

# AN OVERVIEW OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

## *SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY*

**Danny Hall**

---

This being an election year, all kinds of voices are going to tell us how America could be better. Among them will be Christian voices that will tell us what candidates to vote for and what issues to support or oppose. There is always a merging of faith and politics in our culture, but in an election year we get bombarded with it, and it's something we have to sort through.

I wonder why there is so little difference between the way Christians and non-Christians live in our culture. Why do we have so little impact? There are all kinds of indices of this. I recently received a brochure from Josh McDowell's organization, which is trying to ground our high school kids in an approach to morality and truth that will set them up well for their adult lives. This brochure said, "Christianity makes little or no difference in the lives of our young people." It listed a series of supporting statistics on things like cheating on tests, lying to teachers, lying to parents, physically hurting someone when angered, and being satisfied with one's ethics and character. It would seem that this is reflective of the larger, more troubling fact that a lot of people who have professed to be followers of Jesus live lives that are quite different from the life described by Jesus in the gospels. Why is that? Have we failed to understand what it means to live in the kingdom of God? Have we given up, thinking that the life described in the Bible is an ideal too difficult to attain? Whatever the reason, we all recognize the watering down of Christian life in our culture and struggle with it. It is a very confusing milieu.

In this series we're going to look at a passage of Scripture that will rivet our attention on some of the issues related to being the people of God in our society. This is a theme that is very important to me, and I keep running into it in Scripture. I wrestle with it, mostly because I haven't figured it out for myself. I hope we can walk through this and learn together. This passage is the one we call the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Perhaps in no other place in Scripture is this subject brought into such sharp focus. Matthew presents the compelling teaching of Jesus, which lays out for us a vision of what the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, is all about, challenges us to intentionally enter into the life of the kingdom, and points to some of the means by which we can be transformed into the kind of people who do.

## **The kingdom of God**

In order for us to get the context of the issues Jesus raises, we're going to look at the sermon as a whole in this message. To begin, it is significant that this sermon is set in Matthew's gospel. Matthew's overall purpose in his gospel is to connect Jesus to the history of Israel. All the promises and all the activity of God throughout its history had been pointing toward a time when God would act decisively on the world's behalf. The culmination of all that came in the person of Jesus. Matthew wants us to understand that connection deeply, so he quotes the Old Testament and connects Jesus to the Old Testament story in many ways, declaring to the nation of Israel, "This is our Messiah, the one God promised. We need to recognize him and follow him."

Matthew includes five extended discourses or teachings by Jesus in his gospel. The Sermon on the Mount is the first. The second, in chapter 10, is Jesus' commissioning of the Twelve to go out to preach

the kingdom of heaven. The third, in 13:37-52, is his explanation of the parable of the sower and other parables about the nature of the kingdom of God. The fourth, in chapter 18, is about greatness in the kingdom of God and the character of kingdom people. The fifth, in chapters 24-25, is what we call the Olivet Discourse; in it Jesus talks about the things we should look for as God continues to work in history to establish his kingdom on this earth. Throughout, this theme of the kingdom of God comes up again and again. It is very important to Matthew that we understand the kingdom of God, that Jesus is the leader of that kingdom, and that God is revealing to us the fullness of that kingdom.

Jesus' ministry, including the Sermon on the Mount, takes place in a specific social and political situation. The Jews were called by God to be a light to the nations, to show forth God's righteousness and grace and mercy to a needy world. But over the years, despite some good times and some bad, they degenerated into a society that was very ingrown. Their idea of their specialness and calling of God was more about preserving themselves than declaring the righteousness of God to the nations.

I witnessed a similar phenomenon when I first went to work in Eastern Europe. I worked primarily in the country of Poland during the eighties, and one of the things I observed (something that happens in every place, of course) was a generation gap. The older generation and younger generation of Christian leaders had some sharp divisions. One of the core issues developed because the older generation of Christian leaders in Poland had grown up under the heavy oppression of communism. By the time I came, that heavy oppression was being lifted. The new generation of leaders had not felt that heavy-handedness, and they saw many more opportunities and possibilities in the new openness in their culture. So they had a mentality of wanting to go out and conquer the world, whereas the older generation's whole mentality was to preserve who they were, hang on, and try not to be crushed. That whole approach to life was very much ingrown and self-preserving.

You can understand how that would happen to people living under consistent oppression for a long time. The same thing happened to Israel. It had lived through a long series of oppressive regimes. A lot of what they were doing was about self-preservation. Instead of being a light to the nations, they had erected walls around themselves, and the light was just reflecting back on them. They were so caught up in their own sense of who they were and their own preservation that they had become very legalistic, with many external markers of what being a good Jew was.

They were looking for a deliverer who would restore their sense of national freedom and pride. They had a set of assumptions about what Messiah would be and what they needed, and they had developed a whole culture around that. When Jesus walked in he didn't look anything like what they expected Messiah to be. Jesus came into that situation to turn the whole thing upside-down and call them to a right understanding of who they were to be.

