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PREACHING THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT:  
LEARNING TO BE KINGDOM DISCIPLES  
FROM MATTHEW 5–7

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the Faculty of  
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by  
Nathan Timothy Williams  
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**APPROVAL SHEET**

**PREACHING THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT:  
LEARNING TO BE KINGDOM DISCIPLES  
FROM MATTHEW 5–7**

Nathan Timothy Williams

Read and Approved by:

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Jonathan T. Pennington (Faculty Supervisor)

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Michael Pohlman

October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017

I dedicate this D.Min. project to my wife, Bethany. “Always remember, there was nothing worth sharing like the love that let us share our name.” – The Avett Brothers

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## PREFACE

Studying the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5–7 has been one of the most rewarding academic endeavors I have undertaken. Prior to this study I would not have seen the thread that ties together the Sermon on the Mount, the kingdom of God, and human flourishing. Of course, the Sermon is intended as a pathway to human flourishing, but this thought has begun to shape my Christian life and ministry in profound ways. Without an understanding of God’s desire for human wholeness and well-being, we may view God as a distant judge who hands out commands to be obeyed in an arbitrary manner. However, connecting human flourishing to the kingdom of God has taught me much about the goodness of God. His goal for human beings is that we would experience all the blessings of relationship with him as we live as he originally intended. Jesus is making the path to full humanness plain in the Sermon on the Mount and this is the path of kingdom living. This line of thinking has led me into the study of biblical ethics and solidified the importance of real righteousness being worked out in daily life as Jesus demands through the Sermon. I treasure the hours spent learning at the feet of Jesus as he spoke this greatest sermon.

Of course, the opportunity to study the Sermon on the Mount to this level would not have been possible without several key people and organizations. First, I began this degree while serving as an associate pastor at Timberlake Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. I had the opportunity to work with a team of pastors who allowed me the time and opportunity to embark on this course of study. Their influence on my ministry is profound and I’m deeply grateful. As I neared the end of my writing, I was privileged to be called as the senior pastor at Woodhaven Bible Church in Woodhaven,

Michigan. While we have only lived here for six months, the church body has been gracious and welcomed us with open arms. My ministry at Woodhaven will be shaped by my study of the Sermon.

Second, I must mention my supervisor, Dr. Jonathan Pennington. His books have been very helpful to me, and have given me a greater hunger to know and understand the Gospels. The first book I have been preaching through at Woodhaven is the Gospel of Mark, and my desire is to immerse the people here in the life and teaching of Jesus so that we can be formed in virtue through encountering him. Dr. Pennington's understanding of the Sermon has been deeply influential in my study.

Finally, my wife, Bethany, and our children, Katelynn, Cole, Stella, and Grey, have been incredibly gracious to share me with my schoolwork over the last three years. Bethany and I have been married for thirteen years, and I have spent seven of those years in school. She has willingly moved from the east coast to the west coast and back again. Then she agreed to let me begin this degree with three small children at home, and we have added a fourth during the degree. She told me that she had to approve whatever topic I would write my thesis on because we would end up talking about it over the next two years. Well, I hope the Sermon on the Mount has provided much beneficial conversation and encouraged her faith as it has mine. I still cannot believe how gracious God has been in the family he has given me. Jesus' words in Matthew 7:11 define the graciousness of God to me: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" You all are a treasure given by a good God to an undeserving sinner.

Nathan Williams

Woodhaven, Michigan

December 2017

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

My children love stories. As the scenes begin to unfold, their little eyes fill with wonder, and their imaginations begin to pick up speed like a sled on a steep, snowy hill. Once the sled gets going it is difficult and unwise to try to pull them off. And who would want to divert their attention? There is an enjoyment and satisfaction in engrossing oneself in a story that nothing else in life can duplicate. Not only do stories invoke a sense of wonder, but the right kind of stories shape and form children *and* adults in dramatic ways. N. D. Wilson describes the impact of stories in lofty terms: “Even in adults, stories groom instincts, and instincts control loyalties, and loyalties shape choices.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, no choice is ever made in a vacuum. Whether we are aware of it or not, a lifetime of stories we keep deep inside influences the choices we make every day. We love and we hate, we hope and we despair, we deny and we believe because of the stories that have shaped us. N. T. Wright goes so far as to say that people are largely molded by the stories they believe they inhabit. He says, “Human life, then, can be seen as grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell themselves and one another . . . . Stories are a basic constituent of human life; they are, in fact, one key element within the total construction of a worldview.”<sup>2</sup>

Clearly stories are significant for shaping daily life, but they must be the right kinds of stories. There is no greater story that must fashion us than the story unfolded in

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<sup>1</sup>N. D. Wilson, *Death by Living: Life Is Meant to Be Spent* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 12.

<sup>2</sup>N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 38.

God's Word. Believers must know the basics of the narrative found in God's Word and how those basics fit into that account of reality. Kevin Vanhoozer describes the purpose of the church as speaking and living out the gospel, and this is impossible without a clear grasp of God's story. He writes, "The church's unique responsibility is to proclaim and to practice the gospel, to witness in its speech and life to the reality of God's presence and action in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup> Biblical theology proves monumentally important in giving us the unified story of Scripture to tell and allowing the practice of that story to form us into the image of Christ.

### **Defining Biblical Theology**

Before the church can utilize biblical theology, it must be clearly defined. Biblical theology as a discipline is built on two primary concepts. First, Scripture is a unified, progressively unfolding story centered on Christ and second, the interpretive perspective of the authors is key to understanding how each part of the story relates to the whole.<sup>4</sup>

First, to understand biblical theology, it is vital to understand the unified story of Scripture that progressively unfolds with Christ as the center. It will be helpful to explain this first concept in pieces and then bring them back together as a whole.

Graeme Goldsworthy highlights the idea of Scripture as a story when he says, "From the evangelical preacher's point of view, biblical theology involves the quest for the big picture, or the overview, of biblical revelation. It is of the nature of biblical

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<sup>3</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>4</sup> James Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), locs 670–671, Kindle. These two concepts are derived from Hamilton's discussion of the center of biblical theology and how to arrive at that center. He posits that there is a unified center which is God's glory in salvation through judgment and the way to arrive at this center is through the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors. He says, "For the believing community, the goal of biblical theology is simply to learn this practice of interpretation from the biblical authors so that we can interpret the Bible and life in this world the way they did."

revelation that it tells a story rather than sets out timeless principles in abstract.”<sup>5</sup> Biblical theology sees Scripture as a whole and follows the narrative of what God is doing in the world from creation, to the fall, through redemption, and to the culmination in the new creation. Because biblical theology understands Scripture as a story, it deals with the Bible as history. George Ladd makes this point in his book *New Testament Theology*. He says, “Biblical theology must be done from a starting point that is biblical-historical in orientation. Only this approach can deal adequately with the reality of God and his inbreaking into history.”<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on the Bible as history can keep the student from treating the Bible as an encyclopedia of proof texts for present day problems. Studying each passage as history provides texture and variety to the text by showing it within its original context. Seeing a passage in its original context places the reader under the text and not vice versa. Geerhardus Vos understood the energizing value of seeing Scripture as history as the reader seeks to understand the Bible on its own terms. He writes, “Biblical Theology imparts new life and freshness to the truth by showing it to us in its original historic setting. The Bible is not a dogmatic handbook but a historical book full of dramatic interest.”<sup>7</sup> This “dramatic interest” comes as Scripture is rightly understood as a vivid account of the story of God’s working in the world.

However, the biblical writers did not get that unified story all at once. Each individual author did not know the entire story, and so each one wrote within a particular moment of God’s plan. Because revelation is progressive, biblical theology must place each work within its own historical time period. G. K. Beale highlights the necessity of

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<sup>5</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 22.

<sup>6</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 13.

<sup>7</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975), 17.

historical interpretation when he writes, “In this light, a biblical theological approach to a particular text seeks to give its interpretation first with regard to its own literary context and primarily in relation to its own redemptive-historical epoch, and then to the epoch or epochs preceding and following it.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, one of the key strategies of biblical theology is to let the author’s work stand during its own time period, then to see how that work fits into the flow of redemptive history, and ultimately how that work fits into the unified whole of Scripture. In *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, Jonathan Pennington describes this as “circles of contextual meaning.” He explains, “Any particular story in the Gospels (or elsewhere) sits in the story line that ranges from its immediate context to broader literary structures to the whole book of which it is a part, as well as its place in the canon of Scripture itself. We may think of this range of contexts as a series of concentric circles.”<sup>9</sup>

For example, when studying the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5–7, the student’s goal is to fit this Sermon into its immediate context and to expand out to further circles of contextual meaning. The first order of business when studying the sermon is to understand the unity of chapters 5–7 and the structure of the sermon. If one can imagine a target with a bull’s-eye in the center, the understanding of the actual story or passage itself would be the center.

The structure of Matthew 5–7 is quite simple. Matthew 5:1–2 gives the setting of the Sermon within the narrative of Matthew’s gospel as Jesus sat on a mountain and instructed his disciples. Matthew 5:3–16 gives the introduction to the sermon. As Turner points out, “The Beatitudes (5:3–12) describe the divinely approved lifestyle of those who have repented at the arrival of the rule of God in Jesus’s words and works. Those

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<sup>8</sup>G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 9.

<sup>9</sup>Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 185.

who live by Jesus's ethical teaching manifest the values of the rule of God to the world as salt and light (5:13–16).”<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:17–7:12 is the main body of the sermon and begins and ends with verses speaking of the Law and the Prophets. In 5:17 Jesus points out that he has come, not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them. Then in 7:12 he says to do to others what you would have them do to you, summarizing the entire Law and the Prophets. In other words, the main point of the sermon is to teach Christ's followers a lifestyle that is focused on the good of others and not self. This summary statement is not meant as a moralistic law implemented for those trying to earn God's favor. This command is given to those participating in the Kingdom through repentance and faith. Turner helpfully recaps,

With the summarizing statement of the Golden Rule in 7:12, the sermon's main body has concluded. Jesus has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets (5:17), and he requires that his disciples do no less. The summation of the law as loving one's neighbor or doing for others whatever one would like them to do to oneself is therefore not a higher law that replaces the Torah but the true goal of the law.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Jesus ends the Sermon with imagery that calls the listener to act on what he or she has heard. While France divides 7:13–27 into four illustrations and in reality, there are only three, his summary of the conclusion is helpful when he says, “What follows is a series of four short sketches which underline the importance of an existential response to what has been heard and warn of the consequences of failing to respond.”<sup>12</sup>

Once the student has understood the passage itself, the study must expand to the surrounding context. With the Sermon on the Mount, this means seeing what comes

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<sup>10</sup>David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 143.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>12</sup>R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 285.

immediately before in the book of Matthew. In Matthew 4:17, Jesus began His public ministry, and Matthew summarizes it by saying that His message was centered on the arrival of God's kingdom. Again in 4:23 the reader finds Jesus traveling throughout Galilee teaching the gospel of the kingdom, healing and casting out demons. Mark Strauss points out that these verses mean that the Sermon on the Mount is a prime example of the proclamation of the Kingdom. He writes, "The Sermon on the Mount provides the example par excellence of Jesus' teaching: his inaugural kingdom address. In it Jesus identifies himself as the true interpreter of the Old Testament law and the one who fulfills its purpose."<sup>13</sup>

Once the student has placed the Sermon into its immediate context, he would need to place the text within the context of the book as a whole. Within Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount is one of five major discourses Jesus gives. Matthew pairs each discourse with a section of narrative that covers a common theme.<sup>14</sup> For example, the Sermon on the Mount teaches the kingdom ethics of Christ's disciples, and chapters 8–9 describe the arrival of the kingdom through powerful healings and the defeat of the powers of darkness.

Finally, to truly apply biblical theology to the Sermon on the Mount, the student must place the Sermon within the broader context of Scripture. James Hamilton summarizes the place of the Sermon in the storyline of Scripture, "The seed of the woman, born of a virgin to save his people from their sins, comes up from Egypt, passes through the waters, faces down temptation in the wilderness, gathers his fishermen, then ascends the mountain to give his people a new word from God."<sup>15</sup> The kingdom which

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<sup>13</sup>Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 228.

<sup>14</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1997), 128.

<sup>15</sup>Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, loc. 8666, Kindle.



was forfeited with the sin of Adam was brought to earth through the coming of Christ. This Sermon expounds the lifestyle of those who have repented of sin and entered the kingdom by faith.<sup>16</sup>

If one is going to view Scripture as a single story and fit each passage within its proper context, it is vital to wrestle with the unity and diversity found within the biblical account. Attempts to show the relationship between the New Testament and the Old Testament have filled the history of interpretation, and these ideas have many times emphasized the distinctions more than the similarities.<sup>17</sup> The Bible has arrived to the modern reader in a variety of genres and languages. Yet, the great diversity of genres rally together to expand and teach the same storyline. Beale shows that the way biblical theology focuses on the story of Scripture is still possible and preferable to other methods of biblical theology, even in light of the great diversity found in the Bible. He writes, “Instead, it is more fitting and suitable to the Bible as narrative and literature to talk of the ‘storyline’ that is woven through the various genres of the OT (historical narrative, prophetic, poetic, wisdom, etc.), from which most other significant ideas are derived and are to be seen as subordinate and explanatory of parts of the storyline.”<sup>18</sup>

Once one understands the nature of biblical theology as a progressively unfolding story, it is necessary to be clear about the climax of that story, the person and work of Jesus Christ. Throughout the Old Testament expectations have been set that have yet to be realized. Throughout the New Testament, the biblical authors expound the meaning of the person and work of the fulfiller of those expectations, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>16</sup>Only three circles of contextual meaning have been examined here to serve as representative of this method of study.

<sup>17</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, “Relationship of Old Testament and New Testament,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. Brian S. Rosner et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 81–89.

<sup>18</sup>Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 86.

Graeme Goldsworthy explains this clearly,

Because Christ sums up the whole of biblical revelation, what is revealed of him controls the way we do biblical theology. The historic event of Jesus of Nazareth is God's fullest self-disclosure to mankind. It brings to full clarity what has been present in the Old Testament as a shadow from the beginning. Although Christ is the fulfillment and the solid reality, he cannot be understood in isolation from the promises and shadows in the Old Testament. From our starting point with Christ we find ourselves moving backward and forward between the two Testaments. Our understanding of the gospel is enhanced by our understanding of its Old Testament roots, and at the same time the gospel shows us the true meaning of the Old Testament.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, the first major aspect of biblical theology understands Scripture as a unified story which progressively unfolds with Christ as the center. The second vital facet of biblical theology is that the interpretive perspective of the author will impact how each part of the unified story relates to the whole.

Hamilton uses the phrase, "the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors,"<sup>20</sup> to summarize biblical theology. This means that we take what the biblical authors wrote on their terms. We start with the presuppositions that the biblical texts are inspired and authoritative and that we must submit to their view of reality and not vice versa. Hamilton further defines this interpretive perspective beyond simple authority when he says, "It's the framework of assumptions and presuppositions, associations and identifications, truths and symbols that are taken for granted as an author or speaker describes the world and the events that take place in it."<sup>21</sup>

In other words, the inspired writers of Scripture all describe the same house from the inside. They may use different words and describe different rooms, but each author contributes to the same story and describes the same Author. Biblical theology is

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<sup>19</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 76.

<sup>20</sup>James Hamilton Jr., *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 15.

<sup>21</sup>Hamilton, 15.

the attempt to come to understand that story world or plotline into which every biblical text fits. It is the attempt to fit every text into the overarching narrative from each author's perspective.

So, biblical theology is the interpretive assumptions and worldview of the biblical authors that leads them to write each book, regardless of genre, to contribute to one unified story. Brian Rosner gives a helpful definition of biblical theology that fuses these two concepts when he says,

Biblical theology may be defined as theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyse and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, it would be unhelpful to speak of biblical theology without ending the same place Rosner's definition ends. What is the ultimate purpose of the story that the biblical authors tell with one unified perspective? In the words of Colossians 1:16 the ultimate purpose is that "all things were created through him and for him." Biblical theology has a focus on the risen Christ that shapes how we see the entire story.

### **Matthew and Biblical Theology**

If biblical theology is the attempt to tell *the* story, then how does the book of Matthew fit into that story? In order for this study on Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount to proclaim the gospel properly so people can practice the gospel consistently, it has to incorporate the major tenants of biblical theology into every section with the ultimate goal of aiding the preaching of the Sermon on the Mount. David Helm describes the impact biblical theology has on preaching when he says, "The discipline of biblical theology offers preachers a certain benefit. It prevents merely intellectual or moralistic

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<sup>22</sup>Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. Brian S. Rosner et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 10.

preaching. To put that positively, it brings you—legitimately—to the heart of the Christian gospel from particular texts in the Bible. It keeps the main thing the main thing.”<sup>23</sup>

In order to draw the attention to the pearl of the gospel, there are two concepts from biblical theology that are vital to preaching the Gospel of Matthew. First, if biblical theology is about seeing the larger story of Scripture as single unit, then it is vital to see Matthew’s account of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. In fact, for those who read the early chapters of Matthew, this is exactly what they will find. Repeatedly, Matthew presents Jesus as the culmination of Israel’s expectations.

The book begins in Matthew 1:1 with an allusion to the book of Genesis. Matthew begins with the Greek words *biblos geneseos*, which are used in the LXX in Genesis 2:4 and 5:1. G. K. Beale points out the significance of this allusion, “The point is that Matthew is narrating the record of the new age, the new creation, launched by the coming, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>24</sup> Then Matthew follows this allusion with a genealogy of the ancestors of Jesus and highlighting Abraham and David in Matthew 1:1–17. Both Abraham and David are key figures in the history of Israel, and both were given covenantal promises which Matthew sees as finding fulfillment in Jesus (Genesis 12:1–3; 22:15–18; 2 Samuel 7:5–16; Isaiah 9:2–7; 11:1–5).

Beyond the specific mentions of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament expectations, there are several major canonical themes which dominate the book of Matthew that are clearly traced throughout the Old Testament.<sup>25</sup> These motifs show that Matthew’s primary concerns are the same as the Old Testament writers, indicating that they are telling the same story.

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<sup>23</sup>David R. Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God’s Word Today* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 69.

<sup>24</sup>Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 389.

<sup>25</sup>For lack of space these themes, other than kingdom, will not be discussed at length in this first chapter. They are God’s presence with humanity, the mission to the Gentiles, the return from exile, and the new creation.

Matthew's major theme of kingdom is a predominant Old Testament motif. In Matthew, Jesus came preaching the kingdom (4:17, 23; 9:35), and His ministry was centered on that key theme. If one were reading the book of Matthew in isolation it would be difficult to understand exactly what Jesus was getting at by preaching the kingdom and announcing its arrival. As Graeme Goldsworthy states regarding the kingdom, "The evidence of the NT overwhelmingly supports the view that Jesus and the apostles understood the kingdom of God as the fulfillment of the hopes and promises recorded in the sacred Scriptures of the OT."<sup>26</sup>

The impetus for this statement is found in the very first chapter of Genesis. God created a good world and placed the man and woman in this good world to serve as his stewards. They would do this by having dominion over the earth and reigning as God's representatives (Gen 1:26–28). This possibility of kingly rule was forfeited through a terrible rebellion in Genesis 3. In Genesis 3:15 God promises the defeat of the serpent through the offspring of the woman, giving great hope to humanity. The restoration of Eden and the realization of God's rule over the world through humanity will one day be won by a coming descendent.

As the biblical story unfolds, it becomes clear that this victory will be won by a King (Gen 49:10). As God's chosen people enter the land they have been promised, God uses the Davidic kings to represent the rule of God, or His kingdom.<sup>27</sup> He also promises David that one of his descendants will reign forever (2 Sam 7:16). The prophets, particularly Isaiah, pick up this expectation of a King who will defeat God's enemies and restore the righteous reign of God.

With the expectations of the Old Testament serving as background, it should

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<sup>26</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, "The Kingdom of God," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. Brian S. Rosner et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 618.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*, 619.

be clear what Jesus was doing when He announced the arrival of God's kingdom.

Thomas Schreiner explains, "The arrival of the kingdom of heaven meant that God's enemies would be destroyed, and that the godly would enjoy a new world where peace reigned."<sup>28</sup> In his discussion of the purpose of the gospels, Jonathan Pennington gives a helpful summary of the arrival of this kingdom through the work of Christ.

But for now we can observe that the New Testament authors, building especially on the Isaianic vision, define the 'gospel' as Jesus's effecting the long awaited return of God himself as King, in the power of the Spirit bringing his people back from exile and into the true promised land of a new creation, forgiving their sins, and fulfilling all the promises of God and the hopes of his people.<sup>29</sup>

When specifically addressing the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7, it becomes clear that Jesus is preaching the Kingdom as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. This sermon comes right after 4:17, 23 which tell us that the primary content of Christ's preaching was the gospel of the kingdom. Carson summarizes the intention of the sermon by saying, "It provides ethical guidelines for life in the kingdom, but does so within an explanation of the place of the contemporary setting within redemption history and Jesus' relation to the OT (5:17–20)."<sup>30</sup> Those who have embraced Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, as presented in Matthew 1–4, are guided by these kingdom principles given in the Sermon on the Mount.

A second key concept of biblical theology necessary for preaching Matthew in general and the Sermon on the Mount in particular is the biblical author's interpretive perspective. James Hamilton describes this approach when he says, "The biblical authors model a perspective for interpreting the Bible, history, and current events. Should we adopt that perspective today? Absolutely. Why? I'm convinced that the biblical authors

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<sup>28</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 443.

<sup>29</sup>Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 16.

<sup>30</sup>D. A. Carson, *Matthew and Mark*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 157.

were inspired by the Holy Spirit, that God guided them to the truth by his Spirit, and that, therefore, they got it right.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, as we read the Gospel of Matthew, we must try to understand Matthew’s perspective on earlier biblical texts and on the story of Scripture as a whole.

Matthew was a Jew, and this gospel turns out to be the most Jewish of the four gospels. Matthew wants to affirm great continuity with the Old Testament but also show how the coming of Christ has inaugurated something new. D. A. Hagner describes Matthew’s perspective this way, “If we are to understand the evangelist we must think of him first of all as a Jew who believes that his Jewish faith has not been abolished, but rather fulfilled in Christ.”<sup>32</sup> One of the key passages in the sermon speaks of Matthew’s perspective of Christ when Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

In the gospel of Matthew this “interpretive perspective” also shows up powerfully in the way Matthew wrote the first four chapters. Matthew could have simply said that Jesus is the true Israel, and he succeeds where Israel failed because that is the major point of the first portion of the book. However, Matthew wrote these chapters with the “dramatic interest” Vos spoke of concerning biblical theology.<sup>33</sup> As the reader interacts with the text he must experience the story itself and not simply mine the story for a propositional statement to summarize and move on.<sup>34</sup>

Christ as the true Israel is worked out as Matthew describes the actions of

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<sup>31</sup>Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, 21.

<sup>32</sup>Donald A Hagner, “Matthew,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. Brian S. Rosner et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 262.

<sup>33</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 17.

<sup>34</sup>Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 180. Pennington is very helpful in guiding the reader to experience the story and not simply search for a single sentence propositional truth. “Because the story is not only about the analysis of the plot or the idea or the truth that may come from the story – though those can all be important – but rather the story itself is to be experienced, and therein lies its power and effectiveness.”

Christ as fulfilling certain OT passages and themes. Beginning in 1:1–17, Matthew shows Jesus as the culmination of Israel’s history and particularly of the promises made to Abraham and David. In 2:13–14 Jesus flees to Egypt when Herod threatens to destroy all the male children in Bethlehem and then he returns to the Promised Land from Egypt, as Israel had done. In 2:15 Matthew describes this exit and return to the Promised Land as fulfilling a prophecy from Hosea 11:1 where God says, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Before he can embark on his work in the Promised Land, Jesus must pass through the waters of baptism as Israel passed through the Red Sea (3:13–17). Again, Matthew quotes the words of Jesus in 3:15 that this was done “to fulfill all righteousness.” After passing through the waters, Jesus enters the wilderness where he spends forty days and forty nights and is tempted by the Devil (4:1–11). He answers Satan’s temptations by quoting three passages from Deuteronomy, all of which address Israel’s failure to obey God in their sojourn in the wilderness (4:4, 6, 10). Finally, in chapter 4 Jesus enters the land and begins to have victory over the powers of darkness while proclaiming the arrival of his kingdom. G. K. Beale points out the significance of Matthew’s approach.

Matthew portrays Jesus to be recapitulating the history of Israel because he sums up Israel in himself. Since Israel disobeyed, Jesus has come to do what it should have, so he must retrace Israel’s steps up to the point where it failed and then continue to obey and succeed in the mission that Israel should have carried out.<sup>35</sup>

Why would Matthew present Jesus as the recapitulation of Israel’s history? He had a particular perspective or worldview that came through in the way he presented the work of Jesus. The task of biblical theology is to examine the literature that Matthew wrote and try to understand the symbols, types, patterns and allusions he used to make his theological point. In this instance, Matthew views Jesus as the true Israel who traces the pattern of Israel’s history in order to succeed where Israel failed and bring righteousness to those who so desperately needed it (1:21).

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<sup>35</sup>Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 406.



## Matthew and the Local Church

During the time of writing this thesis, I have transitioned from being an associate pastor at Timberlake Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, to being the senior pastor at Woodhaven Bible Church in Woodhaven, Michigan. As I am becoming more familiar with the ministry at Woodhaven, I am seeing the need to move this ministry from a major focus on instruction to the primary focus of discipleship. Of course, biblical discipleship includes instruction in the Word according to Matthew 28:18–20, but it is possible to emphasize teaching and instruction without making the connection to discipleship. Studying the Sermon on the Mount would aid in the task of developing leaders and encouraging discipleship for three primary reasons.

First, the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5–7, is one of the most significant sections of Scripture for guiding the growth of believers. Charles Quarles explains, “For those who affirm the deity and authority of the Lord Jesus, no portion of Scripture could possibly be more important for defining the nature of Christian discipleship and the lofty ethic that should characterize God's people.”<sup>36</sup> If the goal of Woodhaven Bible Church is to foster discipleship within the church body, the “nature of Christian discipleship and the lofty ethic” found in the Sermon can be used as a primary means to accomplish that growth.

Second, to grow as disciples, it is necessary to understand both the content of Scripture as well as *how* to read the Bible. A series on the Sermon on the Mount will have a primary goal of showing the congregation how to study Scripture in context. This means putting the Sermon on the Mount within the narrative flow of the book of Matthew as well as within the larger flow of the storyline of the Bible. Pennington explains how the proper study of the Gospels holds both the Old Testament writings and the New

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<sup>36</sup>Charles L. Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2011), 1.

Testament epistles together. He writes,

So too, the fourfold Gospel book functions as the portion of Holy Scripture that is so fitted and placed that it holds together the archway with its two sides—the Old Testament Scripture on the one side and the rest of the New Testament writings on the other. The Gospel accounts complete and make ultimate sense of the story of God’s work in the world as found in the Jewish Scriptures, while at the same time they serve as the fountainhead for the rest of the apostolic witness and teaching.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, the Old Testament finds its fulfillment and culmination in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It will be vitally important for church members to see the way the Old Testament prepares for Christ and how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament (5:17–20).

Finally, a series on the Sermon on the Mount will have the goal of holding up the grace of Jesus Christ for the enjoyment and transformation of the church. Hebrews 1:1–3 presents Jesus Christ as the final revelation of God, and it is through his person and work that the church is transformed to be more like him. Second Corinthians 3:18 points out that as we behold the glory of the Lord, we will be changed from one degree of glory to another. The transformation does not happen through human effort, and the “lofty ethic” of the Sermon cannot be produced apart from the grace of Christ. Instead of bringing the believer to despair because of his inability to obey the demands of the Sermon on the Mount, Quarles points out that the Sermon is a tool God uses to produce this righteousness by his power. He writes,

Although the SM may drive sinners to seek God’s forgiving grace, the sermon was intended to be a description of the effects of God’s transforming grace. Believers should recognize that the righteousness described in the SM is not attained through mere human effort. On the contrary this amazing righteousness is progressively produced in Jesus’ disciples through the expression of God’s saving power.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, the goal is that a sermon series from the Sermon on the Mount will progressively produce this “amazing righteousness” in the church body at Woodhaven

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<sup>37</sup>Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 231.

<sup>38</sup>Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount*, 20.

Bible Church as they experience the power of God by understanding the Word of God.

### **Familiarity with Relevant Literature**

The aim of this section will be to show a general familiarity with 8–10 significant resources that will be used in the Matthew preaching project. The two main categories of literature summarized here will be as follows: first, books discussing the gospels as a genre of literature and detailing interpretive methods along with historical and cultural background information, and second, commentaries that specifically cover the book of Matthew.

#### **Gospels as Genre**

One of the primary books in this section will be Jonathan Pennington's work *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. This book provides rich discussion regarding the genre of gospel, the reason for four Gospels and not one, and the importance of the Gospels as stories. His definition of a gospel will prove helpful in understanding Matthew's place in the biblical theological storyline. "Our canonical Gospels are the theological, historical, and aretological (virtue-forming) biographical narratives that retell the story and proclaim the significance of Jesus Christ, who through the power of the Spirit is the Restorer of God's reign."<sup>39</sup>

Another important work dealing with the Gospels as a genre will be *Four Portraits, One Jesus* by Mark Strauss.<sup>40</sup> This work is ambitious in scope but manages to provide enough helpful detail in the summaries of the Gospels. In fact, the summaries of each of the Gospels are well crafted and give a succinct overview of the argument of each book. This is very beneficial in gaining the big picture and flow of the narrative. Strauss goes into more detail than Pennington on the historical and cultural background and

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<sup>39</sup>Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 35.

<sup>40</sup>Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus*.

provides discussions on various topics within the Gospels such as parables, miracles, and the words and actions of Jesus.

A massive work that touches on nearly every area of biblical theology is the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by Brian S. Rosner, T. Desmond Alexander, D. A. Carson and Graeme Goldsworthy.<sup>41</sup> This dictionary provides concise articles dealing with biblical theology from a number of angles including, preaching and biblical theology, systematic theology and biblical theology, and a clear definition of biblical theology. There are articles explaining the role of the various periods in biblical history and how they fit into the storyline of Scripture as well as articles discussing the role of each book in biblical theology. Finally, two-thirds of the book is made up of articles tracing various themes throughout the canon of Scripture. This work will be quite helpful in putting Matthew in its proper place within the canon of Scripture as well as understanding from a biblical theological perspective the various themes addressed in Matthew.

