

## THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT -- IS IT FOR TODAY? (Matthew 5-7)

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The Sermon on the Mount has likely been Christ's most famous teaching. Its beloved sayings have been shared by countless numbers of ministers. Many people base their entire Christian living on practicing the Golden Rule, turning the other cheek, and some even base their salvation on following Christ's teaching which He gave on this mountain. How should we understand and interpret the Sermon on the Mount? Does it speak of the way of salvation? Should today's Christians (the Church) view the Sermon on the Mount as their primary mandate for Christian living? Is this sermon geared only toward the future Kingdom Age? Does it contain an ethic or set of moral principles and guidelines that relate to our Christian life today? Should we look to the Sermon on the Mount for victory in the Christian life? Why did Jesus give this sermon? Let's discover the answers to these questions by looking at an overview of this famous sermon of Jesus.

### Different Approaches to the Sermon

In today's theological world there have been various approaches to understanding the relevancy and importance of this sermon.

First, there have been those people who take the **soteriological** (salvation) approach to this sermon. In other words, this is God's plan of salvation. This has been the longstanding liberal or modernistic approach to Jesus' words. They claim that one can attain their salvation through following or governing their lives by the principles set forth here. Liberalism has taught for many years that the keeping of the Sermon on the Mount was to be regarded as the message of the Gospel. Thus, it promotes a system of salvation by good works. This of course is an erroneous view. Salvation is by grace and not by the righteous works of the law. Jesus even presents this truth to us within His sermon (Matt. 5:20). The sermon does not present salvation by works (Eph. 2:8-9).

Many church members across America hear their ministers preach from the Sermon on the Mount. But sadly, these same liberal ministers do not share the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ with their congregations (1 Thess. 2:2, 8) and the majority of the people think that living by the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount results in their salvation. However, when a person places themselves under the Sermon of the Mount as a means of a law/works salvation (legalism), they bypass God's grace and mercy in salvation (2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5). The Law aspect of this sermon condemns the unsaved as sinners (Rom. 3:19, 23) for breaking God's perfect moral law (James 2:10; Gal. 3:10). We must remember that God demands righteous perfection which is the only standard He accepts (Rom. 3:10; Matt. 5:48).

In other words, a person who is not as good as God is not acceptable to God (Rom. 3:12). If you are trying to live by the Sermon on the Mount to gain acceptance before God and salvation, then you will be condemned to hell like the Pharisees (Matt. 5:29-30). Theron Babcock on the topic of the ecumenical movement once said: "They always talk about the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount, but whether you've ever been born again, doesn't even seem to count." This is true in most mainline denominational churches who live and die by the Sermon on the Mount. Sadly, most of them die and go to hell for they have not been born again!

Second, there is a **sociological** approach to the Sermon on the Mount. This is similar to the first approach. This strange view claims that the Sermon on the Mount can be used to transform a society and this transformation is really the Gospel. This of course is the social gospel approach. If we follow the precepts and golden rule of Jesus, our society would be improved. This is a bizarre approach for the simple reason that it does not fit into the context of what Jesus was saying. Christ did not give this sermon as a cure for the wrongs of today's society and He certainly was not presenting the Gospel as the betterment and transformation of society. Paul spoke of the true Gospel of grace, and it had nothing to do with the improvement of society but the salvation of souls (I Corinthians 15:3-4).

John MacArthur correctly observes:

"The thrust of the Sermon on the Mount is that the message and work of the King are first and most importantly internal and not external, and

spiritual and moral rather than physical and political. Here we find no politics or social reform. His concern is for what men are, because what they are determines what they do.”

Third, there is the *penitential* view or approach to the Sermon on the Mount. This approach says that the sermon was given to simply drive men to repentance through the recognition of their own inability to live according to the perfect standards of the Old Testament Law. This was Martin Luther’s view. The listeners were to respond to Jesus’ words by saying that they could not at all live by the laws of the Old Testament and therefore, they must repent. In short, this view simply holds that the sole purpose of the Sermon on the Mount was to condemn people living under the Mosaic Law (Rom. 3:19-20; Gal. 4:21) and make them realize that they need to depend on Christ for salvation. This means that the sermon has no significant application to the Church today as far as living the Christian life. This view sometimes will recognize the truths being taught within this Kingdom message, but hold that its precepts are impossible to attain, thus nullifying its significance for the Christian.

I find this view lacking even though some dispensationalists do teach that the entire sermon was used to convict and condemn the unsaved. Christ did at various places in the sermon condemn the Pharisees for failing to follow the deeper meaning of the law (Matt. 5:20-22, 27-30), which should have brought conviction and condemnation upon their hearts for not measuring up the true character of the Law. However, the entire sermon discourse does not focus merely on the Law’s condemnation. Christ’s instructions given to His disciples about salt, light, reward, etc. are not simply designed to provide *condemnation* for failure but also *commendation* for obedience. Many statements that Jesus gave are not necessarily designed to bring people to repentance who are condemned to die the sinner’s death under the Law.

One expositor said:

“Some have seen this entire sermon as a message calculated to produce the greatest possible guilt in the fewest possible chapters! It has often been presented that way: ‘Here is the standard. Look how miserably you have failed. Pull yourself together and do better.’”

I don't think this is the overall intent of the Sermon on the Mount. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that when people, like the Pharisees, do place themselves under the law as a means of salvation and justification (Rom. 3:19), the Law, which is included in the Sermon on the Mount, does become a curse and condemnation to the sinner (Matt. 5:28-30). Jesus clearly brings this out as He explains the deeper meaning of the Law which the Pharisees ignored while they continued to sin against God. Those who reject salvation through Christ alone will not make it to Heaven on their flawed and imperfect righteousness (Matt. 5:20). Furthermore, the condemnation that Jesus gives in this sermon is designed to prove that a person is not saved (Matt. 5:22; 7:21-23). The fruitful character of a disciple is given to prove that a person is saved because the new birth is manifest in his life ("created in Christ Jesus unto good works" - Eph. 2:10).

This being said, I do not believe that Christ's words to be "perfect" (Matt. 5:48) were originally given to Christ's followers to preach actual perfection to them, or to live in a state of perfection, which the Law demands, or else experience damnation (Gal. 3:10). He used this expression ("Be ye therefore perfect") as a goal for which His true disciples can strive as they seek to live a holy and consecrated life.

The word "perfect" (Gr. teleios) can sometimes be understood to reach a level of maturity and spiritual advancement in life (1 Cor. 14:20; Eph. 4:13; Heb. 5:14; 6:1). However, it can also mean perfection. In this context, which is talking about the Father, I think Jesus is using the term "perfect" in regard to conformity to God's righteous requirements, which are perfect, and those which He had just clarified. Murder, lust, hate, deception, and retaliation obviously do not characterize God and they should not characterize His disciples. Christ's words to be "perfect" (Matt. 5:48) were not used to condemn unsaved people for their imperfection since Jesus was obviously speaking to His true disciples at this point, when He says, "even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Therefore, Jesus wanted His disciples to press on to perfect righteousness. Of course, this is a goal that no sinful person can actually attain in their present life. We will never get to moral perfection in this life, but we should be constantly

striving for this goal in our daily living as Christ's followers. We should desire to be more like the Father.

Rod Mattoon states:

"Our tendency to sin must never deter us from striving to be more like the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ calls all of His disciples to excel, to rise above mediocrity, and to mature in every area, becoming like Him."

Paul said in Philippians 3:13-14:

"Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended (attain the goal of perfection): but *this* one thing *I do*, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

"I'm pressing on the upward way,  
New heights I'm gaining every day;  
Still praying as I'm onward bound,  
"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."

Lord, lift me up and let me stand,  
By faith, on Heaven's tableland,  
A higher plane than I have found;  
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."

As Jesus pointed out in this sermon, His disciples should not view righteousness as simply external, as the scribes and Pharisees did, but they should pursue inner moral purity and love (Matt. 5:22, 28). This is appropriate since their heavenly Father is indeed perfect and we should seek to follow His example. So, we should strive for this goal in our daily living realizing our own human limitations. In other words, we should seek to conform our inner thoughts and outward living to God's righteous and perfect standard without falling into the pitfalls and traps of perfectionism. We are to possess a humble and holy attitude as we seek to conform our ways to the Father's ways.

