

# The Sermon on the Mount

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Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has been called the epitome of His ethical teaching, His manifesto, and the key of the whole Bible. To understand the Sermon on the Mount and its relevance for you, you need to know who was Jesus' intended audience and whether Jesus was correcting the misunderstandings of the scribes and Pharisees, whether He was fulfilling the role of the new Lawgiver by giving a new law, or whether He had an entirely different purpose.

So, who was Jesus' intended audience for the Sermon on the Mount? In Matthew 5, verses one and two, we read, "And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them." Jesus' immediate audience was His disciples. By the end of the sermon, the multitudes had apparently also gathered, for Matthew 7:28 says, "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine." Notice that throughout the sermon, Jesus uses the second person; that is, He uses "you," and the "you" is frequently plural (i.e. "you all"). For example, in the verses where He says, "But I say unto you," the "you" is plural.

In light of this, it is amazing to me that so many Bible commentators say that Jesus intended His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount for people living in a future kingdom age that we have not yet entered. Where is the evidence for this position? It is apparently in the minds of those who teach it. It is certainly not in the words of Jesus. The word "kingdom" is mentioned nine times in the sermon. Yes, the Sermon on the Mount is intended for those living in the kingdom of God, but it is the kingdom of God that, as Jesus said in Luke 17, is among us—on the earth right now. It cannot refer to some future idyllic world, because it speaks of the unjust, those who try to sue others, the giving of alms (which implies that there will be poor people), not worrying about the physical things of this life (which implies a less than ideal life that might cause us to worry), being persecuted for righteousness' sake, and so on. The Sermon on the Mount was for the potential Christians of that age, and for the potential and converted Christians of the centuries that followed right to our time today. He was speaking to you.

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Jesus spoke directly to His disciples and all who joined them to hear Him. It is also important to see that Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount by giving eight characteristics of the people God will bless. These characteristics are found in what are often called the Beatitudes. I am going to show you that the Beatitudes describe sinners who have been saved and are living in this world. They cannot refer to anyone else, because these traits can only be attained by grace. These are the citizens of the kingdom. In 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul admonishes us to, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" By studying these descriptions of these citizens, you will be able to determine whether you are among them. You will see that they are not perfect in themselves, but that their righteousness comes from Jesus Christ.

### **The Beatitudes**

1) "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The poor in spirit refers to those who know they are spiritually poor. They know that there is nothing they can do—no good works, no good words, no good thoughts—to earn any merit with God. They are spiritually bankrupt, and they know it. No one in the world can merit anything with God. But the difference between the average person of the world and the regenerated saint of God is that the saint knows that his account is in the red and he has no way in himself to repay it. But the person of the world is in ignorance of his balance and is writing checks that will bounce.

In John 9:41, Jesus said to the self-righteous Pharisees, "If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth." In other words, if the Pharisees knew that they were spiritually blind, poor, and naked, they would seek God and be forgiven their sins. But since they proudly denied their spiritual blindness, their sin remained. Only by God's freely given grace can a sinner know he is poor in spirit.

Do you know that you are spiritually poor? Do you know of your need for God's grace? Do you know that Jesus Christ alone has cancelled your debt? If so, then yours is the kingdom of heaven.

2) The second characteristic is found in this: "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." This is not, as some have misunderstood it, merely saying that Jesus will comfort those who mourn over the loss of their loved ones. Jesus is here describing those who mourn over sin. Those who are spiritually poor see their

wretched, sinful state before God and mourn over it. With David, they say, "I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me." Like the publican in Jesus' parable, they know that they are unworthy to even lift their eyes to heaven. They cry out, "God be merciful to me a sinner." And God is merciful.

Jesus says they will be comforted. But what comforts them? A resolution to do better? A reading of the Ten Commandments? Only one thing comforts them: Jesus Christ and Him crucified for their sins. Only the Gospel knowledge that Jesus Christ alone is their Savior will comfort them. Their comfort is in Jesus' substitutionary, effectual atonement on the Cross, totally paying the penalty for their sins; His resurrection from the dead, showing that the Father had accepted His sacrifice and that their sins—past, present, and future—are gone; and the righteousness of His sinless life imputed to them, put on them as a robe making them to the Father as righteous as Jesus. They are comforted now, they will be comforted tomorrow, they will be comforted in the judgment and for eternity. Do you mourn over your wretched sinfulness? If so, then be comforted by the Gospel.