*The Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church* by Charles Quarles will be an important resource dealing specifically with Matthew 5–7.<sup>42</sup> This volume is part of the NAC Studies in Bible and Theology, which is edited by E. Ray Clendenen. This particular volume will be helpful in determining the interpretive approach to be used when studying the Sermon on the Mount. Quarles notes in the preface that he felt there was a substantial enough gap in the literature on the Sermon on the Mount to warrant this work. He summarizes his purpose by saying, “Few texts deal with the important questions of whether believers may live by the Sermon on the Mount today and, if so, how. This commentary was written to fill that perceived gap in hopes

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<sup>41</sup>Brian S. Rosner et al., eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000).

<sup>42</sup>Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount*.

that this crucial section of our Lord's teaching may be restored to its proper place in His church."<sup>43</sup>

### **Commentaries on Matthew**

The *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, edited by D. A. Carson and G. K. Beale, is an important work that has a section on every book in the NT. This project will be mainly dealing with the section on Matthew, authored by Craig Blomberg.<sup>44</sup> The goal of this volume is to discuss the passages in Scripture where the author quotes or alludes to the Old Testament. Each passage is broken down into multiple sections. First, the author gives the NT context for the quotation or allusion. Second, he gives the OT context from which the allusion or quotation was drawn. Third, he shows how Jewish scholars have understood this OT passage. Fourth, he dives into the textual background and shows whether the passage was taken from the LXX or the Hebrew text and any textual issues that go with the quotation. Fifth, Blomberg attempts to show the hermeneutic being employed by the NT author. Finally, the theological use of the OT quotation or allusion is summarized. This work will be very helpful in connecting the Gospel of Matthew to the Old Testament and in understanding the interpretive perspective of Matthew, the author.

A vital commentary for my exposition on the Sermon on the Mount will be Scot McKnight's enlightening work *Sermon on the Mount* in The Story of God Bible Commentary series.<sup>45</sup> McKnight has an excellent grasp on the Old Testament background to the sermon and rightfully places the sermon within the proper Greco-Roman context.

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<sup>43</sup>Quarles, xiii.

<sup>44</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Carson and G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

<sup>45</sup>Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

His discussion of the Greek word *makarios*, which is normally translated “blessing,” is quite helpful in setting the stage for how the sermon functions and can be applied.

Another key aspect of biblical theology is to see each text within the literary flow of the narrative in which it falls. Understanding the details of the text will be aided by consulting several major commentaries. The first is *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing* by Jonathan Pennington.<sup>46</sup> Pennington’s work provides much of the background understanding of the Sermon on the Mount as a guide to human flourishing. His book was not released until the last few months of this project and so is not cited until the last couple of chapters. However, the root understanding of the Sermon presented in this work reflects Pennington’s understanding of Matthew 5–7. Another commentary to be consulted often will be R. T. France’s work *The Gospel of Matthew*.<sup>47</sup> France has written elsewhere on the academic issues surrounding Matthew, but he states that this volume “is intended for the use of those who are seeking help in understanding and appreciating the text.”<sup>48</sup> France writes from an evangelical perspective and also walks the reader through the text verse by verse. Also of key importance will be Charles Talbert’s book *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5–7*. His explanation of the Sermon on the Mount as a guide to character formation has shaped much of the discussion in this work. Also, David Turner’s commentary on Matthew from the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament will be consulted.<sup>49</sup> This commentary mixes the exegesis of the text with sound exposition and will be most helpful in understanding the Sermon on the Mount and the impact it should have on today’s reader. Last, one cannot interact with the Sermon on the

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<sup>46</sup>Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

<sup>47</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid*, 1.

<sup>49</sup>Turner, *Matthew*.

Mount in a significant way without consulting Davies and Allison's massive three-volume work on the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>50</sup>

### Chapter Divisions

After being introduced to Jesus as the one who fulfills the expectations of the Old Testament, Matthew 5–7 gives the reader the first of five discourses of the Savior's teaching. The Sermon on the Mount has been one of the most studied and quoted passages throughout the history of the church. Because of this keen interest, a variety of quite diverse interpretations have been espoused over the centuries. In his commentary on Matthew, Carson lists eight common interpretive positions taken on the Sermon.<sup>51</sup> Harvey McArthur lists twelve approaches in his book *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*.<sup>52</sup>

In his study on the Sermon on the Mount, Charles Quarles gives a brief, yet helpful history of the interpretation of the Sermon.<sup>53</sup> Despite the nuances within the different approaches, the major distinctions hinge on whether the interpreter finds the ethics of the Sermon possible and applicable for believers within the church. The Lutheran view sees the Sermon as “an exposition of law designed to drive people to cry for grace.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, the standards were so lofty that the only possible reaction was to recognize one's inability and beg for mercy. While the Lutheran view proposes that the purpose of the Sermon is to function as law, the classic dispensational position

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<sup>50</sup>W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004).

<sup>51</sup>Carson, *Matthew and Mark*, 155–57.

<sup>52</sup>Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*. (New York: Harper, 1960), 106–27.

<sup>53</sup>Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount*, 4–11.

<sup>54</sup>Carson, *Matthew and Mark*, 155.

sees the Sermon as livable, but not within the current time.<sup>55</sup>

In distinction to these two approaches, along with others mentioned in the above works, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are both possible and applicable for believers. This point of view is tied closely to how one understands the kingdom Jesus preached in the gospels. Since the kingdom was inaugurated with the coming of Christ and the Sermon on the Mount concerns the ethics of the kingdom, the sermon is for disciples of all ages and not just the future messianic kingdom. Charles Quarles summarizes by saying, “The Sermon on the Mount expresses a kingdom ethic. Since Jesus’ kingdom has already been inaugurated, the ethic of the Sermon is the goal and ideal for Christian disciples here and now.”<sup>56</sup> Of course, in this present life believers will never obey the commands of the Sermon on the Mount with sinless perfection. However, this does not mean that the purpose of the Sermon is to only show them their need for a Savior. The Sermon provides the guidelines for kingdom disciples as they make their way toward the final consummation of the heavenly kingdom, and believers can expect to make genuine progress. As Craig Blomberg says, “We can expect the Spirit to empower us to make substantial strides in obedience, even as we recognize that our sinfulness will prevent us from ever coming close to attaining God’s standards.”<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, it is vital to see the Sermon on the Mount as a kingdom sermon. As Mark Strauss points out, “The Sermon on the Mount provides the example par excellence of Jesus’ teaching: his inaugural kingdom address. In it Jesus identifies himself as the true interpreter of the Old Testament law and the one who fulfills its purpose.”<sup>58</sup> But this address is not aimed at the general population. Matthew makes it quite clear in the

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<sup>55</sup>Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount*, 9–10.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid, 10.

<sup>57</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 95.

<sup>58</sup>Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus*, 228.



opening verses of chapter 5 that this sermon is addressed primarily to Christ's disciples.

As followers of Christ, one of the most difficult aspects of the faith is living in constant tension. We exist as members of the already inaugurated kingdom. Yet, we recognize the kingdom has not come in all its fullness, and we long for that day. But longing must not turn to laziness. Christ has outlined a clear ethical call in Matthew 5–7 to be salt and light as kingdom citizens in this foreign land. In his excellent book, *Heaven on Earth*, Stephen Nichols describes the church's task with clarity.

Christians do not reveal their heavenly citizenship by simply pining away for the blessed life to come. Rather, they show their citizenship by bringing heaven to earth. Our calling is not to sit along the sidelines and wait for the world to come. Instead, our calling is to bring heaven here, to live in light of heaven's realities now, to show the citizens of these earthly and temporal countries that there is a far better, eternal country.<sup>59</sup>

In light of this tension, a discussion on the kingdom sermon of Matthew 5–7 will help believers to navigate life on this earth as heavenly citizens.

### **Matthew 1–4**

While Matthew 1–4 does not serve as the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, these chapters do introduce us to the person and work of Jesus in a way that prepares us to hear the teaching of the Sermon. These chapters present Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament expectations and the typological culmination of the entire scope of the Old Testament narrative. Matthew presents Jesus as the last Adam, the true Israel, the new David, and the new Moses.

### **Matthew 5:1–12**

Jesus begins the sermon by giving a series of statements outlining certain character qualities called *makarisms*. The interpretation of these qualities and the

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<sup>59</sup>Stephen J. Nichols, *Heaven on Earth: Capturing Jonathan Edwards's Vision of Living in Between* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 48.

promises that go with them depends on one's understanding of the Greek word *makarios*. In the Beatitudes Christ paints a compelling picture of the virtues descriptive of kingdom disciples, and those who inculcate these qualities can be described as "flourishing."

### **Matthew 5:13–16**

After explaining the virtues of the citizens of his kingdom, Jesus explains how they must relate to the world around them in terms of beneficial influence. As his disciples live in accordance with their status as kingdom citizens, they will be persecuted (vs. 11–12). However, this persecution must not keep them from engaging the world around them; they must seek to do good without becoming tainted by the sinful patterns of living they encounter. David Turner summarizes this idea when he says, "As salt, Jesus's disciples must engage the world, but as light, they must never allow their engagement to lead to the compromise of kingdom values and their assimilation to the world. Jesus perfectly and harmoniously models both images."<sup>60</sup> Of course, in the Old Testament Israel has consistently failed to engage the world with the light of God's glory without being tainted by it.

### **Matthew 5:17–48**

Matthew 5:17–20 are perhaps the most significant verses for understanding the Sermon on the Mount. D. A. Carson explains the monumental influence of one's interpretation when he says,

The theological and canonical ramifications of one's exegetical conclusions on this pericope are so numerous that discussion becomes freighted with the intricacies of biblical theology. At stake are the relation between the Testaments, the place of law in the context of gospel, and the relation of this pericope to other NT passages that unambiguously affirm that certain parts of the law have been abrogated as obsolete (e.g. Mk 7:19; Ac 10–11; Heb. 7:1–9:10).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Turner, *Matthew*, 156.

<sup>61</sup>Carson, *Matthew and Mark*, 171.

It is in this passage that the reader must understand both Christ's relationship to what has come before and His creation of something new. The bottom line is that Jesus has not come to destroy the Old, but has come to fulfill it. All the expectations of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Him, and the eschatological kingdom is realized in His very presence. Craig Blomberg's summary is helpful: "Jesus has not come to abolish the Old Testament. But neither is he preserving all things unchanged. In 'fulfilling' the Law, he is bringing to completion all that to which it pointed."<sup>62</sup>

After summarizing his relationship to the Law and the expectations of the Old Testament, Jesus gives multiple examples of how He fulfills the Law in these verses. France says this, "These six varied topics illustrate the concept of a righteousness which goes beyond the legal correctness of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20). Each is presented in the form of a contrast (hence the frequent description of this section as 'the antithesis') between what 'was said' and Jesus' own more demanding ethic."<sup>63</sup> Christ's kingdom demands a lofty and sobering ethic, and the final words of this section would have been shocking to the Jewish crowds listening. "You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

### **Matthew 6:1–21**

In Matthew 6, Jesus speaks about three religious practices which are often abused for the purposes of self-promotion and to earn approval in the eyes of men. These practices are almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Jesus sets the standard for those living in the kingdom of heaven and points out that the righteousness of his kingdom is more than an external righteousness. The righteousness Jesus calls for must impact the disciples to the level of motivation. Matthew 6:1 summarizes the entire section of 6:1–21 with these

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<sup>62</sup>Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 249.

<sup>63</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 194.

words, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”

### **Matthew 6:19–7:12**

After exposing the shallowness of external righteousness in 6:1–21, Jesus turns to address the way a disciple lives in the world in relation to others. He does this in two parts. First, he addresses desire for earthly wealth as well as anxiety over the basic necessities of life. Instead of serving the master of temporary needs, we ought to “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” D. A. Carson summarizes the text well, “Having excoriated religious piety that is little more than ostentation, Jesus warns against the opposite sins of greed, materialism, and worry that stem from misplaced and worldly priorities. Instead, he demands unswerving loyalty to kingdom values (vv. 19–24) and uncompromised trust (vv. 25–34).”<sup>64</sup>

Having just discussed the relationship between members of His kingdom and earthly necessities, which affect those around us, Jesus moves to a discussion of how those in His kingdom handle interpersonal relationships. Davies and Allison comment, “Matthew now turns from one social issue, what to do with and about mammon (6:19–34), to another, how to treat one’s neighbor.”<sup>65</sup> With perhaps the most abused words in all of Scripture, Jesus tells His followers that they must not judge others improperly (vv. 1–5), but they must also be discerning in their dealings with others (v. 6). We must treat others in much the same way our heavenly Father has treated us, with grace and generosity (vv. 7–11). This section is summarized by verse 12. “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” With this statement, Jesus summarizes the way kingdom members treat others as well as brings

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<sup>64</sup>Carson, *Matthew and Mark*, 211.

<sup>65</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 668.

the main body of the sermon to a close. Turner explains,

With the summarizing statement of the Golden Rule in 7:12, the sermon's main body has concluded. Jesus has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets (5:17), and he requires that his disciples do no less. The summation of the law as loving one's neighbor or doing for others whatever one would like them to do to oneself is therefore not a higher law that replaces the Torah but the true goal of the law.<sup>66</sup>

### **Conclusion: Matthew 7:13–29**

Now that Jesus has finished the main body of the sermon, he moves to a conclusion that calls for a response from the hearers. With abrupt imagery Jesus presses those listening to act on what they have heard. He gives three illustrations which divide those listening into two groups. The major difference between the two groups identified here is that one group acts on what they have heard, and the other fails to act. Both groups hear the words, but only one group continues in what it hears and puts it into practice. The crowds respond by recognizing the authoritative proclamation they have just heard. In fact, there is a noticeable difference between what they have just heard from Jesus and the scribes whom they are used to hearing (vv. 28–29).

### **Thesis**

Having developed the principles of biblical theology used in this thesis, it is important to clearly state the scope and goal of this project. This work will be used as an aid to preaching the Sermon on the Mount highlighting the themes of kingdom, righteousness, and human flourishing. Biblical Theology as a discipline provides the perspective necessary to bring these themes together in the Sermon. The objective of the Sermon on the Mount is to teach disciples of Christ what it looks like to live now as citizens of the kingdom, who live righteous lives, with the result that they flourish as human beings. These themes will be worked out through five chapters walking the reader

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<sup>66</sup>Turner, *Matthew*, 212.

through the Sermon on the Mount and a conclusion showing the importance of application and how the Sermon relates to the overall biblical picture of sanctification. Since the goal of this thesis is to teach the Sermon on the Mount and grow disciples to Christlikeness, it is important to begin with a study of the person of Jesus from Matthew 1–4. This second chapter will set the groundwork for the one preaching the Sermon.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PORTRAIT OF THE PREACHER (MATTHEW 1–4)

Imagine for a moment that you have been invited to a prestigious state dinner at the White House with many foreign dignitaries, celebrities, and politicians. It is quite an impressive guest list, and your head is still spinning that you are on it. As the day draws closer another letter from the White House arrives in the mail outlining the events for the evening, and you glance through it with eager anticipation. You suddenly discover the reason for your invitation to this dinner, and your heart begins to race like a bicycle with no brakes. Your best friend has recently won an important award, and he will be giving the keynote speech at this dinner. His name appears near the bottom of the program, but you are shocked to see that your name appears right above your friend's because you will be doing his introduction.

At this point it would be appropriate to experience a small amount of panic. What will you say? How will you introduce your friend to this group of people? It is quite clear that most of the people in attendance will have no idea about the work your friend has done or have not even heard his name. Regardless, your name appears on the program, so you sit down with a blank piece of paper and begin to ponder what in the world you are going to say.

You want the audience to listen well to your friend because you know he has done significant work, and he deserves a hearing with even the best and brightest in the world. But how can you set him up for success in the two to three minutes that you have for an introduction?

A good introduction can significantly influence how the audience listens to a

speech and perceives a speaker, especially if the listeners are unfamiliar with him. One author said this about the purpose of the introduction, “A good introduction should answer 3 questions: why this speaker, on this subject, to this audience? The idea is to build the speaker up in the audience’s mind.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, put yourself in the shoes of Matthew, the gospel writer, and imagine him sitting down to pen an introduction to the greatest sermon ever preached, found in Matthew 5–7. How does he prepare his immediate audience and all subsequent audiences to hear the words of Jesus spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount? Why should they listen to this speaker on this subject at this time? Yet, for Matthew, it is not enough to simply get the audience to hear the words of Jesus. At the very end of His Sermon, Jesus tells the audience that those who merely hear his words and do not do them will be like a man building his house upon sand (Matt 7:26–27). His life will be flimsy and unable to stand the storms that will surely come.

In light of these words, Matthew cannot simply tell his audience to listen to Jesus. He must present a portrait of this preacher so compelling and so attractive that his audience will hear the words of Jesus and act on them. And what better way to present the person and work of Jesus to his audience than portraying Jesus as the complete fulfillment of Old Testament expectations? Matthew’s gospel brims with Old Testament quotations and allusions.<sup>2</sup> He clearly sees the ways in which the Old Testament has prepared for Jesus to come.

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<sup>1</sup>Nick Morgan, “How to introduce a speaker — the art of giving (and receiving) a great introduction.” Nov. 26, 2011, accessed on 9/15/15 <http://publicwords.com/how-to-introduce-a-speaker-the-art-of-giving-and-receiving-a-great-introduction/>

<sup>2</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 10. “The UBS Greek New Testament lists fifty-four direct citations of the OT in Matthew and a further 262 ‘allusions and verbal parallels,’ and that is a conservative figure based only on the most widely recognized allusions.”



### Matthew's Method: Fulfillment by Typology

In order to understand the portrait Matthew is painting in these opening chapters, we must understand what he means when he speaks of Christ fulfilling the Old Testament. Multiple times in chapters 1–4 Matthew uses an Old Testament quotation, ties it to the life of Christ, and speaks of Christ's life as fulfilling this OT text (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14). These are called "fulfillment formulas," and nearly half of the formulas used in Matthew occur in these first four chapters.<sup>3</sup> But even when Matthew does not use the word *fulfillment* in these opening chapters, he is intentionally connecting the life of Jesus to the Old Testament in a manner which leads us to think of Christ bringing the expectations of the Old Testament to completion.<sup>4</sup>

When people normally think of Christ fulfilling the Old Testament, they think of specific predictive prophecies. In other words, we think of a passage like Isaiah 53 that explicitly promises the substitutionary atonement of a future Messiah (Isaiah 53:4–6). They often think of Christ's fulfillment as having a one-to-one equivalence. Some Old Testament passage predicts this here, and some New Testament passage shows us when that prediction was born out in time and space. Often Matthew understands fulfillment to mean something quite a bit different.

When Matthew speaks of Christ fulfilling the Old Testament, whether he uses the word *fulfillment* or not, he is looking beyond the prophecies to the entire shape and scope of the biblical story.<sup>5</sup> Matthew's early chapters are meant to show us the similarities between the narrative in the Old Testament and the life of Jesus. The purpose

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<sup>3</sup>France, 13–14. "Five of the eleven generally recognized formula-quotations occur within the short section 1:18–2:23, where, together with the genealogy of 1:1–17, they form a concentrated 'manifesto' setting out how Jesus the Messiah fulfills the hopes of OT Israel."

<sup>4</sup>Richard B Hays, "The Gospel of Matthew: Reconfigured Torah," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 61, nos. 1–2 (March 2005): 167.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 176. "Matthew is not merely looking for random Old Testament proof-texts that Jesus might somehow fulfill; rather he is thinking about the shape of Israel's story and linking Jesus' life with key passages that promise God's unbreakable redemptive love for his people."

of pointing out these parallels is the assumption that God acts in similar ways repeatedly with his people and that in the life of Jesus the significance of these actions will escalate to an unmatched degree.<sup>6</sup> So, Matthew wants to show his audience that Jesus's life brings the entire story of Israel and ultimately the world to its climax.<sup>7</sup>

One of the primary ways that Matthew presents Jesus as fulfilling the Old Testament is through a technique called *typology*. Francis Foulkes helps us understand typology when he says, "Early Christians often wrote using typological writing, describing a person, event, or thing in the present in terms of a person, event, or thing in Scripture so as to make a claim about the nature of the present person, event, or thing."<sup>8</sup>

Think back to the idea of introducing Jesus, and think of a modern-day equivalent to typology. If you were to introduce and describe a great American leader, you might tell people something like this: "He is a new George Washington in his courage, a new Thomas Jefferson in his intellect, a new Abraham Lincoln in his conviction, and a new Ronald Reagan in his charm." Of course, you would be identifying this one individual with certain characteristics from all these other American leaders. As you did this the reader or listener would get a very vivid image in his or her head of what courage looks like from the life of George Washington and then how a similar courage might be displayed in this new leader. Then your listeners would begin to ponder the other great men listed and make correlations between their lives and the life of the leader you are introducing.

That sort of vivid and compelling introduction is exactly what one finds in

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<sup>6</sup>Francis Foulkes, *The Acts of God: A Study of the Basis of Typology in the Old Testament*, Tyndale Old Testament Lectures (London: Tyndale Press, 1966), 24. "The second great fact on which typology is based is that hope of Israel that not only would God act on principles of His past action, but that He would do so on an unprecedented scale."

<sup>7</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 25.

<sup>8</sup>Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 14.

Matthew 1–4 as Matthew lays out four Vignettes of the Preacher that clarify how people listen to the SM and compel them to obey.<sup>9</sup>

### **Jesus Is the Last Adam**

In order to understand this first vignette of Jesus, we must examine the very beginning of the book in Matthew 1:1. In English the book opens with the phrase, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.” Most modern readers are rather unimpressed by a book of the Bible starting with a genealogy, but this beginning firmly places the book in the context of the history of the nation of Israel and even more firmly as the continuation and culmination of God’s plans for the entire universe.

This phrase in Greek is used only two times in the entire Old Testament, in Genesis 2:4 and 5:1. Rather than translating the word *geneseôs* as “genealogy,” it is better to translate it “genesis” or “beginning.” In other words, this phrase forms the title of the gospel and essentially means we are reading an account of the new creation in contrast to the old creation begun in Genesis.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the creation account in the book of Genesis began with Adam, and this creation account in Matthew begins with Jesus. Both Adam in Genesis 5:1 and Christ in Matthew 1:1 are tied to genealogies. Because of this Matthew seems to have Genesis 5:1 in his mind and therefore is presenting Jesus Christ as the last Adam, or the one who brings the new creation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Talbert, 14. "By reading Matthew 1:1–5:2 consecutively the auditors have a sense of who is speaking in the Sermon. He is son of Abraham, son of David (1:1–17), one conceived by the Spirit (1:18, 20), Savior (1:21), Immanuel (1:23), King of the Jews (2:2), Messiah (2:4), fulfiller of all righteousness (3:15), God's beloved Son (3:17), God's victorious Son (4:1–11), a preacher of repentance (4:17), a gatherer of disciples (4:18–22, 23–25), a healer (4:23–24), and a teacher of disciples (5:1–2). This mountain of praise would prepare the auditors to hear the Sermon as the words of a dominant figure."

<sup>10</sup>W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004), 150. "This in turn suggests that Matthew might have opened his gospel as he did in order to draw a parallel between one beginning and another beginning, between the creation of the cosmos and Adam and Eve on the one hand and the new creation brought by the Messiah on the other."

<sup>11</sup>G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 389. "The point is that Matthew is narrating the record of the new age, the new creation, launched by the coming, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And, since Matthew is narrating a genealogy of Jesus, it is likely that the Gen. 5:1 reference is uppermost in mind, and

The implications of this insight from the very first verse of Matthew's gospel are staggering. Since Matthew puts the age of Jesus, or the new creation, in contrast to the age of Adam, we can expect that Christ's age will make things right that originally went wrong. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in Romans 5:12–21. He points out that death characterized Adam's leadership while life comes with Christ's. We will continue to work out the implications of the new creation in Christ as we study the other portraits Matthew paints in chapters 1–4.

Since we are studying these chapters as an introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, what are the repercussions of the arrival of the new creation for our reading of the Sermon? First, the Sermon on the Mount is new creation teaching. Obeying these commands and living out this ethic becomes a possibility if you have entered the new creation. N. T. Wright explains this important point regarding the Sermon on the Mount when he says, "And that larger truth, in which the Sermon on the Mount makes the excellent sense it does, is this: God's future is arriving in the present, in the person and work of Jesus, and you can practice, right now, the habits of life which will find their goal in that coming future."<sup>12</sup>

Second, because Jesus is the true human image of God, believers can expect His ethical standards and teaching to inform what it means to be truly human as God intended.<sup>13</sup> Adam was created to live in certain ways and according to God's good rule of the universe. Living as God intended would bring peace, joy, and human flourishing. When Adam and Eve decided to subvert God's rule and determine their own good, they

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that Jesus is being painted with the genealogical brush of Adam. And just as Adam created others 'in his own likeness, according to his image' (Gen. 5:3), so would Christ."

<sup>12</sup>N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: Harper One, 2012), 103.

<sup>13</sup>Michael E. Wittmer, *Becoming Worldly Saints: Can You Serve Jesus and Still Enjoy Your Life?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 23. "We learn what it means to be human from Scripture's opening act of creation and what it means to be Christian from its closing act of redemption. If redemption restores creation, then the point of being a Christian is to restore our humanity."

chose a path of frustrating and polluted desires that ultimately led them away from peace and well-being. As Christ inaugurates the new creation, his person and work model how we must live, and his teaching instructs us in how to develop virtues appropriate to the new creation and human well-being.<sup>14</sup>

Third, beyond the ethical teaching concerning what it means to live as truly human, Christ's position as the new Adam is significant because he obeyed as a human being and earned righteousness for those from the human race who would believe in Him. We will discuss Adam's kingly task a bit later, but he failed to accomplish the royal mission he had been given. Jason Hood explains the connection between Adam and Christ when he says, "As the new Adam and the true human, Jesus has accomplished what humanity consistently failed to accomplish."<sup>15</sup>

So, Matthew's introduction of Jesus presents him as the last Adam, the one who inaugurates the new creation and teaches us what it means to be truly human as God intended. But Adam is not the only Old Testament figure who shapes our understanding of Christ.

### **Jesus Is the True Israel**

At this point in the introduction to Jesus as the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount, one starts to really dive into the way Matthew is introducing Jesus. Matthew is quite fond of the typological method of introducing Jesus and connecting Him to various Old Testament figures. In Matthew 12:38–41 he compares Jesus to Jonah and points out that Christ's call to repentance must be heard because "something greater than Jonah is

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<sup>14</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 60. "What cannot be forgotten is that the one who preaches the sermon is the Son of God, that is, he is the Messiah, making all things new. The sermon is the reality of the new age made possible in time."

<sup>15</sup>Jason B. Hood, *Imitating God in Christ: Recapturing a Biblical Pattern* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 64.

here.” In Matthew 12:42 he makes a similar point regarding the wisdom of Solomon and the fact that “something greater than Solomon is here.”

However, in Matthew 1–4 we do not find these direct statements of comparison regarding individuals. Instead, we find observant descriptions of events from the life of Jesus that correspond to events in the history of the nation of Israel. In these chapters the typology of Jesus as the true Israel can be even more powerful because of its subtle nature. Because of the elusive way that Matthew compares Jesus to Israel, we must study these passages carefully to detect the allusions to the nation of Israel.<sup>16</sup> He cleverly ties certain events of these chapters back to events in the history of Israel, but it is not always clear *how* Matthew is viewing the connection between Jesus and Israel. In other words, what does Matthew want us to take away concerning the connection between Israel and Jesus and the way in which Jesus fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures mentioned in these chapters?

One can summarize the goal of Matthew’s approach here by saying that Jesus is the true Israel.<sup>17</sup> He brings to completion the tasks assigned to Israel. He “recapitulates” the major events from the history of Israel in order to identify with the nation, and he succeeds where Israel failed.<sup>18</sup> The goal is to briefly examine how Matthew does this in chapters 1–4 and then discuss the significance of this comparison in the ministry of Christ, which includes the Sermon on the Mount.

While one chapter can never cover all the typological details of these chapters,

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<sup>16</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 25–26. “More often, however, the testimony of Scripture is woven into the way the stories are told, so that their significance depends on the ability of the reader to recognize allusions to biblical events and persons and to draw the appropriate conclusions.”

<sup>17</sup>Hays, “The Gospel of Matthew,” 173. “Another way that Matthew carries forward the story of Israel is through a typological identification of Jesus with Israel: Jesus becomes the one in whom the fate of Israel is embodied and enacted. The story of Israel and the story of Jesus become one and the same.”

<sup>18</sup>Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 406. “Matthew portrays Jesus to be recapitulating the history of Israel because he sums up Israel in himself. Since Israel disobeyed, Jesus has come to do what it should have, so he must retrace Israel’s steps up to the point where it failed and then continue to obey and succeed in the mission that Israel should have carried out.”

one can see how Matthew is painting a vibrant portrait of Christ so that he will be prepared to listen to Christ's Words. The beginning of the genealogy that begins the book presents Jesus as the new Adam and the new creation. The rest of the genealogy presents Jesus as the hope and consummation of all of Israel's history. Matthew carefully arranges this genealogy around the key figures from Israel's story of Abraham and David and the key event of the exodus. Richard Hays describes the purpose of this genealogy by saying, "This genealogy prepares the reader to interpret Jesus as the heir of the promises to Abraham, the consummation of Israel's epic story that began in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis."<sup>19</sup>

After the genealogy that ends in Matthew 1:17, Matthew establishes Jesus as the true son of David, the Messiah, by showing the details behind his birth and how those fulfilled the expectations of Isaiah 7:14, which is connected to Isaiah 9:6–7. Not only does he have the right lineage, but according to Matthew 2:1–12, he has the right birthplace.

Once these details have been established, Matthew moves to two very brief stories from Jesus's early life that show his connection to and representation of the nation of Israel. After the birth of Jesus, Herod hears that a king has been born who will eventually rule over the Jewish people. In 2:13 an angel of God warns Joseph that Herod will search for this child in order to destroy him. Because of this danger, Joseph is to take his wife and newly-born son and flee to Egypt until the death of Herod. Verse 15 tells us that this trip to Egypt and return to Israel fit within the providence of God in order to fulfill the Old Testament.