John Walvoord writes:

“Perfection here refers to uprightness and sincerity of character with the thought of maturity in godliness or attaining the goal of conformity to the character of God. While sinless perfection is impossible, godliness, in its biblical concept, is attainable.”

Good children in the ancient East imitated their fathers. Jesus advocated the same of His disciples. They were to always seek to imitate the perfection of their Father.

Fourth, there is the **kingdom** approach to the Sermon on the Mount which teaches how a person (a Jew) should specifically live during the earthly Kingdom. This approach has been taught by the older, godly dispensationalists of the past. Men such as Lewis Sperry Chafer, William Kelly, and William Pettingill took this approach to the sermon.

I. M. Haldeman wrote:

“This sermon ... cannot be taken in its plain import and be applied to Christians universally. ... It has been tried in spots ... but it has always been like planting a beautiful flower in stony ground or in a dry and withering atmosphere.”

This view simply holds that the sermon was given to the Jews to show them the rules and standards to live by in the Kingdom Age known as the Millennium. This teaching states that the sermon is addressed to the Jew living before the cross while Jesus was offering the earthly Kingdom. Since Israel’s rejection of the Kingdom, the sermon can only apply to the future Kingdom time when Christ sets up His Kingdom over the earth. It is referring to the time period that is exclusively relating to the coming Millennial Kingdom. It’s restricted to only the 1,000-year reign of Christ over the earth. However, if this sermon deals exclusively with the Kingdom Age, then why would Jesus give instructions for those facing persecution (Matthew 5:11-12). No one is going to be persecuted during the Millennium!

This is the King's Sermon! Therefore, no dispensationalist should ever doubt the literal Kingdom truths presented here to Israel. The sermon was written

to Israel and for Israel (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:6) and it pertains to how they should conduct themselves as Kingdom citizens. Jesus seems to be offering the Kingdom to Israel with the future potential of its establishment on earth (Matt. 6:9). He sets forth the standards, character and conduct that should govern the life of the disciples who will one day enter the earthly Kingdom. Therefore, there certainly is some application for the Church today since we too will one day enter the earthly theocracy or Kingdom (Rev. 2:26-27; 5:10; 19:14-20:1-6). However, we must remember that the Church is described as a heavenly people that possess a heavenly citizenship (Phil. 3:20). Our main destination (Rev. 19:7; 21:2) and focus is heavenly (Col. 3:1).

Nevertheless, it seems that when we relegate the entire application of Jesus' longest recorded sermon to a "Jewish-only life-style" during the Millennium and disregard any practical application to the Church today, as do hyper-dispensationalists, this robs the Church of important truths that can relate to Christian living. To be sure, there should be an exclusive Kingdom only *interpretation* of this sermon, as understood in its historic context, but we should not relegate this sermon to a Kingdom only *application*, since there are many ways it relates to Christian living today.

Fifth, there is the ***believer's ethic*** interpretation or approach to the sermon Jesus gave on the mount. This can be regarded as the ecclesiastical or Church approach. This view holds that Jesus was giving an ethic for all time in this famous sermon. This is why this theological group chose the name believers ethic. The teaching of the sermon was to be a principle of conduct which should be interpreted for all people of all time. It does not matter if they were living before the Kingdom or during the Kingdom. It does not matter if they are living during the Age of the Law or in the Dispensation of Grace. In other words, the ethic (principle of conduct) Jesus was establishing was one that should be interpreted as a mandate to follow for all dispensational ages, specifically the Law, Kingdom and Grace ages.

The main emphasis of this approach to Jesus' sermon is to mix Israel with the Church (Covenant Theology) or apply some of Israel's Kingdom promises to the Church today (Progressive Dispensationalism). Of course, all of this counteracts the literal Kingdom approach to the sermon and

concludes that Matthew recorded this ethic in the context of the Church Age. For this reason, it must be applicable to the Church Age. This view really holds that the interpretation of the sermon must be directly addressed to the Church. It concludes that we must actually interpret the sermon as being part of the Church Age. Jesus addresses these words directly to the Church today and we should interpret them as such. Thus, it becomes the rule of life for believers in this present age.

The problem with this view is that the Church was not formed until Pentecost (Acts 2) and Jesus did not mention the Church until Matthew 16:18. Also, Jesus was addressing the Jews and not the Church. Lastly, the believer's rule of life for today which gives him power, direction, and which rules and regulates his life, is not the teachings found in the Sermon on the Mount, but the new inner work of God's sanctifying and life-transforming grace which occurs in the hearts of Christ's Church (Rom. 6:14-15; Titus 2:11-12). The purpose of Jesus' famous sermon was not intended to reveal Church truth. The Church is not found in the Sermon on the Mount and we should never try and force the Church into this sermon by changing the name and meaning of Israel to the Church or by allegorizing the Kingdom promises given to Israel and applying them to the Church.

Sixth, there is what theologians call the *interim ethic* view. This view or approach to the Sermon on the Mount concludes that Jesus was teaching a moral and godly standard or rule of conduct to live by until the Kingdom would arrive upon the earth. This view holds that Christ's teaching was an interim (interval) teaching to be followed by His followers until the Kingdom was established upon the earth. I think this is the correct view. It allows for a dispensational approach to the sermon which basically is this: "Live like a kingdom citizen in view of the coming Kingdom" (Matt. 6:9 - "Thy Kingdom Come"). It's modeling Kingdom life in a non-kingdom age. It's preparing to be a Kingdom citizen before the time comes. Jesus is preparing His disciples to live in the coming earthly Kingdom which in their day had the potential of being established on earth (Matt. 21:5-9; Luke 17:21). This seems to be what Jesus was teaching His disciples.

The Sermon on the Mount presents ethical instructions for Jesus' disciples that apply from the time Jesus gave them until the beginning of the earthly Kingdom.



Stanley Toussaint says:

“The sermon is primarily addressed to disciples exhorting them to a righteous life in view of the coming kingdom. Those who were not genuine disciples were warned concerning the danger of their hypocrisy and unbelief. They are enjoined to enter the narrow gate and to walk the narrow way. This is included in the discourse, but it is only the secondary application of the sermon.”

I will give more evidence for this view throughout the remainder of this study.

### The Kingdom Context

After contemplating all these different approaches to the sermon which Jesus gave on the mount, one may throw up his arms and say that no one really can be sure what Jesus was teaching. I think that is what some would want us to believe today. To appeal to everyone, they would want us to conclude that there are many possible interpretations to any passage of scripture. This of course is not true. There is only one interpretation to any passage, but many applications to our life.

Herein lies the entire problem. We must look at the sermon which Jesus gave in the historical context that Jesus gave it. Like any other passage of Scripture, we must study the setting or context of the passage. We must also understand the words, such as “kingdom” in its historical and prophetic significance and how this kingdom relates to the Jewish disciples, to whom He was specifically addressing. It’s only then that we can arrive at the proper interpretation and approach to this sermon which Jesus gave. Disregarding the context in which this message appears has led to all kinds of strange interpretations of this passage.

As we consider the total surroundings of this passage or sermon, we must realize that the whole setting of Matthew’s gospel deals with the King (Jesus Christ) and the kingdom. In Matthew, Jesus is presented as King to a Jewish audience. Matthew was written by a Jew, to Jews and for Jews. Christ is presented to the Jews as their long-awaited Messiah and King (Matt. 2:2) who is seeking to establish His Kingdom upon the earth (Matt.

3:2, 4:17). During the early period of the Gospels, the message of the kingdom was directed to the nation of Israel and contained the potential fulfillment of the promised Kingdom to the Jews which was outlined in the covenant program given to the Jews.

