**THE KING’S PRINCIPLES: TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS**

*Matthew 5*

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most misunderstood messages that Jesus ever gave. One group says it is God’s plan of salvation, that if we ever hope to go to heaven we must obey these rules. Another group calls it a “charter for world peace” and begs the nations of the earth to accept it. Still a third group tells us that the Sermon on the Mount does not apply to today, but that it will apply at some future time, perhaps during the Tribulation or the millennial kingdom.

I have always felt that Matthew 5:20 was the key to this important sermon: “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.” The main theme is true righteousness. The religious leaders had an artificial, external righteousness based on Law. But the righteousness Jesus described is a true and vital righteousness that begins internally, in the heart. The Pharisees were concerned about the minute details of conduct, but they neglected the major matter of *character*. Conduct flows out of character.

Whatever applications the Sermon on the Mount may have to world problems, or to future events, it is certain that this sermon has definite applications for us today. Jesus gave this message to individual believers, not to the unsaved world at large. What was taught in the Sermon on the Mount is repeated in the New Testament epistles for the church today. Jesus originally gave these words to His disciples (Matt. 5:1), and they have shared them with us.

In this chapter, Jesus gave three explanations about true, spiritual righteousness.

**What True Righteousness Is (Matt. 5:1–16)**

Being a master Teacher, our Lord did not begin this important sermon with a negative criticism of the scribes and Pharisees. He began with a positive emphasis on righteous character and the blessings that it brings to the life of the believer. The Pharisees taught that righteousness was an external thing, a matter of obeying rules and regulations. Righteousness could be measured by praying, giving, fasting, etc. In the Beatitudes and the pictures of the believer, Jesus described Christian character that flowed from within.

Imagine how the crowd’s attention was riveted on Jesus when He uttered His first word: “Blessed.” (The Latin word for blessed is *beatus*, and from this comes the word *beatitude*.) This was a powerful word to those who heard Jesus that day. To them it meant “divine joy and perfect happiness.” The word was not used for humans; it described the kind of joy experienced only by the gods or the dead. “Blessed” implied an inner satisfaction and sufficiency that did not depend on outward circumstances for happiness. This is what the Lord offers those who trust Him!

The Beatitudes describe the attitudes that ought to be in our lives today. Four attitudes are described here.

***Our attitude toward ourselves (v. 3)*.** To be poor in spirit means to be humble, to have a correct estimate of oneself (Rom. 12:3). It does not mean to be “poor spirited” and have no backbone at all! “Poor in spirit” is the opposite of the world’s attitudes of self-praise and self-assertion. It is not a false humility that says, “I am not worth anything, I can’t do anything!” It is honesty with ourselves: we know ourselves, accept ourselves, and try to be ourselves to the glory of God.

***Our attitude toward our sins (vv. 4–6)*.** We mourn over sin and despise it. We see sin the way God sees it and seek to treat it the way God does. Those who cover sin or defend sin certainly have the wrong attitude. We should not only mourn over our sins, but we should also meekly submit to God (see Luke 18:9–14; Phil. 3:1–14).

Meekness is not weakness, for both Moses and Jesus were meek men (Num. 12:3; Matt. 11:29). This word translated “meek” was used by the Greeks to describe a horse that had been broken. It refers to power under control.

***Our attitude toward the Lord (vv. 7–9)*.** We experience God’s mercy when we trust Christ (Eph. 2:4–7), and He gives us a clean heart (Acts 15:9) and peace within (Rom. 5:1). But having received His mercy, we then *share* His mercy with others. We seek to keep our hearts pure that we might see God in our lives today. We become peacemakers in a troubled world and channels for God’s mercy, purity, and peace.

***Our attitude toward the world (vv. 10–16)*.** It is not easy to be a dedicated Christian. Our society is not a friend to God nor to God’s people. Whether we like it or not, there is *conflict* between us and the world. Why? Because we are different from the world and we have different attitudes.

