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Examining the Sermon on the Mount

by David Dunlap

Undoubtedly, the Sermon on the Mount is among the most beloved and treasured texts of Scripture. It contains the well-known Lord's prayer, the Beatitudes, and the so-called "Golden rule." It exhorts the believer toward the lofty level of service to Christ by urging, "Let your light so shine before men, so they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). It contains comfort for the weary heart and strength for the Christian to persevere in the most difficult and trying of circumstances. The spiritual themes of prayer, holiness, faith, marriage, and worry are all addressed by the Lord. Down through the centuries, scholars and skeptics alike have all praised the spiritual virtues of the Sermon on the Mount. Its value is carried over into other books of the New Testament, where the Sermon is alluded to fifteen times in the book of James and quoted over twenty times in the other epistles. Beloved preacher Harry A. Ironside writes:

The keenest intellects of the earth have recognized in the Sermon on the Mount the highest ethical teaching to men...¹

Nevertheless, in the Sermon, our Lord Jesus was not preaching a salvation message; but rather, He was setting forth the principles of the kingdom which should guide the lives of believers in all ages.

Is the Sermon on the Mount a Gospel Presentation?

Despite the Sermon on the Mount's rich spiritual teaching, it has also been the subject of much misunderstanding and controversy. Liberal theologians have argued that, within the Sermon, the gospel of Christ is richly presented. Liberals such as German theologian Adolph Harnack (1851-1930), as well as American modernists Harry Emerson Fosdick and Norman V. Peale, have held this view. A few evangelical leaders have also argued for the gospel perspective. Bible teacher and popular author John MacArthur writes: "(Sermon on the Mount) is pure gospel, with as pointed an invitation as ever been presented."² Evangelical Lutheran scholar R. H. C. Lenski also held this view.

Clearly, there are aspects of the Sermon on the Mount that lend themselves to a gospel application. Many have come to Christ through hearing gospel sermons based upon the Lord's teaching about the "strait" and "wide" gates (Mt. 7:14). The sins of hypocrisy, hatred, lust, and adultery, among others, are denounced by the Lord in this Sermon. Nevertheless, it seems very clear that the Sermon on the Mount, as a whole, is not a gospel presentation. It is an exhortation to disciples of all

*"It is not for us to
relegate all this to
the Jewish remnant
in the last days or
to the disciples
before the cross,
though fully
applicable to both.
But we discern here
"wholesome words,
even the words of
our Lord Jesus
Christ" which we
dare not refuse to
obey."*

Harry Ironside
(1876-1951)
*Commentator and Bible
Expositor*

ages concerning the conduct and character of those who would acknowledge Him as their rightful King. This sermon was never intended to be a presentation of the plan of salvation to unsaved people or teaching for the unsaved. This sermon was addressed to the disciples, not to an unsaved audience (Matt. 5:1). William MacDonald writes:

For whom was this sermon intended? It was meant for all who acknowledge Christ as King, whether in the past, present, or future. When Christ was on earth, it had direct application to His disciples. During the present age, when our Lord is in heaven, it applies to all who crown Him King in their hearts. ³

On the question of whether the Sermon presents a salvation message, early dispensational scholar William Kelly (1820-1906) writes:

*The Sermon on the Mount treats not (the subject) of salvation but of the character and conduct of those that belong to Christ—the true yet rejected King. But when we examine these Beatitudes closely, we shall find an astonishing depth in them...*⁴

Is the Sermon on the Mount for the Kingdom Age Only?

Dispensationalists have been roundly criticized for teaching that the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount are primarily for the kingdom age alone, and then secondarily for Christians today. This was the teaching of Bible teachers Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952), the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, and C. I. Scofield (1843-1921), editor of the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), and a small number of other dispensational Bible teachers.

In fairness to them, they clearly acknowledged that the Sermon on the Mount's principles should be practiced by Christians in this age. Sadly, this fact was usually omitted by their critics. Nonetheless, in retrospect, it seems as if these good scholars were guilty of dispensational over zealotry. The majority of dispensationalists have not held this view. Many other dispensational scholars of that time and the majority of present-day dispensationalists did not hold this perspective. Dispensationalists such as William Kelly, C. F. Hogg, J. B. Watson, and H. A. Ironside along with modern-day dispensationalists William MacDonald and Charles Ryrie, have taught that the Sermon on the Mount is for disciples that acknowledge Christ as King in every age.

What is the biblical basis for setting aside the view that the principles of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount are primarily intended for disciples during the Millennial kingdom? The principle reason is that the conditions described in the Sermon on the Mount contradict, in many ways, the characteristics that will typify the reign of Christ. For example, the kingdom reign of Christ is a period of unrivaled and unparalleled righteousness, yet the Sermon on the Mount suggests a period where evil and unrighteousness predominate. The kingdom into which the disciples of the King are sent is one that has not yet been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a kingdom that has not yet submitted to the rule of Christ. C. F. Hogg and J. B. Watson wrote in the book entitled *Scaling the Sermon on the Mount*:

It is sometimes contended that the Sermon on the Mount is to be in force during the millennial reign of Christ. But the characteristic of the millennial age is that righteousness will be maintained with adequate power...In this (present) age there are two kingdoms—"the power of darkness" and the "kingdom of the Son