From the very start of this book, the King comes into focus. In Matthew 1:11 we see that the Magi brought the gift of gold to the Christ child. This points to Christ's kingliness (Rev. 4:4, 14:14). Since gold was associated with royal honor, it was understood that these Magi were honoring his royal kingliness in the presentation of this gift. Next, John the Baptist (the last Old Testament prophet) would prepare the way for the King. John clearly presented the message about the kingdom. This message was plainly stated in Matthew 3:2. John's message was, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." In Matthew 4:17, Jesus also began to preach the same identical message concerning the earthly rule or kingdom. "Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Since the king was present, the Kingdom was ready to be set up by the king. All that the people (the Jews) needed to do was repent and accept their King.

In the presentation of this earthly Kingdom, Jesus went up into a mountain and began to teach some truths regarding His approaching kingdom. Both John and Jesus had been preaching the nearness of the earthly kingdom promised in the Old Testament. Why would the Lord suddenly interject teaching that belongs to the Church Age in which we live today? The word "church" is not even mentioned until Matthew 16:18. Furthermore, the simple facts are that this sermon was delivered in the Age of the Law. The Jews were still living under the total rules and regulations of the Law. Since this message was being delivered in the context of the Mosaic Law, it can never be interpreted for the Church. Since it was specifically addressed to Israel it cannot be addressed to the Church. We must remember that Jesus told the disciples to take the message of the Kingdom only to "the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 10:6) – not the Church. He limited the proclamation of the Sermon and the Mount, which is connected with Kingdom truth, to the nation Israel.

## Application versus Interpretation

The problem with the believer's ethic interpretation or the Church interpretation of this sermon is rather obvious. The more progressive dispensationalists are promoting that this passage was actually given to the Church and should be interpreted as such. The newer dispensationalists are claiming that this sermon was specifically addressed to the New Testament believers within the Church Age and therefore must be interpreted as being for this Church Age. However, if we would interpret the sermon for the present Church Age, we would be directed back under the Law from which Jesus has set us free (Romans 7:6, 8:2).

If we rightly divide the Scriptures (2 Tim. 2:15), we must understand that this sermon was not directed toward the Church and should not be *interpreted* as being for the Church. However, it can be *applied* to the Church today in many ways and can be a useful teaching tool for the Church. All of us would agree that there are many wonderful applications to our lives which we can discover from this sermon. Jesus said that we were to make disciples of all nations and teach them to observe all of His commands (Matthew 28:19-20). This would certainly include those parts of the Sermon on the Mount which relate to living the Christian life within the Church Age.

In summary, there is an ethic (rule of conduct) which we can apply to the dispensation in which we live. However, application and strict Biblical interpretation are two different matters. We must recall that "all scripture is for us, but not all scripture is to us." So what is the problem? As mentioned above, the progressive dispensationalist does not align with the traditional dispensationalist and is muddying the waters of God's dispensational dealings. They view that the Church *partially* fulfills the Old Testament prophecies given to Israel about a Kingdom and this concept of Christ ruling over the Church in a Kingdom (as presented in the Sermon on the Mount) should be adopted for Church life today. In some sense, the "messianic days" of Christ's rule are already "inaugurated" and therefore the Church is a spiritual kingdom over which Christ rules today. Therefore, these progressive interpreters of dispensationalism seek to stress that we must actually interpret the Sermon on the Mount for this Church Age.

This seems to be the primary error which is being propagated in some of today's dispensational circles. However, we must maintain the distinction between the Law Age and the Church Age. We must maintain a clear distinction between the Kingdom and the Church. We must maintain a total distinction between Israel and the Church if we want to maintain the literal interpretation of Scripture. In short, this sermon can only in some ways be *applied* to the Church Age. However, it is contextually under the Law and it can only be *interpreted* as such. It also must be understood in the context of the Kingdom offered to Israel which does not contain grace teaching and the grace principles found in the Church epistles. One cannot interpret this sermon as being directly given to the Church and specifically for the Church since it was not given during the Church Age.

### The Mandate of the Church

To interpret this message as a mandate or official order, commission, and command that is specifically directed to the Church will place the believer back under the regulations of the Law. It would mean that we must bring offerings to the Old Testament altar (Matt. 5:23-24). It would mean that we should right now be praying for Christ's coming Kingdom (Matt. 6:10). The kind of teaching that concludes the Sermon on the Mount is the mandate and main ethic for living is utterly incompatible with the Dispensation of Grace. The truth is this, we no longer must live under the Law in any sense, whether it pertains to our salvation (Rom. 3:19-20; Gal. 2:16) or sanctification (Rom. 6:14-15; Gal. 5:18). We no longer live under the dictates, rule, and authority of the Law. Furthermore, we are not the Jewish people of God living under the law waiting for the arrival of the Kingdom. We are waiting for His return in the air (the Rapture) to take us home to be with Him (John 14:1-3).

In addition, we do not find any "church truth" in this sermon which Jesus addressed in John 13-17 and the New Testament Church epistles mention. Such things as the Spirit's permanent indwelling and residency (John 14:16) to provide us with power (Acts 1:11), transformation (Gal. 5:22-23), and victory (Gal. 5:25; Eph. 5:18) are not spoken about. Nor is the believer's union with Jesus Christ mentioned (John 14:18-20; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:1). This is how I live my Christian life today!

As a New Testament believer, I don't look to the Sermon on the Mount as supplying the actual means to live a victorious Christian life. I must look to the new grace features mentioned above to grant me victory. This means that outward compliance to the Sermon on the Mount is not the official mandate or teaching and commission given to the Church. Living under grace is the mandate for Church living (Romans 6:1-15; Titus 2:11-12). The motivation, power, transformation, and victory are all supplied by grace. The mandate for the Church on how to live the Christian life is specifically found in the Church epistles and is spelled out as a new dynamic for living.

The official commission and regulatory principle that is to govern the life of the Church is found in John 13-17 and the uniform testimony of the Church epistles. It is centered upon the new "grace features" that would be introduced for Christ's Church in the Grace Dispensation (Eph. 3:1-11). Although this sermon is not directly given to the Church, it does contain specific truths directly related to Church Age living. In other words, there still is an "ethic" or set of moral principles and standards of godly living that we can apply to our lives today (Rom. 15:4). However, today we must seek to live out Christ's instructions through the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit's power and our relationship with Christ (Phil. 1:19).

The earliest edition of the Scofield Reference Bible says:  
"The Sermon on the Mount in its primary application gives neither the privilege nor the duty of the church."

Of course, there are many principles that can be applied to our lives today as we read this sermon. There is a remaining ethic (rule of conduct) for the Church today. We all should be lights in this world (5:14), and meek (5:5) and thirst after righteousness (5:6). Certainly, we are to love our enemies (5:44) by praying for them. Yes, we are to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven (6:20). All of these things are applicable to our Christian lives today. However, application is one thing, but strict interpretation is another.

### Church Truth

The entire setting and teaching of this passage reveal to us that it should never be interpreted as an official mandate for the Church since the Church

itself had not yet been formed (Acts 2) and since “church truth” is not being presented in the Sermon on the Mount. The truths found in the Grace Dispensation are not presented in this sermon. You cannot find them. There is no mention of the believer’s position in Christ (Eph. 1:3), identification with Christ (Gal. 2:20), the finished work of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-3; Titus 2:11), the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 2:22) and mention of the New Covenant in this sermon (2 Cor. 3:3).

Since we do not find the New Covenant work and ministry of the Holy Spirit spoken about in this sermon, which is the new work of God designed to produce sanctification in our hearts and lives (Acts 1:8; Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:25), the hallmark of the Grace Dispensation, we can be sure that this sermon is not the official mandate given to the Church on how to live effectively and victoriously for God. This is because the Sermon on the Mount is still based upon Old Covenant living and could never be the foundational basis for Church living.

This means that the Sermon on the Mount is not the official mandate and Magna Carta given to the Church. The mandate for the Church on how to live the Christian life is specifically found in the Church epistles. Instructions on how to live and function in this Grace Dispensation can only be discovered in the epistles given to us by Paul, Peter, John, James, and Jude which talk about “grace features” that we follow in conjunction with our lives today. For these simple reasons, we can be sure that this message is not to be interpreted for this Church Age in which we live. This entire mountain setting is clearly given under the Law and in view of the coming Millennial Kingdom that Jesus was seeking to establish. It is simply exegetically impossible to come to any other conclusion.