At first glance, it appears that Matthew grabbed this verse out of context and that it has very little value in introducing us to Jesus. However, this text is one of the

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<sup>19</sup>Hays, "The Gospel of Matthew," 170.

clearest indications in the early chapters of this book that Matthew understands Jesus to be the true Israel. Matthew tells us that this flight of Jesus into Egypt and ultimately back to the land of Israel fulfills Hosea 11:1. Hosea 11:1 begins a section of Hosea which contrasts the faithful love of Yahweh with the untamable passions of the nation of Israel. The most vivid event in the nation's history that demonstrates the unbreakable love of God for his people was the exodus from Egypt. Hosea 11:1 is clearly looking back to the exodus of the nation of Israel from Egypt.<sup>20</sup> The exodus was God's faithfulness to his covenant promises put on full display in miraculous and complete deliverance. The point is that in Hosea 11:1, Israel is called God's son. Matthew speaks of the journey of Jesus out of Egypt and back into the Promised Land as a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1 because he is identifying Jesus with Israel. The same event occurs in the life of Jesus and it is more than a strange historical coincidence. Jesus now embodies the destiny of the nation of Israel because He is identified as God's son.<sup>21</sup> It is also important to notice that as Jesus is tied to Israel in this passage, He is tied to the redemption and deliverance of Israel. You could also speak of the death and resurrection of Jesus as the "new exodus" for God's people as God delivers them through their righteous representative.

The second of these brief stories also quotes an Old Testament passage and claims its fulfillment in events surrounding the early life of Jesus. This story must be read on the heels of Matthew's identification with Israel in 2:13–15. In 2:16–18 Matthew describes the terrible slaughter of children brought about by Herod's lust to destroy a potential threat. As the children are slaughtered, Matthew says this fulfills a passage from Jeremiah that places Israel at the staging ground, Ramah, for her exile to Babylon.

This quote from Jeremiah should remind the reader of the great hope of the

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<sup>20</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>21</sup>Hays, "The Gospel of Matthew," 174. "The effect of the juxtaposition is to hint that Jesus now will carry the destiny of the people Israel, and that the outcome will be the rescue and vindication of Israel, as foreshadowed in the exodus story and brought to fulfillment in the resurrection of Jesus."



rest of the chapter. In fact, the quotation pulled from Jeremiah 31:15 is one of the only negative parts of this chapter. In the verses immediately following the mention of Rachel weeping for her children, hope is promised (31:16–17), and the new covenant is affirmed (31:31–34).

As Jesus returns to the Promised Land after his exile to Egypt, he inaugurates his work of hope and salvation. As the true Israel, he can end the exile spoken of in Jeremiah 31:15 and bring the New Covenant. The weeping of the mothers of Bethlehem portends the "fulfillment" or end of the tragic history of assault on God's people as Jesus ends Israel's exile.<sup>22</sup>

So, even in these two brief stories, from Matthew 2:13–18, Jesus has been identified with Israel as he goes into Egypt and out again and as he signals the end of Israel's exile and the hope of a future New Covenant. These two passages connect Jesus to Israel with specific "fulfillment formulas" in which Matthew quotes passages from the Old Testament. But it is also important to see how the broader movement of the life of Jesus in these early chapters of Matthew recapitulates the history of Israel.

Jesus went into Egypt in 2:13–15 and identified with Israel as God calls him out of Egypt to return to the Promised Land. Many years pass in the life of Christ, and in Matthew 3 we are introduced to John the Baptist, who comes proclaiming the kingdom and baptizing believers. We will explore the significance of the baptism of Christ below, but after the baptism the next major movement of Christ is to be led by the Spirit into the wilderness. In the wilderness in Matthew 4:1–11, Jesus undergoes a series of temptations by Satan. Notice that Matthew mentions Jesus as being in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights in Matthew 4:2. This seems to be an allusion to Israel's forty years of

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<sup>22</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 267. "In the light of all this, and given the typological equation of Jesus with Israel, the evangelist could readily have seen in Jeremiah's prophecy of Israel's return from the exile and of the new things promised for thereafter a transparent cipher or prototype for the Messiah's return to Israel and subsequent ministry: the words originally spoken of Israel are equally applicable to Israel's Messiah."

temptation in the wilderness. After the temptations, Jesus enters the Promised Land and begins to have victory over the enemy and to heal those afflicted by sickness and disease all while proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. What is the significance of this series of events?

If the reader is familiar with the history of Israel, the course of these events corresponds to the major movement of the nation of Israel through exile to Egypt and return to the Promised Land. The baptism corresponds to the Red Sea experience and after going through the Red Sea, Israel enters the wilderness and is tempted to forsake God. After the temptation in the wilderness, Israel enters the Promised Land and for a while has victory over the enemy.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, in our discussion of Jesus as the true Israel, there is a title that ties these stories together and clearly identifies Jesus as the true Israel. That title is “the son of God,” and to understand it we must return to the Old Testament.

Genesis 5:1 implies that Adam is the son of God. In fact, Luke 3:38 confirms that Adam was considered the son of God. In Exodus 4:22–23 God tells Moses to inform Pharaoh that Israel is considered his son. As we move forward in the biblical story to the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7:12–15, God considers each Davidic king who will rule and reign in Israel as his son. This title has a clear Old Testament precedent, and as we have already seen in Matthew 2:15, Matthew connects this title for Israel to Jesus of Nazareth. This quote from Hosea 11:1 is the first time this phrase is used in the Gospel, and it is a word directly from God declaring Jesus to be the son of God or the true Israel.

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<sup>23</sup>Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 412. "John the Baptist fulfills the first prophetic announcement of Israel's restoration in Isa. 40–66 . . . John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River, along with other Israelites. What is the significance of the water? Why is it apparently so important that Jesus be baptized by water in a river, along with other Jews, at the inception of his ministry? The answer seems ready at hand, if one is sensitive to OT precedents. Just as Israel was led by Moses and had to go through the sea at the exodus to enter the promised land, and just as the second generation had to do the same thing at the Jordan River under Joshua's leadership, as a miniature second exodus, so again, now that Israel's restoration is imminent through Jesus, true Israelites must again identify with the water and the Jordan and their prophetic leader in order to begin to experience true conversion."

As if that quote was not enough, after the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:16–17, we get another direct word from God declaring Jesus to be his son. Finally, as Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Satan asks Jesus to prove He is the Son of God by His obedience to God’s Word. Of course, Jesus does identify as the son of God as His obedience demonstrates.<sup>24</sup>

So, we have tried to prove from Matthew 1–4 that Jesus should be identified as the true Israel or as the summary and culmination of Israel’s history and mission. Now we must ask about the implications of this connection for the work of Christ as well as our study of the Sermon on the Mount.

First, it is vital to identify Jesus as the true Israel because he can succeed where Israel has failed. One of the main reasons to see Jesus as “recapitulating” the history of Israel is to see him correcting the wrongs from events in the life of the nation. We know this because in the passages where Matthew identifies Jesus as Israel, he generally uses events from Israel’s past that speak very clearly of Israel’s failure.<sup>25</sup> For example, Matthew 2:13–15 quotes Hosea 11, which is largely a passage outlining the ways in which Israel had failed to obey the covenant with Yahweh. Yet, at the end of this section in Hosea 11:11–12 God promises that he will return the people to the land after exile. Matthew appears to see Christ’s obedience to the will of God in journeying to Egypt (Matt 2:14) and then his return to the Promised Land (Matt 2:20–21) as a correcting and fulfillment of the original failure of the nation which caused exile.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Beale, 403. “When one then comes to the Gospels and finds Jesus being repeatedly called ‘the Son of God,’ this probably should be understood in light of the OT and Jewish background of Adam and Israel being conceived to be God’s son.”

<sup>25</sup>Brandon D. Crowe, “Fulfillment in Matthew as Eschatological Reversal,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 75, no. 1 (2013): 116. “First, Matthew highlights prophetic texts that underscore the waywardness of Israel, the negative consequences that accrue to the nation, or the closely related idea of a rejected Messiah.”

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 116. “Thus, the resolution to Israel’s predicament in Hos 11 is eschatologically found in the life of Jesus according to Matt 2:15.”

This same pattern of connecting Jesus to a passage that speaks of the failure of Israel and then showing Christ as overcoming that failure is demonstrated in Matthew 2:16–18 as well. Of course, the passage quoted by Matthew, Jeremiah 31:15, which speaks of the mother of Israel, Rachel, weeping over her children is precisely because the nation is heading into exile. But as we discussed earlier, Jeremiah 31 also offers hope of a future restoration that will come about through the work of Christ. However, Matthew quotes this verse and speaks of its fulfillment because he sees Christ's fulfillment of this passage as a reversal of the wrongs that brought about Israel's difficulties.<sup>27</sup>

We see the positive portrayal of Christ's obedience even more clearly in the story of Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3. As John is baptizing in the wilderness and Jesus approaches him to receive baptism, John struggles to understand how the son of God could possibly need to be baptized by him. But Jesus forcefully answers that His baptism by John will fulfill all righteousness. In effect, Jesus is saying that he must obey God and take up the role of a servant to fulfill righteousness, right wrongs, and "save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21).<sup>28</sup> Once he is baptized we see God the Father approving of his work, and also identifying Him with the past failures of Israel by calling Jesus His son (Mt. 3:16–17).

After his baptism, Jesus enters the wilderness to experience temptation for forty days and forty nights. As we mentioned above this is an allusion to Israel's years of failure and temptation in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. Of course, Israel failed repeatedly in the wilderness, and here we see Jesus overcome each temptation thrown His way. He obviously succeeds, but the way he succeeds is truly remarkable.

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<sup>27</sup>Crowe, 111–12. "In sum, I am arguing that for Matthew, the fulfillment of the Scriptures has in large part to do with the overcoming of Israel's disobedient history in the wide-ranging obedience of Jesus.

<sup>28</sup>D. A. Carson, *Matthew and Mark*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 137. "By his baptism, Jesus affirms his determination to do his assigned work."

This is what shows us that as the true Israel, the true son of God, he is bringing righteousness through the perfect obedience of his life and the reversal of Israel's failures.<sup>29</sup> Jesus confronts each of the temptations from Satan by quoting a passage of Scripture. But this tactic goes far beyond simply teaching us to quote the Bible when we face temptation. Each of the quotations from Jesus is taken from Deuteronomy 6–8. In this section of Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the second generation out of Egypt of the failures of their parents in the wilderness.<sup>30</sup> By identifying with Israel's failures in the wilderness and acting in righteousness, Jesus overcomes these failures and is able to prove His own righteousness as the representative of Israel.

Now that we have seen the reality of Jesus' righteousness as he identifies with Israel, we must point out the implications of this truth for our reading of the Sermon on the Mount. In other words, why does it matter for our reading of the Sermon that Jesus corrects the failures of Israel and fulfills all righteousness?

First and most clearly, because Jesus is righteous, he can fulfill the expectation of Matthew 1:21. He is able to redeem from the penalty and power of sin and then instruct us to live out that salvation in daily life. The Sermon on the Mount crystallizes the ethic of those who have been saved by the righteousness of Jesus and have begun to follow him.<sup>31</sup>

Second, the content of the Sermon on the Mount centers on the progressively developing righteousness of the followers of Christ; therefore, the one teaching on righteousness must himself be righteous. In fact, the harmony of the moral character of

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<sup>29</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 128. "The story of the testing in the wilderness is thus an elaborate typological presentation of Jesus as himself the true Israel, the "Son of God" through whom God's redemptive purpose for his people is now at last to reach its fulfillment."

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 127. "The most significant key to the understanding of this story is to be found in Jesus' three scriptural quotations. All come from Deut 6–8, the part of Moses' address to the Israelites before their entry into Canaan in which he reminds them of their forty years of wilderness experiences."

<sup>31</sup>Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 20.

the one teaching and the message of the speech would have been expected in the ancient world.<sup>32</sup> The Sermon on the Mount leads the reader to ponder and put on the righteousness of Christ. Matthew 5:6 tells the listener to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Matthew 5:10 promises that those who are persecuted for righteousness sake will inherit the kingdom of heaven. The introduction to the Sermon in Matthew 5:13–16 instructs listeners that their good works must be on full display for the world to see. Matthew 5:17–20 informs us that Christ has fulfilled the law and that we must possess righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew 6:1 warns that those listening must not practice their righteousness before men to receive their praise. Matthew 6:33 challenges followers of Jesus to seek his righteousness and kingdom first and all their physical needs will be met. And finally, the last warning of the Sermon in Matthew 7:24–27 decisively divides listeners of the Sermon between those who act on what has been spoken and those who simply hear. If Jesus is going to give this sort of instruction to his people, he must be the sort of teacher whose life backs up what he says. Charles Talbert summarized the place of righteousness in Matthew 1–7 well when he said, “The Matthean narrative depicts Jesus as fulfilling all righteousness before he teaches his disciples about righteousness.”<sup>33</sup>

Of course, now that we have seen Jesus presented as the true Israel in Matthew 1–4, that certainly doesn’t discount other portraits of Jesus presented with some of the same passages. We have two more vignettes of Jesus to study as we prepare to hear His teaching from Matthew 5–7.

### **Jesus Is the New David**

We have already discussed how Matthew presents Jesus as the true Israel in his

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<sup>32</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 18.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 18.

Gospel through his use of the title “son of God.” However, this title is not exclusively connecting Jesus to Israel and showing Jesus as the fulfillment and culmination of Israel’s history and hope. In fact, despite the small number of uses of the title “son of God” in the Old Testament, the use of this title to connect Jesus to the Davidic kings is the more prominent New Testament meaning.<sup>34</sup> In 2 Samuel 7:14–15 the responsibility given to Adam and then Israel as the son of God moves to the line of Davidic kings.<sup>35</sup> Psalm 2:7 describes a future Davidic king as the “son” and expects that this coming king will have dominion over the nations. So, when Matthew picks up this title, he is presenting Jesus as the true son of David or the true and better David who will finally fulfill the hope of Psalm 2 and the expectation of 2 Samuel 7.

We often consider the title “son of God” as primarily teaching Jesus as having a divine nature. Perhaps this means we think of “son of God” more in terms of systematic theology rather than biblical theology. When we begin to grasp the Old Testament precedent for this title, certain truths about Jesus rise to the surface of our reading of Matthew’s Gospel. Primarily, this title indicates that as the son of God Jesus will perfectly obey the will of the Father. Consider the crucial passages in Matthew 1–4 where this title is used. At His baptism in Matthew 3:13–17 we see a clear emphasis on both fulfillment of righteousness and Jesus as the son. In the temptation narrative in Matthew 4:1–11, Satan calls on Jesus to use his son-ship to perform signs and wonders, but Jesus demonstrates his son-ship by perfectly submitting to the will of the Father.<sup>36</sup> As the true and better David, Jesus corrects the wrongs committed by the entire line of Davidic kings who went before Him. Psalm 89:26–36 shows that God will remain faithful to his

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<sup>34</sup>David R. Bauer, “Son of God,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 770.

<sup>35</sup>Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 398.

<sup>36</sup>Bauer, “Son of God,” 774.

covenant to David, but he will not allow disobedient kings to remain unpunished. A tension exists in this Psalm which highlights both the failure of David's descendants and the need for righteousness before God for David's house to remain forever. Jesus fulfills that expectation as the true son of God as he submits to the will of the Father.

We also must briefly consider what the announcement of the arrival of the kingdom in the preaching of Jesus has to say about Jesus as the true Davidic king. Graeme Goldsworthy explains what the announcement of the arrival of the kingdom meant for Christ's followers when he says, "The evidence of the NT overwhelmingly supports the view that Jesus and the apostles understood the kingdom of God as the fulfillment of the hopes and promises recorded in the sacred Scriptures of the OT."<sup>37</sup> To what hopes and promises is Goldsworthy referring?

God's plan for earth begins with Adam and Eve created to reign over the earth as royalty. Despite their failure to properly act on this mission, God makes a series of promises to Abraham to ultimately restore blessing and dominion to mankind on earth (Gen 12:1–3). As the promises to Abraham move forward in the Pentateuch, a number of passages hint that blessing and dominion will come through a king born in Abraham's line (Gen 17:6; 49:8–12; Deut 17:14–20). When David came to the throne of Israel and the monarchy was established, the king in Israel became the representative of the people and the monarchy of Israel was the "concrete manifestation of Yahweh's rule."<sup>38</sup> The narrative throughout Samuel and Kings demonstrates that as the king goes, so go the people. At that point the destiny of the nation, and thus the kingdom of God on earth, was tied up with the fate of the king. God promised David that he would establish his throne

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<sup>37</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, "The Kingdom of God," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. Brian S. Rosner et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 618.

<sup>38</sup>Chrys C. Caragounis, "Kingdom of God/Heaven," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 418.



and kingdom forever, and for a while, under Solomon, it looked as if the original intention of God in Genesis 1:26–28 of dominion might be realized. In tragic manner, the kings of Israel, and subsequently the nation, failed to the point of exile. Yet, the prophets are filled with anticipation of the restoration of the people from exile, the return of God to his people, and the reign of a Davidic king in an age of peace and prosperity. Graeme Goldsworthy summarizes this expectation when he says, “The overall pattern of renewal is seen as a recapitulation of the past history of redemption: a new Exodus; a new covenant; a new entry into the land; a new Jerusalem with its new temple; and a new Davidic king to rule in a perfect, glorious, and eternal kingdom.”<sup>39</sup>

As the reader begins the New Testament with these expectations in mind, the first words of Matthew clamor for understanding and attention. Jesus is the long awaited “son of David.” Matthew spends much of chapters 1 and 2 establishing Jesus as coming through the line of David so the reader will understand him as the anticipated Davidic King. In 1:20, the angel addresses Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father, as the son of David. In Matthew 2:1–2 the expectation is that one will be born who will be the promised king of the Jews. In fact, in Matthew 2:6 His birth is linked to the city of David, Bethlehem. Finally, as Jesus begins his preaching ministry in Matthew 4:17, his message is quite simple yet utterly profound. The kingdom, the long-awaited rule and reign of God, is breaking into the present. This kingdom takes the listener all the way back to Adam and his failure to take dominion over the earth as God commanded him to do. Yet, we cannot read this phrase “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew without making the other OT connections regarding the physical manifestation of God’s kingdom in the Old Testament, the Davidic dynasty.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Goldsworthy, “The Kingdom of God,” 619.

<sup>40</sup>Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 344.

What are the implications of the way Matthew presents Jesus as the son of David or the new David for our reading of the Sermon on the Mount? Certainly, since the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 4:23–5:2 presents Jesus as proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, we must read the Sermon in light of that kingdom proclamation.<sup>41</sup> In 5:1 we find Jesus teaching his disciples. Therefore, the Sermon on the Mount is a kingdom message to disciples of Christ to live out the ethics of the kingdom. Author N. T. Wright summarizes this message in a most helpful way when he says,

The life of heaven—the life of the realm where God is already king—is to become the life of the world, transforming the present 'earth' into the place of beauty and delight that God always intended. And those who follow Jesus are to begin to live by this rule here and now. That's the point of the Sermon on the Mount, and these 'beatitudes' in particular. They are a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God's promised future; because that future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>42</sup>

The reality is that we cannot separate our understanding of the Sermon on the Mount from Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom. Of course, the announcement of the arrival of the kingdom presupposes the OT story of God's people and the restoration of God's rule in one like Adam and David.

### **Jesus Is the New Moses**

So far, we have seen Matthew present Jesus as the last Adam, the true Israel, and the new David. Saying that Jesus possesses each of these identities does not preclude Matthew from also presenting him as the new Moses.<sup>43</sup> Like a master painter, Matthew overlaps the layers of the portrait of Jesus so the reader receives a rich and fulfilling introduction. Of course, if the reader has carefully read the Old Testament, there should

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<sup>41</sup>Carson, *Matthew and Mark*, 150.

<sup>42</sup>N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15*, New Testament for Everyone (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 38.

<sup>43</sup>Dale C. Allison Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 142. "Jesus is many things in the First Gospel, and there is no more tension or contradiction between maintaining that Jesus is simultaneously like Moses and the embodiment of true Israel than in saying that Jesus is the son of Abraham and the Son of David."

be some expectation of one like Moses, only greater. Deuteronomy 18:15–19 makes this abundantly clear. Since our hermeneutical antennae will be on alert because of Deuteronomy 18, we want to ask and answer two questions here. How does Matthew present Jesus as the new Moses and why does it matter that Jesus is the new Moses?

Many of the same passages in Matthew 1–4 that speak of Jesus as the true Israel connect back to the exodus of God’s people from Egypt. In these accounts of the exodus, there is a particular emphasis on the life of Moses that Matthew wants to bring to the surface. The birth of Christ and the birth of Moses are surrounded by the destruction of other male children at the command of an evil king (see Exod 1:15 and Matt 2:16). Moses was forced to flee from a despotic ruler bent on his annihilation while Jesus was also forced by a pagan ruler to escape to a foreign land to avoid extermination (Exod 2:15 and Matth 2:13–14). The very same language is used in Exodus 4:19 and Matthew 2:20 as God tells both Moses and Joseph to return home because those who sought to kill are now dead themselves. Not only is Matthew connecting Jesus to Israel, but he also wants the reader to see Christ’s connection to Moses as the leader of Israel.<sup>44</sup>

After seeing how the shape of the narrative resembles the life of Moses in chapters 1–2, we should be alert for more similarities in the next few chapters and ultimately the rest of the book. In chapter 4 we find Jesus going into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights to be tempted. In 4:2 Matthew points out that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights which is similar language to Moses’ statement in Deuteronomy 9:9 concerning his time on Mt. Horeb. Then in Matthew 5:1, we find Jesus in a teaching posture on a mountain giving instruction to his disciples. This resembles Moses receiving the law on the mountain and then imparting it to God’s people.<sup>45</sup> Jesus

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<sup>44</sup>Allison, 141. "This interpretation means that the reader of Matthew 1–2 is to behold in Jesus' story the replay of another, that of the exodus from Egypt, a story whose hero is Moses."

<sup>45</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 15. "It is as a new Moses that Jesus will speak in 5:3–7:27."

will give the Sermon on the Mount as the new Moses. Of course, once we have established the similarities between Jesus and Moses in Matthew, we also must be alert to the differences. Since Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament and the new and better Moses, he speaks with his own authority (Matthew 7:28–29) and fulfills the law (Matthew 5:17–20). The comparison of Jesus as the new Moses is supposed to show us similarities as well as highlight the ways in which Jesus goes beyond Moses.<sup>46</sup>

As we ponder the portrait of Jesus as the new Moses, two important truths shine with clarity. First, we are justified in thinking of Jesus' giving of the Sermon on the Mount as a "new law" for new covenant disciples.<sup>47</sup> Deuteronomy 18:15 says that a prophet will arise like Moses and "it is to him you shall listen." As Jesus unfolds the Sermon to his disciples we must listen carefully to his words. The covenant made with Israel and delivered by Moses in Exodus 19–24 was based on God's deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 19:4–6) and made thorough demands on every area of life. As partakers of the New Covenant and having been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount places thorough demands on our lives in every area, including the very desires of our hearts (Matthew 5:21–48).

Second, when considering Jesus as the new Moses, we must not only think of Jesus as a new law-giver. We are empowered to obey the demands of righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount because Jesus is first and foremost our deliverer. Matthew 1:21 tells us that Jesus will save his people from their sins and it is in this context, as a deliverer from the slavery of sin that we must hear the demands of Jesus on our lives. Charles Quarles clarifies the connection between Jesus and Moses when he points out,

The theological point made by comparing Jesus to Moses was quite profound— Jesus is the Savior of God's people. Although modern Christians think of Moses primarily as a lawgiver, to the ancient Jews he was far more. Moses was recognized first and

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<sup>46</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 157.

<sup>47</sup>Allison, *The New Moses*, 327–28.

foremost as a redeemer, deliverer, and savior.<sup>48</sup>

Since Jesus is our Savior we can be confident of his deliverance of us from the power of sin. As Paul points out in Romans 6:2, we are dead to sin. We are no longer enslaved to sin, as Israel was no longer bound in Egypt, but can now actively hear the “new law” of Jesus and put on virtue commensurate to our freedom in Christ.

### **Conclusion**

We began by imagining what it would be like to prepare an introduction for a special speaker for a room of distinguished guests. Now put yourself in one of the chairs listening to such an introduction. The person introducing the speaker begins to tell you that the speaker you are about to hear is like Adam, only better, because he teaches us what it means to be truly human as God intended us to live. He ushers in a new age characterized by life and joy. He is like Israel, only better, because he obeyed God’s commands and lived a perfectly righteous life. He brings righteousness and shows us what it means to live righteously. He is like David, only better, because His kingdom will not fail and those who enter his kingdom will reign with him as God intended. His kingdom is ultimately not of this world, but of the world to come. Finally, he is like Moses, only better, because he doesn’t just deliver us from temporal slavery but from eternal slavery to sin.

How would you listen to a speaker giving that introduction? Would you excuse yourself from the room for a lack of interest? Would you pop in headphones and sit at the table acting like you are paying attention but really distracted by a top forty radio station? Would you turn and begin a conversation with someone sitting at your table, faintly aware of someone speaking in the distance? Or, would you edge forward in your seat, mind alert to think, heart ready to be ignited in worship, and hands prepared to act on

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<sup>48</sup>Charles L. Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ’s Message to the Modern Church* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2011), 37.

whatever a man introduced in this manner has to say? Distractions are as plentiful as fallen leaves in autumn. His words bring life and give instruction. How will you listen to one introduced like this?

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE HABITS OF GOD’S KINGDOM DISCIPLES (MATTHEW 5:3-12)

In his book *The Road to Character* author David Brooks describes our culture’s emphasis on what he terms the resume virtues, as opposed to the eulogy virtues.<sup>1</sup> The resume virtues are those qualities a person possesses that help him or her gain traction in the work place. These qualities help you to get a job and succeed in a cutthroat marketplace where the strong push aside the weak to increase the bottom line. Not all the resume virtues are immoral, but they are geared toward what Brooks calls “external success.”

On the other hand, the eulogy virtues are those qualities that deep down we all hope someone will say about us at our funeral. These are the qualities that are formed in the very core of your person and may or may not help you earn a great deal of power, money, or fame. Eulogy virtues may hamper one’s ascent up the ladder of success, but those who have had a lasting impact in our world cultivated these qualities and often worked to see them developed in others. These are qualities like faithfulness, integrity, honesty, and sacrifice.

Underlying our cultural fascination with the resume virtues and neglect of the eulogy virtues is a vision of what constitutes the good life. From the time we are young we are immersed in an environment that implicitly and sometimes explicitly teaches us its version of human well-being, happiness, and a life well-lived. We exalt character qualities because we believe these qualities will move the one who possesses them

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<sup>1</sup>David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015).

toward happiness and the good life. Along with this vision of the good life, which shapes the qualities we encourage, is an understanding of what human beings are created for. When combined, these two ideas, although rarely stated clearly, influence vast amounts of what we do and say as a society, or our cultural practices. At the same time, what we do and say as a society reaches back to shape our understanding of human beings and the life we are meant to lead. Author James K. A. Smith has noted the powerful connection between cultural practices and our longing for a life well-lived. He says, “The visions of the good life embedded in these practices become surreptitiously embedded in us through our participation in the rituals and rhythms of these institutions.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, far too many Christians are deeply instilled with what the culture trains us to believe is a life well-lived. We must battle this cultural immersion, and to do this we need a compelling picture of human flourishing and well-being. This vision is exactly what Jesus has given us in the Sermon on the Mount and in particular the Beatitudes. In this chapter, we will examine the Beatitudes as presenting a counter-cultural vision of the good life as one which develops certain character qualities in the present which are culminated in God's future kingdom.

### **The Beatitudes and Human Flourishing**

A discussion of the Beatitudes must begin with the idea of a life well-lived, or human flourishing, because this is where Jesus begins. The first word in each of the Beatitudes is the Greek word *makarioi*. We cannot begin to understand the direction Jesus is taking with the Beatitudes or the Sermon on the Mount unless we grasp the meaning of this word. As Scot McKnight says, "Get this word right, the rest falls into place; get it wrong, and the whole thing falls apart."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

<sup>3</sup>Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 32.



Many of the major commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount have a section discussing the meaning of this important word.<sup>4</sup> The two most common translations are “blessed” and “happy.”<sup>5</sup>

The translation “blessed” certainly gets at part of what Jesus was communicating with the Beatitudes. When we use the word “blessed,” we typically mean that the individual being described has the approval of God. For example, this translation would say that the one who is “poor in spirit” has the stamp of God’s approval on his life because he recognizes his needy position before God. While this is certainly the case, the word *makarios* is not emphasizing divine approbation.<sup>6</sup>

A few other translators have used the word “happy” to begin the Beatitudes. Rather than focusing on divine approval, this translation focuses on the status of the individual and the life which he or she is living. While the emphasis here is indeed on the individual life well-lived, the word happy communicates more about the mental state of the individual and less about the overall structure and pattern of his or her life.<sup>7</sup>

Neither translation is quite right because the statements Jesus gives here are not pulled out of thin air; they fit into a literary tradition.<sup>8</sup> A large background in the OT as well as other literature stands behind the formulation of the Beatitudes. The use of the word *makarios* here places these nine statements into that tradition as a particular type of

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<sup>4</sup>See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 160–61. McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 32–36. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004), 431–34.

<sup>5</sup>For “Blessed,” see ESV, NAS, ASV, KJV, NET, RSV, NIV. For “Happy,” see GNT, YLT.

<sup>6</sup>Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 53.

<sup>7</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 161. “The sense of congratulation and commendation is perhaps better conveyed by ‘happy,’ but this term generally has too psychological a connotation: *makarios* does not state that a person feels happy, but that they are in a ‘happy’ situation, one which other people ought also to wish to share . . . Beatitudes are descriptions, and commendations, of the good life.”

