

The Sermon *on the Mount*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matthew 5–7, Rom. 7:7, Gen. 15:6, Mic. 6:6–8, Luke 6:36, Matt. 13:44–52, Rom. 8:5–10.*

Memory Text: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (*Matthew 7:28, 29, NIV*).

In the book of Exodus, we see God lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, “baptize” them in the Red Sea, bring them through the wilderness for 40 years, work signs and wonders, and meet with them personally on a mountaintop where He gives them His law.

In the book of Matthew, we see Jesus come out of Egypt, be baptized in the Jordan River, go out into the wilderness for 40 days, work signs and wonders, and meet personally with Israel on a mountaintop where He amplifies this same law. Jesus walked the history of Israel, became Israel, and in Him all the covenant promises were fulfilled.

The Sermon on the Mount is the most powerful sermon ever preached. His words have profoundly influenced not only its immediate listeners but all who would hear its life-changing messages down through the centuries and even to our time.

And yet, we must not just listen to this sermon; we also must apply it. This week, along with studying what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5–7*), we will study what Jesus said in Matthew 13 about *applying* His words to our lives.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 16.*

Principles and Standards

Skim through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. Summarize on the lines below what stands out the most in your mind about it, about what it says to you.

“Perhaps no other religious discourse in the history of humanity has attracted the attention which has been devoted to the Sermon on the Mount. Philosophers and activists from many non-Christian perspectives who have refused to worship Jesus nevertheless have admired His ethic. In the twentieth century, Mohandas Gandhi was the sermon’s most famous non-Christian devotee.”—Craig L. Blomberg, *The New American Commentary: Matthew* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), vol. 22, pp. 93, 94.

This sermon has been viewed in many different ways. Some see it as an impossibly high moral standard that drives us to our knees and causes us to claim the righteousness of Jesus as our only hope of salvation because we all have fallen far short of the divine standard that God calls us to as revealed in the Sermon on the Mount. Others see it as a discourse in civil ethics, a call for pacifism. Some have seen in it the social gospel, a call to bring the kingdom of God to earth by human effort.

In a sense, probably everyone brings something of himself or herself into this sermon because it so powerfully touches us in crucial areas of our lives; thus, we all react to it in our own way.

Ellen G. White writes: “In the Sermon on the Mount He sought to undo the work that had been wrought by false education, and to give His hearers a right conception of His kingdom and of His own character. . . . The truths He taught are no less important to us than to the multitude that followed Him. We no less than they need to learn the foundation principles of the kingdom of God.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 299.

Thus, whatever else we bring to it, the Sermon on the Mount gives us the foundation principles of God’s kingdom. It tells us what God is like, as the ruler of His kingdom, and tells us what God calls us to be like, as subjects of His kingdom. It’s a radical call from the principles and standards of the fleeting kingdoms of this world to the principles and standards of the one kingdom that will exist forever. (*See Dan. 7:27.*)

The Sermon Versus the Law

Some Christians view the Sermon on the Mount as a new “law of Christ,” one that replaced the “law of God.” They say that a system of legalism was now replaced with a system of grace, or that Jesus’ law differs from the law of God itself. These views are misconceptions about the Sermon on the Mount.

What do the following texts say about the law and indirectly about the idea that, somehow, the law (i.e., the Ten Commandments) was replaced by the Sermon on the Mount? *Matt. 5:17–19, 21, 22, 27, 28; see also James 2:10, 11; Rom. 7:7.*

Craig S. Keener writes: “Most Jewish people understood the commandments in the context of grace . . . ; given Jesus’ demands for greater grace in practice . . . , he undoubtedly intended the kingdom demands in light of grace (compare *Matt. 6:12; Luke 11:4; Mark 11:25; Matt. 6:14, 15; Mark 10:15*). In the Gospel narratives, Jesus embraces those who humble themselves, acknowledging God’s right to rule, even if in practice they fall short of the goal of moral perfection (5:48). But the kingdom of grace Jesus proclaimed was not the workless grace of much of Western Christendom; in the Gospels the kingdom message transforms those who meekly embrace it, just as it crushes the arrogant, the religiously and socially satisfied.” —*The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 161, 162.