### Mixed-Up Dispensationalism

Some dispensationalists are becoming more compromising with the camp of Covenant or Reformed Theology which mixes the Church and Israel together as the same people of God. They are muddying the waters by claiming that there is a sense in which the Church actually fulfills the Kingdom promises given to Israel today. It is asserted that Christ is already on the throne of David in some sense, ruling over the Church, and for this

reason the Sermon on the Mount can be interpreted and understood as Church truth. However, the Lord gave this sermon to the Jews, not to the Church. Dispensationalists should stop trying to accommodate the nonliteral hermeneutic of Reformed Theology. The old adage is still true: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense!”

Reformed teachers conclude that the sermon was delivered to the Church which they believe is made up of the saints of all the ages. Thus, they teach that the Church existed in the Old Testament and during our Lord’s earthly ministry (Acts 7:38). They believe that there is only one people of God and ignore the important dispensational features of the Mosaic Law, Church Age, and Kingdom. Sadly, the revised dispensationalism is moving hermeneutically to the left when it comes to the literal interpretation of Scripture and “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). The newer dispensationalists claim that this sermon was delivered to the Church since Christ is ruling over the Church today in view of a partial and spiritual fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant in the present Church Age. This type of teaching is called an accommodating hermeneutic, but it is actually a compromising hermeneutic. It’s very clear that this sermon Jesus gave was addressed to the Jews who were seeking to enter His royal kingdom upon the earth. It cannot possibly be addressed to the Church in any manner unless one commits voodoo exegesis of the Scriptures.

### Entering the Kingdom

In Matthew 4:24-25 we read how Jesus’ fame went throughout all Jewry. People came to Him expecting the earthly theocracy or kingdom to be established. As he saw these great multitudes who longed and looked for His kingdom, he went up into the mount. The reason he went up into the mountain was to teach the standards of those disciples who would enter the coming kingdom. Jesus in this sermon taught the character of those people who would enter His earthly kingdom. They would exhibit a Christ-like character. However, we need to understand that good moral standards or exemplary character would not be the determining factor for entrance into the kingdom.

Jesus said in John 3:3 that the new birth was the only way to enter His coming earthly kingdom. Jesus said to a religious Jew, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Entrance into Christ's kingdom was only through regeneration.

Jim Ellis confirms this when writing:

"The Sermon on the Mount is not a presentation of the gospel telling one how to get saved. As Dr. S. Lewis Johnson has humorously pointed out, when the Philippian jailer asked the apostle Paul, 'what must I do to be saved?' (Acts 16:30), Paul did not reply with, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

"So let's be clear right here at the beginning. Jesus told Nicodemus "unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3). Citizens of this kingdom are those who are born again believers. Jesus Himself makes it clear that to enter this kingdom is in fact to enter salvation and eternal life. Jesus equates entering the kingdom with entering life in Mark 9:45-47."

The Sermon on the Mount is not how to get into the Kingdom, but how you are to be and live because you are going to be a citizen of the coming Kingdom. Jesus is simply bringing out the character of those people suitable for life in the Kingdom Age. So, this sermon is addressed primarily to His Jewish disciples and followers. It exhorts them to live a righteous life in view of the coming Kingdom. Those who were not genuine disciples were warned concerning the danger of their hypocrisy and unbelief (Matt. 7:21-23).

In all probability, the men Christ chose to follow Him had received Christ as Savior previous to their call, except Judas (Matt. 10:4). They were already believers under the message of John the Baptist. His message was one of repentance (Matt. 3:2) and included faith in the Lamb of God (John 1:29). It would be these same disciples who would manifest a life of Christian conduct and service. It would be these born-again and fruitful believers who would enter the coming Kingdom. The rest, some whom were also deemed as followers and disciples (Matt. 7:21-22; 25:1-12; John 6:64-66), would not enter the Kingdom.



## His Disciples

The Lord saw it fitting to walk up a mountain side in order to present more truth about this earthly Kingdom, which John and Himself had been preaching (Matt. 3:1; 4:17). Some expositors suggest that the sermon was only directed to His twelve disciples and they were the only ones sitting with the Lord. This is why He spoke of them as the light of the world and salt of the earth (5:13-14). However, we must remember that Judas was among them at this point. It's more likely that the disciples included everyone that was following Christ at this specific time, both saved and unsaved, the true and the false. This is apparently the case for Jesus spoke against the Scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20) and actually gave an invitation at the close of His message to any poor lost souls who were there (Matt. 7:13-14).

Matthew 5:1 states:

“And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him.”

Matthew 8:1 also states:

“When he was come down from the mountain, great multitudes (the crowd) followed him.”

Who were the disciples?

George Zeller comments on this:

“In Matthew 5:1 the term “disciples” is probably a general term for those who followed Christ, similar to the way the term “disciples” is used in John chapter 6 (see verses 60,61,66) where it included more than the twelve.”

Jim Ellis agrees with the larger audience view:

“I mention this because I want us to pause just long enough to get clear on who the audience is for Jesus’ sermon. In Matthew 5:1, we are told that He sat down and His disciples came to Him. We must not think this is referring only to the twelve – for we see in Luke 6:13 that early that morning He called His disciples to Himself and chose the twelve from among them. So there were other disciples – apparently a large number of them according

to Luke 6:17. Therefore, we must understand that it was the twelve along with many other disciples who came to sit around Him.

“We also see, not only from Luke’s account (6:18) but from the end of Matthew’s account (7:28), that a multitude was also there, gathered at least within hearing distance. So, to whom was Jesus speaking? You could look at it as a three-tiered audience – the twelve as His newly-appointed inner circle, the other disciples, and then, perhaps at a distance, the multitude. Even though His words were directed to His disciples (5:2) – which is indeed significant – I would suggest that He also spoke for the benefit of all.”

We must understand that it was the twelve along with many other disciples (followers) who came to sit around Jesus when He was on the mountainside.

The term “disciples” means followers of Jesus. This term speaks of all those who were at this time were literally following Jesus around the countryside because they were interested in Christ’s teachings. Of course, not all of the followers of Christ were actually committed to Him. There were some “would-be followers” as we often say. They had not believed in Him as their personal Messiah and they were not genuinely interested in committing themselves to His teachings.

The term “disciples” was a reference to a neutral crowd of people, a curious group of people who are astounded by his teaching and ministry (Matt. 7:28-29) but many who had not yet made a commitment to Jesus Christ for salvation. It’s one thing to PHYSICALLY follow Jesus but it’s quite another thing to SPIRITUALLY follow Jesus and commit yourselves to Him as your Savior and also commit yourselves to His sayings and teachings.

Thomas Figart of Lancaster Bible College states:

“He begins with His ‘disciples,’ a group certainly not limited to the Twelve, and discusses the blessing they can expect if they follow Him as Messiah/King; it will not be easy, but it will be rewarding (5:1-16).”

The disciples were then a hodgepodge of people – saved and unsaved. Nevertheless, when Jesus says “your Father” (Matt. 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 8, 14,

15; 6:26, 32; 7:11). He is saying something that can only be true of believers, not people in general. Although in this sermon Jesus was addressing a mixed audience (believers and nonbelievers), He sometimes speaks specifically to His true disciples or believers. However, the fact that Jesus introduces stern warnings of judgment against those who live a “non-kingdom” lifestyle would suggest that other “would be” followers were eventually included in this group who listened to Christ’s sermon. In fact, the Pharisees likely were in ear shot of the sermon!

Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that there will be a certain kind of people (disciple) who will enter His Kingdom. These would be true, born-again disciples who would manifest a Christ-like spirit and possess godly fruit. This is what John the Baptist spoke of as “fruits meet for repentance” (Matt. 3:8) as he announced about preparedness for the coming Kingdom (Matt. 3:2). The only way of entrance into the earthly Kingdom was by new birth (John 3:3) but the proof of regeneration was transformation of living. Out of the root of repentance and the new birth comes the fruit (transformed living).