<sup>8</sup>Raymond F Collins, “Beatitudes,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 1:629.

literature. The form used here is often called a *macarism*. The form itself communicates to the reader or listener just as the content of the material communicates. Raymond Collins explains how the form of the Beatitudes communicates when he says, "In form, the macarisms begin with the adjective makarios, followed by a relative or personal pronoun introducing a clause which describes a particular conduct or quality which prompted the praise of the person who is pronounced blessed."<sup>9</sup>

What does a macarism communicate regarding the individual who possesses the quality described? Jonathan Pennington gives a helpful definition of a macarism when he says, "A macarism is a pronouncement, based on observation, that a certain way of being in the world produces human flourishing and felicity."<sup>10</sup> So, in Matthew 5:3–12 Jesus uses a series of macarisms to communicate to his followers what it looks like to live life well. This vision of the good life was not initiated by Jesus. Instead, he builds and clarifies on the teaching of the OT regarding human flourishing.

### **The Old Testament and Makarios**

The Old Testament frequently appeals to our passion for a satisfying and whole life by using the Hebrew equivalent to *makarios*, the word *ashre*. Davies and Allison point out that the macarisms used in the OT typically come in one of two contexts: wisdom literature or eschatological literature. When used in the context of wisdom, the Hebrew word *ashre* is used "in sentences praising the wise man and holding him up as a model."<sup>11</sup> In other words, wisdom *macarisms* have a distinct focus on the here and now the promises of human flourishing found in eschatological literature focus on the future. Davies and Allison explain the difference,

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<sup>9</sup>Collins, 1:629.

<sup>10</sup>Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 42.

<sup>11</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 432.

The eschatological *makarism*, it is important to observe, is usually addressed to people in dire straits, and the promise to them is of future consolation. So in contrast to the wisdom beatitude, where moral exhortation is, despite the declarative form, generally the object, assurance and the proffering of hope are the goal: eyes become focused on the future, which will reverse natural values and the present situation; fulfillment is no longer to be found in this world but in a new world.<sup>12</sup>

This distinction is necessary in summarizing the OT picture of the good life, and it is important to see this picture as standing behind Christ's use of *makarios* in Matthew 5. To do that, we need to begin with the introduction to the entire Psalter, Psalms 1 and 2.<sup>13</sup> When put together, these two Psalms tie together the twin themes of wisdom and eschatological hope which make up OT *macarisms*.

Psalms 1 begins with the Hebrew equivalent to *makarios* and then develops a compelling picture of human flourishing centered on God's Word. Verse 3 depicts the man who meditates on God's Word as a fruitful tree that prospers in its season. Of course, the wicked in Psalm 1 are not living the good life but, according to verse 4, are blown in the wind like the chaff.

While Psalm 1 makes clear the importance of obedience to God's commands for a life of human flourishing, Psalm 2 partners with Psalm 1 to round out the vision of human flourishing by showing the one experiencing *ashre* as finding refuge in God's established king. Psalm 2:3 makes it clear that the rulers of the earth will consider God's authority as one of bondage and suffering. They view God's kingship as confining and detrimental and the only path to true freedom is to cast aside God's rule. God responds in verses 4–5 with laughter and then wrath. He will not stand their insolence, but his response does not end in anger. Instead, he answers the nation's rebellion against his established order by installing a King. This King is the fulfillment of a myriad of OT

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<sup>12</sup>Davies and Allison, 432.

<sup>13</sup>Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 408. "Psalm 2 helps its predecessor introduce the Psalter, for Psalms 1–2 both lack superscriptions, and 1:1 begins with a statement of who is 'blessed,' a concept that finishes Psalm 2 (cf. 2:12)."

expectations including the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7.<sup>14</sup> Psalm 2:7–9 shows that this Davidic king, installed by God, will establish a kingdom over all the earth. He will crush the nations and rule over them. All of this is important because of the response to this King called for in Psalm 2:11–12. “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.” The psalmist calls for a response of submission and devotion to God’s king, and then he motivates us to this response by promising *ashre* to the one who finds refuge in the Son.

Together these Psalms present a picture of the good life as one lived under the Word of God in the kingdom of God with His “Son” (2:7) as the reigning king. The type of person who experiences human flourishing is the one who is filled with God’s Word and takes refuge in God’s king. The good life can only be found in God’s kingdom and according to its order.

### **Makarios and The Kingdom**

Matthew does not clearly allude to Psalms 1 and 2 to set up the Sermon on the Mount, but these texts do provide significant conceptual background to the idea of human flourishing in the OT through their use of the word *makarios*. The Psalms promise that the Davidic King will come and that those who take refuge in him and obey his Word will experience well-being. Matthew 1–4 clearly present Jesus as fulfilling the OT expectations set by Adam, Moses, Israel, and David.

At this point we need to see that Christ’s definition of human flourishing and well-being fits with his announcement of the arrival of the kingdom and his call for disciples to act in accordance with kingdom values. These are not mutually exclusive

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<sup>14</sup>Other key “royal” texts include Gen 17:6, 16. Gen 35:11. Gen 49:8 –12. Num 24:7, 17 – 19. Deut 17:14 –20 Judg 8 –9. Judg 21:25

ideas and we have seen above that the OT witness clearly ties them together by emphasizing both the kingdom and ethical action or wisdom.

After showing Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's history and the true Davidic heir, Matthew demonstrates that the emphasis of Christ's ministry was on the arrival and proclamation of the expected kingdom. In Matthew 4:17 Jesus began to preach and the substance of His message was a call for Israel to repent because the kingdom is at hand. Again, in Matthew 4:23 Jesus is moving throughout Galilee doing various works along with the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom. Christ's preaching is about the kingdom, but His instructions in the Sermon on the Mount are not a call to be obeyed in order to enter the kingdom. Instead, they are the ethical values of those who have already begun the journey of discipleship. Summarizing the purpose of the Sermon, R. T. France points out, "The focus of these chapters is not then the wider proclamation of the 'good news of the kingdom' (4:23), but the instruction of those who have already responded to that proclamation and now need to learn what life in the 'kingdom of heaven' is really about."<sup>15</sup> The focus on discipleship becomes clear in Matthew 5:1–2 where "he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them."

As this King begins to instruct his followers in Matthew 5, he reaches back to that core desire for fulfillment and flourishing and tells them exactly how to live the good life. Even the Beatitudes are framed by promises regarding the kingdom of heaven. In fact, Davies and Allison make the case that the promises in Matthew 5:4–9 are simply the working out of the phrase "theirs is the kingdom of heaven."<sup>16</sup> So, the Sermon on the Mount is clearly about the eschatological kingdom and for kingdom disciples.

But does the emphasis on the kingdom indicate that the Sermon as a whole and

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<sup>15</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 153.

<sup>16</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 446.

the Beatitudes in particular are oriented toward the future alone? Interpreters of the Beatitudes often struggle with whether they are presenting future blessings to be received at the end of time in Christ's fully consummated kingdom or entrance requirements for admission to the kingdom and thus demands on our present behavior. The emphasis on the kingdom leads us to combine these elements by seeing the Beatitudes as promising an ultimate consummation in Christ's kingdom but only as the macarisms stated are lived out faithfully in the present. These are not entrance requirements but descriptions of those who are disciples of the kingdom. Harrington and Keenan summarize the Beatitudes saying, "The nine Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–12 give a sample of virtues and actions that will be rewarded in the fullness of God's kingdom and therefore are to be cultivated in the present."<sup>17</sup>

One can feel this tension between present and future by paying attention to the tenses in the statements of promise in each beatitude. Verses 3 and 10 use the present tense while verses 4 through 9 use the future tense. The kingdom has arrived in Jesus (Matt 4:17), and yet the kingdom has not been fully consummated. In other words, the disciples who are hearing the Sermon are members of God's kingdom, but they are waiting for the kingdom to come in its fullness. There is certainly a sense of expectation and future orientation in the Beatitudes, but the very use of the word *makarios* indicates that disciples can begin to experience the good life now as they labor to put on these paradoxical virtues. So, what does this pull between future and present mean for our understanding of the Beatitudes?

We feel a mighty tension between our desires to fully receive the promises given here and the fact that we still await their final consummation in the future. But this does not mean we cannot begin to experience the life of the kingdom now. In fact, Jesus

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<sup>17</sup>Daniel J Harrington and James F. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2005), 62.

fully expects that the development of these virtues shows that we have already entered his kingdom and that we will experience the joy and the “good life” in the very activity of developing these “blessings.” N.T. Wright explains that the Beatitudes are really the habits of those who have entered God’s kingdom. He says, “Those who follow Jesus can begin to practice, in the present, the habits of heart and life which correspond to the way things are in God’s kingdom—the way they will be eventually, yes, but the way they already are because Jesus is here.”<sup>18</sup>

Because the future has broken into the present, we must begin to develop these character qualities now. In fact, when we read the Beatitudes we need to remember that they are not commands in the strict sense of the word, yet they do carry ethical weight.<sup>19</sup> They are qualities are stated in such a way as to attract the reader to develop virtue in these areas. The Beatitudes inspire our imaginations to pursue these character qualities. James K. A. Smith explains how this “vision” of the good life leads us to actually acquire these character qualities in daily life. He says, “Our ultimate love is oriented by and to a picture of what we think it looks like for us to live well, and that picture then governs, shapes, and motivates our decisions and actions.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, the Beatitudes are not answering the question, “How should I behave or what should I do?” They are aiming to provoke us to ponder, “What sort of person should I be? What habits must I develop in my life, right now, that will bring a bit of God’s future kingdom to the present?” So, what we have in the Beatitudes is a description of the good life that compels us to re-structure

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<sup>18</sup>N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: Harper One, 2012), 105.

<sup>19</sup>Robert A. Guelich, “The Matthean Beatitudes: ‘Entrance-Requirements’ or Eschatological Blessings?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, no. 3 (September 1976): 416–17. “A beatitude is essentially a declarative sentence, but the nature of the declaration is such that it readily takes on a hortative and parenetic tone. Consequently, the declaration comes almost as a challenge or summons for the hearers to join in the ranks of the ‘blessed’ by meeting the implicit demands of the statement.”

<sup>20</sup>James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 53.

our lives to live out this vision. The restructuring is the putting on of virtue and the reshaping of desires.

Of course, when we speak of God's kingdom arriving and of putting on virtues that are descriptive of citizens of that kingdom, we are talking about God's original purpose for all of creation. The Beatitudes are holding out a vision of what life truly should be, and that life can only happen through Jesus Christ and his work. In her book, *God and the Art of Happiness*, Ellen T. Charry argues for Asherism, which is based on the Hebrew word for human flourishing, *ashre*. She sums up her approach by saying,

Salvation is the healing of love that one may rest in God. Asherism works out that healing process in a life of reverent obedience to divine commands that shape character and bring moral-psychological flourishing and enhance societal well-being. Salvation is an excellent pattern of living that is personally rewarding because it advances God's intention for creation. It is a realizing eschatology.<sup>21</sup>

Eschatology is the goal or aim of God's creation. Sin knocked that goal off balance, and redemption is the act of God that sets the goal on level footing again. According to Charry, considering a topic like human flourishing is vital to eschatology because it means bringing into the present God's ultimate aim for all human life. So, when we ponder the Beatitudes and catch the vision of humanity they develop, we are realizing eschatology, or the kingdom. We are thinking and acting in the realm of God's original intention for humanity, and we can begin now to live according to our glorious future.

### **The Structure of the Beatitudes**

When considering the place of Matthew 5:3–12 in the whole Sermon on the Mount, it is important to see that the Beatitudes are part of the introduction to the Sermon and should be paired with Matthew 5:13–16. The Beatitudes give the character qualities

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<sup>21</sup>Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), xi.



of kingdom disciples along with promises of reward while 5:13–16 focus on the qualities of disciples that will help them in their mission to the unbelieving world.<sup>22</sup>

While there has been much debate about the particular number of Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–12, it seems evident that Matthew intends for us to read nine Beatitudes. He has used the word *makarios* nine times. Of course, verses 11–12 are an expansion of the eighth makarism found in verse 10 as is typical of ancient literature.<sup>23</sup> When understood as nine Beatitudes, all with ethical demands on the listener, it makes sense to group these into three units, each emphasizing a different characteristic. Scot McKnight divides them this way and organizes them into broad categories of humility, justice, and peace.<sup>24</sup>

### **Exposition of the Beatitudes**

#### **Blessed Are The Poor In Spirit (5:3)**

The first three Beatitudes are listed in the same order as the characteristics that are found in Isaiah 61:1–4.<sup>25</sup> Jesus is the eschatological hope and expectation of Isaiah and the setting right of what went wrong with Israel. Matthew 11:5 confirms that the ministry of Jesus was the fulfillment of this hope. So, our understanding of the first grouping of Beatitudes must be informed by Isaiah 61.

The word translated “poor” in Matthew 5:3 is the Greek word *ptôchoi*. This word very often indicates one who is lacking in this world’s goods and can even include those who are desperate for the help of others.<sup>26</sup> But Matthew’s qualification of “in spirit”

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<sup>22</sup>Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 48–49.

<sup>23</sup>Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 119.

<sup>24</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 37–38.

<sup>25</sup>I will maintain the majority translation of “blessed” here, but with the understanding explained earlier in this chapter.

<sup>26</sup>Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 896.

makes the interpretation of this a little more complex than simply a person destitute of possessions. Some commentators take the phrase “in spirit” to be indicating that Matthew is no longer speaking of material poverty at all. The common interpretation here is to see the “poor in spirit” as those who recognize their own spiritual bankruptcy and need for the grace of God. With this idea in mind Charles Talbert writes,

The parallels show that 'poor in spirit' is a religious designation. They are those who embrace the poverty of their condition by trusting in God. They are the humble before God. Matthew is not talking about people who live in material destitution but about those who live with the right disposition.<sup>27</sup>

While Jesus is certainly speaking of those who recognize their need for God, it does not seem necessary to completely exclude the idea of material goods from our understanding of the word “poor” here. Davies and Allison bring the two ideas together when they write,

The primary reference is to economic poverty. But already in the OT, especially in the Psalms, the Greek word and its Hebrew equivalents refer to those who are in special need of God's help, and in time 'poor' came to be a self-designation for the meek, humiliated, and oppressed people of God . . . Yet it must be stressed that the religious meaning of 'poor' does not exclude the economic meaning. Rather do the two go together.<sup>28</sup>

These two ideas come together to give us a picture of someone who understands what it means to be in need. Isaiah 61:1 presents the “poor” as the afflicted and those who need good news brought to them. They are in this position because they have suffered exile and are in need of both God’s grace and mercy as well as material help. Someone in need does not appear to be an example of enjoying a satisfying and happy life in our culture. In our affluent Western society we barely recognize need when we see it. If we are out of bread, we simply run to the store and pick from multiple varieties of bread from a host of different brands. Our culture views the self-sufficient individual as the one who is truly living the good life.

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<sup>27</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 50.

<sup>28</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 446.

In contrast Jesus offers a vision of the good life that defies the self-made man or the idea that riches are necessary for a well-lived life. Instead, humans flourish when they are free from the overwhelming attachment to material goods that comes from recognizing their great need for God. William Mattison explains,

Therefore, being humble and refusing to cling to material possessions as the source of happiness are not simply prerequisite conditions for reward but enduring characteristics of possession of the kingdom of heaven. Thus the reward here is not a simple reversal of material poverty. It is a continuation, indeed culmination, of a life of humility and freedom from possession by possessions.<sup>29</sup>

The good life comes from the freedom from self-promotion and pride. Inherent within the reward of the kingdom is the freedom of self-forgetfulness. Those who would live the good life are not wrapped up in pride and self-promotion. So, what does it mean to possess the kingdom of heaven? With the anticipation of God's return to Israel from Isaiah 61 in mind, Scot McKnight explains that the kingdom of heaven "pulls together the entire hope of Israel's story for the messianic age. It involves a King (Messiah), a land, a holy, loving people (Israel), and a redemptive power that will create holiness, love, and peace."<sup>30</sup>

### **Blessed Are Those Who Mourn (5:4)**

Here we find a description of the good life that hardly makes sense at first glance. How can those who mourn be described as living well? Once again, to properly grasp the virtue being presented we must return to Isaiah 61 and see how this text describes those who mourn. The same word is used three times in Isaiah 61:2–3 and in this case those who mourn are comforted. The key is to notice that the mourners are Israel and they are mourning because of their exile. There is a promise of comfort, and the people need it because they have suffered greatly for their sins. Davies and Allison

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<sup>29</sup>William C. Mattison III, "The Beatitudes and Moral Theology: A Virtue Ethics Approach," *Nova et Vetera (English Edition)* 11, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 830.

<sup>30</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 40.

explain why they are mourning when they write, “In the OT text Israel is oppressed at the hands of her heathen captors; her cities are in ruins (v. 4); and her people know shame and dishonour (v. 7). In sum, God's own are on the bottom, the wicked on the top.”<sup>31</sup>

Since the people of Israel were mourning over their own exile here, their comfort comes from God's eschatological deliverance and fulfillment of his promises. Isaiah 61:2 describes “the year of the Lord's favor” coming to his people. So, the mourning is related to the lack of God's deliverance in the present and angst over their own sinfulness. The virtue being called for is the recognition that the world and even one's own life is not as it should be. God's kingdom has not yet arrived, and we still live in a sinful and broken world. God's promises seem to lack fulfillment now, and this brings grief. Scot McKnight explains,

This text clearly suggests that the mourners are those who are grieved over both Israel's and their own exile, who are teamed with one another in grief, and who long for Israel's return, for the temple to be restored, and for God's favor to return on Israel. It is a longing for grace and justice and for kingdom, and at the same time a commitment to faithfulness and hope.<sup>32</sup>

People who exhibit this character quality feel the brokenness of the world deeply and can empathize with the injustice experienced by others. The culture would certainly not see those who mourn as living the good life. Mourning is a sign that your life is not as you would like it. You have lost something or someone, and how can someone who is lacking be described as flourishing? Yet, mourning over the brokenness of the world is necessary for our comfort in this life and our preparation for the next life. Christ's vision of the good life is not one that simply glosses over the difficulties of the human experience. To truly find deep and lasting comfort one must recognize that the world is not right and long for it to be made right.

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<sup>31</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 448.

<sup>32</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 41.

## **Blessed Are the Meek (5:5)**

The last character quality presented in the humility triad describes those who will live the good life meekly. According to Talbert, *praeis* (vs. 5) and *ptôchoi* (vs. 3) are virtual synonyms, but there does seem to be a difference in emphasis between the two qualities.<sup>33</sup> While the term “poor” from verse 3 emphasizes the status of God’s people as those who are lacking material wealth and must find their solace in God, verse 5 focuses on the inter-personal response of those in that situation. Concerning the “meek” France writes, “The term in itself may properly be understood of their relations with other people; they are those who do not throw their weight about.”<sup>34</sup>

The quality described here is either translated “gentle” or “meek” and is also a characteristic of Jesus in Matthew 11:29. His yoke can be born without great difficulty. The word is used in 1 Peter 3:4 to suggest that the meek are those who are not brash and outspoken. Both times the word is used of relationships with others. Mattison clarifies the virtue when he explains, “Hence the qualifying condition praised here is not being subjugated or passive, but rather being mild with regard to occasions of anger.”<sup>35</sup>

Psalm 37:11 serves as the background to this Beatitude and promises that those who are meek will inherit the land. The connection of this character description with the promise in verse 5 of the land is what makes this so counter-cultural. In our culture those who take possession of large amounts of land often do it by force and without much concern for others. Scot McKnight explains,

Because meekness connects here to land inheritance, and because the Beatitudes are so inherently countercultural, we suggest that meekness is framed over against wrath, anger, violence, acquisitiveness, rapaciousness, theft, violent takeovers, and brutal reclamations of property.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 51–52.

<sup>34</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 166.

<sup>35</sup>Mattison III, “The Beatitudes and Moral Theology,” 833.

<sup>36</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 42.

Of course, the land referred to in Psalm 37:11 was the Promised Land; however, by the time of the New Testament, this land was seen as being eschatologically fulfilled when Christ's kingdom covers the entire earth (Rom 4:13). So, the meek are those who do not respond to difficulty and oppression with anger and outrage but instead humbly trust God's timing and sovereign hand. The reality is that this character quality fits one to reign with Christ by possessing the earth in Christ's kingdom. Christ's disciples do not take possession by force but are ready to reign because of the development of gentleness in their hearts. Mattison explains, "Indeed it is one's very meekness, not a cessation of it, that enables one to possess."<sup>37</sup>

### **Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness (5:6)**

The fourth beatitude may be the most easily recognizable as counter-cultural. Those who hunger and thirst are not considered living life to the fullest in most cultures. In fact, hunger and thirst are two of the most fundamental desires and necessities to even sustain life at a basic level. To describe a human life as flourishing, we normally picture one whose every desire is exceeded. For the world, the person without moral constraints can fully pursue his or her desires to the fullest, and this is what so many in our culture strive to achieve.

In the face of a morally permissive lifestyle Jesus says that true well-being comes from one whose most basic desires are controlled by God's righteousness. There are two basic interpretations of the use of the word righteousness here. On the one hand, some see "righteousness" as a gift of God in providing salvation. So, Jesus would be commending those who long for God's eschatological gift of grace and salvation. Others see the word "righteousness" as carrying an ethical weight here.<sup>38</sup> Considering our

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<sup>37</sup>Mattison, "The Beatitudes and Moral Theology," 833.

<sup>38</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 52. Talbert presents both positions and then argues for the eschatological salvation view.

interpretation of the Beatitudes as presenting the virtues of disciples of the kingdom, it makes sense to take the second position. This fits well with Matthew's use of the Greek word *dikaio sunên* in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. In 5:10 the righteous are persecuted for their righteousness which indicates an ethical interpretation of this word. In 5:20 it seems very clear that Jesus is using the word to speak of obedience to God's will and commands.

So, Jesus commends a life that hungers and thirsts for conformity to God's will.

Scot McKnight summarizes this well when he writes,

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who love God and God's will (revealed in Torah as love and justice) with their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Because they love God and others, they are willing to check their passions and will in order to do God's will, to further God's justice, and to express their longing that God act to establish his will and kingdom.

They long for righteousness because they know that righteousness is ultimately good for others. They recognize the connection between God's design for human flourishing and his will and Word; therefore, they seek the good of others by passionately pursuing God's will.

And what is the promise held out as motivation for this pursuit? Davies and Allison claim that the way in which those who hunger are satisfied is not explicitly stated but they do offer a few reasonable options. "It could be the vision of God, as in Psalm 17:15, or the messianic banquet, or—most probably—a world in which righteousness dwells."<sup>39</sup> In keeping with the rest of the Beatitudes and the expectation of the future, it makes sense to see this as the hope of a world in which righteousness resides. So, we bring this character quality of hungering and thirsting into the present and begin to live this out. We await ultimate satisfaction in the future, but we begin to live out God's will in the world in which we live now.

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<sup>39</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 453.

## **Blessed Are the Merciful (5:7)**

Keep in mind that each of these Beatitudes gives us a characteristic of a kingdom disciple. These are the ethical qualities that disciples live by, and as Jesus makes clear, these qualities paint the picture of what it looks like to truly live well as a human being. In verse 7 we find another clear example of a counter-cultural virtue that defines human flourishing.

What does it mean to be merciful? There are three key elements to the idea of mercy in the Beatitudes. First, mercy is directed outward toward other people and not toward God. One who is merciful can see events and circumstances from the other person's perspective, particularly when that person is oppressed or suffering wrong. Second, mercy is not simply the emotion of empathy but ultimately must be expressed as action. The word translated "merciful" in 5:7 is only used one other time in the NT in Hebrews 2:17 to speak of Christ as the merciful high priest. Christ's mercy was more than an emotional reaction to our miserable plight. His mercy led him to come to earth to identify with us and die for us. Mercy is active. Third, the true motivation for mercy is to understand the depth of mercy given to us by God the Father. In Matthew 18:21–35 Jesus tells a story to teach the disciples about forgiveness and mercy. The climax of this story is found in 18:33 where the master utters these words to his distastefully unmerciful servant, "And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"

Pondering God's mercy toward us brings us to the promise that is held out and assures us of the good life. When we are merciful we can be confident that we will receive mercy on the last day when we stand before God's judgment. Our merciful lifestyle is not in order to secure God's kindness to us in the future. This is a perfect instance of God's future kingdom invading the present. Geulich explains when he writes, "In contrast to Judaism, the present does not condition the future as much as the future conditions the present. The display of mercy shown by the merciful is already the mercy



that will be expressed ultimately in the consummation."<sup>40</sup>

We recognize, by faith, that we will receive the mercy of God in the last day, and we act in light of that presently as we deal with others.

### **Blessed Are the Pure in Heart (5:8)**

Those who are “pure in heart” are those whose outer conduct matches their inner disposition. This phrasing is most likely taken from Psalm 24:3–4 where “pure in heart” is a requirement to enter the presence of the Lord and truly worship him. Beyond the connection between inner reality and outer practice, the “pure in heart” are singly focused on God and his righteous commands. Davies and Allison define this virtue when they write,

So, purity of heart must involve integrity, a correspondence between outward action and inward thought, a lack of duplicity, singleness of intention, and the desire to please God above all else. More succinctly: purity of heart is to will one thing, God's will, with all of one's being.<sup>41</sup>

Once again, we find this characteristic of disciples to be counter-cultural. Those who are pure in heart are driven by deeply held convictions and are not riding the current wave of popularity to get ahead in the world.

The Sermon on the Mount picks up the theme of outward versus inward righteousness repeatedly. In 5:27–30 disciples are to not just avoid adultery but to guard their hearts against lust. In 6:1–21 we get an extended treatment of this topic covering three religious activities: fasting, prayer, and giving. These can easily be done for outward show and not with purity of heart. Finally, at the end of the Sermon as Jesus warns about false prophets to come, he describes them as wolves in sheep's clothing. They appear righteous but inwardly they are “ravenous wolves.”

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<sup>40</sup>Robert A Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 104.

<sup>41</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 456.

Why is purity of heart descriptive of human flourishing? Certainly, it is because it promises a future time when we will be in God's presence, but also it is because this quality makes the true worship and knowledge of God a reality in the present. Carl Holladay explains when he writes, "The life well-lived, devoid of all the things normally associated with an impure heart, opens one's eyes to God."<sup>42</sup> When we live with purity of heart the future invades the present to fulfill the expectation of Psalm 24 that we experience God's presence in a true and lasting way.

### **Blessed Are the Peacemakers (5:9)**

In keeping with the eschatological expectations of the Beatitudes, kingdom disciples are characterized as those who actively engage in creating peaceful relationships. This is an eschatological idea because the OT expects the messianic age to be characterized by peace. Isaiah 9:6–7 promises that the coming Davidic king will be the "prince of peace" and that his government will be characterized by a peace that will have no end. Zechariah 9:9–10 predicts that when Israel's king comes he will stop war and usher in an era of peace for all the nations. Peace is certainly associated with the messianic age and so it makes sense that kingdom disciples who are bringing the future into the present will be those who pursue peace.

Strife, bitterness, and warring factions are an ever-present reality in this fallen world. The culture trains us to highlight differences to pursue "the natural desire for advantage and/or retribution."<sup>43</sup> This mentality leads many to believe that the good life for me is won by others' loss. Christ's definition of human well-being is exactly the opposite. His followers do not simply love peace, they passionately pursue bringing

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<sup>42</sup>Carl R. Holladay, "The Beatitudes: Happiness and the Kingdom of God," in *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life*, ed. Brent A. Strawn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 151.

<sup>43</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 169.

peace to every area of influence in their lives. Carl Holladay beautifully explains what it means to possess this active virtue,

Happiness is not bestowed on those who love peace or even on those who are peaceful themselves but on those who actively make peace. In view is an activist, aggressive stance toward conflict and controversy, which summons those committed to peace not only to seek but also to construct conversations, alliances, relationships, treaties, and political and social structures that have the possibility of achieving meaningful reconciliation.<sup>44</sup>

Peacemakers seek to bring about reconciliation without ignoring or glossing over differences. Instead, they seek to create relationships of understanding and love and bring healing to those suffering from strife. This love of peace extends to racial injustice, failing marriages, church splits, and other relationships. Those who pursue peace live the good life because they are called the “sons of God.” They are children of God because they act like God. Once again Holladay explains, “The question this beatitude invites us to probe, then, is the relationship between peacemaking and divine childhood . . . One might even argue that this beatitude asserts that the instinct for resolving conflict peacefully is divine.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Blessed Are the Persecuted (5:10–12)**

Matthew now finishes the Beatitudes by giving us two macarisms centered on one theme persecution. We have already discussed the fact that there are nine Beatitudes, but now we can see that the last beatitude, found in verses 11–12, looks quite a bit different from the previous eight. Together, the description of the good life found in these two Beatitudes is quite shocking to modern sensibilities. As Holladay writes, “To be persecuted for righteousness sake, that is, to suffer unjustly, would appear to be an experience that is neither blissful nor blessed, certainly not one normally associated with

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<sup>44</sup>Holladay, “The Beatitudes: Happiness and the Kingdom of God,” 151.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid, 151.

happiness.”<sup>46</sup> Jesus expands on the idea of persecution in verse 11 by describing it as reviling and having false things said about you. What is the reason for this persecution?

The eighth beatitude, found in verse 10, states that one of the qualities of the good life is suffering persecution “for righteousness sake.” This is not the first time we have encountered the word “righteousness” in the Sermon, and it will not be the last. Holladay points out that the persecution described in this beatitude results from embodying the first seven.<sup>47</sup> This “righteous” lifestyle, according to verse 11 means that you are closely associated with Jesus because the persecution is “on account of me.”

Verse 10 bookends the Beatitudes by promising that the persecution indicates the good life because of the kingdom of heaven. Verse 12 expands that hope by actually promising a reward in heaven for those whose lifestyles identify them with Christ. The reward builds motivation and confidence to abide the insults and injury. Jesus’ statement in verse 12 also connects the suffering of his people to those who came before in the OT. This type of unjust suffering has always been the pattern for God's people; it was certainly the pattern for our Messiah; and it will continue to be the pattern for all who truly follow him.

It is vital to note the changes found in the last beatitude, in verses 11–12. For the first time in the Beatitudes we have commands. Jesus calls his followers to rejoice and be glad when they are persecuted. Davies and Allison explain the reasoning by saying, “The thought is: since the disciples are being ill-treated just as the prophets of old were, they too must be God's servants; therefore they will have a great reward and, knowing this, can even now rejoice and be glad.”<sup>48</sup> But these commands are combined with a change from the third person to the second person. This change prepares the reader

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<sup>46</sup>Holladay, 150.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, 152.