3) The third Beatitude is, "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth." The meekness Jesus means here is not weakness or timidity. Numbers 12:3 tells us that "Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth." Yet he struck and killed an Egyptian, confronted Pharaoh, and led the children of Israel through the wilderness for forty years. He was meek before God, submissive to God's will. He was God's servant. Such submission can come only by God's grace. To try to make ourselves meek would be self-defeating, for it would make us proud instead of meek.

Jesus Himself was meek and told us to learn from Him: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls," He said.

In the parable of the talents, we read that those who are faithful servants concerning the little things in this life are commended: "Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." Likewise, Christ says the meek shall inherit the earth. They are "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ."

4) "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." Are you hungry and thirsting after righteousness? I hope so, but I equally hope that it is not your own righteousness you want.

Notice that if you are poor in spirit, knowing your sinfulness, you will mourn. You will then lose all pride and be meek, and then you will hunger and thirst for righteousness. But you will know that you can have none of your own. An outward show of human morality will not do. The people Jesus describes are hungering and thirsting after the righteousness that can come only from Jesus Christ, "who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." God "made him to be sin for us...that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

Those who ate the manna were filled; those who ate the loaves and fish were filled. Jesus told the woman at the well, "But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." And He said, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst."

The prophet Jeremiah tells us, "In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS." David writes, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God." Is the Lord your righteousness? Is He your only righteousness? Do you hunger and thirst after Him? Then you will be filled, freely and completely. Isaiah 55:1 says, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Jesus says, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink."

5) "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy." Does this mean that God's mercy to us is a reaction to our own mercy? Can it mean that we can buy our mercy by being merciful to others? No, mercy cannot be bought. But if you are poor in spirit, knowing and mourning over your sinfulness, becoming meek instead of prideful, and hungering and thirsting for the righteousness of Jesus Christ, then you have already obtained God's mercy, for all of these are His gracious gifts. And He will continue to be merciful to you in this life and in the Judgment. As Hebrews says of God, "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." And those to whom God has been merciful will be merciful. When Jesus showed mercy to Zacchaeus by coming to the house of this sinner, Zacchaeus could not help but declare, "Behold, Lord, the

half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold." Paul explains in Colossians 3:13, "even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." Do you show God's mercy to you by being merciful to others?

6) "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." What does being pure in heart mean? It should be obvious that man, who is totally depraved in nature, cannot purify his own heart. What example do we find in the Old or New Testaments of a saint who made his own heart pure? None. Those who try to purify their own hearts either live a life of frustrating failure or, if they deceive themselves into thinking they have succeeded, wind up as self-righteous puffballs.

Having a pure heart is a work of God, who in Ezekiel 36:26 says, "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh." If we are going to have a pure heart, it must be a new heart, and that is a miracle of God. We do not sanctify ourselves. Jesus is our sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30; Hebrews 10:10, 14). Further reading: "Are We Sanctified by Works or by Grace?" (<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/sanctified-grace-works-1/>).

Do you have a pure heart? If so, you will know your sin and mourn over it. Having a pure heart does not mean being sinless. As 1 John 1:8 says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." But, as John again says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." And in 1 John 3:2, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." Do you have a pure heart from God? If so, you are blessed because you will see Him as He is.

7) "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." Many years ago, I visited a church and heard one of the most carnally minded, world-centered, human-worshipping, Christ-dishonoring sermons I have ever heard. The central message of the sermon was the application of this Scripture to the United Nations. Jesus is not talking about the godless, human efforts of the United Nations in trying to bring about world peace. Romans 3:17-18 says of the carnally minded, "The way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Another misunderstanding of "Blessed are the peacemakers" is that it refers to men making peace with God. Sometimes we hear of a dying man saying that it is time for him to make his peace with God. But men do not make peace with God. God makes peace with men through His Son, Jesus Christ the Righteous.

So, who are the peacemakers? In Isaiah 9:6, we read of Jesus Christ, who is called the Prince of Peace. Are you ruled by Him? Have you taken up your cross and followed Him? Are your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace, as Ephesians 6:15 says? Do you speak and support the ministry of reconciliation? Is the Spirit of Christ leading you to "follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another," as Romans 14:19 tells us to do? Are you, as much as lieth in you, living peaceably with all men? Are you, "With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"? This does not mean to sacrifice truth for the spirit of unity, but to keep the unity of the Spirit. If you are doing this, "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God," you are a peacemaker, and you will be called the children of God, who is, after all, the God of peace.