As we read the Beatitudes, we find that they represent an outlook radically different from that of the world. The world praises pride, not humility. The world endorses sin, especially if you “get away with it.” The world is at war with God, while God is seeking to reconcile His enemies and make them His children. We must expect to be persecuted *if* we are living as God wants us to live. But we must be sure that our suffering is not due to our own foolishness or disobedience.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**HERE’S GOOD NEWS!**

Twenty or thirty years after Jesus had gone back to heaven, a Jewish disciple named Matthew was inspired by the Spirit of God to write a book. The finished product is what we know today as “The Gospel According to Matthew.”

Nowhere in the four Gospels do we find a single recorded word that Matthew spoke. Yet in his Gospel, he gives us the words and works of Jesus Christ, “the Son of David, the Son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). Matthew did not write to tell us about himself. But let’s get acquainted with him and the book he wrote. Then we can learn all that he wanted us to know about Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit used Matthew to accomplish three important tasks in the writing of his Gospel.

**The Bridge-Builder: He Introduced a New Book**

That book was the New Testament. If a Bible reader were to jump from Malachi into Mark, or Acts, or Romans, he would be bewildered. Matthew’s Gospel is the bridge that leads us out of the Old Testament and into the New Testament.

The theme of the Old Testament is given in Genesis 5:1: “This is the book of the generations of Adam.” The Old Testament gives the history of “the Adam family,” and it is a sad history indeed. God created man in His own image, but man sinned—thus defiling and deforming that image. Then man brought forth children “in his own likeness, after his image” (Gen. 5:3). These children proved themselves to be sinners like their parents. No matter where you read in the Old Testament, you meet sin and sinners.

But the New Testament is, “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ” (Matt. 1:1). Jesus is the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), and He came to earth to save the “generations of Adam.” (This includes you and me, by the way.) Through no choice of our own, we were born into the generations of Adam, and this made us sinners. But by a choice of faith, we can be born into the generation of Jesus Christ and become the children of God!

When you read the genealogy in Genesis 5, the repeated phrase *and he died* sounds like the tolling of a funeral bell. The Old Testament illustrates the truth that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). But when you turn to the New Testament, that first genealogy emphasizes *birth* and not death! The message of the New Testament is that “the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

The Old Testament is a book of promise, while the New Testament is a book of fulfillment. (To be sure, there are many precious promises in the New Testament. But I am referring to the emphasis of each half of the Bible.) Beginning with Genesis 3:15, God promised a Redeemer; and Jesus Christ fulfilled that promise. *Fulfilled* is one of the key words in the Gospel of Matthew, used about fifteen times.

One purpose of this Gospel is to show that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament promises concerning the Messiah. His birth at Bethlehem fulfilled Isaiah 7:14 (Matt. 1:22–23). Jesus was taken to Egypt for safety, and this fulfilled Hosea 11:1 (Matt. 2:14–15). When Joseph and the family returned and decided to settle in Nazareth, this fulfilled several Old Testament prophecies (Matt. 2:22–23). Matthew used at least 129 quotations or allusions to the Old Testament in this Gospel. He wrote primarily for Jewish readers to show them that Jesus Christ was indeed their promised Messiah.

**The Biographer: He Introduced a New King**

None of the four Gospels is a biography in the modern sense of the word. In fact, the Apostle John doubted that a complete biography of Jesus could ever be written (John 21:25). There are many details about the earthly life of Jesus that are not given in any of the Gospels.

Each of the four Gospels has its own emphasis. Matthew’s book is called, “the Gospel of the King.” It was written primarily for Jewish readers. Mark’s book, the Gospel of the Servant, was written to instruct Roman readers. Luke wrote mainly to the Greeks and presented Christ as the perfect “Son of man.” John’s appeal is universal, and his message was, “This is the Son of God.” No one Gospel is able to tell the whole story as God wants us to see it. But when we put these four Gospel accounts together, we have a composite picture of the person and work of our Lord.