Read Genesis 15:6. How does this help us to understand that salvation has always been by faith?

The faith of Jesus Christ was not a new faith; it was the same faith from the Fall onward. The Sermon on the Mount wasn’t salvation by grace replacing salvation by works. It was *always* salvation by grace. The children of Israel were saved by grace at the Red Sea *before* they were asked to obey at Sinai (*see Exod. 20:2*).

What should your own experience with the Lord and His law teach you about why salvation has always had to be by faith and not by the law?

The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

Read Matthew 5:20. What does Jesus mean when He says that unless our righteousness “surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law” (NIV) we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven?

Though salvation has always been by faith, and though Judaism, as it should have been practiced, was always a system of grace, legalism did creep in, as it can in any religion that takes obedience seriously, such as Seventh-day Adventism. At the time of Christ, many (but not all) of the religious leaders had fallen into a kind of “hard religious orthodoxy . . . destitute of contrition, tenderness or love” that left them with “no power to preserve the world from corruption.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 53.

Mere outward forms, especially those that are man-made, have no power to change lives or transform character. The only true faith is that which works by love (*Gal. 5:6*); that alone is what makes outward actions acceptable in the sight of God.

Read Micah 6:6–8. In what ways is this a summary of the Sermon on the Mount?

Even in Old Testament times, the sacrifices were not an end in themselves but a means to an end, and that end was a life in which followers of God reflect the love and character of God, something that could be done only through a complete surrender to God and a realization of our utter dependence on His saving grace. Despite all their outward appearances of piety and faith, many of the scribes and Pharisees were definitely not a model on how a follower of the Lord should live.

Even if you are a great believer in salvation by faith alone and that only Jesus’ righteousness can save you, how can you be sure that even subtle forms of legalism don’t creep in?

The Principles of the Kingdom

Perhaps the most radical teaching of Jesus is found in Matthew 5:48. Read the text. How are we, especially as sinners, supposed to do that?

Of all the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, this has to be one of the most amazing, the most “extreme.” To be as perfect as “your Father in heaven”? What does that mean?

A crucial component in understanding this text is found in the first word of it, “therefore.” That is, it implies a conclusion, an inference from what came before it. What came before?

Read Matthew 5:43–47. How do these verses, which are then brought to a close with Matthew 5:48, help us to understand better what Jesus meant by Matthew 5:48? See also Luke 6:36.

This isn’t the first time an idea like this is seen in the Bible. Way back in the book of Leviticus (19:2), the Lord says to His people, “ ‘ ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy’ ’ ” (NKJV). In Luke (6:36), Jesus said: “Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful” (NKJV).

The whole context here, in Matthew 5:43–48, is not about an outward conformity to rules and standards, however important that may be. Instead, the whole focus on this section deals with loving people, not just those whom anyone could love but those whom, by the world’s standards, we would not generally love (again, this is about the standards of God’s kingdom, not man’s).

The important thing to remember here is that God does not ask of us anything that He cannot accomplish in us. If left to ourselves, if dominated by our sinful and selfish hearts, who would love their enemies? That’s not how the world works, but are we not now citizens of another kingdom? We have the promise that if we surrender ourselves to God then “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6, NKJV), and what greater work could God do in us than to get us, in our own sphere, to love as He loves us?

How different would your life be, right now, were you to love your enemies?

Receiving the Words of the Kingdom

A mountaintop wasn't the only place Jesus preached. He preached the same message of the kingdom all over Israel. Matthew 13 records Jesus teaching from a boat, "while all the people stood on the shore" (*Matt. 13:2, NIV*). Jesus then told the people parables intended to drive home the importance of not only *hearing* His word but *applying* it.

Read Matthew 13:44–52. What is being said here in these parables that is of particular importance to us in understanding how to apply to our lives the truths revealed in the Sermon on the Mount?

Two points stand out in the first two of these stories. In both, there is the idea of separation, of getting rid of what one has in order to obtain something new, be it treasure in a field or a pearl. The other crucial point is the great value each man placed on what he had found. In both cases, they went and sold all that they possessed in order to get it. Though we cannot buy salvation (*Isa. 55:1, 2*), the point of the parables is clear: nothing we have in this kingdom, this world, is worth our losing out on the next one.