Please especially notice that neither Jesus nor any of His disciples ever says, Blessed are the war makers; blessed are they who bomb their enemies; blessed are they who waterboard and otherwise torture their prisoners. No, war making has no place in the life of a Christian. If you have been deceived into thinking or acting otherwise, it is time to repent. As we will shortly read, Jesus tells us to love and bless and pray for our enemies.

8) "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The key phrase here is "for righteousness' sake." Everyone has suffered at one time or another for sins, mistakes, foolish words, wrong-headedness, and so on. Many have also suffered for their own self-righteousness, including wrong religious convictions. Many martyrs have died for the world's religions. But they are not blessed because they were not persecuted for righteousness' sake. They died for a false cause.

It is also true that people do not persecute you for doing those things most readily associated with popular Christianity. Who do you know of who has been persecuted for doing good works, giving to the poor, establishing hospitals, or devoting one's life to the poor and sick in far-flung corners of the world? I can think of no one. Of course, we should

be doing good works. But Christians are also supposed to speak the truth. Pull no punches in preaching the truth from the Bible and see how quickly you become unpopular.

9) "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake." I will tell you how to guarantee persecution. Preach that absolutely no one is good, not one. Preach that every good work that anyone has ever done, whether it is dropping a coin in Santa Claus's bucket in front of a store or living among the untouchables in Calcutta, are as filthy rags to God. Preach that no amount of law-keeping will ever make anyone righteous, that righteousness and salvation are only in Jesus Christ and that God gives them only to whom he sovereignly wills, and that there is now no condemnation, and never will be any condemnation, to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. You will be persecuted by every variety of human-centered religion. You will be called narrow-minded and deceived. You will be judged as judgmental. You will be called ignorant. You will be accused of limiting God. You will be called antinomian. But take no heed. Yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Now we know for whom Jesus intended the Sermon on the Mount. He intended it for those who know their spiritual poverty, their sinful inability, and mourn and are humbled. But they hunger and thirst after Jesus Christ, the Lord of Righteousness. And, in regeneration, God gives them mercy—both extending mercy and giving them the gift to be merciful. And He gives them new, pure hearts, making them peacemakers. Nevertheless, their Gospel makes the world revile and persecute them. This cannot be referring to the citizens of some future Utopian kingdom, as they would not, in that kingdom, be persecuted. These are the citizens of the kingdom of God on earth right now.

They are not perfect; they are still at war within themselves—the old man against the new. They see their weakness and mourn. But they have perfect righteousness in Jesus Christ. Dear listener, I pray that in this description, you see yourself.

### **But I Say**

In Matthew 5:21, Jesus says, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment." Is this a Pharisaic misinterpretation of the law? In Exodus 20:13, we read the Sixth Commandment: "Thou shalt not kill." It is exactly as Jesus said the people had heard. There is no

misunderstanding. In Exodus 21:1, we read, "Now these are the judgments which thou shalt set before them." What follows are judgments transgressors would be in danger of. And, in verse 12, we read, "He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death." There is the judgment for someone who breaks the Sixth Commandment. Verses 13-15 give similar judgments.

Is Jesus stating a misinterpretation of the Pharisees? No. He is stating the law as God gave it to Moses. And then, in Matthew 5:22, He says, "But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." Notice carefully that Jesus states the Old Covenant law, and then says, "But I say unto you." Thus, Jesus was not correcting the Pharisees.

In Matthew 5:27, Jesus says, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery." Is "Thou shalt not commit adultery" a Pharisaic misunderstanding of the law? Of course not. Jesus has exactly quoted the Seventh Commandment as found in Exodus 20:14. In Matthew 5:28, Jesus continues, "But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." Again, Jesus has quoted the Old Covenant law and then says, "But I say unto you." In verses 28-32, Jesus gives a standard that does not merely regulate external actions, as the Old Covenant law does. The standard Jesus gives requires perfect, sinless thoughts.