What Jesus often spoke about in this sermon is the fruitfulness and transformation of character which is the confirmation of a person’s salvation. Of course, we could never earn citizenship in His Kingdom by following Christ’s standards set forth in this sermon (Titus 3:5). Rather, by living out His standards, we give evidence of what we already have been given by God’s free grace (salvation) and what we already are (God’s child).

First, true citizens and disciples of the Kingdom enter the Kingdom by the small gate and narrow way (Matt. 7:13-14). In light of the whole sermon, this suggests those who have received *imputed* righteousness (Matt. 5:20) which is the WAY of salvation through Christ (Matt. 7:24; John 10:8; 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5) and whose life has been transformed by *practical* righteous living which is the CONFIRMATION of salvation (Matt. 5:9, 45; Heb. 3:6, 14; James 2:20, 26; 2 Pet. 1:10) will enter the Kingdom. The narrow way speaks of a genuine salvation experience through faith in the Messiah and which is confirmed by discipleship (transformation of character and conduct). This is the only path that leads to eternal life and it’s a path that is unpopular and filled with hardships (Luke 13:23-24).

All other non-kingdom citizens, like the Pharisees, enter through a wide gate and were traveling a broad road that leads to hell (spiritual ruin). This is because they only manifested an outward righteousness and external requirements but had experienced no inward transformation of the heart (regeneration of life). This is why Jesus taught in John 3:3, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." To a Jewish mind salvation was related to the Kingdom, that is, a person was saved in order to enter into God's Kingdom (Mark 10:17-25). Citizens of this coming Kingdom are those who are born again believers. It's here that Jesus focuses on the inevitable decision that every person must make. At the crossroads of life, he must decide on the gate he will enter and the way he will go. Most people spend their lives rushing around with the crowds, doing what everyone else does and believing what everyone else believes. But as far as salvation is concerned, there is no security in numbers!

Secondly, we discover in Jesus' teaching that true citizens or disciples of the kingdom are like the tree that bears good fruit where non-kingdom citizens do not bear genuine fruit (Matt. 7:15-23). And thirdly, Jesus taught that true citizens of the Kingdom build their house on the rock (Matt. 7:24-27), which is Jesus Christ, the Messiah and His righteousness (Rom. 4:6). The entire Sermon on the Mount presupposes faith in Jesus as Messiah which results in transformed living. In this sermon, Jesus is not adding works to faith, but, as James reminds us, He is showing genuine faith by its works (James 2:14-17). Faith is the *root* of salvation and works are its *fruit* of salvation.

### A Future Kingdom

In view of this explanation, it would be best to agree with the *interim (interval)* approach to the sermon. Jesus was simply teaching a moral and godly standard to live by until the Kingdom would arrive upon the earth. This message was an interval teaching to be followed by Jesus' disciples until the kingdom was established upon the earth ("thy kingdom come" - Matt. 6:9). Granted, even during the kingdom they would continue to live for Him in these ways. However, the best understanding of this sermon would be to take the sermon as the present teaching and standard of

kingdom living for Christ's disciples in view of their entrance into the coming Kingdom.

There is plenty of future tense seen in this sermon which is related to the coming Kingdom. Jesus talks about future rewards (Matt. 5:46, 6:1, 4, 6, 18) and future recognition (Matt. 5:19) in the earthly Kingdom. This is clearly all anticipatory truth. The "Disciples Prayer" includes a request for the Kingdom to come (Matt. 6:10). There is the repeated and abundant use of the future tense in this message which anticipates the coming arrival of the earthly theocratic Kingdom (Matt. 5:4-9, 19-20; 6:4, 6, 14, 15, 18, 33; 7:2, 7, 11, 16, 20-22).

Jesus taught in Matthew 4:17 that people should "Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." This means that during Jesus' day the Kingdom had the potential of being established on earth. This again reminds us of the relevance of this sermon to those living during the days prior to the Kingdom's establishment. The sermon is given in view of the coming Kingdom. Although it is the King's instructions for those ready to enter the earthly Kingdom, it can still have practical implications for our lives today.

All of these future details, point to the fact that we should approach this sermon which Jesus gave to His disciples, as a message by which they were to live by in view of the coming Davidic Kingdom. It was like an *interval* sermon and message dealing with the godly life of Jewish disciples until the Kingdom was to come (Matt. 6:10). Again, this type of living would also exist in the actual Kingdom itself, but we cannot miss the point that the disciples were also to live like this until the Kingdom arrived. During the early period of the Gospels, the message of the Kingdom was directed to the nation of Israel and contained the potential fulfillment of the promised Kingdom to the Jews (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:6; 15:24; Luke 17:21). Therefore, Jesus was teaching how Kingdom citizens should live and describing the kind of lifestyle that is appropriate to citizenship in His Kingdom. At the same time, He condemned the non-kingdom citizens (like the Pharisees) by using the Law requirements to judge them.

After a detailed analysis of this sermon, we can conclude that this sermon does not only deal with the standards or regulations that will govern the

actual earthly Kingdom, but the standards, character or conduct that should govern the life of the disciples who will one day enter the earthly Kingdom. The character qualities mentioned in this sermon should be true of Kingdom citizens who would one day enter the Millennium. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and many other Old Testament prophets dealt with the actual conditions and standards that would exist on earth during the Millennial Kingdom (Isaiah 11). But in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke about the kind of life that His disciples were to live before they enter the Kingdom. Godliness and fruit would characterize the life of a future Kingdom disciple.

The character of future Kingdom disciples is seen in Matthew 5:3-12. Their influence on a lost world is seen in Matthew 5:13-16. Their obedience to the Law and future reign in the Kingdom is seen in Matthew 5:19. Their genuine inward motives or internal attitudes are seen in Matthew 5:20-48. Their actions are to give God the glory and not man (Matt. 6:1-18). Their lives will not covet earthly wealth but heavenly reward (Matt. 6:19-24). Their lives will not be filled with anxiety or care (Matt. 6:25-34). They will not falsely judge people (Matt. 7:1-6). They will learn to pray in faith (Matt. 7:7-11) and live properly before others (Matt. 7:12). They will be people who someday enter the Kingdom (Matt. 7:13-14). They would be those who would experience false prophets and deception (Matt. 7:15-23). Finally, the disciples of King Jesus would truly follow or practice what Jesus proclaimed (Matt. 7:24-29). This will be the character, conduct and experiences that Christ's true disciples will face in view of the coming Kingdom. Again, it would seem that the Lord gave this message as a preliminary message for the disciples who would one day enter the future Kingdom reign.

### Skipping the Church Age

At this point in our study, we need to once again reconfirm the literal interpretation of this entire sermon that Jesus gave. One will be in error if they interpret the Sermon on the Mount for the Church Age in which we live today. It is clearly evident by the context that this sermon skips the Church Age (Matt. 16:19; 28:20) and is talking about the days leading up to and prior to the future earthly Kingdom. Let's consider some facts and put them together. Long ago a kingdom was promised and covenanted to David

(II Samuel 7:13-16). A King was also promised through the great Davidic covenant given to the Jews. The throne of the King would be established forever (II Samuel 7:13).

In Matthew's gospel the king is finally born and He is seen among His people, seeking to establish this long, awaited earthly theocratic kingdom. First, John the Baptist announced that the arrival of the Kingdom was at hand (Matthew 3:2). Second, Jesus announced the arrival of this same earthly Kingdom as being at hand (Matt. 4:7). This sermon is placed within the context of Christ's offer of the Kingdom to the nation of Israel which was promised to them in the covenant program of God. The word translated "kingdom" has two elements. It refers first to the king's reign and rule, and secondly to the king's realm.

The Old Testament reveals that an earthly Kingdom was promised and covenanted to David (II Samuel 7:13-16). A Jewish King was promised to reign through the Davidic covenant. The throne of the King would be established forever (II Samuel 7:13; Luke 1:32-33). These truths link up with the Sermon on the Mount. Just prior to this sermon, we discover that the multitudes gathered around Christ while He was "preaching the kingdom of God" (Matt. 4:23).