Being accustomed to keeping systematic records, Matthew gives us a beautifully organized account of our Lord’s life and ministry. The book can be divided into ten sections in which “doing” and “teaching” alternate.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**The Believer: He Introduced a New People**

This new people, of course, was the church. Matthew is the only Gospel writer to use the word *church* (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). The Greek word translated *church* means “a called-out assembly.” In the New Testament, for the most part, this word refers to a local assembly of believers. In the Old Testament, Israel was God’s called-out people, beginning with the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1ff; Deut. 7:6–8). In fact, Stephen called the nation of Israel “the church [assembly] in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38), for they were God’s called-out people.

But the New Testament church is a different people, for it is composed of *both* Jews and Gentiles. In this church there were no racial distinctions (Gal. 3:28). Even though Matthew wrote primarily for the Jews, he has a “universal” element in his book that includes the Gentiles. For example, Gentile leaders came to worship the Infant Jesus (Matt. 2:1–12). Jesus performed miracles for Gentiles and even commended them for their faith (Matt. 8:5–13; 15:21–28). The Gentile Queen of Sheba was praised for her willingness to make a long journey to hear God’s wisdom (Matt. 12:42). At a crisis hour in Jesus’ ministry He turned to a prophecy about the Gentiles (Matt. 12:14–21). Even in the parables, Jesus indicated that the blessings which Israel refused would be shared with the Gentiles (Matt. 22:8–10; 21:40–46). The Olivet Discourse stated that the message would go “unto all nations” (Matt. 24:14); and the Lord’s commission involves all nations (Matt. 28:19–20).

There were only believing Jews and believing Jewish proselytes in the church at the beginning (Acts 2–7). When the Gospel went to Samaria (Acts 8), people who were part Jewish and part Gentile came into the church. When Peter went to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10), the Gentiles became fully accepted in the church. The Conference at Jerusalem (Acts 15), settled the decision that a Gentile did not have to become a Jew before he could become a Christian.

But Matthew anticipated all of this. And when his book was read by members of the early church, both Jews and Gentiles, it helped to settle differences and create unity. Matthew made it clear that this new people, the church, must not maintain a racial or social exclusiveness. Faith in Jesus Christ makes believers “all one” in the body of Christ, the church.

Matthew’s own experience with the Lord is recorded in Matthew 9:9–17; and it is a beautiful example of the grace of God. His old name was Levi, the son of Alphaeus (Mark 2:14). “Matthew” means “the gift of God.” Apparently, the name was given to commemorate his conversion and his call to be a disciple.

Remember that tax collectors were among the most hated people in Jewish society. To begin with, they were traitors to their own nation because they “sold themselves” to the Romans to work for the government. Each tax collector purchased from Rome the right to gather taxes; and the more he gathered, the more he could keep. They were considered thieves as well as traitors; and their constant contacts with Gentiles made them religiously suspect, if not unclean. Jesus reflected the popular view of the publicans when He classified them with harlots and other sinners (Matt. 5:46–47; 18:17); but it was obvious that He was the “friend of publicans and sinners” (Matt. 11:19; 21:31–32).

Matthew opened his heart to Jesus Christ and became a new person. This was not an easy decision for him to make. He was a native of Capernaum, and Capernaum had rejected the Lord (Matt. 11:23). Matthew was a well-known businessman in the city, and his old friends probably persecuted him. Certainly Matthew lost a good deal of income when he left all to follow Christ.

Matthew not only opened his heart, but he also opened his home. He knew that most, if not all, of his old friends would drop him when he began to follow Jesus Christ; so Matthew took advantage of the situation and invited them to meet Jesus. He gave a great feast and invited all the other tax collectors (some of whom could have been Gentiles), and the Jewish people who were not keeping the Law (“sinners”).

Of course, the Pharisees criticized Jesus for daring to eat with such a defiled group of people. They even tried to get the disciples of John the Baptist to create a disagreement (Luke 5:33). The Lord explained why He was fellowshipping with “publicans and sinners”: They were spiritually sick and needed a physician. He had not come to call the righteous *because there were no righteous people*. He came to call sinners, and that included the Pharisees. Of course, His critics did not consider themselves “spiritually sick,” but they *were* just the same.