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William Kelly
(1820-1906)

*Commentator, Bible expositor
and Greek scholar*

of His love." In that age there will be but one, for then "the kingdoms of the world" will have become "the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ."⁵

In addition to this general inconsistency, there are a host of lesser, but nonetheless important, contradictions. For instance, under the thousand-year administration of the "Prince of Peace" there will be a time of unprecedented peace; yet, in the Sermon on the Mount, we find that there is physical persecution of believers. In the Sermon on the Mount spiritual darkness is assumed because Christ exhorts His followers to be the light of the world. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord warns of the hatred of Christ, the love of mammon, hypocrisy, false almsgiving, and moral darkness, all of which clash with the character of the thousand-year kingdom of Christ. Many students of Scripture have noticed these difficulties. Dispensational Bible scholar Charles C. Ryrie makes the following important observation:

If the Sermon will be the new rule of life for the millennial kingdom, what will be the purpose of praying "thy kingdom come" if it has already come (Matt. 6:10)? Another is this: If the sermon is for the future kingdom when righteousness will reign, why will some be persecuted (Matt 5:10)?⁶

While the Sermon on the Mount is certainly to be taken seriously by followers of Christ in every age, another important yet thorny question remains to be examined.

Is the Sermon on the Mount the "Magna Carta" of Church?

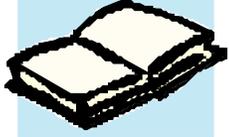
It has been said that the Sermon on the Mount is the "Magna Carta" of the church. By this it is meant that in these three chapters of Matthew, the Lord Jesus Christ has given Christians the highest and most complete teaching for the church. We must state firmly that although the Sermon on the Mount is a powerful presentation of spiritual truth, at the same time, it is *not* the most complete summary of New Testament truth. The Sermon on the Mount, generally speaking, portrays the inward spiritual life and the spiritual disciplines of the followers of Christ. So, in it we find the Lord developing teaching on holiness, prayer, fasting, confession, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. However, the doctrines that are the foundation of the Christian life and the New Testament church go strangely unmentioned. We find their absence in this Sermon very significant. It should be noted that in the Sermon on the Mount there is *no mention of*: 1) The cross and death of Christ; 2) Water and Holy Spirit baptism; 3) The person and work of the Holy Spirit; 4) Elders, deacons and church leadership; 5) Spiritual gifts given to the church; 6) The indwelling Holy Spirit in the believer. 7) The doctrines of justification, redemption, eternal security. 8) The doctrines concerning future things such as the tribulation period, the rapture of the church, the second coming, and Antichrist.

The doctrines that are set forth in passages such as John 13-17, Romans, Ephesians, and 1 Corinthians give us a much fuller revelation of God's design for the church and the believer's resources in Christ. Sadly, today there is a sharp departure from these doctrinal sections in favor of the more ethical, moral, and pragmatic portions of Scripture. This de-emphasis of New Testament doctrine has led to a surge of interest in the Emerging church, ancient rituals, and a growing modernist tendency in once-strong evangelical churches.

"For whom was this sermon intended? It was meant for all who acknowledge Christ as King, whether in the past, present, or future. When Christ was on earth, it had direct application to His disciples. During the present age, when our Lord is in heaven, it applies to all who crown Him King in their hearts."

William MacDonald
(1918-2008)

from *Matthew: Behold the King*



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Respected Bible commentator Arno C. Gaebelein (1863-1930) noticed this same pattern nearly one hundred years ago. He writes:

In our days more than ever before, we notice an astonishing misuse of the Sermon on the Mount. The saddest of all is that many preachers of various evangelical denominations fall back upon it as the most important document of Christendom; for them it seems to become more and more the Gospel, and the consequences are that we hear in our times more ethical preaching, more about becoming better, doing good, improving your better self, than ever before...And as this is done, there is less preaching on the utter corruption of man, his lost condition, and his helplessness to be righteous...As the teachings of the Epistle of Romans have been and are being abandoned in Christendom, the false application of this discourse here in Matthew has been taken up.⁷

CONCLUSION

The warning is clear. Biblical truth must be balanced. The inward spiritual truths of the Sermon on the Mount must be tempered and grounded by the teaching of the Pauline epistles. Every truth of Scripture is important and valuable to the church. The Sermon on the Mount sets forth teaching that is precious to every believer and useful to the church, but not truth that is unique to the church. May the church never neglect the rich spiritual challenges of the Sermon on the Mount but may she also never spurn the challenges of the doctrinally important Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine epistles.

Endnotes

1. H. A. Ironside, *Matthew*, (New York, NY: Loizeaux, 1975), 44
2. John MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 179
3. William MacDonald, *Matthew*, (Kansas City, KS: Walterick, 1974), 45
4. William Kelly, *Lectures on Matthew*, (New York, NY: Loizeaux, 1926), 106
5. C. F. Hogg, J. B. Watson, *Scaling the Sermon on the Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Gospel Folio Press, 2001) 19
6. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1995), 99
7. Arno C. Gaebelein, *Matthew*, (New York, NY: Loizeaux, 1977), 107