, not just outward
(1 Thess 5:16–18, “ Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”)

4. Fasting (6:16–18)

A person who is fasting should not make a public show of this righteous deed. His only interest should be that it is seen by the Father in heaven.

Possible application to the body of Christ: compliance must be inward, not just outward
(1 Cor 7:5–6, “Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”)

C. Three warnings against Pharisaic errors (6:19–7:6).

1. Against accumulating earthly riches (6:19–34)

The Pharisees had the reputation for being lovers of money (Luke 16:14–15). Heavenly treasures are a far greater prize than the temporary advantages that are provided by treasures on earth. The heavenly Father will see to it that our earthly needs are met. Our only concern must be to seek the spiritual values that He espouses. Beyond that, we rest in His willingness and ability to take care of our mundane needs.

Possible Application: 1 Tim 6:9–10, “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

2. Against censorious judgment (7:1–5)

The Pharisees practiced a destructive type of criticism which ignored their own shortcomings while tearing down others. Such bitterly critical judgment should be avoided.

Possible Application: Jude 1:16, “These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage.”

3. Against sharing divine truth with hardened listeners (7:6)

One must be careful not to offer the treasures of divine wisdom to those such as the scribes and Pharisees who have blatantly hardened their hearts against God. In giving the parables of Matthew 13, Jesus put this application in practice.

Possible Application: Jude 1:8–9, “Yet in the same way these men, also by dreaming, defile the flesh, and reject authority, and revile angelic majesties. But Michael the archangel,

when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’”

V. The Right Application of the Sermon’s Principles (7:7–27)

A. Prayer for strength to comply (7:7–11)

The requirements of this Sermon that extend even to having the right motives for one’s actions are beyond human strength. To escape the errors of Jesus’ enemies, the disciple must keep on asking the Father for the ability to fulfil these attitudinal requirements.

Possible application: Eph 6:18, “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.”

B. Over-arching principle of love in action (7:12)

Love for one’s neighbor which is the necessary attitude advocated in this Sermon will dictate that one will treat others as he wants them to treat him. That puts into action the command to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect (Matt 5:48). Also, that is the portion of the Sermon to which Luke in his choice of excerpts from the sermon gives the most distinctive emphasis to some parts that Matthew leaves out (Luke 6:27–36). As a gifted prophet under influence of the apostle Paul, his application of the Sermon is part of inspired Scripture.

Possible application: see Gal 5:6ff. below.

C. Three pairs comparisons (7:13–27)

1. Two gates and two ways (7:13–14)

The narrowness of the right gate and the right way will restrict the ones entering the Kingdom to a relatively small number.

Possible Application: 2 Pet 2:1–3, “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”

2. Two kinds of fruit (7:15–23)

A person’s true colors will be seen in the way that he lives. Only a good tree can produce the right kind of fruit (which means the right kind of deeds). A deceiver may claim to be a good tree, but his bad fruit will reveal his deception.

Possible Application: see Gal 5:6ff. below.

3. Two kinds of houses (7:24–27)

Only the house whose builder has gone to the trouble of constructing a solid foundation will withstand the storms of life. That right foundation consists of hearing *and doing* what Jesus has taught. This means that a person must have a new motivation. Nothing less will be sufficient for entering His Kingdom.

Possible Application. 1 Cor 3:10–11, “According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

Two of Sermon’s Important lessons for application to the body of Christ:

a. As with the scribes and Pharisees, authority sometimes caters to personal, selfish desires to achieve corrupt goals, and eventually leads to discovery and downfall.

The solution:

Rom 12:3 For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

⁴ For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function,

⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

b. Loving enemies as the Father does is impossible without outside help from the Spirit given to the wild olive branches as a New Covenant benefit.

The solution:

Gal 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

.....

Gal 5:16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

.....

Gal 5:22–23 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.