<sup>48</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 463.

to receive the mission called for in 5:13–16 as those displaying the virtues of verses 3–12 go out into the culture as salt and light. So, verses 11–12 are a bridge connecting the description of the virtues of a kingdom disciple to the mission of a kingdom disciple.

## CHAPTER 4

### BE WHO YOU ARE: EXTENDING GOD'S BLESSINGS TO THE NATIONS (MATTHEW 5:13–16)

At the beginning of chapter 3 we briefly examined the difference between the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. Our culture's current bent is tilted dramatically toward the pursuit of the resume virtues, which are those qualities which help one in the work place. Of course, much bigger questions drive the quest for a set of qualities, whatever those qualities might be. We narrowed in on two questions that support and shape what we value. First, although rarely articulated clearly, one's vision of the good life, or a life well-lived, profoundly determines which virtues one pursues. If the picture of human well-being and flourishing that has sunk into my gut holds out material wealth and power as the height of human well-being, then I will naturally pursue those qualities that help me make a lot of money and have as much power as possible. Because of the motivating and nourishing power of one's picture of human flourishing, it is vital that our picture be accurate and grounded in God's truth.

This is precisely how the Beatitudes become a vital source of truth for human flourishing. The Beatitudes paint a vivid picture for us of a life well-lived that is both compelling and confusing. It is compelling because of the broad sweep of the promises attached to the virtues given in verses 3–12. It is confusing at first because these qualities are so counter-cultural. Scot McKnight explains the counter-cultural picture of the Beatitudes when he says, "We need to remind ourselves that each beatitude is a reversal of cultural values: the self-dependent or wealthy oppressor is at odds with the economy of

the kingdom.”<sup>1</sup> So, the Beatitudes shape what virtues we pursue by giving us a dynamic vision of the good life.

However, the second key ingredient in determining what virtues we will pursue is our conception of what human beings are for. This concept can be captured by questions like, Why are we here? What is our goal as human beings? Why did God create us in the first place? If the Beatitudes inform our vision of the good life, then the salt and light metaphors in verses 13–16 tell us our purpose as human beings. Both the vision of the good life and the mission of human beings will shape our pursuit of virtues and character. In this chapter, we will examine the salt and light metaphors in verses 13–16 as summarizing the mission of God’s people by using covenantal language so that God’s kingdom disciples will extend His blessings to the nations. In other words, Matthew 5:13–16 serves as a manifesto for Christ’s disciples to model a true humanity and thus influence the broader world.

### **Moving from Beatitudes to Salt and Light**

In Matthew 5:3–12 Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with a series of macarisms designed to motivate and inspire his followers with a vision of the good life. These virtues are descriptive of those who are truly living as God originally intended. Of course, this portrait of the good life is antithetical to the type of life longed for by many in our culture today. In fact, the Beatitudes are specifically count-cultural and this gives them a certain appeal.

Wrapped up in this vision of the good life is an implicit understanding of what human beings are for. God created humans with a specific purpose in mind, and it is to this purpose that Jesus now turns in Matthew 5:13–16. In fact, Dumbrell suggests that verses 13–16 summarize and pull together the entire message of the Sermon on the

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<sup>1</sup>Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 39.

Mount to this point. He says, “If, as we have suggested, the salt and light images summarize the sermon to that point, under the two images may be being subsumed the two-fold thrust of the previous eight Beatitudes i.e. that salt may refer to the disciple’s nature, light to their function.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, in the Beatitudes Jesus gives us the character of the disciples, and salt and light summarize these virtues on mission.

Conceptual connections are not all that ties the Beatitudes to the salt and light metaphors of verses 13–16. In verses 11–12 the ninth beatitude looks quite a bit different from the previous eight. The structure of the first eight is jettisoned for an expanded explanation of persecution, which is the same theme as the eighth beatitude. In this explanation Matthew switches from third person descriptions in verses 3–10 to second person plural commands in verses 11–16. Some have even seen this change in grammar as an indication that there are only eight Beatitudes and that verses 11–12 should be grouped with 13–16 in the overall structure of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>3</sup>

However, as the ninth beatitude commands disciples to rejoice and be glad in the midst of their persecution, it transitions from a life of virtues exhibited by disciples to the way in which disciples interact with those in the world around them. R.T. France summarizes this shift by saying,

At this point, then, the discourse turns from a general statement about the good life to a specific address to the disciples gathered around Jesus on the hillside. Because they have committed themselves to follow Jesus and so to adopt the new values of the kingdom of heaven, they are now going to stand out as different from other people.<sup>4</sup>

The shift to second person plural commands in verses 11–16 has significant

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<sup>2</sup>William J Dumbrell, “The Logic of the Role of the Law in Matthew 5:1-20,” *Novum Testamentum* 23, no. 1 (January 1981): 12.

<sup>3</sup>David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 146.

<sup>4</sup>R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 171.



impact for the relationship of believers to the world. We must not think of these instructions regarding persecution and descriptions of salt and light as individually focused. Our tendency is to ponder how my individual life can serve as salt and light. The shift to second person plural indicates that Jesus is here thinking of the entire community as salt and light. When we ponder salt and light we are to think in terms of God's people as a unit. In other words, Christ's followers as citizens of the new creational kingdom are described as salt and light in verses 13–16. Once again, France points out the importance of this shift by saying, "The address is in the second-person plural not only because more than one person is being addressed, but because it is the corporate impact of the disciple community, as an alternative society, which is here in view."<sup>5</sup>

What exactly does he mean by this "alternative society?" We will return to this phrase in a few pages as we try to pull the concepts together. For now it is enough to know that salt and light give the function in the broader world of those described in the Beatitudes. Since we are going to be examining the disciples function in the culture, it is vital to grasp how Jesus uses these two metaphors to illuminate that role for his followers.

## **Salt**

We cannot just state that these verses are picking up the mission of God's followers without making the connection between salt and light clear and without clarifying the way in which Jesus is using these metaphors. Without a doubt salt has been the more confusing of the two images used to depict God's people and their role in the world. Rather than simply understanding salt and light to be nifty images pulled out of thin air, many scholars try to ground their interpretation of these passages in the Old Testament and other ancient literature. However, that does not leave the interpreter with any less ambiguity and perhaps with a little more. Davies and Allison list eleven possible

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<sup>5</sup>France, 171.

uses for salt from the Old Testament as well as other ancient sources. Their survey concludes with this statement, “Given the various uses for salt and its several symbolic associations, it is quite impossible to decide what one characteristic is to the fore in Matthew 5:13.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite the despair of Davies and Allison, it does seem possible to unify the various uses of salt in the OT under one heading that can properly inform our understanding of both salt and light. The best understanding of salt and light is to view both of these images as painting kingdom disciples as covenant representatives in the world.

Our study of the Beatitudes has shown that Christ’s proclamation of the kingdom is intimately connected to the promises of the kingdom in Isaiah as a whole and chapters 40–66 in particular. Adrian Leske makes the case that the salt and light sayings should be interpreted with this background in mind. He says, “However, considering that the Beatitudes express so strongly the proclamation of the Kingdom promises in Isaiah 40–66, one would expect that these two sayings would be directly connected to these promises.”<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 42:6 makes the resulting mission of his servant quite clear. It says, “I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations.” We can already see the connection between light and covenant in 42:6. Although salt and light each carry unique nuance to the picture of kingdom disciples, they are parallel in some ways. David Turner points out the close connection between salt and light when he says, “The image of salt should be viewed contextually as in some ways analogous to the more accessible

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<sup>6</sup>W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004), 473.

<sup>7</sup>Adrian M. Leske, “The Beatitudes: Salt and Light in Matthew and Luke,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 30 (1991): 836.

image of light.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, if the picture of God’s servant as light indicates that the servant is in some way mediating God’s covenant, then we would expect to find a clear OT connection to salt as the covenant as well. We will come more specifically to the light metaphor in a moment, but we need to examine the use of salt language in the Old Testament to confirm that both salt and light have covenant implications.

As was mentioned earlier, the OT uses salt in a wide variety of ways, which has made the interpretation of this passage somewhat problematic. However, when working through the key OT passages related to salt, it is possible to group them under a single heading, that of covenant. Don Arlington gives a helpful analysis of the OT background and then concludes that a covenantal framework is the key understanding of salt that informed Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. He divides these texts into four main categories.

(1) As “salt,” the disciples exhibit covenant fidelity and so preserve the continuance of the covenant. This category includes the probability that Jesus’ followers are conceived of as sacrifices in their own persons. (2) By virtue of their identification as salt, the disciples share in covenant fellowship, including that of the table, and thus form a society in communion with the covenant Lord. (3) The disciples impart purity to the creation, thereby causing it to be better than before—a new creation. (4) There is the punitive function of salt. If the world rejects the message of the disciples, their witness to the blessings of salvation turns into a condemnation of it.<sup>9</sup>

We will return to these four categories in the application section, but one of the most profound elements to keep in mind when thinking of salt in covenantal terms is that a covenant of salt meant permanence. William Dumbrell explains, “In short, not purity but durability and fidelity to an established arrangement lie behind the use of the salt figure in covenant contexts in the Old Testament.”<sup>10</sup> So, when Jesus calls his kingdom disciples the salt of the earth, he is indicating that their presence in the world indicates the

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<sup>8</sup>Turner, *Matthew*, 155.

<sup>9</sup>Don B Garlington, “‘The Salt of the Earth’ in Covenantal Perspective,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 4 (December 2011): 748.

<sup>10</sup>Dumbrell, “The Logic of the Role of the Law in Matthew 5,” 12.

reality and the permanence of God's covenant. In other words, the disciple's very presence in living out the Beatitudes and the realities of the Sermon indicate God's desire for the nations to come to him and embrace the covenant he is offering.

## **Light**

While salt is often difficult to interpret in light of the OT, there seems to be an entire OT theology of light, particularly as it relates to the Messiah and Israel's role for the nations. In fact, Matthew has already drawn the reader's attention to Isaiah's theology of light in Matthew 4:12–17. In this text, Matthew quotes Isaiah 9:1–2, a key text in the expectation of Israel's renewal and Messiah's arrival and says that Jesus' arrival in Galilee fulfilled this text from Isaiah. In Isaiah 9 Israel is described as walking in darkness and dwelling in a land of deep darkness. This metaphor takes the reader back to Deuteronomy 28:29 and the promise of judgment and curse from Yahweh if Israel will not keep his covenant. The people had rebelled against Yahweh, and now they were being held in contempt for their rebellion. Darkness was the result. They would blindly grope in darkness and futility because of their sin.

Yet, Isaiah 9:2 promises that these very people who had groped in darkness would see a great light. Just a few verses later in Isaiah 9:6–7 the promise of a child is given who will bring righteousness and justice as he sits on the throne of David and rules over his kingdom. Matthew presents the coming of Jesus to Galilee as the realization of this light, and in Matthew 4:17 we find Jesus proclaiming the good news of the arrival of the kingdom.

Isaiah understands the coming Davidic king to be a light to the people of Israel in Isaiah 9:1–2, but he also understands the mission of the servant to serve as a light to the nations. We have already examined Isaiah 42:6, which ties the mission of the servant to the nations. But this question is often debated, what is the identity of the servant in Isaiah 40–66? Are we reading about the nation Israel or an individual?

Certain texts in Isaiah clearly point to the entire nation as God's servant. Isaiah 41:8 says, "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend." But just a few chapters later in Isaiah 49:1–6 the servant appears to be an individual who will bring the nation of Israel back into the presence of God. Gentry and Wellum highlight this dilemma by asking, "How can the servant be both the nation and the deliverer of the nation?"<sup>11</sup> They provide the answer,

There is only one possible solution that resolves this conundrum fairly, and Isaiah has prepared us for this in the first part of his work: the servant must be the future king described earlier (e.g., 11:1–10). As an individual, the king can say, "I am Israel." The king can represent the nation as a whole, yet he can be distinguished from Israel.<sup>12</sup>

The concept of the representative king is vital for our understanding of Isaiah's use of the light metaphor and how it provides significant background for Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:14–16. As we track through Isaiah 40–66 we find repeated use of the light metaphor in the context of the servant of the Lord. In Isaiah 49:6 God speaks to the servant-king and says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." In other words, God's servant-king's work will move beyond the borders of Israel and illuminate the entire world.

Isaiah 51:4 continues the logic of chapter 49 as the servant speaks directly to the nation of Israel and tells them his justice will bring light to the peoples of the earth. Thus far, the individual servant is the one who will bring light to the people through his justice and righteousness. However, in Isaiah 58 a subtle shift occurs that will culminate in chapter 60. Now, instead of directly associating the spreading light with an individual,

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<sup>11</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 440.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 440.

it will emanate from the people. In Isaiah 58:8 it is the light of the people that will break forth, and this illumination to others will be associated with their healing. Verse 10 describes their light going forth as they do good works such as feeding the hungry and helping the afflicted.

Finally, in Isaiah 60 the future restoration of Israel is described. This chapter plays a key role in the last section of Isaiah. John Oswalt describes chapters 60–62 by saying, “They show Israel’s final destiny as the restored people of God in whom the reality of God’s salvation is displayed to all the earth.”<sup>13</sup> Israel’s final destiny brings together both the individual servant’s light shining on Israel as well as Israel’s light going forth to the nations. Isaiah 60:1 commands the people of Israel to arise and shine precisely because the glory of the Lord has risen upon them. Verse 2 indicates that the Lord will arise upon them and that His very glory will be seen upon them. Then verse 3 brings the original mission of Israel into focus as “the nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”

So, when Jesus uses the metaphor of light to describe His kingdom disciples in Matthew 5:14–16, he is rooting their mission in Isaiah’s theology of light. Isaiah uses light to depict Israel’s mission to the nations as God’s servant and darkness to convey their failure to fulfill that mission. Isaiah then speaks of a coming servant who will take up the mantle of spreading the brightness of God’s glory to the peoples and then bringing Israel to the place where they will shine forth that glory as well. Matthew connects the work of Jesus to Isaiah’s understanding of light and mission by his use of Isaiah 9:1–2 in Matthew 4:15–16. With a proper grasp of both salt and light we must now move to fit Christ’s description of His kingdom followers’ mission into the broader story of Scripture.

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<sup>13</sup>John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 534.

## **The Mission of Humanity**

Thus far we have seen that salt carries very clear covenantal connotations based in the OT as Jesus uses it in Matthew 5:13. We have also seen that the metaphor of light is built on God's mission for Israel and a coming Davidic king described in Isaiah as God's servant. Both metaphors, when properly rooted in their OT covenantal backgrounds, indicate that God's kingdom disciples are to be his covenant representatives on the earth. As Scot McKnight says, "This text encourages us to reimagine our role in the world as God's agents of redemption."<sup>14</sup> Since we are "agents of redemption" on a mission, we want to connect that mission to the broader role for God's people in the story of Scripture.

God has always had a purpose for his people, even as he placed them in the garden in the very first chapter of Genesis. N.T. Wright explains the nature of God's goal-oriented creation,

Creation, it seems, was not a tableau, a static scene. It was designed as a project, created in order to go somewhere. The creator has a future in mind for it; and Human—this strange creature, full of mystery and glory—is the means by which the creator is going to take his project forward. The garden, and all the living creatures, plants and animals, within it, are designed to become what they were meant to be through the work of God's image-bearing creatures in their midst.<sup>15</sup>

Once we see that God has a mission for his creation, to be mediated through the pinnacle of that creation, man, we can begin to trace his overarching purpose through the story of Scripture. Scot McKnight lists a series of texts that highlight this divine purpose for mankind. He summarizes by saying, "A brief sketch of those passages in the Bible assigns a particular role to Adam and Eve (Gen 1:26–27); Ps 8:1–6), then to Abraham (Gen 12), then through him to Israel (Exodus 19:4–6), and eventually to Jesus and through him to disciples as the church (Matthew 19:28; 1 Peter 2:1–12)."<sup>16</sup> We've

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<sup>14</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 55.

<sup>15</sup>N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: Harper One, 2012), 74.

<sup>16</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 55.

already hinted at this continuum in our discussion in Isaiah of God's servant as the one bringing light to the nation of Israel and then Israel picking up that light and carrying it to the nations. Israel had been given her missional purpose in Exodus 19:4–6. Yet, according to Isaiah she had utterly failed to realize that purpose. Gentry and Wellum tie this failure back to Genesis and God's promise to bless the nations through Israel his servant. "This is the dilemma: how can God keep his promises to Abraham when Israel has completely failed as the servant of the Lord?"<sup>17</sup> The answer, of course, is that God will raise up a deliverer, a Davidic king, who will be a light to the nation of Israel and according to Isaiah 60:2–3 create those who will broadly display the glory of the Lord and shine as a light to the nations.

Therefore, when we read in Matthew 5:13–16 that disciples of Jesus are salt and light, we are engaging with a much bigger reality than a simple metaphor. Salt and light are both covenantal images rooted in the Old Testament which connect the role of Jesus' disciples to the broader mission of God in the world. These verses pick up the pervasive biblical theme of God's purpose for humanity. Since we are dealing with a new humanity here, through the work of Christ and as the values of the makarisms are inculcated, this is a manifesto for Christ's disciples to model a true humanity and thus influence the broader world.

### **Application**

At this juncture, we need to consider the practical ramifications of Christ's use of both salt and light to describe his followers and their mission in the world. Those who may be described as salt and light are those who exhibit the virtues of Matthew 5:3–12 and demonstrate the greater righteousness of Matthew 5:17–7:12. Davies and Allison explain how these images fit within the rest of the Sermon on the Mount,

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<sup>17</sup>Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 439.



The reader is not told how to become salt or light. This is because 5:13–16, as a general description or superscription, stands above the detailed paraenesis proper. It is a transitional passage in which the speaker moves from the life of the blessed future (5:3–12) to the demands of life in the present (5:17–7:12), in which the theme switches from gift to task, and in which those who live as 5:17–7:12 will direct are summarily characterized. In short, in 5:13–16 descriptive names are bestowed upon those who live as the sermon on the mount demands.<sup>18</sup>

Both images give us the character of the disciple as well as his goal. Yet, the way these images are used varies to the point where each is making a unique statement regarding the mission of Christ's disciples. The salt image seems to function as a warning, while the light image is a directive for action.

After stating that disciples are the salt of the earth, Jesus goes on to explain the dire consequences of salt losing its taste. This most likely would happen as the salt was diluted with other minerals that it could not be reasonably used as salt any longer.<sup>19</sup> Jesus explains that when salt loses its saltiness it becomes “no longer good for anything.” The word used here is *môranthê*, and it has the primary idea of showing one to be foolish or worthless.<sup>20</sup> Don Garlington explains what this looks like in a disciple when he says,

To be a 'fool' in this specific sense is to align oneself with values and goals that are antithetical to the kingdom of God and its ideals . . . . Insipid disciples are those who have ceased to have any meaningful influence for good on the earth; they have ceased to be covenant-keepers and have become covenant-breakers.<sup>21</sup>

The image of light, though it does contain a warning, very strongly exhorts Christ's followers to let their lights shine before men. Of course, we have already seen that Jesus was described as the “light” in Matthew 4:16. Now his disciples are tasked to be that light to the nations by their actions on earth. Ulrich Luz explains, “The readers of the Gospel of Matthew will think back to 4:16, where Isaiah spoke of the light that the

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<sup>18</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 471.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 473.

<sup>20</sup>George Abbott-Smith, “*Môranthê*,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 299.

<sup>21</sup>Garlington, “‘The Salt of the Earth’ in Covenantal Perspective,” 736–37.

people sitting in darkness see. Thus, the task given the disciples corresponds to the mission of Christ himself.”<sup>22</sup> And we can see with both salt and light that the task given to the disciples through Christ is intended to reach to the ends of the earth. So what exactly is this task? How can followers of Christ be salt and light?

We have stressed throughout this chapter the covenantal nature of the salt and light metaphors. To better understand how Christ’s followers can actually function as salt and light in a covenantal sense we must return to the image of salt and the four covenantal categories described by Don Garlington as quoted above. First, disciples are covenantal representatives by their very existence on earth. The presence of the Beatitudes in the character of disciples and the disciples’ presence in the world indicate that God’s kingdom has arrived. Garlington explains when he says, “That is to say, because they exhibit the qualities signaled by the indicatives of Matt. 5:3–12, the disciples are proof positive that the kingdom is a reality in the world.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore Jesus does not command the disciples to become salt. They are already salt, and they are to live in line with their position as covenantal representatives on earth. In practical terms this means practicing the virtues found in Matthew 5:3–12 and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. It means giving themselves as a sacrifice, as Paul commands in Romans 12:1–2, just as the prophets did before them. Second, salt was used in the sacrificial meal as a symbol of fellowship and friendship with God and with others. As the salt of the earth, kingdom disciples attest to the fellowship and union that is to be had with God and with other believers. We demonstrate the reality of the present kingdom and the covenant of God by showcasing our loving union with one another before a watching world. Third, as the salt of the earth, disciples do preserve the world from a deeper corruption and can

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<sup>22</sup>Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 207.

<sup>23</sup>Garlington, “‘The Salt of the Earth’ in Covenantal Perspective,” 730.

even make it better than before, indicating the coming hope of a new creation. Finally, as the salt of the earth Christ's disciples create a decision point for the rest of the world. Salt was often used in the OT to indicate God's judgment had fallen.<sup>24</sup> As covenantal representatives we are proof of the reality of God's gracious covenant and offer of salvation. Yet, if this offer is rejected, rather than bringing others into joyful table fellowship with God, his followers will indicate the reality of God's judgment as they suffer persecution for Christ's name (Matt 5:11–12).

Both salt and light project God's kingdom disciples as having an impact on the world around them. Scot McKnight explains, "Both salt and light are images for impact on something else: salt impacts, for instance, meats, while light impacts darkness."<sup>25</sup> The metaphor of salt attests to the influence of God's kingdom disciples through their presence on earth. Light attests to their influence through their proclamation to the earth.

Disciples are not merely to hear the news of the kingdom and be changed by it internally. They are those who embrace the offer of the kingdom and then turn around and shine that good news out into the world. Guelich explains,

"Disciples are not only those who hear and respond to the good news but become by the very nature of discipleship messengers of this good news. This role, which was once Israel's, is integral to being a part of the age of salvation. The recipients of the good news become themselves messengers of the good news."<sup>26</sup>

How can kingdom disciples be both salt and light? It is by their presence attesting to the reality of God's covenantal love and their proclamation of that love to those around them. Therefore, kingdom disciples are salt and light when they pick up the mission of humanity passed down from Abraham to Israel to Jesus and seek to extend the blessings of God's covenant to those around them and witness to the glory of his

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<sup>24</sup>Gen 19:24–26; Deut 29:22–23; Judg 9:45; Ps 107 33–34; Jer 17:5–6

<sup>25</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 56.

<sup>26</sup>Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 128.

kingdom by the way they interact with the world.

Finally, as we consider the practical ramifications of living out the realities of our covenantal status as salt and light, it will be helpful to consider a contemporary paradigm of what it means to be the people of God in our late-modern world. James Davison Hunter has written a helpful book called *To Change the World* in which he considers this very topic. After defining culture and critiquing a variety of Christian approaches to life and witness in our culture, Hunter offers his own model for Christians to consider. He calls it faithful presence. He defines it by saying, “At root, a theology of faithful presence begins with an acknowledgement of God’s faithful presence to us and that his call upon us is that we be faithfully present to him in return. This is the foundation, the logic, the paradigm.”<sup>27</sup>

Hunter is getting to the heart of what it means to be salt and light as we live as God’s covenantal representatives to the world around us. The metaphors of salt and light can become a vague call for influence if they are detached from the OT background of covenant. Christians should certainly be an influence but we need specifics. The outworking of our covenantal responsibilities within the paradigm of faithful presence gives us a more concrete grasp on the task at hand.

What are these specifics? First, as we discussed above, they are wrapped up in God’s overall purpose for humanity. God deals with us on a covenantal basis because he is moving all of creation toward a final redemption to make things right. This means that our daily functioning as salt and light in terms of faithful presence will have an eschatological bent and goal. Hunter explains,

The vision of this community—the hope for which it longs and the ideals to which it strives—is the vision of shalom. It is a vision of order and harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, and well-being. For the Christian, this was

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<sup>27</sup>James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 243.

God's intention in creation and it is his promise for the new heaven and the new earth.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, we enter a covenant with God not just to free us from our sins but to bring us back in line with the purpose of God for the universe.

Second, because this vision is eschatological, it embraces all of life. According to Hunter, being faithfully present to God works itself out in three precise ways which wash over the scope of our existence. We are faithfully present to each other, to our tasks, and within our spheres of influence. As we are present to those inside and outside the body of Christ we are intentional and active in our relationships. We seek to do good and bring others to a life filled with more flourishing.<sup>29</sup> Our tasks are not just incidental parts of our lives. God has placed us on earth to work according to the early chapters of Genesis. We put our hands to the plow and “work heartily, as to the Lord and not for men” (Colossians 3:23). Even the most menial task has eternal value and worth and can contribute to the well-being of others. Consequently, our daily work is a key element of our faithful presence. Finally, each of us has been placed in a sphere of influence, whether that is our family, neighborhood, local community, trade union, or children's sports teams. God has placed us within these particular webs of relationships in order to be faithfully present, or salt and light. Hunter summarizes the goal of faithful presence when he says, “What this means is that where and to the extent we are able, faithful presence commits us to do what we can to create conditions in the structures of social life we inhabit that are conducive to the flourishing of all.”<sup>30</sup>

Third, if we are going to be faithfully present in the world, then we must give ourselves in sacrificial love. God's faithful presence to us is most clearly exemplified by the sacrificial gift of his son on the cross. We are to take that love and redirect it outward

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<sup>28</sup>Hunter, 228.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 244.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 247.

to those within our spheres of influence in order to promote well-being and human flourishing. Hunter explains, “Pursuit, identification, the offer of life through sacrificial love – this is what God’s faithful presence means. It is a quality of commitment that is active, not passive; intentional, not accidental; covenantal, not contractual.”<sup>31</sup>

So, our mission as God’s kingdom disciples is to extend his blessings to the nations through our faithful presence. We have received God’s covenantal blessings and now we model the sacrificial love and self-giving that has as its goal the benefit of others. This is what it means to be salt and light.

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<sup>31</sup>Hunter, 243.

## CHAPTER 5

### TRANSFORMATIVE RIGHTEOUSNESS (MATTHEW 5:17–48)

Thus far in our discussion of the Sermon on the Mount we have examined the Beatitudes and the disciples' status as salt and light in the world. In many ways, these two sections form the introduction to the body of the Sermon on the Mount. The main body of the Sermon goes from 5:17 to 7:12, and the mention of the "law and the prophets" forms an *inclusio* around the body.<sup>1</sup>

The Beatitudes set the stage for the rest of the Sermon on the Mount by showing the reader what the good life looks like. They present a counter-cultural vision of human flourishing as a life which develops these character qualities that anticipate God's future kingdom on earth now. As these qualities are developed in the present life the kingdom disciple will be on mission to the world as a covenantal representative, or salt and light. Matthew 5:16 ends with the reality that our good works will be seen by men, and they will ultimately bring glory to our Father in heaven.

The body of the Sermon on the Mount picks up the theme of "good works" and develops that theme by giving much more detail. Instead of using the term "good works," Jesus now moves to the term "righteousness." R.T. France makes the connection between these two terms clear when he says, "The phrase 'good deeds' conveys the qualities set out in the Beatitudes, and especially the 'righteousness' of life which is to be characteristic of disciples."<sup>2</sup> Of course, the idea of "righteousness" is sprinkled

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<sup>1</sup>Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 25.

<sup>2</sup>R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 177.

throughout the Sermon on the Mount in unusually high numbers compared to the rest of the gospels.<sup>3</sup> We will discuss the proper meaning of this term later, but the entire body of the Sermon divides into three large sections which address various aspects of righteousness. In 5:17–48 Jesus deals with transformative righteousness that impacts the whole person and goes far beyond a simple avoidance of sin. In 6:1–21 he addresses three key spiritual practices and calls his disciples to a righteousness that is done before God and not just to be seen by men. Finally, in 6:19–7:12 Jesus instructs his disciples in a social righteousness concerning how they relate to their basic needs in this world and to each other.

If one of the primary goals of the Sermon on the Mount is to present a picture of true human flourishing and well-being, then the call of the main body to a transcendent righteousness is at the heart of the good life. In 5:17–48 we have one aspect of this righteousness explained. It must be a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees because it goes beyond the legality of actions to a vision of human wholeness made clear by Jesus.

### **5:17–20 and Bible Reading**

As we begin the main body of the Sermon on the Mount, we must interact with this important passage concerning Christ's relationship to the OT law. Here we have a passage explaining Christ's relationship to the OT law and instructing us on how to read the six examples set down in 5:21–47. It is hard to overstate just how important this passage is for how we fit our Bible together and understand them. Scot McKnight explains the centrality of 5:17–20 when he says,

Our passage is the most significant passage in the entire Bible on how to read the

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<sup>3</sup>Brice L Martin, "Matthew on Christ and the Law," *Theological Studies* 44, no. 1 (March 1983): 61. "*Dikaioyne* is a special word in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount; five times (5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33) it occurs there but only twice (3:15; 21:32) in the rest of Matthew and only once more (Luke 1:75) in the rest of the Synoptics."



Bible, with a nod to Luke 24:13–49; Galatians 3:19–25; Romans 9–11; and the book of Hebrews, because Jesus tells us here how to read the Bible. The entire Old Testament or, in Jesus' Jewish shorthand summary, the Law and the Prophets, aim at and are completed in/fulfilled in Jesus as Messiah.<sup>4</sup>

Essentially, Jesus anticipates objections to his teaching and deals with them up front in this text. He is guarding against two ditches into which the listener may fall. On one side, it would be easy for Jewish listeners to believe Jesus jettisons the entire OT law with this teaching. Because of this they would reject Christianity and not understand Christ as the fulfillment of the law. On the other side would be Christian, perhaps Gentile, listeners who would hear a wholesale rejection of the law and fail to value it as Scripture with a desire to rightly understand it and obey.