Thus, to apply to our lives what God asks of us, we need to make a choice to separate ourselves from all the things of the world, of the flesh, and let God's Spirit fill us instead (*see Rom. 8:5–10*). This might not be easy; it will require a death to self and a taking up of one's cross. But if we always have before us the value and the worth of what we are promised, we should have all the motivation we need to make the choices that we must.

Read the next parable (*Matt. 13:47–50*). This, too, is talking about a separation. In what ways does the separation seen in the first two parables help us to understand what is happening in the third parable?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Sermon on the Mount,” pp. 298–314, in *The Desire of Ages*, and the book *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (available online at <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/mb/mb.asp>).

In the parables of Matthew 13:44–46, the men found something of great value. Given the context, especially after Jesus told the third parable (*Matt. 13:47–50*), what they found was the truth, the truth that leads to eternal life, as opposed to eternal destruction “in the furnace of fire.” This is important because we live in an age where the idea of “truth” itself is considered old-fashioned at best or dangerous at worst. And, unfortunately, this is a false idea that some Christians have bought into. Nevertheless, the message of these parables is that not only does truth exist but that truth will make a difference for eternity in every human life. This shouldn’t be surprising. The Bible is predicated on the idea of absolute truth. After all, Jesus said, “ ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me’ ” (*John 14:6, NKJV*). If that is not stating an absolute truth, what is? Of course, when someone with as much knowledge of the truth as Paul could say that “we know in part” (*1 Cor. 13:9*), it’s obvious that there’s a lot we don’t know. But his mere statement that we know “in part” implies that there’s more truth to know, truth that literally makes a difference, either for eternal life or eternal death. Eternal life or eternal death? It doesn’t get more absolute than that.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What would it be like living in a world where everyone followed the principles found in the Sermon on the Mount?
- ② Jesus told the parable of the wise and foolish builders (*see Matt. 7:24–27*) in sight of the shores of the Sea of Galilee. In the dry season, the difference in the appearance of the rock and the sand on the shores was almost imperceptible, and a builder could build his house on sand, thinking it was rock. When the rains came, the sandy foundation was revealed, and the house collapsed. Jesus compares those who hear His words but don’t practice them to a sandy foundation. How do the storms of our own lives reveal whether our foundation is of rock or sand? How can we have a foundation that will keep us stable and firm, even amid the worst of trials?

An Amazing Ride: Part 1

Note: The following firsthand stories are from Carol Boehm, wife of Wayne Boehm, former president of the Solomon Islands Mission. He now serves as manager of the Hope Channel in Sydney, Australia.

One of the things I have learned in the Solomon Islands is to plan big for God, no matter how few your resources. Some amazing things have been achieved during the past two years: a huge mission outreach, the setting up of a nationwide radio station, a health program that has reached more than 100 people and is exploding in popularity, smaller missions on every island, and large-scale renovations at Betikama Adventist College.

How was all this achieved with no money? God has moved on the hearts of so many people who have given generously. And He has multiplied; their gifts stretch further than we ever dreamed possible.

Another lesson I've learned is to never be ashamed of God. The Solomon Islanders talk openly about their loving Father. They never hesitate to say grace in public, to pray in a huddle at airports or wharfs, or to invite strangers to meetings or socials. Their boldness has been a silent witness to me.

Exciting things are happening at Savo, our closest neighboring island. We have tried in vain on several occasions to witness to a few of the villages there. The last time our pastor tried, he was expelled from the area. But then the annual Dorcas Federation met in Savo, and things began to change.

Every year dozens of Seventh-day Adventist Dorcas members from area churches visit a remote area where there is much need. They enter the village singing so that everyone knows they are there. They offer workshops on cooking, sewing, dyeing fabric, sewing machine repair, hospitality, and Bible study. One day is set aside for what they call "Highways and Byways." This is when they distribute bundles of clothing and food, and mix with the locals. The ladies turn the region upside down! While the women are being the hands and feet of Jesus, the men cook for them, enabling them to focus completely on their ministry. The women make friends and the men follow up with meetings and baptisms. They make a fantastic team!

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.