

Gospel of Matthew: Preaching the Sermon on the Mount

By Bob Young

Introduction

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five discourses in the gospel of Matthew. It serves as foundational, both in Matthew and in Jesus' ministry, in that it introduces the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders of his day. The Sermon on the Mount must be read and understood against the background of Jesus' time. One must be careful not to read it through Christian lenses. The application to Christianity should be secondary, only after the text is understood contextually. The Sermon on the Mount is not Jesus' effort to summarize Christianity. It is rather Jesus' effort to correct the misunderstandings and mistaken emphases of Judaism. As such it must be understood against the background of Jewish attitudes and practices in the first century.

The sermon is often placed within the genre of wisdom literature. In many ways, it functions as wisdom literature typically functions. Blenkinsopp (*Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament*) suggests that wisdom and law are two great rivers which eventually flow together and find their outlet in rabbinic writings and early Christian theology. He notes the formal similarities between case law and proverbial sayings, between apodictic sentences of law and the instruction of wisdom literature. He also suggests that Matthew in his gospel intended to place the teaching of Jesus within the ongoing tradition of Israelite and Jewish wisdom. In fact, of canonical gospels, Matthew seems most interested in presenting Jesus as a wise teacher. This may explain why Matthew organizes Jesus' teachings into five discourses, perhaps modeled on the Pentateuch. The first of these, the Sermon on the Mount, concludes with the familiar contrast between the wise person and the fool.

Is the Sermon on the Mount wisdom literature? Harry Hunt, professor of Old Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, notes that the role of the sage and the priest became more prominent (Eccl. 38:24-39:11) as the role of the prophet became less visible during the intertestamental period. This he sees as a fitting bridge to the New Testament where the magi (sages or wise men) announce the birth of Christ, the one who is to become greatest of all wisdom teachers (cf. Mt. 12:42; 13:54).

Wisdom literature is a broad genre. The wisdom literature of the OT (the Writings) is echoed in the wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East. Proverbial, instructional wisdom literature was known in Egypt from the third millennium B.C. There is no doubt that the Old Testament wisdom tradition continues in the New Testament, as wisdom is used in the New Testament with a variety of nuances. I have in my files a quotation from Huber Drumwright, Dean of the School of Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Unfortunately, the original source is not noted.

"There is in the Sermon on the Mount the clearest and fullest approach to the wisdom method to be found in the teachings of Jesus. The love of life and learning of large lessons with spiritual import from nature, both of which characterize the sages of the OT, are evidenced in Jesus' longest sermon of record. Even the short, pithy, sometimes antithetical method of the wisdom writers seems to have been employed by Jesus."

Treating the Sermon on the Mount as wisdom literature suggests fresh approaches to preaching the text. One may follow a tried (and tired?) approach to textual preaching and allow each individual periscope to stand alone. One may also seek points of commonality, themes and threads that run through the Sermon like a fine tapestry, not only holding the Sermon together but also giving it beauty.

Subdividing or Outlining the Text

Many outlines of the Sermon on the Mount are available. The outline below identifies the paragraphs of the sermon and shows the continuity of parallel sections, e.g. the six “you have heard it said...” sections of chapter 5. The outline identifies 19 individual paragraphs or periscopes. Treating each section independently will result in a relatively long (too long!) sermon series. Thus the outline also suggests visually how the Sermon on the Mount might be preached in a shorter eight-sermon series (the eight textual sections are listed in the far left column). Combining 6:19-24 and 6:25-34 would result in a seven-sermon series. A six-sermon series might divide each chapter into two major sections and preach the sections thematically: the higher righteousness of the kingdom (5:1-20), when unrighteousness seems justified (5:21-48), acts of righteousness done unrighteously (6:1-18), what it means to seek his kingdom righteousness (6:19-34), how to be righteous (7:1-23), to be righteousness is wise, or wisdom acts righteously (7:24-27).

5:1-12	Beatitudes. Different Kind of King: Different Kind of Kingdom. Who is really blessed?
5:13-20	Higher Righteousness of the Kingdom
5:21-48	Six “righteousness” contrasts
5:21-26	Six contrasts and correctives-1: Murder: If you are angry with your brother
5:27-30	Six contrasts and correctives-2: Adultery: If your eye causes you to sin
5:31-32	Six contrasts and correctives-3: Divorce: If your spouse displeases you
5:33-37	Six contrasts and correctives-4: Oaths: Let your yes be yes
5:38-42	Six contrasts and correctives-5: Revenge: If someone hurts you
5:42-48	Six contrasts and correctives-6: Love your enemies: Be like God
6:1-18	Right way to do righteous deeds [3 examples]
6:1-4	When you give to the needy
6:5-15	When you pray [9-14, Pray like this....]
6:16-18	When you fast
6:19-24	“Where your treasure is....”, but the topic is trust not treasures; kingdom principles
6: 25-34	Do not be anxious [Today is all you have, need, can handle
7:1-23	How to be righteous
7:1-6	Do not judge
7:7-11	Ask, seek, knock [dependence on God]
7:12	Golden Rule
7:13-14	Two ways
15-23	Known by your fruits
7:24-27	Like a wise man