## **The authority of Jesus**

Let's look at just a couple of verses. Matthew 5:1-2:

**When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. He opened His mouth and began to teach them....**

At the end of chapter 4 Matthew writes, "Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis and

Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan.” (4:23-25.) In other words, they were coming from all over because they had heard about this man named Jesus who was healing people and teaching, and they wanted to find out what was going on. I imagine they were motivated by at least two things: they probably wanted to see miraculous healing, either of themselves or somebody else, and they were just generally curious. So as crowds began to gather, Jesus went up on the mountain, found a level place to sit down, as was the custom of great teachers, and the people gathered around to hear what he had to say. What Jesus taught them shook them to the core of who they were.

In 7:28-29 Matthew describes how it ended:

**When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.**

They were totally blown away. It doesn't say that they all responded to his teaching; they were just amazed at it. He had marked himself out by the nature of what he said as being something radically different from what they were used to.

Matthew describes him as having authority. The idea of authority is another important theme in Matthew's gospel. There are five other instances where he uses the word "authority" as he seeks to paint a portrait of Jesus as *the* authority, the one who has come to lead God's kingdom. In 8:5-13 we have the story of Jesus' healing the centurion's servant. When Jesus agrees to the centurion's request, the centurion responds, "Just say the word....For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me...." He believes that Jesus has that authority to heal. In 9:2-8 we have the story of Jesus' healing the paralytic. He forgives the man's sin, and the scribes say he is blaspheming. Jesus says, "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...Get up, pick up your bed and go home." In 10:1 he sends the disciples out on their first big mission on their own, and he gives them authority. In 21:23-24, 27 the chief priests and elders come to Jesus and say, "By what authority are You doing these things...?" Finally in 28:18 we have the culmination of this theme. Jesus' last words begin, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth."

Jesus is immediately understood to have authority. He is not like the scribes. Now, what the scribes did is what all of us who preach here do: study, read what other people say, and talk among ourselves. Then we get up and do our best to explain the Scriptures. When it is appropriate and helpful, we quote other people. The scribes studied all of the historical interpretation of the Torah, and they were really good at saying, "Rabbi So-and-So said this, and Rabbi Such-and-Such said that, and therefore this is what I think it means." But Jesus doesn't do that. He says, "You have heard this, but *I* say this." He isn't quoting other people; he himself is speaking the truth with authority and command, which he backs up by the way he lives, by his whole presence.

So as Jesus speaks with this authority in the Sermon on the Mount, what is he talking about, and what connection does it have to our lives?

## **The true people of God**

Jesus is describing what the true Israel was to be like. They had had this truth, and around that they had developed a culture, an approach to life, assumptions about what a good Jew ought to be and to do. In the same way, the church, at least in America, has had this wonderful freedom in which we have taught and studied the Bible, and we have developed our own Christian culture around that, a set of assumptions that most of us operate by about what a good Christian does. Some of those assumptions may be on track and some of them may not, but when we make choices day by day, most of us are

interacting with our understanding of what is expected of us rather than with the words of God themselves. That is the nature of being part of any culture or social group. But what Jesus is saying to them in this sermon is, “The assumptions you have made about what it means to be a part of the kingdom of God are wrong. I want to point you back to the truth of God’s word. I am not replacing it or changing it. I want to draw you back to what it is really teaching about how you are to be a part of the kingdom of God.” It is more than merely a debate about external righteousness vs. internal righteousness, although that is certainly a part of it, because they had developed layer upon layer of minutiae about external obedience to the Law, and Jesus does say there is something deeper than that. But beyond that, he is explaining to them what the people of God are really called to be like.

One of the problems that we who have grown up in America face is that our society is very individualistic. So when we read Scripture, we tend to ask, “How does this apply to *me*?” Certainly there are enormous amounts of personal application in Scripture, but I think what Jesus is primarily saying here is that this is how *we* are to be the people of God. We need to think in terms of what it means for the body of Christ. Jesus is challenging Israel of his day to be the true Israel. In the same way, God is challenging us to be the true church, the kind of people who will shine forth God’s glory and love and grace to this needy world, instead of falling into the trap of Israel, turning inward and self-preserving, merely keeping to a form of respectability and safety.

In this sermon Jesus takes the idea of loyalty to the Law, or Torah, which was the central point around which that culture gathered, and he makes it loyalty to him. He says he is the fulfillment of the Law. There are three instances in this sermon where he makes himself the focal point. In 5:17 he says, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.” All that they were pointing to is summed up in him. That is an audacious claim that no other rabbi would make! Then in 5:21-48 there is a series of six teachings that flow out of that, which are sometimes called the antitheses, in which Jesus says, “You have heard...but I say....” He refers to the traditional interpretation of the Law, and then he takes them to a new level of thinking about what righteousness really is. He sets himself up as the ultimate interpreter of the Law. Then finally, in perhaps the most audacious statement of all of his audacious statements in this sermon, in 7:21 when teaching about whether people are really part of the kingdom, he says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord....’” He sets himself up as the Lord. So he declares himself the fulfillment of all the Law and Prophets, the one who explains what righteousness really is, and the one they all are going to call Lord one day. He has now redefined what it means to be the true Israel. It is not about loyalty to Torah; it is about loyalty to him, the Messiah and the fulfillment of all of God’s promises.