Yes, this sermon is placed within the framework and understanding of the Israel's earthly Kingdom. It was anticipating how "the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19) and "the times of restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21) and "the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory...judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). We can be sure that this sermon does not appear in a Church context but a Kingdom context. Jesus' sermon must be understood in the context of His offer of the Kingdom to Israel. Dispensationally, the Sermon on the Mount is given by the King to those who were expected to be in His coming Kingdom (Christ's Jewish disciples). This sermon was given in the Law Age, it skips the Church Age, and anticipates the Kingdom Age! In some sense, the sermon predicts the Messianic blessings of the coming New Age (Heb. 6:5).

## A Kingdom Focus

John Walvoord, writing in “Thy Kingdom Come,” confirms: “Accordingly, the study of the Sermon on the Mount yields its treasures to those who analyze each text, determining its general meaning, its present application, and its relation to the future kingdom program. Problems of interpretation in most instances vanish easily when viewed from this prospective.”

The focus of the Sermon on the Mount is on the coming, earthly, messianic Kingdom. In Matthew 5:5 Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth.” Jesus actually taught His disciples a kingdom prayer to learn, anticipating the soon arrival of the earthly Kingdom. They were to pray, “Thy kingdom come” (Matt. 6:10). In the course of His message, Jesus spoke about reward and recognition in the future Kingdom (Matt. 5:19). In Matthew 6:33, He exhorted His disciples to “seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness...” Their life and labor should be centered upon living like a child of the King, ready to enter the earthly Kingdom someday. They were to act like a Kingdom citizen.

In the close of His message, Christ spoke of those who would not enter His coming Kingdom (Matt. 7:21-23). These people, like the Pharisees, did many religious outward acts. However, they were unsaved, and this will be confirmed by their disinterest in following the Father’s true will and purpose for their life. How sad it will be when the Lord in His Second Coming will judge these kinds of people for their unbelief. This prophetic judgment (the Judgment of Living Nations – Matt. 24-25) will occur when His Kingdom comes to earth. In chapter seven, three illustrations are presented to prove who the true Kingdom citizens are 1) the two ways in Matthew 7:13-14, 2) the two trees in Matthew 7:15-20, 3) the two builders in Matthew 7:24-27. The unsaved will fail these tests.

### Kingdom of Heaven versus Heaven

Jesus used the phrase “kingdom of heaven” over and over again (Matt. 5:3, 10, 19, 20). This expression refers to the time when the King of Heaven would come to earth, which would be a time when the God of Heaven



would rule planet earth. Jesus interpreted this phrase and gave the definition of it, when he stated, “thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). The term “the kingdom of heaven” comes from the Jewish Scriptures and would be literally understood as the earthly Kingdom promised to the Jews and which would one day come to planet earth (“The God of heaven shall set up a kingdom” - Daniel 2:44; 4:26, 37; 7:27). Jesus taught that His kingdom was of the heavenly realm (John 18:36).

Paul used similar terminology in 2 Timothy 4:8 when he spoke about “his heavenly kingdom.” The Millennium is the time when the King of Heaven becomes the King of earth, when Heaven itself would rule planet earth. Hence, it was “the kingdom of heaven” or the kingdom that comes from Heaven itself. When Jesus uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven” He is talking about the *origin* of His earthly Kingdom (it comes from Heaven) but He is not saying the Kingdom is the actual dwelling place of Heaven (location). Elsewhere in the sermon Jesus did talk about the actual location of Heaven (Matthew 5:12, 34, 45, 48; 6:1, 6:10, 20; 7:11). Therefore, we should not confuse the phrase “kingdom of heaven” (the earthly Kingdom) with the actual location of the heavenly city (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 21-22).

### The Kingdom of the Church

In addition, we should not confuse the “kingdom of heaven” (the earthly Kingdom covenanted to the Jews) with the Church and conclude that the promises of the earthly Kingdom somehow become the spiritual kingdom over which God rules today, as Covenant or Reformed Theology teaches. The errant teaching that the “kingdom of heaven” is established on earth today in the Church (allegorizing the kingdom) is erroneous. Nowhere in Matthew or the gospels, not even Luke 17:21 (“the kingdom of God is within you”), should the kingdom be allegorized to mean a spiritual kingdom (the Church) over which God rules today. The phrase in Luke 17:21 which says that “the kingdom of God is within you” is often used to promote that there is a spiritual kingdom inside of God’s people today - the Church. Therefore, the literal promises of the Kingdom to Israel are nullified.

The phrase in Luke 17:21 should be translated and understood as “the kingdom of God is in your midst.” Jesus, as the King, was present on earth and was offering the literal Kingdom to His Jewish people. The King and Kingdom were in their midst. It was ready to be inaugurated. This is the clear understanding of this term. However, the term “within you” is often misunderstood as meaning a spiritualized kingdom that exists in the hearts of God’s people (the Church today). The context does not warrant such an interpretation. The Pharisees were rejecting Him as the Messiah and were not believers (Luke 17:20). Therefore, it would not make sense for Jesus to tell the Pharisees that the kingdom of God was within them, as if it were some sort of spiritual kingdom that would magically morph into the Church. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke about the literal Kingdom which was covenanted to Israel. This Kingdom should never be reworked and allegorized to now mean the Church. The Kingdom is not the Church as Reformed Theology teaches. It never was and it never will be.

#### Dispensation of the Law

John F. Walvoord gives this helpful note about the Mosaic Law in the Kingdom Age: “In introducing the laws of the kingdom, Jesus paid full respect to the Mosaic law. He declared that He had not come to destroy it or replace it, but to fulfill it. Although the Mosaic law, as a dispensation, was to end at the cross, its moral and spiritual implications were to be fulfilled in later dispensations, including the kingdom. While it is not accurate to say that the kingdom period when Christ reigns on earth will be under the Mosaic law any more than the present age of grace is, it is obvious that the future kingdom is more legal in its government as directed by an absolute Ruler, who rules with a rod of iron (Rev 19:15).

“It is quite evident that the Jews, while they wanted deliverance from the Romans and fulfillment of the material blessings promised in the millennium, were quite unprepared to accept the view that the millennial kingdom has spiritual implications. It was to be a rule of righteousness as well as a rule of peace. It demanded much of subjects as well as providing much for them. The political character of the kingdom was not seriously questioned by the Jews, who anticipated that their Messiah would bring deliverance to them. Because of their neglect of the spiritual and moral

principles involved, Christ necessarily emphasized these in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon accordingly must be understood in this eschatological context.”

This sermon was actually given in the timeframe of the Dispensation of the Law (Matt. 5:18) as the Jews were anticipating the soon arrival of the Kingdom. Therefore, the moral law (5:27-28), the social or civil laws (5:21-22, 25), and the ceremonial laws (5:23-24) are all seen. Dispensationally, we are no longer under the law as a rule of life (Rom. 6:14) along with all of its civil and ceremonial mandates for living (Col. 2:14-16). We must also remember that to place ourselves under the law, even morally, as a means of salvation and justification, like the Pharisees and legalizers did (Acts 15:1), would rob us of our true freedom in Christ (Gal. 5:1). Many people today still use the Sermon on the Mount as their moral guide to follow which they believe will result in their salvation and entrance into Heaven. But this turns the sermon into one’s judge and condemnation for they place themselves under Law (Rom. 3:19) instead of grace (Titus 2:11) as the means of their salvation (Matt. 5:28-30, 48). When a person tries to gain God’s favor under the law system of human works and achievement, they are condemned to die the sinner’s death and go to hell (Rom. 3:19-20; Gal. 2:16).

“Run, John, run, the law commands  
But gives us neither feet nor hands,  
Far better news the Gospel brings:  
It bids us fly and gives us wings!”

Thy Rapture Come!