Christ's relationship to the OT law is summarized in verse 17 with the word *fulfill*. Davies and Allison list nine possible interpretations of this concept.<sup>5</sup> Brice Martin lists 6 possible translations of the word *fulfill* which each shape how the concept of Christ's fulfillment is played out.<sup>6</sup> There are several important points to make to help us rightly grasp the way in which Jesus fulfills the OT law and prophets.

First, this is not the first time the concept of Christ's fulfillment of the OT has appeared in Matthew. As we discussed in chapter 2, Matthew 1–4 give multiple fulfillment formulas and indicate that Christ's life fulfills the OT pattern set by Israel. Matthew's idea of fulfillment includes the idea of righteousness, meaning that Jesus succeeds in righteousness where Israel had failed in transgression.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Christ's life brings the history of Israel to its completion or summary, and He is identified as the true Israel. If Matthew's use of fulfillment is consistent, then 5:17 indicates that

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<sup>4</sup>Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 66.

<sup>5</sup>W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004), 486.

<sup>6</sup>Martin, "Matthew on Christ and the Law," 64–65.

<sup>7</sup>Brandon D Crowe, "Fulfillment in Matthew as Eschatological Reversal," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 75, no. 1 (2013): 111–12.

Jesus is bringing the law and the prophets to their intended completion and goal. The eschatological reason for the law and the prophets has been realized in Jesus. Guelich explains this eschatological moment when he says,

Matthew's use of the Old Testament is foundational for his Christology that perceives Jesus to be the Messiah Son of God who comes as the fulfillment of God's promise to his people for the end times. The evangelist is most concerned to demonstrate that Jesus stands in line with the prophetic promise of Scripture, but only as the ultimate fulfillment of that promise—the new, final chapter in God's redemptive plan for history.<sup>8</sup>

The ultimate promise of the OT was that God's kingdom would be realized and that goal is a reality through the kingdom ministry of Jesus Christ.

Second, since Christ did not come to abolish but to fulfill, and since His kingdom has arrived through his ministry, the purpose of the OT has now been crystallized. Now the OT law and prophets must be read with that goal and purpose in mind. France explains this realization by saying,

They remain the authoritative word of God. But their role will no longer be the same, now that what they pointed forward to has come, and it will be for Jesus' followers to discern in the light of his teaching and practice what is now the right way to apply those texts in the new situation which his coming has created.<sup>9</sup>

Since Jesus has affirmed the OT, he then states in verse 18 that every part of it will remain. Of course, this affirmation of permanence must be interpreted in keeping with the concept of fulfillment. Our reading of the OT law and prophets must be in line with the purpose of the OT found in Christ. And since the OT is permanent, it must be taught and followed according to verse 19. When this happens, per a proper interpretation, it will result in a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. So, we must carefully inquire as to the nature of this righteousness mentioned in verse 20.

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<sup>8</sup>Robert A Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 142.

<sup>9</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 183.

## Righteousness

After detailing his relationship to the Old Testament law in 5:17–19, Jesus makes a rather shocking statement in 5:20. The righteousness of his followers must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees if one is to enter the kingdom of heaven. Then, after giving six examples of this sort of Christ-focused righteousness, Jesus makes this statement in verse 48, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” It is vital to correctly understand the terms “righteousness” and “perfect” before attempting to grasp the significance of the six examples in 5:21–47.

The first thing we notice about the righteousness described in 5:20 is that it is contrasted with the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. Verse 20 states that the righteousness called for in kingdom disciples should “exceed” that of the scribes and Pharisees. Of course, this would have been a shocking statement to the people who heard it because of the very detailed attention of the scribes and Pharisees to the OT law. Jesus is not arguing that his followers should be those who are even more fastidious than the scribes and Pharisees. He is not calling his followers to list even more laws to obey as if having a list of 615 commands is more valuable than a list of 612. Regarding the righteousness required here, R.T. France explains, “Jesus is not talking about beating the scribes and Pharisees at their own game, but about a different level of concept of righteousness altogether.”<sup>10</sup> There are three primary ways the righteousness described here exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees and thus becomes the type characteristic of kingdom disciples.

First, while the righteousness here is not simply about keeping more commands than the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus *is* calling his disciples to obedience. The word “righteousness” here means “the quality or characteristic of upright behavior.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>France, 189.

<sup>11</sup>Walter Bauer, “Para,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 248.

Certainly at least one of the main themes concerning the “righteousness” of the scribes and Pharisees that we find in Matthew is that they possessed a hypocritical righteousness. We see this clearly in the next major section of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:1–18 and in Jesus’ indictments on the Pharisees in Matthew 23. He tells his disciples to listen to what they say but not to follow their example “For they preach, but do not practice.” Davies and Allison explain that the structure of this section of the Sermon defines “righteousness” for us when they say, “The meaning of ‘righteousness’ in 5:20 is determined by the paragraphs that follow. ‘Righteousness’ is therefore Christian character and conduct in accordance with the demands of Jesus—right intention, right word, right deed.”<sup>12</sup>

At first this seems hard to swallow because the demands seem too unattainable. Some have tried to explain this as primarily a forensic righteousness and not as actions and character qualities showcased in disciples’ lives. Scot McKnight warns us not to water down the words of Christ found here. He says,

It is far too easy for Protestants to take the sting from Jesus’ words by thinking what Jesus really was saying was not that his followers had to do more, but that they were to trust in the righteousness of Christ while the scribes and Pharisees were trusting in themselves. Or to say the Pharisees were externally righteous only.<sup>13</sup>

So, while the righteousness here is not about keeping more rules than the Pharisees, it is nonetheless about obedience to the kingdom ethic Jesus is teaching.

Second, the scribes and Pharisees failed to grasp the true righteousness demanded by the law because they failed to understand the true end of the law. As we saw in our discussion of 5:17–19, the law finds its fulfillment or purpose in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. To fail to take his ministry into account or to fail to recognize the way in which the law points to him is to misunderstand the true intention of the law

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<sup>12</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 499.

<sup>13</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 70.

and the commandments in the law. Don Garlington explains the purpose of the law and how it connects to the Messiah when he says, “Hence, the law is fulfilled, that is, attains its reason for existence, when Jesus opens his mouth and delivers the new law of the kingdom; its only purpose was to point to him and his people as the grand end of God’s eschatological designs.”<sup>14</sup> If the scribes and Pharisees miss this purpose then they will misunderstand the righteousness demanded of the law and expounded by Jesus.

Finally, to truly understand the surpassing righteousness required here, one must think in terms of love as the summation of the law. We will return to this later as we discuss a method for interpreting the examples in 5:21–48, but the righteousness demanded here is defined by love. Matthew 5:17–20 and 7:12 form the bookends of the body of the Sermon on the Mount and both are keys to our interpretation of the guidelines in the middle. As we have been studying, 5:20 demands a righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew 5:21–7:11 define that righteousness for us and 7:12 summarizes and defines that righteousness as self-giving love. Romans 13:8 summarizes by saying, “Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

Since the righteousness is active, faithful to the true intent of the law and prophets, and a true expression of love, the best way to understand the righteousness demanded here is to see it as going beyond legal adherence to OT laws or commands and instead as a description of human well-being and wholeness.

### **From Legality to Wholeness**

Very often these six “antitheses” are presented as simply amplifying or properly interpreting the commands of the Old Testament or as correcting a

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<sup>14</sup>Don B Garlington, “The ‘Better Righteousness’: Matthew 5:20,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20, no. 4 (2010): 483.

misinterpretation of the OT taught by the scribes and Pharisees. While there are certainly elements of amplification and correction in these six examples, they go beyond mere legality or prohibition and give kingdom disciples a vision of wholeness founded in love. Christ intends to teach us how to live and not just how to avoid wrong living.

What are the main ideas that must guide our interpretation of 5:21–47? There are several keys to interpreting the six examples in these verses. First, the way the premise is presented places the focus on the legality of the prohibition. In other words, the command or interpretation of the command is mainly about breaking the law. Guelich explains the emphasis of the antithesis as follows,

Setting the premise in the form of a legal ordinance and using that form to declare anger and name-calling illegal by referring to the increasing levels of judicial processes, focuses the antithesis primarily on the legal orientation of the Old Testament Law against murder. Put somewhat crassly, one's standing before God was measured in terms of one's standing before the Law.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, whether the “You have heard it said” statements are quotes from the OT law or more recent teachings of the scribes and Pharisees, both are pointing toward a legal way of understanding God’s purpose and intentions.

Second, Jesus contrasts the emphasis on legality in each of these examples with a statement rooted in his authority as the Son of God. Each example contrasts what “you” have been taught or heard said with what “I” now say to you, putting the authority of Jesus front and center. It was this level of authority that was noted by all who heard Jesus when he finished the Sermon on the Mount in 7:29 as the crowds were “astonished at this teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.” David Turner comments concerning this authority by saying, “The text emphasizes that Jesus himself is speaking with authority that transcends that of the previous divine revelation through Moses.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 240.

<sup>16</sup>David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 165–66.

Third, the title “antitheses” is a misnomer because these examples are triadic in structure.<sup>17</sup> In his extremely helpful article on the triadic structure, Glen Stassen defines fourteen of these triads in the body of the Sermon on the Mount from 5:21–7:12. Six of them are found in the examples of 5:21–48. He explains how these triads work by saying, “The first member of each triad is a traditional righteousness. The second member is the diagnosis of a vicious cycle and its consequence. The third member is a transforming initiative that points the way to deliverance from the vicious cycle.”<sup>18</sup> We will explore the specifics of these triads later, but for now it is important to note that viewing the examples of 5:21–48 as “antitheses” has led interpreters down unfruitful paths. Once the triadic structure is recognized, the move from legality to wholeness becomes crystal clear, and Christ’s commands give us a direction for pursuing well-being and flourishing. It is this third portion of each triad that becomes the heart of each example. Many interpreters define the heart of Jesus’s teaching in the second part of each triad or the “But I say to you” statement. This approach leaves the hearer amid the vicious cycle and does not provide a vision of life in the kingdom.

Fourth, because the Son of God is speaking to his kingdom disciples about a unique level of righteousness that is expected of them, the examples go beyond legality to a description of love which results in human wholeness and well-being. In other words, the point of these six examples is to present a picture of kingdom disciples as those who pursue wholeness and not those who simply avoid breaking the law. The movement in each of these examples is from legality to wholeness. It is important to keep in mind that the presence of the kingdom through the true king is what makes this level of wholeness possible. Disciples can live out the customs and standards of the heavenly kingdom now

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<sup>17</sup>Glen Harold Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 2 (2003): 267–308.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 268.

because the future kingdom has broken into the present. Scot McKnight explains when he says,

Because the kingdom is in some sense “now”—and that means some of the powers of the kingdom have already been unleashed (think Holy Spirit)—followers of Jesus are to avoid sinful anger, and they are capable of being transformed from anger. In the future kingdom of God, when all is consummated and when heaven comes to earth, anger will vanish because loving fellowship will flourish. The prohibition of anger here is not so much hyperbolic as it is a foretaste of kingdom realities.<sup>19</sup>

Fifth, because of the emphasis on human wholeness and well-being by the use of the term righteousness, these six “antitheses” must be viewed as examples. The whole point is a movement from legality to wholeness so the reader cannot simply assume that if he somehow manages to follow the prescription in these six examples he will have achieved the righteousness of verse 20. These six examples are the *type* of things kingdom disciples will do because they have a different value system. These examples serve to train us in the discernment of God’s will. Charles Talbert explains the difference between this approach and one that sees the antithesis as simply a new, higher law when he says,

There are two very different ways that one can read such material. On the one hand, it is possible to read this text as a 'new law' with a more stringent demand than the old law. One then tends to see the Sermon in a context of covenantal nomism. One has gotten into Jesus' community by his call and grace, but now it is necessary, out of gratitude, to be obedient to the new law. On the other hand, it is also possible to regard the text as a 'verbal icon.' If so, then one looks through the lens of the command into the divine will behind the text. Such a vision of God and the divine will is transformative for those who see. To see God—in this case through the medium of a verbal icon—always changes the self. One is changed as one contemplates the divine will and is drawn into it. When one reads this way one sees the Sermon in the context of new covenant piety in which God's grace enables the disciples' lives moment by moment from first to last.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, believers are to take the examples given in 5:21–48 as descriptive of the type of actions they should take in life. When driven by true love, kingdom disciples will make further applications of these examples, under the authority of Jesus,

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<sup>19</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 82.

<sup>20</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 77.



and work them out in the various circumstances of life.

### **Six Examples of 5:21–48**

#### **Reconciliation (5:21–26)**

If we read this first example as an “antithesis” we will see it as two main parts (vv. 21–22) with two extended examples (vv. 23–24, 25–26). However, if we follow Stassen’s triadic structure and understand Jesus as moving from legality to wholeness, a kingdom-oriented vision of reconciliation opens up for the hearer. Glen Stassen explains why it is vital to see these six examples as triadic rather than “antitheses” when he says, “Seeing the triadic structure transforms our reading of the Sermon on the Mount so that it teaches the grace-based transforming initiatives that enable deliverance from bondage to vicious cycles.”<sup>21</sup>

Jesus begins verse 21 with a clear command taken from the OT and with a summary of OT teaching regarding the consequences for committing the crime of murder. This was familiar instruction, and Jesus emphasizes the legality of the law by adding this summary of OT teaching regarding the outcome of law-breaking. In verse 22 Jesus moves beyond legality and begins to discuss anger. This is the point where many interpreters misdiagnose the heart of Christ’s instruction and place the emphasis on the description of anger.<sup>22</sup> There are no imperatives in Christ’s teaching in verse 22 regarding anger, only explanations of the “vicious cycle,” as Stassen describes it, that ultimately leads one to murder and the consequences of participating in that cycle. Stassen explains how anger functions as this vicious cycle when he says, “I suggest instead that the teaching on anger is a realistic diagnosis of a vicious cycle, a mechanism of temptation

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<sup>21</sup>Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” 270.

<sup>22</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 509–16; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 199–202. They place the emphasis on anger by describing verses 23–26 as two illustrations of the command outlined in verse 22. The problem is that no command has been outlined and these illustrations speak more about reconciliation than anger.

that leads to alienation from God and neighbor, and to murder and insurrection—therefore destruction and judgment.”<sup>23</sup>

But Jesus does not stop by describing anger in verse 22. Instead, he moves from the legality of the command not to murder and the vicious cycle that leads to murder, to a positive presentation of wholeness and well-being by commanding the pursuit of reconciliation. This positive initiative in verses 23–26 is filled with imperatives and is based in the reality of the already inaugurated kingdom. These imperatives are not harsh commands but are the true fulfillment of the law in the sense that now that Christ’s kingdom has arrived through the king, his followers can pursue true wholeness and well-being rather than simply avoiding breaking the law. Charles Talbert explains how this passage functions to shape the disciple’s character in light of the kingdom when he says, “Rather than functioning as a law prohibiting anger and insults, the antithesis aims to shape the disciple’s character in the direction of concern for the health and wholeness of relationships among God’s people.”<sup>24</sup>

Rather than getting caught in the cycle of anger and dysfunctional relationships, kingdom disciples pursue wholeness by prioritizing reconciliation. There are two key words that help to shape our understanding of reconciliation: “something” and “quickly.” In verse 23 Jesus explains that if you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, you are to make things right even before you finish your act of worship. The fact that Jesus says “something” here leaves the door open for us to insert our own daily frustrations and tendencies to anger into the circumstance. We must be alert to our own failings and be aware enough to know when we have damaged a relationship with a brother or sister in Christ, no matter what the “something” may be. Whatever the cause for disharmony, according to verse 25, we are to

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<sup>23</sup>Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” 272.

<sup>24</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 71.

immediately prioritize reconciliation. Scot McKnight explains how vital reconciliation must be when he says, “We must be intentional about reconciliation for it to become a pervasive lifestyle.”<sup>25</sup> Christ’s goal here is to train his disciples for wholeness, and that means moving from legality of avoiding murder to the positive affirmation of reconciliation and community.

### **Sexual Wholeness (5:27–30)**

In Matthew 5:27 Jesus quotes the OT prohibition of adultery from Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18 which is given to prevent the terrible fractures that adultery brings to marriages. Of course, as we study this passage we want to keep the same triadic structure for this example as we did for 5:21–26. Therefore, we view verse 28 as the second portion of the triad, the vicious cycle that leads to adultery. Once again, Jesus does not give an imperative in his description of the cycle and so we should not put the weight of instruction on this verse. Stassen explains how verse 28 fits into the teaching by saying, “It is a vicious cycle with a continuous action present participle as the verb, ‘looking.’ It does lead to judgment—committing adultery in the heart.”<sup>26</sup> Committing adultery in the heart is its own form of judgment because it tears apart the marriage relationship so central to God’s plans and purposes, but it also ultimately leads to eternal judgment when one cannot break the vicious cycle, according to verse 30.

In verses 29–30 Jesus moves to the third part of his triadic instruction, and here is where we find the weight of commands that ultimately lead to wholeness. In straightforward fashion Jesus instructs his followers to cut off the root of lust before it situates itself in the heart. Stassen explains, “It commands us to engage in a specified practice that delivers us from the practices that cause the vicious cycle.”<sup>27</sup> The commands

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<sup>25</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 82.

<sup>26</sup>Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” 275.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

are indeed radical because the issue at stake is so serious. Of course, violently removing one's eye or hand will not ultimately solve the problem of lust, but we must attack the root of the issue with that level of seriousness.

The way this paragraph is given helps us to see how adultery fractures our relationships and personal integrity. Jesus begins with the physical act of adultery and clearly points out the OT prohibition against it (v. 27). Then he moves to the internal practice that leads to outward adultery (v. 28). Then in the avoidance of internal lust he commands us to put whole person practices in place to avoid the vicious cycle (vv. 29–30). Therefore, he mentions both the eye and the hand. Talbert explains Christ's goal here when he says, "The Matthean Jesus' argument is be whole in your relationships. This enables the audience to see God's intent in a new way. So, if some part of you is not integrated, eliminate the unintegrated part."<sup>28</sup> In other words, pursue the gift of human sexuality as God intended. Do not engage the practices and habits that lead to lust and ultimately to adultery.

### **Marriage (5:31–32)**

From the very beginning of Scripture, it has been God's plan for marriage to be an exclusive, life-long relationship according to Genesis 2:24–25. Committed marriages can be a primary source of human flourishing and well-being.

We have been studying the movement in each of these examples from legality to wholeness and despite the brevity of this example, we find the same emphasis in this teaching of Jesus. At the time, the teaching on marriage had apparently been cheapened to the point where divorce was an ever-present option and all one had to do was get a legal certificate to justify the split. Scot McKnight explains the prevailing attitude of the day when he says, "Again, the problem is that the permission of Moses in Deuteronomy

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<sup>28</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 76.

24 to divorce on the basis of *'erwat dabar* ('something indecent about her') had become too permissive."<sup>29</sup> The Torah did give people the option for divorce, but Jesus explains in Matthew 19:8 that this option was given because of the sinfulness of men's hearts. Those giving instruction during the time of Jesus were not taking the full biblical picture of marriage into account but were using the Torah to find a way to get out of marriage for almost any reason.

If the traditional teaching had moved to extreme permissiveness, then Jesus identifies the vicious cycle here as getting divorce after divorce in verse 32. When this cycle is embraced, sin and adultery are the results.

After seeing the very clear three-part structure of the first two examples, it is surprising that this one is lacking a path to deliverance with imperatives. Despite the lack of clear commands here, the emphasis of this example still falls on God's intention for well-being and wholeness. Jesus makes it clear that despite the certificate of divorce that many were clinging to for their legal standing, they would still be committing sin before God if they chose to divorce and remarry in the permissive spirit of the day. Charles Talbert explains how this passage shapes our character to desire God's will and wholeness when he says,

So this is a prophetic statement enabling the auditors to see the unconditioned divine will that marriages be indissoluble and to hear the call for the disciple to be a person who does not violate the indissoluble marriage bond. The disciple is formed so that he or she determines that he or she will not be the cause of adultery.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than adopting the permissive stance toward divorce, Jesus places the emphasis of his teaching on the permanence and importance of marriage. In God's kingdom marriage is valued. McKnight summarizes the teaching of this passage by saying,

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<sup>29</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 99.

<sup>30</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 82.

In summary, then, Jesus is against divorce. He is for marriage. He believes marriage is a sacred, holy, and inviolable union created by God to make a man and a woman 'one flesh.' Because he believes this about marriage, he believes divorce is always contrary to God's creation designs.<sup>31</sup>

### **Truthfulness (5:33–37)**

Jesus begins the second set of three examples the same way he began the first three. It is hard to detect much difference between the two sets of three, but Matthew does organize them into distinct groups.<sup>32</sup> Jesus begins by giving the traditional teaching and quoting from a number Old Testament texts that summarize the OT teaching on oaths and vows including Leviticus 19:12, Psalm 50:14, Deuteronomy 23:21, 23, and Numbers 30:2.

Then in verses 34–36 he gives the vicious cycle that leads one to bear false witness and violate the OT commands. Stassen gives a helpful reminder of the nature of the “vicious cycle” in each example when he says, “Recall the criteria for the vicious cycle identified above: the vicious cycle diagnoses a practice that leads to judgment or destruction; its main verb is a participle, infinitive, subjunctive, or indicative; and it begins with *de*, *gar*, *opou*, or a negative such as *me*.”<sup>33</sup> Here we have an extended cycle that seems to be giving commands. However, in Greek we have an aorist infinitive in verse 34 and an aorist subjunctive in verse 36. Of course, both carry some imperatival weight, but the grammar maintains the consistency of Stassen’s triadic structure. In the vicious cycle in verses 34–36, Jesus lists four common ways of taking an oath that were pronounced to avoid using the name of God. If one could keep from using God’s name, then people believed they were ultimately not obligated to keep the oath. Stassen explains how this cycle bred distrust and lying when he says, “What is far worse, the practice uses

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<sup>31</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 103.

<sup>32</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 214.

<sup>33</sup>Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” 278.

symbols for God's name as a witness in order to manipulate those to whom one is making deceitful promises into belief and eventual betrayal."<sup>34</sup>

Finally, in verse 37 Jesus explains the path of deliverance that leads from legality to wholeness. Rather than trying to deceive and manipulate using oaths and vows, Jesus commands his kingdom disciples to function in truth in all of life. Scot McKnight summarizes this fourth example by saying, "Again, he is sketching a world in which utter honesty rules. The text teaches, then, that eschatological honesty should rule in the words of his followers in the now."<sup>35</sup>

Rather than opposing the law here, Jesus explains the full path of wholeness which is behind the law. God never intended humans to functionally evade truthfulness using oaths. Instead, he intends us to be truthful in all our speech.

In his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller gives the principle that all marriages must function in truth and love.<sup>36</sup> Without truth our love is mere sentimentality that fails to progress the relationship toward wholeness and growth. Without love our truth acts as a blunt object that will cause pain and difficulty in the relationship. In these verses, Jesus teaches that truthfulness is a bedrock principle on which genuine relationships function, and his kingdom disciples must be those who value the truth.

### **Peacemaking (5:38–42)**

Far too often these six examples have been taught as stringent laws intended to give specific instructions rather than examples which teach us what type of character qualities kingdom disciples demonstrate. This happens largely because these examples are divided into two portions rather than three. The pericope found in verses 38–42 is a

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<sup>34</sup>Stassen, 278.

<sup>35</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 119.

<sup>36</sup>Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 161–63.

prime example of how Christ's instruction can get twisted when we put the emphasis on the second portion of the teaching rather than the third.

Keeping this triadic structure in mind will help us move from the legal emphasis of Christ's statement in verse 38 to the commands which illuminate the path of deliverance in verses 39–42. Jesus begins by giving the *lex talionis* principle taken from the OT and quoted in Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. This principle served as the foundation for legal justice in the Old Testament.<sup>37</sup> This is the traditional teaching and could have been used and abused by vengeful retaliation between individuals.<sup>38</sup>

One's interpretation of this text will hinge on the vicious cycle in verse 39. Rather than translating verse 39a as “do not resist the one who is evil,” it makes the most sense contextually to read this as “do not resist by evil means.” This places the emphasis on the type of response and not the individual to whom one responds. Stassen explains when he says, “What we are to renounce is violent or vengeful resistance, not nonviolent resistance, and not rights.”<sup>39</sup> In verse 39 Jesus explains the cycle that leads to brutal personal retaliation and perpetuates violence and harm. Rather than giving in to this cycle and responding “by evil means,” kingdom disciples are to follow the path to deliverance outlined in verses 39b–42. Jesus gives four imperatives that describe the kingdom response as one of generosity and non-violence rather than measured retaliation. Stassen describes the path to deliverance as one of positive action by saying, “Each of the transforming initiatives emphasizes positive, surprising action to take, and each goes beyond what one would be forced to do. The emphasis of the teaching is not on

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<sup>37</sup>Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding*, 250.

<sup>38</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 88–89.

<sup>39</sup>Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” 281.



renunciation of rights but on surprising, transforming initiatives of peacemaking.”<sup>40</sup>

Verses 39–42 form the heart of the passage and give the kingdom disciple a vision of wholeness and well-being. McKnight explains the positive focus by saying, “Instead of the requirement of retribution, Jesus reveals that grace, love, and forgiveness can reverse the dangers of retribution and, even more, create an alternative society.”<sup>41</sup> Rather than pursuing personal vengeance, Christ’s followers pursue peace even at personal cost. Often retaliation only increases the anger and violence. Our goal should be the reversal of injustice, and acting in the ways described here promotes peace and brings the values of the kingdom into the present.

As we read these commands in verses 39b–42, it is important to keep in mind that these are not specific legal commands only applying to these situations. Christ is teaching what type of actions kingdom disciples take to pursue peace. We suffer personal setbacks and consider the needs of others above our own. Much debate has been spent over how these commands work into our daily lives and how we may intentionally live them out. Do they apply to human governments, and are believers required to be pacifists?<sup>42</sup> The discussion is helpful and sharpens our thinking on these important ethical issues. The bottom line is that we must engage the demands of this text. We must be those who pursue peace and implement nonviolent resistance when we must enter conflict. We do live in a broken world, but we are to embody and demonstrate the realities of the kingdom in our lives in that broken world. This will create awkward and difficult decisions at times, and we will not always get things perfectly right. The goal here is to train us to live out a kingdom ethic and to do so with utmost seriousness.

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<sup>40</sup>Stassen, 280.

<sup>41</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 123.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid, 121–38. McKnight has an interesting and compelling chapter on the believer and pacifism. While I am not ultimately convinced of his argument, he does seriously wrestle with the issues raised by this text in a purposeful way.

France gives a challenging call for believers to carefully consider Christ's path to deliverance in this text. He says, "But instead of therefore dismissing Jesus' teaching as starry-eyed utopianism, a proper response to this challenging section is to ask in what practical ways Jesus' radical principles can be set to work in our very different world."<sup>43</sup>

### **Love (5:43–48)**

The final example continues the triadic structure we have come to expect throughout this passage. However, Matthew alternates the path of deliverance and the vicious cycle portions, most likely to indicate the conclusion of this entire section.<sup>44</sup>

As always, he begins with the traditional teaching in verse 43. The command to love one's neighbor is taken from Leviticus 19:18. The second half of the traditional teaching, "and hate your enemy," is found nowhere in the OT and was probably interpreted by some as the natural result of loving one's neighbor. In Leviticus 19:18 one's neighbor would have been a covenant-keeping Jew. The Jews could have interpreted this text as commanding love for only one's Jewish neighbor and either less than love or outright disdain for those outside God's covenant with Israel. Talbert explains by saying, "Verse 43, then, is a quotation from the Old Testament followed by an interpretation of its meaning. The interpretation (hate your enemies) reflects popular sentiment at the time, Jewish and pagan."<sup>45</sup>

Typically, in these six examples the vicious cycle follows the traditional teaching and shows how one ends up committing sin. In this last example, Jesus immediately follows the traditional teaching with two imperatives in verse 44. Rather than showing us the cycle that leads to sin, these imperatives immediately give the reader

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<sup>43</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 218.

<sup>44</sup>Stassen, "The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount," 282.

<sup>45</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 94.

the path to deliverance descriptive of kingdom disciples. France explains how comprehensive these commands are when he says, "His demand here goes even beyond v. 39: not only are they not to retaliate, nor even to resist, but even positively to seek the good of their persecutors and to pray for them."<sup>46</sup> Loving one's enemies means to pursue their good, and praying for them is a concrete way to make this happen. Far too often we water down these commands and the result is that our response to enemies becomes something like "toleration." We assume that if we can just stop hating them we have lived up to the pattern set for kingdom disciples. Scot McKnight explains how woefully inadequate toleration is when he says,

If love and praying are parallel expressions, and if love means what we have described, then praying for those who persecute is not a cute formula designed to get us over the hump of bad feelings or resentment but the concrete behavior of going to God in the hope of reconciliation, love, justice, peace, and a kingdom society.<sup>47</sup>

Verse 45 explains why mere toleration is not an adequate attitude for Christ's followers, and this verse is unique among these six examples. Here we have a very clear reason as to why we must engage in the path to deliverance. Our motivation for pursuing wholeness rather than legality is that we may be like God. We have already encountered language like this in 5:9 where the peacemakers are called children of God. The same idea is at work in the commands to love one's enemies and to pray for them. McKnight explains this connection when he says, "The connection reveals Jesus' kingdom is marked by shalom: to love and pray for the enemy is the first step toward shalom."<sup>48</sup> But how exactly are we like God when we love our enemies and pray for them? Verse 45 goes on to explain that God's goodness abounds toward the just and the unjust. He gives the bounty of his creational goodness to all men, and we must reflect his goodness by

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<sup>46</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 225–26.