Themes of the Sermon on the Mount

To consider the Sermon on the Mount thematically, one asks two questions. Is there a single theme or concept that ties the Sermon together? Does the Sermon contain a series of thematic possibilities so that a sermon series would address multiple themes through which Jesus describes the better righteousness he presents?

One obvious theme is righteousness or justice. A quick concordance search shows that this concept appears periodically throughout the sermon (as reflected in the six sermon suggestions above). Other themes worthy of exploration include a different value system, the nature of the kingdom, blessed by God vs. blessed by men, trust or dependence on God, relationships with others, choices and priorities,

inward righteousness and outward appearances, and the place of wisdom. Studying the Sermon in the context of Matthew's Gospel will yield an interesting array of themes which Matthew uses to introduce the teachings of Jesus in this first narrative section.

Dangers in Preaching the Sermon on the Mount

An obvious danger in preaching the text is to "Christianize" it too soon. The Sermon on the Mount is not Jesus' final statement of how Christianity will work as a replacement for Judaism. It is easy for the modern preacher to preach the sermon as though those listening had the same fuller understanding of the New Testament that we have today. The temptation is to read the Sermon through New Testament eyes rather than through the context of Jesus' life. The Sermon on the Mount was preached in the context of Judaism, by a Jew who practiced the Jewish religion, and addresses the abuses, misunderstandings, and failure to consider the importance of Old Testament prophecies which were an essential part of Judaism.

In the interest of space, other dangers are listed but not expanded: (1) failing to consider righteousness as an Old Testament concept—a description of what one does to maintain covenant, (2) moving from one set of rules to another set of rules, (3) making the Sermon primarily about whether one understands the rules correctly (the Jews didn't but Jesus does), and (4) making the principles which are set forth into requirements for entry into the kingdom.

In preparing to preach the Sermon, one must constantly ask, "How did the listeners hear the text: except your righteousness exceed...?" Would the first century Jew not be asking, "How is it possible that my righteousness exceed that of the religious leaders?" The Pharisees were considered to be as righteous as it gets, none was more righteous. They had drawn the line in the sand concerning righteousness, they had defined it. They had turned righteousness is an absolute—either one is or one isn't. How then is it possible to have a greater righteousness? The Old Testament connection between righteousness and covenant led them to conclude that either one is in the covenant or one is not in the covenant. They had not seen that God maintains covenant through his loving kindness apart from perfect righteousness.

Jesus addresses this question. "Yes, they have defined righteousness, you have heard them say this more than once..." But what they are saying is not a standard that reflects a commitment to covenant and imitating God. Theirs is a far-fetched limit that misses the point. For example, it is not about murder—did I or didn't I? It is about attitudes. This kind of contextualized reading of the entire Sermon will help one develop sermons that accurately communicate the meaning of the text—both the "then" and the "now".

Addendum: Using the Sermon on the Plain to Explain the Beatitudes

Should one preach the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6) separately, or can the teachings of Jesus in Luke 6 be used to help explain the underlying principles of the Beatitudes? While one will certainly find occasion to preach Luke 6 in the context of Luke's Gospel with its unique themes and foci, a comparison of the two "sermons" can be helpful.

The Luke 6 version of the sermon includes both woes and blessings. These woes and blessings provide insights into the worldview comparisons Jesus is setting forth. Consider the following.

The world says one thing, the kingdom another.

The world says the rich are blessed

*the kingdom says the poor in spirit are blessed
and pronounces a woe on the rich*
The world says those with enough food are blessed
The kingdom says true blessing is in being hungry for righteousness
And pronounces a woe on the well-fed who will go hungry
The world says blessing is in happiness and laughter
The kingdom says true blessing is in spiritual mourning that leads to comfort
And pronounces a woe on the laughing who will mourn and weep
The world says people ought to like us, speak well of us
The kingdom says blessing is in persecution for the sake of Jesus and because of righteousness
And pronounces a woe on those well received

This example can be expanded to get to the heart of the principles Jesus presents in the Sermon on the Mount. The true way to blessing (and the true way to righteousness) is not as the world thinks, and is not as Jewish leaders who may represent worldliness more than godliness have taught.