Now I want to sketch out the subject matter Jesus covers in the Sermon on the Mount.

## **Vision and transformation**

In chapter 5 he talks about the character of the people who are true followers of Messiah. He gives this wonderful series of statements of blessing that we call the Beatitudes. What the people of the kingdom are really like is very different from how the Jews were approaching their faith and life. He says when kingdom people are living like this, they will become salt and light to the world. They will proclaim to this world what righteousness and grace and mercy are all about.

In chapter 6 he talks about walking in an intimate relationship with God. He talks about the three primary disciplines the Jewish leaders practiced: almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. These disciplines were designed to lead God’s people into an intimate relationship with him, but what they had become was, in modern terms, a vending-machine mentality about God. If they did these things, like pushing the right buttons, then God would dispense his blessings to them. What they had set aside by approaching God in this perfunctory, performance-oriented way was intimacy with him. They had missed the point. So Jesus

takes them to this new place: life in the kingdom is one of intimacy with the Father.

Finally, in chapter 7 he deals with some practical issues and ultimately issues them a challenge: “Will you continue to be mired in your own wrong assumptions about what it means to be a follower of God, or will you rally around the truth that is embodied in me? Whom will you follow?” He calls them to make the hard choice to hear and obey.

Now, why does this matter? As I said, the parallel to Israel is the church. I grew up thinking America was the chosen people. That was part of the culture where I lived. But I finally began to see the light a little bit. There is no parallel between Israel and any nation today that might do good things (although God promises to bless goodness and righteousness). The real parallel is between Israel and the church. So we need to ask ourselves how the promises and calling of God apply to us as the church. When we do that, God begins to transform us into the people we are supposed to be.

I have referred before to Dallas Willard’s book *Renovation of the Heart*. It’s one of the most thought-provoking books on spiritual transformation I have ever read, and he analyzes some of these phenomena this way:

“Instead of inward transformations, some outward form of religion--often today even called ‘a spirituality’--is taken or imposed as the goal of practical endeavor. What is then important is to be a ‘good \_\_\_\_\_’ (you can fill in the blank). And the respective social group--the ‘good \_\_\_\_\_s’--will enforce that importance, on pain of disapproval or exclusion from the group. Or the individual even enforces upon himself or herself what is ‘obviously’ right. But, whatever the details, authentic inward transformation into Christlikeness is omitted. It is not envisioned, intended, or achieved.

“Not so in the call of Jesus to live with him as his student or apprentice in his kingdom. By contrast, for him and his Father, the heart is what matters, and everything else will then come along. And the process of inward renovation starts from the stark vision of life in the kingdom of God.” (1)

I would suggest to you that what Jesus wants to do in the Sermon on the Mount is give us a vision for the kingdom of God and call us to the kind of inward transformation that enables us to be the people of God. So the reason this sermon matters is that it concerns the core of what kind of people we will be.

There are all kinds of dangers that we have to deal with. One of those is nationalizing our faith, intermeshing what it means to be a good Christian and a good American, or perhaps a good Christian and a good member of our respective political party. Not long ago I saw a piece giving ten reasons why everybody should go to Liberty University (Jerry Falwell’s school). The list starts with some doctrinal statements--commitment to the word of God and a few things like that--and then farther down in the list it says they are basically committed to stand against socialism and political correctness, and they are for free-market enterprise and a strong national defense. I have nothing against Liberty University, but such statements are indicative of the problem we face. We live in a culture where our own history has allowed us to entangle what it means to follow Jesus and what it means to be a good citizen. I’m not passing judgment on anyone’s point of view about how that works out, but it does pose a challenge to us. If we face who we are and the ways we are making the same kind of mistakes that Israel was, it is going to get uncomfortable. But the end of that is freedom in Christ to be his people, if we will let him lead us.

What do we really believe about Jesus? Is he trustworthy? Does he really know better than we? Is following Jesus worth laying down our lives, giving up anything and everything? That is daunting.

When I read the Sermon on the Mount, my first reaction is “I can’t do this!” But God says, “You’re right, but my grace is sufficient for you.” He calls us to rely totally on him. In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus says, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” This incredible life that God calls us to is an enormous burden, yet Jesus says, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Why? Because we serve the God of grace and mercy who enables his people to be what he has called them to be. What he asks from us is our loyalty, our lives, our submission to his lordship, and as we go together to these places that Jesus took the Israelites so many years ago, if we will open ourselves up to his lordship, we will find incredible excitement and adventure, and rest and peace in him.

---

## Notes

1) Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, © 2002, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 86.

Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE (“NASB”). © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Catalog No. 4901  
Matthew 5-7  
First Message  
Danny Hall  
January 4, 2004

[Back to Index page](#)

Copyright © 2004 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the prior written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.