<sup>47</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 143.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid, 144.

desiring the good of every human being. Guelich summarizes verse 45 when he says, “Since God indiscriminately shares his goodness of creation with the 'good and evil,' the 'righteous and unrighteous,' one's corresponding actions toward the 'enemy' distinguish one as a son.”<sup>49</sup>

Having laid out the path of deliverance Jesus now returns to the vicious cycle in verses 46–47. Rather than loving one’s enemies, the vicious cycle is a lifestyle that only seeks to do good to one’s friends and those who love in return. This is the normal course of life for worldly people, even the lowest rung of the moral ladder, the tax collectors. There is nothing distinctively Christian about this type of love, nor is there anything resembling the type of attitude characteristic of kingdom people. Hagner explains verses 46–47 when he says, “The illustrative rhetorical questions make the point that nothing wonderful has been accomplished when one returns good for good.”<sup>50</sup> Not only has nothing good been accomplished, but the world is left in a state of brokenness and disarray when we only love those who love us. To work out our identity as sons of God and to bring the culture of God’s kingdom into the present world, we must be those who pursue the good of others, especially our enemies. McKnight presses the application to our hearts when he says, “The question we must ask now is this: How are you turning your enemies into your neighbors? The implication of this enemy love passage is the elimination of enemies and the creation of a society marked by shalom because the kingdom is shalom.”<sup>51</sup>

In our pursuit of shalom and wholeness we come to verse 48, which is a fitting conclusion to this pericope as well as the entire section from 5:17–48. Once again, the

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<sup>49</sup>Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 254.

<sup>50</sup>Donald A Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 134.

<sup>51</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 148.

goal is to be like God as true sons of the kingdom, and this will display itself in our *telios*. Being perfect does not mean being free from sin, but it does indicate that we will be whole and complete in our love for others. Our ethical choices will no longer be rooted in simple legality but will have the goal of wholeness and well-being as we imitate the Father. Stassen explains *telios* by saying, “It points to being whole, complete, or all-inclusive in love toward others, including enemies, as God is inclusive in love toward the just and the unjust.”<sup>52</sup> This all-inclusive love is the dominating factor behind each of the six examples in verses 21–48, and it is the path to human flourishing and wholeness.

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<sup>52</sup>Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” 282.

## CHAPTER 6

### GENUINE RIGHTEOUSNESS (MATTHEW 6:1–21)

As we have seen throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew wrote with a very intentional structure. The entire Sermon is highly organized as well as each individual section, and Matthew 6:1–21 is no exception.

To start our discussion of the structure of Matthew 6 it is important to decide exactly which portion of the chapter we will cover. Most commentators end the section dealing with the three practices of righteousness in verse 18 after the third practice, fasting, has been explained.<sup>1</sup> The major problem with this is that it ignores the vital discussion of reward and treasure in verses 19–21 that bring this section to completion. Matthew 6:1 sets the tone for the discussion of righteousness and religious duties by warning against any practice that is done to be seen by men. We will return to this verse later, but it is sufficient for now to see this as a prohibition of a certain type of behavior and a threat that this type of behavior will result in no reward with God. Next, Matthew 6:2–18 lays out three very common religious duties practiced by Jews at the time and considered by many as the supreme acts of piety.<sup>2</sup> If we end our discussion of this section in verse 18, we lose the positive exhortation of verses 19–21 that gives hope and stamina to our fight for genuine righteousness. Jonathan Pennington says that this pattern of

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<sup>1</sup>This includes: Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007); W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004); David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Glen Harold Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 2 (2003): 284.

beginning with a negative command and concluding with a positive exhortation places this section in continuity with the two other central sections of the Sermon on the Mount. He explains,

We may observe also that seeing 6:19–21 as the conclusion to 6:1–21 makes it parallel the other two sections (or 'pillars') of the main section of the Sermon: 5:48 provides a conclusion to 5:17–48 and 7:12 provides a conclusion to 6:22 (or 6:19)–7:12. That is, it stands to reason that Matthew would provide 6:1–18 with a conclusion even as he has for the other sections.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond matching the other two sections of 5:17–48 and 6:22–7:12, 6:19–21 form an *inclusio* around the three acts of piety in verses 2–18 by focusing the reader's attention on the contrast between heaven and earth.<sup>4</sup> The “hypocrites” are seeking earthly reward while those who practice genuine righteousness are seeking future rewards that are now being stored up with the Father. How are these rewards being stored up? They are stored up through the genuine participation in the three acts of piety listed in verses 2–18 with the focus on heavenly approbation and reward rather than earthly applause. Nathan Eubank explains, “Within the *inclusio*, Matthew contrasts two ways of receiving repayment for righteous deeds: immediate payment here on earth versus payment stored up in the heavens to be collected in the future.”<sup>5</sup>

Matthew presents each of these three acts of piety with the same structure meant to highlight the different paths to earthly and heavenly rewards. After the summary statement in 6:1, we find tightly organized discussions of merciful deeds (6:2–4), prayer (6:5–6), and fasting (6:16–18). Each of these three sections begins with the word “when” and presents the traditional religious duty. A warning follows intended to keep disciples from practicing these deeds only to be seen by men because that sort of intention will

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<sup>3</sup>Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 245.

<sup>4</sup>Pennington, 242.

<sup>5</sup>Nathan Eubank, “Storing up Treasure with God in the Heavens: Celestial Investments in Matthew 6:1–21,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (January 2014): 91.

only result in earthly rewards. After the negative warning and command to not be like the hypocrites, Matthew presents a contrast. According to Stassen this contrast is meant to be the path to deliverance for the disciple. As in 5:21–47 the path to deliverance comes by means of a command. He comments, “Finally, there is a transforming initiative—in the imperative, as expected—to practice it in God's secret, knowing, and merciful presence, along with an explanation (as expected) that your Father will reward you.”<sup>6</sup> As Stassen mentions, each section ends with the very clear expectation that as one performs the religious duty in the manner described, there will come a reward from the heavenly Father.

### **Righteousness and Rewards**

Our discussion of the structure of this section should make it clear that the dual emphases of Matthew 6:1–21 are righteousness and rewards. The concept of practical righteousness dominates the body of the Sermon on the Mount. The body begins in 5:17–20 with the sobering fact that the righteousness of kingdom disciples must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew 5:21–47 then gives six examples of this excelling righteousness by calling the disciple to wholeness and not mere legal adherence. But as is so typical of human beings, we can take the very clear examples given in 5:21–47 and begin to practice them in ways that bring us glory rather than God. That is why Matthew moves in 6:1–21 to the intention behind the righteous activity. France explains this emphasis on intention when he says,

The last main section of the discourse (5:20–48) has been devoted to setting out a 'righteousness' greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). The discourse now goes on to warn against a wrong kind of 'righteousness' (6:1), which is undertaken not to conform to the will of God and to imitate his perfection, but to gain human approval.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” 284.

<sup>7</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 232.



This righteousness is certainly conformity to the will of God, but it is not possible without the work of Christ resulting in the in-breaking of the kingdom. Believers have entered a new era because of Christ, and they are now able, by His Spirit, to practice righteousness characteristic of that new age. As we saw in both the Beatitudes and the six examples in 5:21–47, this righteousness leads us to human flourishing and wholeness.

Robert Guelich pulls the themes of kingdom, wholeness, and righteousness together when he comments,

In 6:1–7:11 that same wholeness is displayed with reference to God. In both cases, the wholeness between the individual and God as well as between individuals corresponds to the 'new heart,' the 'new covenant,' the age of salvation and wholeness in which God has acted to reconcile and restore broken relationships between himself and his people and consequently among his people.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the righteousness called for here is not fulfilled by simple participation in a religious duty, and wholeness must penetrate to the level of motivation. In 6:1 the warning is against “practicing your righteousness before other people to be seen by them.” The expectation is that we will engage in these three activities, and the warning is meant to cause us to ponder the manner of our engagement. Luz explains, “Without reflection on this inner dimension the righteousness would remain a deeply ambiguous matter.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, while continuing the theme of righteousness, Matthew has only deepened our understanding with the goal of enriching our practice of it.

To further grasp the internal aspect of the righteousness being called for here, we need to compare Matthew 6:1 to Matthew 5:16. On the surface these texts seem to be directly contradictory. In 5:16 disciples are told to let our light shine before others “so that they may see our good works.” Yet, as 6:1 sets the table for this entire section, disciples are told not to practice their righteous deeds in order to be seen by men. The

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<sup>8</sup>Robert A Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 255.

<sup>9</sup>Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 304.

overall teaching of the Sermon is not calling for us to never perform righteous deeds in public as that would directly contradict the teaching of 5:16. The crux of the matter lies in the motivation behind the actions. In 5:16 the goal of public deeds is ultimately for the glory of God, and in 6:1 the emphasis is on the intent of the deeds and not whether they are done in public or private. This clarification is necessary to understand the emphasis in 6:3, 6:6, and 6:17–18 on deeds done in secret. Jesus is not actually calling for us to only give or pray in secret, but he is calling us to God-ward motivations even when we happen to pray or give in public. Scot McKnight gives a helpful clarification between 5:16 and 6:1–18 when he says,

The difference is at the level of intent: in the latter, the intent is to be noticed and congratulated by others as someone who is righteous or pious, while here the act is to be done publicly but in order to mediate God's redeeming presence in Christ and thus to glorify God.<sup>10</sup>

Since righteousness is a major theme running through 6:1–21, it may come as a surprise to find this section filled with language regarding rewards. Beginning in 6:1 with the summary statement for this section, the contrast is drawn between a reward from men and a reward from the Father in heaven. In fact, the motivation for participating in these three acts of piety with the right intention is to receive the more valuable reward, the reward from the Father in heaven. Does this mean that our righteousness will earn us rewards since the two themes seem to be so closely tied together?

Perhaps the clearest text for grasping Jesus' concept of rewards and how they function is Matthew 20:1–16 regarding the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. In this parable, a landowner goes out to hire workers for his vineyard at all hours of the day. Some men work from early morning until sun down while others are hired after the heat of the day and only work for an hour. When the time comes for payment, the landowner gives each man the same amount, which had been agreed upon in advance, regardless of

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<sup>10</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 59–60.

the number of hours he worked. The key verse is 20:14 which states, “Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you.” In Matthew 20 the reward is proportionately not equal to the service rendered. In other words, God does not operate on a payment system but on a grace system. Guelich explains when he says, “Thus, while using the language of reward and punishment current within first-century Judaism, Jesus taught that one's reward was based neither on the keeping of the Law nor on merit, but on God's goodness to his servants.”<sup>11</sup> Rewards are themselves a gift of grace from God.

As we come to Matthew 6 and Christ's promise of rewards, we must not think Jesus is working on a strict merit system. The context of rewards is one of grace. But Christ here delineates between two types of rewards, and the difference between the two lies in one's motivation for action.

First, there is a type of reward that does not flow directly from the activity. A mercenary who is hired to fight receives money as compensation for his activity of making war. But money is not the natural result of fighting, and so there is an unnatural connection between the activity and the reward. This is the sort of reward we find in the way in which the “hypocrites” go about their religious activities. They seek the praise of men, which should not naturally come from pious acts. Therefore, according to Jesus, they have received their reward. They have used the activities of merciful deeds, prayer, and fasting for self-promotion and self-gain.

However, there is another type of reward that does not work on a strict merit system and instead is the consummation of the activity. L. D. Hurst gives an extended explanation of this type of reward when he says,

But there is a deeper, more satisfying type of reward which Jesus advocates, and this reflects his pervasive distinction between that which is arbitrary and that which is

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<sup>11</sup>Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 277.

proper. Arbitrary rewards have nothing to do with the nature of the activity being rewarded (e.g., 'practice the piano two hours a day and you will get a bicycle'); proper rewards are intrinsic to the activity itself (e.g., 'practice the piano two hours a day and one day you will be able to play Mozart'). For Jesus the joys of the kingdom are the result of being a certain kind of person.<sup>12</sup>

The precedent for this type of reward has been set throughout the Sermon on the Mount. The reward of flourishing and well-being naturally flows to the one who possesses the character qualities of the Beatitudes. The wholeness called for in Matthew 5:17–48 is its own reward in a sense. We are to avoid the vicious cycle given in each of these six examples so that we can experience the wholeness which is the result of the path to deliverance. The reward is not based on merit but is the consummation of the activity. Very naturally then the Sermon on the Mount is not a list of impossible demands. It is an ethic that trains us to be those who receive the appropriate rewards for the type of people we have become. L. D. Hurst again puts this plainly when he says, “The rewards which Jesus promises are not extrinsic to human character, but point to the building up of a personality which would ultimately be at home in the presence of God.”<sup>13</sup>

Being home in the presence of God is exactly the reward described in 6:1, and this becomes clear as we examine both 6:1 and 6:19–21. In 6:1 the vast majority of common English translations wrongly see the reward in verse 1 as coming “from your Father in heaven.”<sup>14</sup> Nathan Eubank makes the case that the more accurate translation here should be “with your Father in heaven.”<sup>15</sup> According to BDAG, the dative case with *para* indicates “close association-marker of nearness in space, at/by (the side of), beside, near, with....”<sup>16</sup> If the reward will be received *with* the Father, then Matthew is

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<sup>12</sup>L.D. Hurst, “Ethics of Jesus,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 214.

<sup>13</sup>Hurst, 221.

<sup>14</sup>This includes ESV, HCSB, NIV, NKJV, and RSV. The NASB and NET translations have “with your Father in heaven.”

<sup>15</sup>Eubank, “Storing up Treasure with God in the Heavens,” 77.

<sup>16</sup>Bauer, “Para,” 757.

describing a reward that is being stored up for us in heaven. This is exactly what we find at the end of this section in 6:19–21. This positive exhortation at the end of this section is meant to challenge us to ensure our rewards are being laid up in heaven and not on earth. Obviously, Matthew expects the reward of 6:1 to be in heaven with God. Jonathan Pennington clearly summarizes the reward awaiting the righteous one in heaven when he says,

What lies before all people is the choice between God's ways (the kingdom of heaven, the Father in heaven, rewards in heaven) and humanity's ways (temporary and earthly reward, loss of the kingdom, future judgment) . . . The failure of the *upokritai* is that their hearts value the temporary reward of appearance and honor before others, rather than the eschatological rewards of the kingdom of heaven with the Father in heaven.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus is in favor of disinterested goodness as we see in Matthew 5:41, but he promotes these rewards in 6:1–21 because participation in each of these acts of piety with a God-ward intent will naturally reach its conclusion in the future kingdom with the Father. These activities done in the right way are producing people befitting the kingdom who will dwell happily in the presence of God.

Finally, in our discussion of reward it is vital to see the distinction between the *present* reward of the hypocrites and the *future* reward of those who perform these acts with the right intentions. The same statement, “they have received their reward,” is repeated three times in 6:2, 6:5, and 6:16. Each time the verb *apechousin* is used it is in the present tense to speak of the reward of those who only act in order to be seen by men. In contrast to this use of the present tense is the verb used to describe the reward of those who act in secret only to be seen by God. Each time this verb *apodôsei* is used it is in the future tense to speak of God’s coming reward for those who live faithfully. Donald Hagner explains, “The use of the present tense in, ‘they are having their reward,’ implies that this temporary praise from others is all the reward they will receive, in deliberate

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<sup>17</sup>Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*, 247.

contrast to the statement at the end of each of the three sections that promises a future, eschatological reward.”<sup>18</sup>

In summary, 6:1 sets the stage for the presentation of three key acts of piety and how one can be righteous in practicing them and receive the eschatological reward that naturally flows from them. Jesus uses this text, in the very center of the Sermon, to train us to be people who long for the kingdom and participate, with the right intentions, in kingdom practices now that prepare us for our future *with* the Father in heaven.

### **Merciful Deeds, Prayer, and Fasting**

As was mentioned above, each of these three acts of piety comes with an identical structure. At the heart of this structure stands the contrast between the hypocrites, who will receive their earthly reward, and those who practice these deeds before God, who will receive a heavenly reward.

### **Who are the Hypocrites?**

While 6:1 does not use the word “hypocrite,” it does set the stage for its use in the rest of this section. But beyond the use of this word in 6:2–21, the noun or verb form appears three times more frequently in Matthew than in Luke and seven times more frequently than in Mark. Neither form of this word appears in the Gospel of John.<sup>19</sup> According to BDAG the word *hupokritai* means an actor, pretender, or role-player.<sup>20</sup> The idea seems to be of one on a stage who is pretending to be someone or something else. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the reality of one’s presentation and one’s

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<sup>18</sup>Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 140.

<sup>19</sup>R.H. Smith, “Hypocrite,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 352.

<sup>20</sup>Walter Bauer, “Upkrites,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1038.

true state of being. In Matthew 6 this discrepancy plays itself out as the hypocrite's actions do not match his or her true inner motivations. Hypocrites are those who perform the right actions but do so with the desire for self-promotion. Scot McKnight explains, "The act itself is not the problem, nor even its visibility, but instead the act itself is transformed into hypocrisy and self-pre-occupation when the intent is attraction to oneself."<sup>21</sup>

One of our primary goals in our discussion of the Sermon on the Mount has been to point out the ways in which the Sermon trains us for wholeness and flourishing. As we have already seen, when these three acts of piety are performed with the right motivation as the goal, the result is the cultivation of the type of people who will rejoice in being in heaven with the Father. These people are righteous. So, what does this mean for those who may still perform these actions but who do them with the wrong inner motivations? If consistency between outward actions and inner motivations brings wholeness, then the life of a hypocrite must bring fracture. These acts of piety are intended to focus on God and the future hope with Him. When these acts are misused and abused by trying to gain earthly rewards and applause from men they bring a dissonance and fracturing to the person abusing them. R. H. Smith points this out when he says,

In his Gospel Matthew ranges 'hypocrisy' alongside 'lawlessness' as opposed to the virtue of righteousness, perfection and wholeness. These latter terms speak of integrity and soundness, while 'hypocrisy' describes a splintering, a division, an inconsistency between the inner and outer person, between hearts and lips, between words and deeds.<sup>22</sup>

Many abusing these acts of piety through hypocrisy will be aware of the hypocrisy and dissonance between their hearts and actions. Their true intention will be to deceive others. Sadly, many others will continue to perform these actions but with a self-centered goal and will end up self-deceived. Jesus tells us at the end of the Sermon on the

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<sup>21</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 156.

<sup>22</sup>Smith, "Hypocrite," 353.

Mount that many will fit this category on the last days. Matthew 7:21 says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” We must be attentive to the human tendency toward hypocrisy and self-deception. Scot McKnight issues a stern warning based on Christ’s words in Matthew 6 when he says,

What Jesus aims at is the self-deceit that weaves itself into the fabric of a person's spirituality in which there is not only a notice-me approach, but also an inability to know that the problem is present. This sense of hypocrisy ought to warn us. This is why spiritual directors or close friends or leaders need to be attentive to the codes of our actions.<sup>23</sup>

With a better understanding of the hypocrites who are mentioned in each of these three acts of piety, we now turn to each act individually.

### **Merciful Deeds**

The first act of piety which Jesus mentions in 6:2–4 is the one defined by the Greek word *helêmosunên*. Some translations focus this word on the giving of alms to the needy. This concept certainly includes giving money to those in need. However, David Downs makes it clear that we should not restrict this only to almsgiving. He says,

But translations should be wary not to restrict *helêmosunên* to 'the giving of alms,' not least because, while the term *helêmosunên* is not used in the narrative outside of 6:2–4, the long discussion of charity and reward in Matt 25:31–46 includes feeding the hungry, provisioning the thirsty with water, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting those in prison. The list of actions in Matt 25:31–46 is probably the best definition of *helêmosunên* in the Gospel of Matthew, even though the noun *helêmosunên* is not used there. To understand the action described in Matt 6:2–4 as 'giving alms' is potentially to restrict these merciful deeds to monetary distributions.<sup>24</sup>

In Matthew 6:2 Jesus assumes the action of merciful deeds but then focuses on the way the hypocrites perform this deed. Jesus describes them as those who must sound a trumpet in the synagogues and in the streets before they do their good work. There is no

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<sup>23</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 159.

<sup>24</sup>David J. Downs, *Alms: Charity, Reward, and Atonement in Early Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 115.



indication that blowing a trumpet was an actual practice, and Talbert explains that Christ is using hyperbole to emphasize the end goal of the hypocrites. He says, “This Matthean language (one gives alms after a trumpet has announced the forthcoming act) is so extreme that it must be hyperbole or satire.”<sup>25</sup> They may perform some good work, but they make sure that others see and are given the chance to praise them for it. As we have seen above, they will receive a temporal earthly reward for their performance. They may receive the praise of men, but that is all they will receive, and the reward will not befit the good nature of the work done.

In verse 3 Jesus turns his attention to kingdom disciples and shows that their merciful deeds must be done with an entirely different motivation than the hypocrites. Rather than sounding the trumpet and seeking the approval of men, they are to give in secret. Jesus is not demanding that we somehow give in such a way that we only partly know what we are doing. Instead, he is speaking in hyperbole to show that we must make it our primary aim to give for an audience of one. Scot McKnight explains, “His instructions are designed not to create scrupulosity but to criticize the ostentatious behaviors of those who do things to be seen—like the Pharisees and teachers of the law (see Matt 23)—and to urge his followers to engage God and others directly.”<sup>26</sup> While at times it is impossible to keep a merciful deed completely secret, our goal should be to do good works with God as the one who will see. His approval is our only goal. That is exactly what Jesus means when he calls on us to work in secret because God sees in secret. Jonathan Pennington explains the importance of the language of secrecy when he says,

Most importantly, we can see that stating that God is in secret is closely parallel with calling him the heavenly Father or Father in heaven. By its nature that which is in heaven is hidden, unless of course it is divinely revealed (cf. Matt 3:16–17). The

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<sup>25</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 104.

<sup>26</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 154.

Father in heaven, then, is virtually synonymous with the Father *en to kruppto*.<sup>27</sup>

## Prayer

The second act of piety considered by Jesus is prayer in Matthew 6:5–6. Of course, Matthew spends a significant amount of extra instruction regarding prayer in 6:7–15, but we will return to that. As in the instruction regarding merciful deeds, we find that our prayers must not be practiced in the same manner as the hypocrites. They love to stand and pray in public, whether in synagogues or on street corners, and they do this with the goal of being seen by men. The primary issue here is not praying in public as Jesus himself did (Matthew 19:13). Scot McKnight explains the hypocrites' perversion of prayer when he says, "What is wrong here is praying in order 'to be seen by others'. Jesus focuses on intent. Instead of talking to God, as Adam and Eve did in the garden as a form of fellowship and worship and petition or as David does in the Psalms, hypocrites prayed to be seen."<sup>28</sup>

In verse 6 Jesus turns to kingdom disciples. He tells them to go into an inner room and pray in secret. The inner room is described in Isaiah 26:20 as a place of refuge from indignation and would be the most private place in a Jewish house. Most likely it was the only room that could be locked and had no windows or doors to the outside.<sup>29</sup> Keeping in mind the overall contrast between the motivation of the hypocrites and the motivation of kingdom disciples, commanding one to pray in the inner room is intended to keep disciples focused on God as the audience in prayer. Guelich explains,

Continuing the focus on the audience, Jesus contrasts the synagogue and street corner setting involving a public audience to the situation in which only God could be one's audience. This graphic difference in setting, recalls the true nature of prayer, namely, the personal communication between the individual and God.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*, 237.

<sup>28</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 165.

<sup>29</sup>Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 281.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

Once again, we see that God, who is in secret, will reward. Prayer, whether public or private, must be done, not for show, but to commune with our heavenly Father. When we participate with a God-ward motivation, our hearts are trained and prepared to be with our Father in heaven, and thus fitted for our reward in the kingdom.

## **Fasting**

The final act of piety discussed by Jesus in Matthew 6:16–18 is fasting. Here we find the same structure as the portions on merciful deeds and prayer in Matthew 6. We take for granted in our current culture that believers will do merciful deeds and pray, but many followers of Christ do not often think about fasting. To the Jews in the OT, fasting was an important religious exercise. R. Banks explains,

Jewish meals were never purely physical or social occasions. In addition to accompanying worship, festivals, and covenant-making, meals embodied central aspects of such activities. Therefore, abstaining from eating and drinking, that is fasting, also generally possessed a religious significance.<sup>31</sup>

There were times, like the Day of Atonement, when fasting was commanded by God, but generally fasting was a way to express loss or great hope. In other words, people would fast at significant moments. As the Jews went into exile, fasting became more codified and groups like the Pharisees began practicing two fasts a week.

We see hints in the Old Testament that people were sometimes filled with hypocrisy when fasting according to Jeremiah 14:12 and Zechariah 7:5. Talbert explains that with this temptation toward hypocrisy and the deep religious significance of fasting, one could be lauded by others for profound religious devotion. He says, “By practicing fasting in an extreme way, one could acquire the reputation of a saint.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Jesus warns of such hypocrisy in Matthew 6:16. In order to “acquire the reputation of a saint”

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<sup>31</sup>R. Banks, “Fasting,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 233.

<sup>32</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 106.

you would need to make sure others were aware that you were fasting. Whether the gloominess is intentional here or whether it is hyperbolic, as the other actions of the hypocrites in verses 2 and 5, it is done intentionally to make a show. Scot McKnight describes their action as a performance. He says,

They convert the act of fasting into performance. Instead of participating in God's perspective on something over which one ought to be sorrowful and instead of entering into the grief of a sacred moment, the hypocrites turn a sacred occasion into theatrical performance to draw attention to their own piety.<sup>33</sup>

As we have seen with both prayer and merciful deeds, when fasting is done for a show, the hypocrites have their reward. In verse 17 Jesus turns his attention to his kingdom disciples and commands them to go to great lengths to avoid a performance. Rather than going into public with faces disfigured, they are to go about their normal routine so no one will know they are fasting. However, the goal is not only to avoid letting others in on the details of your religious life but to focus your activities on the goal of God's glory. The act of fasting with the right motivation makes us into the kind of people who are fit for the kingdom. Those who are fit for the kingdom are those who reflect God's love and goodness. Kingdom disciples are so concerned with God that they do not need to do these acts of piety for the praise of men. They are laying up rewards in heaven. Talbert summarizes these three acts of piety when he says, "The aim in Matthew 6:1–18 is not the privatization of piety but the purification of motive in one's relating to God. Piety may be public, but when it is, it should be for God's sake."<sup>34</sup>

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Genuine righteousness, done before God and not to gain the approval of men, is the heart of this section of the Sermon on the Mount. Those who act in secret, or with God as their intended audience, are laying up rewards in heaven rather than on earth.

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<sup>33</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 197.

<sup>34</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 108.

While the major focus has been on genuine righteousness to the exclusion of hypocrisy, Jesus knows that if his followers are going to live this way they are going to need direct access to their good heavenly Father. Therefore, he provides extra instruction regarding prayer and highlights its vital nature for kingdom disciples. Ulrich Luz explains,

If in the admonitions of the traditional address alms, prayer, and fasting appear equally side by side, Matthew himself lifts out prayer as the center of Christian life. He does so with the insertion of the *logion* about the answer to prayer (vv. 7–8) and with the Lord's Prayer by calling attention to what in the final analysis is the only thing that can draw a person into the right, not self-centered attitude toward God—namely, prayer.<sup>35</sup>

Matthew breaks into the very organized structure of 6:1–21 with a lengthy explanation of how to pray. This section, verses 7–15, is both similar and different from the other three portions, vv. 2–4, 5–6, and 16–18. Rather than continuing to address the Jewish hypocrites, Jesus turns his attention toward pagan Gentiles. Their abuse of prayer was not that they sought the approval of men but that they went about seeking divine approval by the wrong means. Jesus points out that the Gentiles use “babble” when praying because they assume they can force a divine reaction through many words. In other words, they feel the responsibility to get whatever god to whom they are speaking to listen. The focus here is on the intent of the pray-er and not on the length of the prayer. Jesus often prayed all night. Charles Talbert explains the Gentile perspective when he says, “Whether it is flattery in the invocation or elaborate presentation of the petitions, the assumption is that an answer to one's prayer depends on one's own ability to get control of God or to persuade the deity to do one's bidding.”<sup>36</sup>

The problem with the Gentiles is that they did not believe the truth of verse 8. Jesus explains that kingdom disciples do not have to resort to pressure and badgering but that their good Father knows what they need before they ask. They know the character of

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<sup>35</sup>Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 307.

<sup>36</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 109.

God, and it is this benevolence on which the requests of verses 9–13 can confidently be asked. All prayer is grounded in trust in God’s goodness.

While the Lord’s Prayer has garnered massive amounts of study and attention, the basic structure of the prayer is delightfully simple. It begins with a clear address to the Father followed by two sets of three petitions. The first three petitions are directed toward God and could be called the “your” petitions, while the second three are aimed at human needs and could be called the “us” petitions. Dunn points out the importance of placing God’s glory before our own needs when he says, “The life which sees its first priority as its right ordering before God can put its needs confidently before God.”<sup>37</sup>

The prayer begins with a simple, yet profound address to the one receiving the requests. He is “Our Father in heaven.” We have already seen in 6:1–21 that God is in heaven, the realm where his will is done, and that those who act for His glory and not the approval of men will lay up rewards with Him. The recognition of God as Father acknowledges the true intimacy that kingdom disciples have with God. Yet, calling him our heavenly Father reminds us of the distance between us. Donald Hagner points out both the intimacy and distance by saying, “Juxtaposed in this address are the contrasting phrases, ‘Father,’ pointing to the intimate relationship between God and his children, and ‘in heaven,’ pointing to his transcendent nature.”<sup>38</sup>

### **The “Your” Petitions**

The three requests found in vs. 9–10 are all direct petitions to God for essentially the same thing.<sup>39</sup> The phrase at the end of verse 10, “on earth as it is in heaven,” refers to each of these three requests and fits perfectly with the entire theme of

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<sup>37</sup>J.D.G. Dunn, “Prayer,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 622.

<sup>38</sup>Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 147.

<sup>39</sup>Turner, *Matthew*, 187.

this section. As we saw earlier, Matthew 6:1–21 is essentially about the difference in rewards between heaven and earth. The hypocrites were pursuing earthly rewards that were temporary according to verses 19–20 rather than rewards that were with the Father in heaven and would last. The “your” petitions are defined by the difference between heaven and earth. Heaven is the place where God is hallowed, his kingdom reigns, and where his will is done. The one praying knows this realm and longs for the realities of heaven to be realized on earth (vs. 21).