Matthew not only opened his heart and home, but he also opened his hands and worked for Christ. Alexander Whyte of Edinburgh once said that, when Matthew left his job to follow Christ, he brought his pen with him! Little did this ex-publican realize that the Holy Spirit would one day use him to write the first of the four Gospels in the New Testament.

According to tradition, Matthew ministered in Palestine for several years after the Lord’s return to heaven, and then made missionary journeys to the Jews who were dispersed among the Gentiles. His work is associated with Persia, Ethiopia, and Syria, and some traditions associate him with Greece. The New Testament is silent on his life, but this we do know: Wherever the Scriptures travel in this world, the Gospel written by Matthew continues to minister to hearts.

**The Sermon on the Mount**

*(5:1–7:29)*

Jesus doesn’t only teach in synagogues. Sometimes he likes to get away from the crowds and teach only his disciples.

Matthew describes Jesus taking his disciples into the hills. Like all rabbis, Jesus sits down to teach and his disciples gather round him to listen. Many people have wondered if the mountain is important. Is Matthew telling us that Jesus is a new Moses, delivering a new law—like Moses on Mount Sinai?

The Sermon on the Mount is Matthew’s great account of Jesus’ teaching to his disciples. Here Jesus describes the attitudes and behaviour he wants of his followers.

The Sermon on the Plain in Luke’s Gospel is shorter, and contains about half of Matthew’s material.

**THE BEATITUDES**

Jesus starts by telling his disciples how to be happy. His list of eight happy attitudes turns popular values upside down (5:3–12).

Most people assume happiness is:

♦ achieving our goals of wealth and success; leaving others behind.

♦ always being fun to have around—the life and soul of every party.

♦ being strong, or beautiful, or rich, or clever; being independent, secure and in control.

♦ getting our terms agreed, our rights established and ensuring that justice is done.

To our shame, we also find happiness in:

♦ taking revenge on our enemies.

♦ indulging our greed and lust.

♦ picking fights and winning arguments.

♦ and (better still) avoiding all trouble or misfortune!

Jesus’ conditions for a happy life are exactly the opposite.

He says the poor in spirit are happy, because they depend completely on God—which is heaven on earth.

He says those who mourn are happy, because God shares their heartbreak and will surely comfort them.

The meek have a special happiness because they are free of pride and ambition; God will give them the world.

Those who hunger and thirst for goodness are happy, because God himself will satisfy their longings.

Those who show mercy are happy, because they in turn will be treated kindly.

The pure in heart are happy, because they will meet God face to face.

Those who make peace are happy, because they take after God and do his work.

Those who are persecuted for doing good are happy, because they share the real cost of God’s kingdom.

Jesus describes a happiness which doesn’t depend on possessions, circumstances or good luck. It’s a happiness God gives us *now* which nothing can take away. It’s a happiness which looks forward to wonderful rewards when God’s kingdom finally comes.

Jesus adds a blessing for those who suffer for their faith in him. He promises that God will make it up to them, with a reward which is far greater than anything they can imagine. And persecution is a compliment of sorts. It means we’re being treated like the old prophets.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Warren W. Wiersbe, [*The Bible Exposition Commentary*](https://ref.ly/logosres/ntbec?ref=Bible.Mt5&off=13&ctx=CHAPTER+FOUR%0a~THE+KING%E2%80%99S+PRINCIPLES%3a+TRUE), vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 20–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Warren W. Wiersbe, [*The Bible Exposition Commentary*](https://ref.ly/logosres/ntbec?ref=Bible.Mt&off=2207&ctx=CHAPTER+ONE%0a~HERE%E2%80%99S+GOOD+NEWS!%0aTwenty+or+), vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 10–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Andrew Knowles, [*The Bible Guide*](https://ref.ly/logosres/bibleguide?ref=Bible.Mt5.1-7.29&off=1966), 1st Augsburg books ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 413–414. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)