In addition, we surely are not anticipating the coming Kingdom as the next prophetic event on God’s calendar for future events. We are looking for the imminent return of Christ in the Rapture of the Church (I Thess. 4:13-18). Jesus is not coming as King in the Rapture. He is coming to take us (the Bride of Christ – the Church) home to be with Him in the Heavenly Jerusalem (John 14:1-3). If this sermon was the official mandate for the Church, it would also mean that we should be praying for His Kingdom to come (Matt. 6:10) even though His Kingdom cannot come until after the Rapture and the seven-year Tribulation Period. Our prayer today is to be,

“Even so come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20) which is a reference to the Rapture.

If there is a prayer that is given for the Church today, it would be: “Thy Rapture Come.” The prayer “Thy Kingdom Come” (Matt. 6:10) was only relevant to the Jews of that day who were anticipating the arrival of Christ’s Kingdom on earth. However, since the Kingdom was postponed due to Israel’s rejection of the Messiah (Matt. 21:43; John 1:11), this prayer will once again be relevant to the Jews in a future day (the Tribulation Period) who will be anticipating the imminent arrival of Christ’s Kingdom on earth in conjunction with His Second Coming (Rev. 11:15, 18; 12:10; 20:1-3).

### The Tribulation Period

Once again, this sermon skips over this Age of Grace and looks ahead to the time immediately before the arrival of the earthly Kingdom or Millennium. This time will be the coming Tribulation Period upon the earth. As we now know, the Jews rejected the king. They cried, “Crucify him, crucify him” (Matt. 27:22-23; John 19:6). As a result, the kingdom that was “at hand” in Jesus’ day was postponed (Matt. 21:42-43, 13:11, Acts 15:14-18; Luke 4:19). It will be put off until His Second Coming to earth. During the future Tribulation Period the full scope of this mountain sermon will be realized.

During this time, Christ’s disciples will suffer persecution (Matt. 5:10-12 with Revelation 12 and Zech. 12:8). It will be during this specific time on earth that they will experience the Lord’s comfort (Matt. 5:4). During the future time of the tribulation, they will truly be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-14). In such a dark period as this (the Tribulation Period) the Jewish disciples will preserve truth and be a shining testimony for Christ. They will experience false prophets as prophetically portrayed in Matthew 7:15-16. This coincides with the prophecy in Matthew 24:14 as well which states: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.”

It will be during this *interval* time (the Tribulation Period) that Christ’s true disciples will anxiously await the soon arrival of His Kingdom (Matt. 6:10).

They will pray to the Lord in order to have food supplied for their physical well-being (Matt. 6:11). At the climax or close of this period of time (the seven-year Tribulation Period), Christ will judge the lost, false disciples (Matt. 7:21-23 with Matt. 24-25) and reward His true disciples (Matt. 6:4, 18 with Isaiah 40:10 and Rev. 11:18). These events are known as the Judgment of the Living Nations and the reward of the Old Testament saints (Daniel 12:1-2).

These statements seem to definitely describe Jesus' teaching as belonging to and having special application to the future Tribulation Period. This will be the time of seven years (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15) which will precede His coming Kingdom. Much of the subject matter of the sermon is pertinent to this future time period. Therefore, it is easy to conclude that Christ's Kingdom was postponed, and Christ was crucified. However, during the future seven-year Tribulation Period, the earthly Kingdom will once again be "at hand" as it was during Jesus' earthly ministry. The teaching of this sermon will then be fully realized and experienced.

During this time (the Tribulation Period) the Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached (Matt. 24:14) heralding the coming Kingdom. Christ will then return at the end of this dark hour to establish His earthly Kingdom known elsewhere as the Millennium (Rev. 20:1-7). Truly, His kingdom will come (Matt. 6:9); however, there would be an *interval period of time* preceding this earthly theocracy or Kingdom. In this time period, prior to the commencement of the Kingdom, His true disciples were to exhibit the moral and godly standards as presented in this sermon. They would also experience the very things depicted in Jesus' sermon.

Finally, Christ's followers or disciples who seek to live by all His commandments in this future time period of persecution will have greater praise and honor in the coming Kingdom (Matt. 5:19 with Luke 22:24-28). Ultimately, this mountain message is then an *interval teaching* that will be followed by Jesus' disciples during the dark days of the Tribulation Period, prior to the establishment of Christ's Kingdom. The observation, exegesis and hermeneutics all lead to this simple and sane conclusion or approach.

At this point, allow me to reiterate something without trying to be redundant. Although this message was not directed to the Church, there are valuable lessons, insights, and applications we can make to our lives today (Rom. 15:4). There is an ethic (rule of conduct) which we can follow from many of these beloved verses. However, let us be careful to distinguish between application and strict, Biblical interpretation. One can never interpret this message as the primary mandate for the Church. It is to be understood in the context of His offer of the Kingdom to Israel. Also, it was given under the Law Dispensation and pointed to a future prophetic time (the arrival of the Kingdom). These dispensational times (stewardships) have different features, rules and standards, which cannot be interpreted strictly for today (Matt. 5:24; Deut. 14:3-21, 15:1-2; Matt. 6:10, 24:14).

### Progressive Dispensationalism

As mentioned previously, some dispensationalists are trying to water down Dispensational Premillennialism. They are seeking to cooperate with the Covenant Theologians and their mixed scheme of interpretation which blurs the distinctions between Israel and the Church and the outworking of God's dispensational programs. Many are seeking to ignore the dispensational distinctives and timing of this sermon. It was given during the Law Dispensation and was looking ahead to the Kingdom Dispensation. It was given *to* the Jews and it was *for* the Jews. We should be weary of the modern and progressive trends that are occurring in the field of dispensationalism.

Progressive Dispensationalists are trying in some ways to reassign the promises of the earthly Kingdom, which were given exclusively to Israel, and interpret them as being partially fulfilled by the Church today, as Christ rules upon the Davidic throne in Heaven. This is unsound exegesis and is a debunked theory that cannot be supported by the literal interpretation and understanding of Scripture (2 Tim. 2:15). Christ is never said to be reigning on the throne of David today. He is reigning on the throne of His Father in Heaven (Rev. 3:21). In the future, Christ will exclusively reign on David's throne (Luke 1:32). Therefore, the Sermon on the Mount should not be interpreted to mean that the Church is a direct recipient of this message.

The dispensational timing and teachings presented about the Mosaic Law, the Kingdom, and King are not connected with the Church Age but only with Israel. The people of Israel and the promises given to Israel should never be mixed together with Church teaching and Christ's Bride (the New Testament Church) without creating confusion and errant teachings (1 Cor. 10:32).

### Pacifism

Today, we also have groups (Amish and Mennonites) that use Jesus' words to teach pacifism (Matt. 5:38-39, 44; 6:14-15). This is a debunked interpretation, mainly because Jesus has personal wrongs in view and not social and governmental crimes (Rom. 13:1-4). Jesus is talking to His disciples about personal problems and not national relations. He is not laying down moral directives for states and nations to follow in this sermon. The question of warfare and the banning of weapons which are designed to protect oneself (nonresistance) is not in Christ's thinking or teaching. The nonresistance Jesus is referencing is not to retaliate against those who might try to shame us or take advantage of us in some way. Again, personal wrongs are in view, not social or governmental crimes.

### The Confirmation of Salvation

We must once again remember that the Sermon on the Mount is not teaching the WAY of salvation (John 14:6; Eph. 2:8-9) as the liberals have historically taught. However, sometimes Jesus is talking about the PROOF and CONFIRMATION of one's salvation through both outward transformation of living and inner transformation of heart (Matt. 5:3, 5, 10, 44-45; 7:21). The beatitudes are portraying the general characteristics of those who enter the earthly Kingdom. These overall character traits confirm the salvation of a person. In this sermon, Jesus is giving proofs of one's salvation by the way a person thinks, lives, and what he craves on the inside of his heart. In many ways, Jesus is making a distinction between believers and nonbelievers throughout this sermon (Matt. 5:20-22, 29-30; 6:8; 7:13-27).