In Matthew 5:33, Jesus states, "Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths." This is a paraphrase of Old Testament Scriptures, such as Numbers 30, verse 2: "If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth." Obviously, Jesus was not stating a misunderstanding of the Scriptures. The Old Testament law clearly told the Israelites to perform their oaths. In Matthew 5:34, Jesus says, "But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne." And He expounds on this in the next three verses. Clearly, this is a new law. There is quite a difference between telling people to perform what they swear and telling them not to swear at all. To get around this, proponents of the "correct the Pharisee" interpretation say that Jesus was not really forbidding all swearing, but only some swearing. But as a second witness to Jesus' command, James writes in

James 5:12, "But above all things, my brethren, swear not." There is no getting around it. Jesus is telling us, "Swear not at all."

In Matthew 5:38, Jesus said, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." This is from Exodus 21:24, and is also found in Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21. It is not a Pharisaic misunderstanding. It is Old Covenant law. In Matthew 5:39, Jesus says, "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also," and so on to verse 42.

The last example is in verse 43: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy." Some have criticized this because there is no command that says, "Hate thine enemy." Granted, Jesus is doing some interpreting here. But it is valid. He is basing this statement on many Old Testament Scriptures where God tells the Israelites to utterly destroy their enemies. As just one of many possible examples, I'll quote verses 2 and 16 from Deuteronomy 7: "And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor show mercy unto them.... And thou shalt consume all the people which the LORD thy God shall deliver thee; thine eye shall have no pity upon them: neither shalt thou serve their gods; for that will be a snare unto thee."

Then, in direct contrast, in Matthew 5:44, Jesus says, "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." All of this can be perplexing.

Why did Jesus say, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20)? We might possibly imagine ourselves doing that, but what about what Jesus says after telling us to love even our enemies? "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (verse 48). How can we possibly attain God's perfection? The answer is that with our works, we cannot. Jesus was teaching that the Old Covenant law was merely a shadow with standards of morality that were far below God's true, righteous standards. Jesus' "But I say unto you" statements were a sampling of God's real standards of righteousness. Jesus wanted us to see that even perfectly keeping the Old Testament laws wasn't good enough to be saved, and that God's true standards are beyond our ability. Our only hope is to trust in

Jesus to pay for our sins and to keep the law—even God’s perfect standards—for us and have His righteousness imputed to us. Further reading: “Why Did Jesus Say, ‘But I Tell You?’” (<https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/but-i-tell-you/>).

### **Not Destroy, But Fulfill**

What, then, did Jesus mean in Matthew 5:17-20, where He says, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven”?

Jesus says He did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. What Jesus means can be seen in this illustration: If I have a debt and pay it off, I have fulfilled my obligation to my creditor. I didn’t destroy the obligation before paying it off. I fulfilled it. Jesus did not just destroy the law. He fulfilled the law in two ways. First, He lived under the law perfectly. He obeyed every bit of the law. And His perfect righteousness is imputed to us. Secondly, He paid our penal obligations under law by dying in our stead. Because of our transgression of law, because we have all sinned, our obligation under law was to die and spend eternity in hell. Jesus fulfilled that obligation for us by what He went through on the cross. Jesus did not destroy law, but by fulfilling the law, He removed us from under it.

And what commandments did Jesus mean when He said, “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven”? Most assume that he means the Ten Commandments. But He never says this. To properly understand, we must look to the context. And the context shows us that Jesus must be referring to the commandments He is about to give—the commandments that are summed in one word, love. And love is something that only God works in us.

And how can our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? How can we be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect? There is only one way. Jesus Christ was perfect. He embodied perfect righteousness. And His perfect righteousness is imputed to us if we believe on Him alone as our Savior. That is the only way to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, and that is the only way to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. We know that in this life we do not perfectly keep God's standards because our carnality does not allow us to perfectly and consistently love. But Jesus Christ is our righteousness, and, that being so, it is impossible for us to be condemned. As John says, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God." There is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, as Romans 8:1 says. We always remain perfectly righteous when we are robed with the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. Beware of those who are now rising up who say that only Jesus' death on the cross is imputed to us (His passive obedience, as they say), but not His righteous life or active obedience. This thinking will only draw you into an impossible attempt at a works salvation.

What does this mean for you? If you are Christ's, then know that your righteousness is in Him. Never even begin to trust your own righteousness. You are under the New Covenant and not the Old. You do not have to keep the law or die. Christ has died for you, and you are dead to the law.

Jesus Christ is your Righteousness and He said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."