Jesus taught in Matthew 4:17, "Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." We might view this proclamation as an introduction to what follows

and a summary of the message of the Sermon on the Mount which is basically this: “What it means to repent and belong to the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, those who repent of their sins and become God’s child, are not only spiritually prepared to enter the Kingdom, but they will also live like a Kingdom citizen. Jesus in this sermon is describing the kind of lifestyle that is appropriate to citizenship in His Kingdom.

Kingdom citizens are characterized in this sermon as being humble, compassionate, meek, yearning for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and they are persecuted because of their righteousness living (Matt. 5). In the world’s eyes these characteristics are the marks of losers. The world says, “Assert yourself, stand up for yourself, be proud of yourself, elevate yourself, defend yourself, avenge yourself, serve yourself.” These are the basic traits or characteristics of the world’s people and the world’s kingdoms. But they are not the character traits of those who will inherit the Millennial Kingdom.

The key verse in this sermon is what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:20: “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 Pharisees righteousness was the result of selective obedience that produced only a superficial righteousness (external conformity to the Mosaic Law). This type of righteousness, Jesus declared, would not be adequate for admission into the Kingdom. In short, it’s not good enough (Rom. 3:12). This is because it was only external and not salvational. The main theme of this sermon is true righteousness.

In one respect, Jesus was teaching that the righteousness of the Pharisees (a self-righteousness – Rom. 10:3) consisted of salvation by human effort (legalism), as in Luke 18:9, and they needed to have imputed righteousness given to them by God as both the forefathers Abraham (Romans 4:3; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23) and David experienced (Rom. 4:6-8). This is something that comes from the heart (Rom. 10:10). The religious leaders had an artificial, external righteousness based on Law (rigid compliance to the rules and rabbinic traditions) but they did not possess the true imputed righteousness that comes through faith (Rom. 3:21-22).



In another sense, Jesus was also teaching that the Pharisees hearts were spiritually defiled (Matt. 5:28; 6:21; 12:35) and they needed a quality of righteousness that is experienced internally in their hearts (Ps. 40:10; 1 Sam. 16:7) which is a righteousness that reflects regenerating life (Phil. 3:9). The Pharisees were concerned about the minute conduct of the Law but did not possess a clean heart before God (Matt. 15:8). They were play-actors who flaunted their alleged spirituality by performing many outward religious ceremonies and actions, which were designed to impress others (Matt. 6:1-8, 16-18; 7:1-5, 22), but they neglected the spiritual condition of their hearts (Matt. 15:8; 23:27).

Jesus was teaching in this sermon that the true righteousness which is experienced in the heart (inner transformation) and the righteousness related to external godly living (outward transformation) becomes the confirmation of a person's salvation (Matt. 5:3, 8, 9, 10, 44-45; 7:15-21). In this sermon, Jesus was teaching that there is a Kingdom righteousness related to salvation through the Messiah (Matt. 5:20; 7:24-25), a Kingdom righteousness related to the intentions and ambitions of the heart (Matt. 5:8, 28; 6:21), and a Kingdom righteousness related to everyday living and worship (Matt. 5:10; 6:33).

### You Say and I Say

Jesus repeated expression throughout the sermon, "But I say" (Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44) means that He sought to clarify exactly what the law of Moses required. He was not contrasting His interpretation with Moses' teaching but with the limited and exaggerated interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees. In fact, when Jesus said "Ye have heard" (what the Pharisees taught – Matt. 5:27, 33, 38, 43) or "It hath been said" (what the Pharisees spoke - Matt. 5:31), He was reminding the people how the Pharisees and traditions had misrepresented the Law and assigned different meanings to it. Jesus was correcting perversions of the Law perpetrated by the religious teaching of His day. William Kelly comments on the Sermon on the Mount and states: "it was designed to counteract the earthly views of the people of Israel." Jesus was teaching that the Law not only demanded righteous actions but also righteous attitudes. The words "But I say" make it clear that Jesus was presenting (a) what the Pharisees and teachers of the Law

were saying to the people and, by contrast, (b) what God's true intent of the Law was. Jesus was expounding the true meaning of the text that God originally intended. He was doing Bible exposition!

Matthew 5:1-2

"And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain (The Sermon on the Mount!): and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying."

Jesus taught them. This is Bible exposition! This reminds me how some men open their mouths to say something (they possess the gift of gab) while others have something to say (they preach and teach the Bible).

### Kingdom Living for Today

The Sermon on the Mount shows the role of the Kingdom citizens in an unbelieving world. It describes the character traits of Kingdom citizens (true disciples) and contrasts them with those who are not Kingdom citizens (false disciples). In this sermon, Christ is showing what His Kingdom is like, what its people are like, and are not like. Yes, there is a sense where we should practice what I call "Kingdom living for today." It's the type of living that revolves around transformation of character and conduct, the same kind of living that was expected of Christ's disciples, who would one day enter the earthly Kingdom or Millennium (Rev. 20:1-7).

Every kingdom has subjects and Jesus in this famous sermon is painting a picture of the kind of people who would populate His future Kingdom. It describes the character traits of Kingdom citizens. It's interesting that even the Church epistles of Paul, Peter, and James talk about living in light of the Kingdom (1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Pet. 1:11; James 2:5) and John reminds us about honor, recognition, and reigning privileges in the future, earthly Kingdom (Rev. 2:26-27). So, there definitely is some application of the Sermon of the Mount to our lives today. This sermon shows the role of Kingdom citizens as they live in an unbelieving world. Therefore, this sermon has many practical lessons that we can apply to our own personal lives for we will one day be in the earthly Kingdom.

We must remember that all Scripture is profitable (2 Tim. 3:16-17) for believers today. In fact, since we too will one day be a Kingdom citizen (Rev. 5:10), we should take the instructions that Jesus gave for Kingdom citizens to heart. The spiritual principles set forth in this sermon can be life-changing and its timeless truths are for all generations. However, all of Christ's instructions in this sermon should be followed in the context of grace living for Christians today. We should practice living out the Sermon of the Mount through the lens of Church truth (our New Covenant position in Christ and union with Christ, the power and fruit of the Holy Spirit, etc.).

George Zeller mentions some great dispensationalists of the past who saw the importance of applying this sermon to our lives today. "The original Scofield Reference Bible (1909) stated that the Sermon on the Mount "clearly has a beautiful moral application to the Christian" (p.1000). An early dispensationalist, Arno Gaebelein, devoted two pages in refuting the teaching of those who refuse to consider the Sermon as having any reference to Christian believers at all 'as if there is no application to be made in this direction and the believer could afford to pass them by entirely and not be concerned about it' (The Gospel of Matthew, pages 109-111).

"He argues strongly that Christians may rightly find rich application from the Sermon. Concerning the Beatitudes, Gaebelein says, 'The blessings in themselves are most wonderful in their scope and inexhaustible in their meaning' (p. 112). John Walvoord said that Christian believers should not push aside the Sermon as though it were unimportant: 'The Sermon on the Mount is clearly intended to be a definitive statement of Christ's teaching and should not be pushed aside lightly by unnecessary stricture which would relegate it to unimportant truth' (Matthew—Thy Kingdom Come, p. 45)."

I recall meeting John Walvoord many years ago. I was talking with him before he was going to preach and teach on the covenant program for Israel. As a young man, I asked him about the relevance of the Sermon of the Mount for our lives today and he shared these words with me: "I believe there is an ethic that we can apply to our lives today when studying the Sermon on the Mount." I think he is right. The spiritual principles taught

in the Sermon on the Mount can be helpful in giving us spiritual direction for our lives, if we are saved and are allowing God's grace and power to change us both inwardly and outwardly (Phil. 2:13). The general message of the Sermon of the Mount contains timeless truths that are trans-dispensational and apply to all generations. Even today, in the Church Age, the moral and righteous aspects of the Law are recreated in our hearts and worked out in our daily lives by the presence of Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4). We must remember how this sermon fits into God's dispensational program while at the same time recognize the enduring ethic that it has for our personal lives today. There is something here for all of us. How do I know this? It's because this is the sermon of the King!