Yet, the Lord’s Prayer is necessary for kingdom disciples because the longings of the three “your” petitions have not been realized yet. Talbert explains the future orientation of these requests when he says, “They are a prayer for the speedy coming of the eschatological kingdom.”<sup>40</sup> However, the primary focus of these requests is not on the way in which humans can hallow God’s name or see his kingdom come but on the longing for God to accomplish these things. Scot McKnight explains that these requests are more about “gospel aches” than specific actions. He says, “The first and second petitions of the Lord’s Prayer are fundamentally gospel aches: they ache for the full Story to become complete where God is All in All.”<sup>41</sup> As in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, the future-oriented longings demonstrated in these requests will begin to shape the disciple now. Praying the Lord’s Prayer makes the disciple a certain kind of virtuous person who lives the present in light of the future.

### **The “Us” Petitions**

While prayer is not primarily about human needs but God’s glory, the Lord’s Prayer does move to concern for “us-oriented” requests. It begins with God and addresses our desires for his kingdom to come and will to be done but then highlights daily

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<sup>40</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 116.

<sup>41</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 179.

provisions and needs to be met in the present. While the “your” petitions certainly have impact on the disciple in the present, they are largely anticipating a future state of being. The “us” petitions are largely focused on life here with an eye toward the future. Talbert views the second three petitions as both eschatological and temporal. He says, “In all three of the Us-petitions, then, both an eschatological and a present, existential meaning seem to be present.”<sup>42</sup>

The first of these three “us” requests has been the subject of much debate because it is rather difficult to pin down the precise meaning of the word *epiousion* found in verse 11. One line of interpretation sees this word as focused on the future messianic banquet.<sup>43</sup> This keeps the “us” petitions in line with the eschatological focus of the “your” petitions. The other main interpretation of this word translates it something like “what is necessary for existence” or “daily bread.” This view certainly can keep the eschatological reality in view but grounds this request in the need for daily sustenance.

Since Luke 11:3 seems to interpret this request as emphasizing temporal provision and because of the major emphasis on temporal needs in Matthew 6:25–34, it seems more likely that the tone of the Lord’s Prayer shifts toward present needs in the “us” requests. This does not rule out a future focus and the realization that our needs will only fully and finally be met when we are enjoying the eschatological banquet. Dunn summarizes by saying,

However, whatever the precise emphasis, the petition is a powerful expression of trust and dependence: Give us what we need, but what God sees our need actually to be. The more material needs are in view, the clearer the implication that God is concerned for the provisions of these needs.<sup>44</sup>

Kingdom disciples must be those who are fully dependent on God for their

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<sup>42</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 118.

<sup>43</sup>Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 149–50.

<sup>44</sup>Dunn, “Prayer,” 622.



needs. He is our Father who will provide, and as we anticipate the full realization of His kingdom in the future we rely on His goodness in the present.

The second “us” request, found in verse 12, targets a present need that many will not see as a priority. But even in targeting our present experience of forgiveness there is a very clear eschatological dimension to this request. The word “debts” shows that believers need forgiveness from God because they have not lived up to the standard God has set. Turner explains, “Here in Matthew the idea is moral obligations owed to God that have not been met . . . . When disciples pray for pardon, they recognize that they are not yet perfect—their attitudes and activities often fall short of kingdom standards.”<sup>45</sup>

Clearly kingdom disciples need forgiveness from God in the present, and praying for this proves they are looking toward the future with hope. While nothing strikes us as particularly unusual about asking God for our debts to be forgiven, what becomes unnerving about this text is the way in which our forgiveness of others is tied to God’s forgiveness of us. Not only does Jesus give us the request in verse 12 regarding forgiveness which hints at the close connection, but he expands on this instruction in verses 14–15 because of the incredible importance of forgiveness for the present lives of kingdom disciples. Verse 14 gives the positive statement of Christ’s teaching, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” Verse 15 gives the same teaching but stated negatively, “But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

At first glance, this portion of the Lord’s Prayer may seem problematic. However, passages such as Matthew 18:23–35 indicate that God’s forgiveness comes prior to our forgiveness of others. Rather than thinking of the discussion of forgiveness here as a way of convincing God to forgive us, we should view this as a strong

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<sup>45</sup>Turner, *Matthew*, 188.

encouragement and warning that an attitude of forgiveness is a hallmark of kingdom disciples. Charles Talbert points out the true nature of forgiveness when he says, “Forgiveness can never be earned; it is always an act of undeserved generosity. It cannot be received, however, without repentance. Repentance makes the recipient capable of receiving the forgiveness offered, but the offer remains one of free generosity.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, by living with an attitude of forgiveness toward others, we position our hearts to receive and acknowledge God’s forgiveness of us. R.T. France explains the hypocrisy of claiming to be forgiven by God and refusing to offer forgiveness to others when he says, “There is then something inevitably reciprocal about forgiveness. To ask to be forgiven while oneself refusing to forgive is hypocritical.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it is vital that our prayers be immersed in the joy of receiving forgiveness from God so that we can then in turn forgive others.

Finally, the third “us” petition is a request that God would not lead us into temptation. Jesus recognizes that as we pray “your kingdom come” we still live in the present age. We long for the full realization of the kingdom and yet wrestle and struggle in the current age and against our flesh and the world. Considering this struggle, we must consistently endure by seeking the Lord’s aid to keep us from temptation.

### **Conclusion**

As we saw earlier, the best way to divide up this section of the Sermon on the Mount is to include 6:19–21 with 6:1–18. Despite the number of commentators who lump 19–21 with what follows and fail to see the connections with verses 1–18, verses 19–21 provide a fitting conclusion and exhortation to this section.<sup>48</sup> The focus on rewards or

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<sup>46</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 118.

<sup>47</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 250.

<sup>48</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*; Luz, *Matthew 1-7*; Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*; Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding*.

treasures brings the section full circle. Of course, as we will see in the next chapter, verses 19–21 serve as a bridge between sections two (6:1–21) and three (6:19–7:12) of the main body of the Sermon on the Mount.

Verse 19 seems to be a summary of verses 2–18, exhorting us not to pursue the earthly rewards of the hypocrites. An imperative follows in verse 20 exhorting us to lay up treasures in heaven that will not fade away. Eubank explains how verse 20 ties back to verse 1 when he says, “This image of treasures stored up in heaven provides a highly plausible explanation of the meaning of 6:1.”<sup>49</sup>

Verse 21 completes the idea that the pursuit of earthly or heavenly rewards will shape one’s character in the direction commensurate with the activity. Pennington helpfully points out that the true intent of this phrase is not a mere repetition of ideas. He says, “Rather, because the Jewish conception of ‘heart’ is more than emotions or affections but is the very nature or essence of a person, this statement is saying much more: what one values is who one really is as a person.”<sup>50</sup> This concept is masterfully drawn out in James K. A. Smith’s book *You Are What You Love*.<sup>51</sup> In light of the teaching of Jesus regarding rewards laid up in heaven, Smith’s central thesis provides a fitting conclusion to this section of the Sermon on the Mount. If you are what you love, and you participate in the practices of giving, praying, and fasting while valuing God and his kingdom, your reward will be to become the type of person who is at home in the presence of God. In other words, when you value God’s favor and approval and practice your faith accordingly, you will become what you love, and your treasure will be where your heart is.

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<sup>49</sup>Eubank, “Storing up Treasure with God in the Heavens,” 79.

<sup>50</sup>Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 233.

<sup>51</sup>James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

## CHAPTER 7

### SOCIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS (MATTHEW 6:19–7:12)

As we approach the final section of the main body of the Sermon on the Mount, it will be helpful to place this portion within the overall flow of the Sermon. The main body goes from 5:17–7:12 and consists of three major sections. Since the major theme of the Sermon is the righteousness characteristic of kingdom disciples, each of the sections of the body expounds one aspect of this righteousness.

First, in 5:17–48, the theme is transformative righteousness. Rather than just beating the Pharisees at their own game (5:48), the righteousness called for in this section embraces the whole person and leads to wholeness and well-being. Kingdom citizens are able to live out this righteousness because of the finished work of Christ. Second, in 6:1–21, the theme is genuine righteousness. Instead of a righteousness which puts on a show and fragments the outer person from the intention of the heart, here Jesus calls for disciples to participate in practices with a God-ward aim. They will then become the type of people who are fit for fellowship with their Father in heaven. And finally, in 6:19–7:12, the theme is social righteousness. If the Beatitudes set the trajectory for the Sermon and indicate that it is primarily about human well-being and flourishing, then we can expect that line of thinking to continue into the last of three major sections, 6:19–7:12. This is exactly what we find as this section describes the righteousness or wholeness of those who are living in community with one another.

#### **Theme of 6:19–7:12**

Without a doubt, this last section has proven the most difficult for interpreters to coalesce under one heading. Describing that difficulty, Luz comments, “It is not easy

to give it a title that covers its contents.”<sup>1</sup> This comes from the seemingly odd mixture of discussion regarding money and physical necessities in chapter 6 as well as the enigmatic parables at the beginning of chapter 7. For example, France sees clearly enough the way 6:19–34 fits into the overall flow of the sermon but not 7:1–12. He comments, “After the extended section of the discourse which has dealt with the disciples’ attitude to possessions, a number of shorter sections deal with apparently unrelated issues before a further summary verse (7:12) brings the main body of the discourse to a close.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the skepticism regarding the unified status of 6:19–7:12, it does make sense to see an overall theme of social righteousness for a couple of reasons.

First, the tightly bound overall structure of the Sermon on the Mount and the way in which the main body has been organized thus far leads the reader to expect a unified theme to the remaining portion of the body. So far, the body of the Sermon has held two clearly defined units, 5:17–48 and 6:1–21, and this leads the interpreter to expect another thematically bound section in 6:19–7:12. Also, the connections and similarities between 6:19–34 and 7:1–12 make it obvious that the same theme is tying these two sections together. We will discuss these parallels below, but for now it is enough to note that they are present. So, the question naturally arises, if the interpreter should expect to find an overall theme in this section, what could possibly tie these passages together?

I believe the best way to summarize the instruction of this last major section of the Sermon on the Mount is with the phrase social righteousness, or the righteousness we live out in community. With this theme in mind, 7:12 makes a fitting conclusion to both this section and the entire main body of the sermon with its summarizing ethical insight

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<sup>1</sup>Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 328.

<sup>2</sup>R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 273.

concerning how we live among other human beings. In his excellent article dealing with the theme and contribution of this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Walter Wilson compares Matthew 6:19–7:12 to other ancient wisdom texts and concludes, “They illustrate how exhortation on the proper attitude towards material wealth, towards others, and towards God could be integrated into a unified instruction organized around an ethic that is not self-regarding but other-regarding in its orientation.”<sup>3</sup> Wholeness, or well-being, demands that our attention be moved away from self and turned to others, and that is the lesson 6:19–7:12 intends to teach.<sup>4</sup>

### **Parallels between 6:19–34 and 7:1–12**

One of the reasons to pursue a single, overarching theme to this section lies in the significant parallels between the two major divisions of 6:19–7:12.<sup>5</sup> Both begin with a prohibition, 7:1–2 and 6:19–21, which is then followed by a parable referencing the eye in 6:22–23 and 7:3–5. In both 6:24 and 7:6 there is a second parable comparing two items which are unsuited for each other, you cannot serve God and money (6:24), and you cannot put what is holy before swine (7:6).

Many interpreters see the link between 7:7–11 and 6:25–34 as both passages encourage the disciple with God’s goodness and generosity. In 6:19–24 we have strong teaching concerning the relationship between mankind and financial resources. Then 6:25–34 follow that teaching up with encouragement not to worry over our temporal needs but to trust God to provide. Following the same pattern, 7:1–6 teaches a balanced

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<sup>3</sup>W. T. Wilson, “A Third Form of Righteousness: The Theme and Contribution of Matthew 6.19-7.12 in the Sermon on the Mount,” *New Testament Studies* 53, no. 3 (2007): 319.

<sup>4</sup>Dale C. Allison Jr., *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 198–99. Note Allison’s titles for the three major sections of the Sermon: “There are three major topics: Torah (5:17–48), the Christian Cult (6:1–18), and social issues (6:19–7:12).” My titles for the three sections are based on the idea that the idea of righteousness is the heart of the sermon and each of these sections are explaining a different aspect of righteousness.

<sup>5</sup>Allison, 189–93. Allison goes into detail on these comparisons. I will only highlight some of the major parallels to show that these sections belong together and should be grouped under a single theme.

discernment in dealing with others and follows that with an exhortation that God will provide the wisdom we need in relating to others.

We must be self-aware enough to recognize our own temptations to worry over financial resources and to struggle with condemnation versus discernment. However, the balancing acts of 6:19–24 and 7:1–6 are both met with the overwhelming encouragement that God will provide for our needs as they arise. Dale Allison summarizes by saying, “Matthew 7:1–6 is then succeeded by 7:7–11, a passage that, like 6:25–34, offers encouragement by reference to the care of the Father in heaven, ‘Ask and you will receive.’”<sup>6</sup>

With the overall theme in place, we now turn to specific discussion regarding each of these sections and how they advance the idea of social righteousness and overall well-being and flourishing.

### **Wealth and Worry (6:19–34)**

In chapter 6 we have already touched on the connection 6:19–21 has with the previous section as a fitting conclusion to the discussion of heavenly versus earthly rewards. Even though it makes sense to include 6:19–21 with 6:1–18, most commentators see 6:19–21 as beginning the next section dealing with money. Therefore, viewing 6:19–21 as a “bridge” which can be included in both sections is ideal.<sup>7</sup>

The reason for the movement to a discussion of money and wealth here is based on two factors. First, the disciple has just prayed for God to provide his daily bread in 6:11. France explains this connection when he says, “When that prayer has been sincerely prayed, the disciple is set free from material anxiety and can instead concentrate on the kingship and righteousness of God (6:33) which are the prayer’s primary focus.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Allison, 190.

<sup>7</sup>Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 124.

<sup>8</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 257.

However, the temptation to serve money is often present, and specific instruction is necessary because, secondly, the realities of money continue to shape our lives.

Therefore, a great deal of our discipleship and righteousness comes from how we handle and view financial resources. Luz clarifies the significance of money in our discipleship when he says, “Matthew actually thinks that money is the place where a person’s heart is when it is not with God or with the ‘heavenly treasure’.”<sup>9</sup>

However, we must not only get our priorities in line regarding money, but also how we handle our money will actively shape our priorities according to verse 21. This verse describes the principle that your loves will shape you into the type of person who is the natural end of those loves. Our practices shape our loves and reveal our loves. It is vital that we grasp how our practices shape our loves and determine the type of people we will be when it comes to a very earthly endeavor, the way we handle money.

We typically think of money as a static object that we can use as we please. Then, like a thermometer, we can evaluate our spiritual lives based on our use of financial resources. On the contrary, Jesus would have us think of money as a master which will control and shape us rather than vice versa per verses 21 and 24. While not evil in and of themselves, financial resources have incredible power to feed our desires and point the heart in a direction. In his book *The Economy of Desire*, Daniel Bell Jr. argues that we often approach discussions of modern capitalistic economies with the wrong starting point. He says, “Instead of asking, Does capitalism *work*? we ought to ask, *What* work does it do?”<sup>10</sup> Capitalism trains and orders our desires toward the view that humans are *for* production and consumption. Again, Bell explains, “In other words, capitalism as an economy of desire has everything to do with how life is ordered or organized toward

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<sup>9</sup>Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 336.

<sup>10</sup>Daniel M. Bell Jr., *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 84.



particular ends or purposes.”<sup>11</sup> When we find our treasure in money, our hearts will begin to be shaped by this understanding that we are here for the production and consumption of goods. The form of our economy encourages this anthropology and ends up creating servants who find their purpose in production and consumption. The way to battle this is to heed the instructions of Jesus in 6:19–34 and to serve the true master which will lead to righteousness and flourishing.

After the bridge passage of vs. 19–21, Jesus works out the principle that we must lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven rather than earth. France explains the unifying theme of these verses as single-mindedness, but it is vital to keep in mind that this single-mindedness is dealing with how one relates to money.<sup>12</sup> Keeping on the theme of money, verses 22–23 transition to a light and darkness dichotomy while also bringing in language of wholeness and fragmentation. The vital pieces in these verses are the use of the words “healthy” and “bad” and how they relate to the eye metaphor.

Pennington helpfully identifies the eye as a metaphor which connects the inside and outside of the person.<sup>13</sup> With the metaphorical understanding of the eye in place, the key word of “healthy” defines how there can be continuity between one’s heart and actions, or inside and outside. This word could be defined in a variety of ways, but it makes the most sense as meaning generosity in this context, emphasizing one’s relationship to money.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, if your intentions and actions toward money are showcasing a generous disposition, your entire self will be light. In other words, if you are free from the burden of laying up earthly treasures both in desire and action, you will

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<sup>11</sup>Bell, 88.

<sup>12</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 257.

<sup>13</sup>Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 241.

<sup>14</sup>Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 122; Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 333; Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 241–42.

be a person of wholeness and well-being. On the other hand, if your eye, or disposition toward money is “bad,” your whole self will be full of darkness. In contrast to the person who is generous, the one with the bad eye is less than willing to part with financial resources. Some have translated this word as “stingy” or “greedy” with the result that your whole self will be full of darkness.<sup>15</sup> Verses 22–23 make it clear that a primary theme of the Sermon, wholeness or righteousness, applies to the way we use our financial resources.

Despite the way some have seen the connection between the eye metaphor and verse 24 as confusing, the concept of serving two masters continues the discussion concerning money very naturally. Luz comments, “Verse 24 then does not mean a return to a superficial level; it follows exactly from what has just been said.”<sup>16</sup> If you are trying to lay up treasures on earth while also attempting to serve God, you will not experience wholeness and well-being. The way a person handles money impacts his entire self positively or negatively. Conflict and fragmentation will be the result of one devoted to earthly treasure.

Typically, when we hear the word *treasure*, we picture someone with great financial resources. There is a danger here of thinking Jesus’ teaching regarding generosity and stinginess only applies to the wealthy. But since the “eye” serves as a metaphor for the relationship between one’s desires and actions, the teaching here is equally significant for those with far fewer treasures on earth. In Rebecca DeYoung’s book *Glittering Vices*, she makes the case that the vice of avarice is not so discriminating as to only afflict the rich. She says,

The greedy person’s attachment to wealth can wear many faces—an overflowing shopping cart or a single purchase, a stock portfolio that is aggressive or conservative, a wallet full of credit cards or a safety deposit box with a few carefully

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<sup>15</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 122.

<sup>16</sup>Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 334.

guarded treasures, a garage full of expensive cars or a closet jammed full of ‘great deals.’ It can affect the young, the old, and everyone in between. In all of its varied expressions, however, greed is a perverted love. Its profile has disordered desire written all over it.<sup>17</sup>

The point she makes is compelling. Greed, or serving money, is a perverted love or a disordered desire. Verse 24 points out that our service of God or money will flow from our hatred of one and love for the other. The only way to pursue righteousness is to have loves that are rightly ordered, and this means generosity with earthly treasures no matter how much one has. When one’s inside and outside are rightly ordered and desire matches action in loving service to God, we are free from the enslavement of greed or avarice. However, failure to entrust our financial resources to God will lead to worry, anxiety, and fear as we serve the master of money. In light of this, Jesus draws our attention to God’s gracious provision in the counterpart and conclusion to 19–24, verses 25–34. Scot McKnight pulls these two sections together when he says,

Matthew (or Jesus) ties our passage to the previous one as if to say, if you have to choose which God you will serve, if you are to have a sound/generous eye, and if you are to store up treasures that last, then you will not worry about provisions, will trust God, and will pursue the kingdom and righteousness.<sup>18</sup>

At this point it is helpful to return to Stassen’s idea of the vicious cycle when we consider the command of verse 25.<sup>19</sup> The word “therefore” connects the flow of thought between verse 24 and 25 and shows the result of disordered desires and greed. This double-mindedness will cause anxiety and worry, but to be whole we must not get caught in the cycle of fear and stress over physical provisions. Anxiety creates a sequence of intruding thoughts that disrupt our well-being and relationship with God. Worry over physical needs or accumulation of wealth can dominate our lives no matter which end of

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<sup>17</sup>Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 100–101.

<sup>18</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 217.

<sup>19</sup>Glen Harold Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 2 (2003): 287.

the financial spectrum we inhabit. This command to avoid worry leaves the reader pondering how one can take practical steps to break this vicious cycle. Jesus provides profound answers in the rest of chapter 6.

There are several ways to divide up the structure of verses 25–34, each with a different emphasis. One can focus on the three commands not to be anxious, found in verses 25, 31, and 34.<sup>20</sup> One can apportion the text off by the three imperatives that give the transforming initiatives of how to overcome worry and rightly relate to money: look, consider, and seek.<sup>21</sup> Or, one can divide the section into two topics, sustenance (26–27) and clothing (28–32), with a general heading (25) and a conclusion (33–34).<sup>22</sup> Regardless of how one sees the structure of the passage, the main line of argument is the same; instead of being ruled by money (24) to the point where you are anxious (25), ponder the providential care of God seen in nature (26–32) and pursue His kingdom (33–34).

As was just mentioned, Stassen sees the commands to look, consider, and seek as the transforming initiatives which free the disciples from the tyranny of worry and anxiety. It appears that, thematically, the commands to look and consider encourage us in the same direction. One of the most biblical tactics we can utilize to fight the surging reality of worry is to enjoy God’s bountiful gifts of the physical world. Scripture calls us repeatedly to recognize the glory of God expressed in creation in passages like Psalm 19. Farmer and author Wendell Berry puts the connection between the cure for anxiety and the physical world beautifully in his poem “The Peace of Wild Things.”

When despair for the world grows in me/ and I wake in the night at the least sound/  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,/ I go and lie down where the  
wood drake/ rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds./ I come into  
the peace of wild things/ who do not tax their lives with forethought/ of grief. I

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<sup>20</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 125–26.

<sup>21</sup>Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” 287.

<sup>22</sup>Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 246.

come into the presence of still water./ And I feel above me the day-blind stars/  
waiting with their light. For a time/ I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.<sup>23</sup>

However, according to the Sermon on the Mount, our amazement at creation must turn from wonder to purposeful acknowledgement of God's providential care. Pennington points out that in both topics, food (26) and clothing (28), Jesus makes a "lesser to greater" argument.<sup>24</sup> If God takes care of the birds and the flowers, then of course he will provide for our most basic needs. France explains, "If God creates with such extravagant and loving care something which is destined so soon for such an ignoble end, his care for his 'higher' creation may confidently be expected to be 'much more.'"<sup>25</sup>

This lesser to greater argument highlights the root cause of this sort of anxiety in verse 30. Those who are serving money rather than God are the *oligopistoi*, or those of "little faith." Rather than living as the *oligopistoi*, verse 31 repeats the command to avoid anxiety, and verse 32 points out that the Gentiles are seeking after these things. Rather than living as those around them who do not know the heavenly Father, kingdom disciples must put into practice these transforming initiatives. They must not perpetuate the service of money leading to anxiety but must put in place practices that increase faith in God's character and care. One of these practices is the combination of looking and considering God's providential care for the natural world. The other, found in verse 33, is what Stassen considers the "climactic initiative."<sup>26</sup>

This climactic initiative brings the discussion of wealth and worry to a close. Those who want to break free from the vicious cycle of being tossed between two masters and consumed with anxiety and worry must consider verse 33 carefully. The

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<sup>23</sup>Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things by Wendell Berry," *On Being* (blog), December 8, 2016, <https://onbeing.org/blog/wendell-berry-the-peace-of-wild-things/>.

<sup>24</sup>Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 245.

<sup>25</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 270.

<sup>26</sup>Stassen, "The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount," 287.

initiative comes in two parts. First, place a priority on seeking the kingdom, and second, pursue his righteousness. The entire context of the Sermon has been one of kingdom proclamation. In other words, the kingdom has arrived through the ministry of Jesus and we must begin acting like it now. N. T. Wright explains when he says, “God’s future is arriving in the present, in the person and work of Jesus, and you can practice, right now, the habits of life which will find their goal in that coming future.”<sup>27</sup> So, rather than giving one’s life primarily to the acquisition of financial means and physical goods, one’s master must be God. Life must be oriented toward the recognition of his present kingdom and the desire to be under his kingly reign. Scot McKnight beautifully explains the arrival of God’s kingdom within the biblical narrative when he says, “The ‘kingdom’ is Jesus’ shorthand expression for the Story of Israel’s hope for this world coming to completion in Jesus, and it takes place as the society that does God’s will under King Jesus is empowered by God’s redemptive work.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, seeking the kingdom means finding my place within the story that God is telling and culminates in Christ. It means finding my identity in the right place – in how I fit into that story.

Seeking his righteousness brings us back to the overall message of the Sermon on the Mount. Living under God’s rule and reign means putting into place habits of life and virtues that demonstrate the reality of God’s reign in my life. The entire message of the Sermon has been to show the righteousness that ultimately leads to flourishing and well-being in the present and future as a citizen of God’s kingdom. So, to seek his righteousness means to seek to embody the ethical norms that come from the story of God’s kingdom culminating in Christ. These are the ethical realities that guide our lives as we live in the kingdom of already-not yet. These are the ethics described in the

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<sup>27</sup>N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: Harper One, 2012), 103.

<sup>28</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 220.

Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon. Pennington summarizes verse 33 when he says, “Taken together, then, the exhortation in 6:33 is a broad vision or marching orders for the Christian way of being in the world—being one who is dedicated to God’s coming reign and the kind of Christ-centered righteous behavior that marks the kingdom.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Condemnation and Discernment (7:1–12)**

We have attempted to make the case above that 7:1–12 should be included with 6:19–34 under the heading of social righteousness. The disciple’s posture toward financial resources is hardly a private matter. Along with one’s stance toward money, kingdom citizens are called to a different way of dealing with one another. Disciples must put into place a proper understanding of condemnation and discernment in how they relate to others. Talbert’s division of 7:1–12 into two sections, 7:1–5 and 7:6–12, each made up of three parts is beneficial to grasping the unified message of this section.

Jesus begins the section by giving a broad principle that, unfortunately, has been often misunderstood. We are not to judge others (7:1), but what does this mean? Some believe Jesus is calling us to only confront our own sins and deal with others by “putting aside our hangups.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, many believe we are never to make a call as to what is moral or immoral in the life of another person. This view of Matthew 7:1 fails to understand the context of this prohibition and strips it of its true meaning and use. The command here is better understood as “do not condemn” one another. Jesus is not saying there is never a place for moral discernment or the recognition of wrong doing. Instead, he is calling kingdom disciples to avoid personal condemnation or, as Pennington explains, “judging unfairly.”<sup>31</sup> Verse 2 makes more sense with the proper

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<sup>29</sup>Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 249.

<sup>30</sup>Corine Gatti, “Christian and Gay?,” accessed August 10, 2017, <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/articles/christian-and-gay.aspx>.

<sup>31</sup>Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 256.

understanding of verse 1 in place. Personal condemnation will come from God when one views others with this type of judgment. Luz explains, “Since all of us will appear before God’s judgment, the standard we apply to others will someday be applied to us.”<sup>32</sup>

Rather than lives characterized by harsh and critical judgment of others, kingdom disciples must be those who take seriously an evaluation of their own lives before they deal with others according to verses 3–5. France explains that this parable is intended to explain and properly balance the principles given regarding judgment and condemnation in verses 1–2.<sup>33</sup>

Rather than judging unfairly, kingdom citizens are to be humble and to seek the good of others as they pursue righteousness together. One who condemns will not be in the habit of evaluating his own life and seeking to grow in righteousness, which is what verses 3–5 call us to model. Stassen calls the command to “take the speck out of your eye” the transforming initiative. Here is the virtue that we must develop to avoid being those who judge unfairly and instead live peaceably with others. Stassen says, “In its echo of the transforming initiative immediately preceding, ‘seek first the reign of God,’ it suggests that the initiative of repenting for the log in one’s own eye is a practice that participates in the coming of the reign of God.”<sup>34</sup> Verse 5 calls the believer to be actively engaged in his community for the purpose of holiness. The practice of a kingdom citizen does not stop with self-evaluation but flows out into the community. Luz explains this corporate context when he says, “Thus the text is speaking of a process in the context of the community in which even the splinter in the brother’s eye is simply not a private matter.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the heading of social righteousness for this entire section is appropriate.

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<sup>32</sup>Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 352.

<sup>33</sup>France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 275.

<sup>34</sup>Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount,” 289.

<sup>35</sup>Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 353.



Following on the heels of verses 1–5 is probably the most difficult verse to interpret and place in the Sermon on the Mount. However, when viewed in the context of verses 1–12 and as part of the larger section on social righteousness, it becomes easier to understand 7:6. If 7:1–5 have been about personal condemnation, then verse six is the balancing verse calling the disciple to practice moral discernment, particularly in relationships with others. Pennington explains, “If 7:3–5 emphasizes hesitancy and extra care in discerning the faults of others, 7:6 supplies the counterweight or ballast lest we become foolish and undiscerning.”<sup>36</sup> When understood in this way, this balancing act can become intimidating. How can the disciple ensure that he will avoid personal condemnation and harsh judgment, while at the same time display proper discernment as to who qualifies as a “dog” or “swine”? Not only is the balancing act difficult, but the warning at the end of verse 6 adds an element of personal danger to the mix. Should you act with wrong discernment, this action will end up costing you something precious. So, how does the disciple proceed? There are practices, such as careful self-evaluation (vs. 5), that will bring the disciple greater moral clarity. However, the weight of this passage can be overwhelming, and so the next portion, verses 7–11, is a refreshing drink of water for the wavering disciple.

Interpreting verses 7–11 largely depends on how you view 7:1–12 fitting together. If, like Scot McKnight, one views this section as containing random sayings of Jesus with nothing holding them together, verses 7–11 will present general teaching on prayer.<sup>37</sup> While the application of these verses can certainly be broadened out to all sorts of requests in prayer, it seems best to take them as continuing the theme of verses 1–12 regarding discernment and condemnation. Talbert explains the importance of reading this passage within its narrow context when he says, “Reading verses 7–11 in context results

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<sup>36</sup>Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 262.

<sup>37</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 242.

in seeing the periscope as an enablement of verse 6. If one needs to discern what is appropriate judging and discerning, ask God for wisdom and God will provide it.”<sup>38</sup>

These verses make their point in the same way as 6:25–34 by appealing to God’s character through a lesser to greater argument. McKnight says, “Jesus anchors petition in God’s goodness.”<sup>39</sup> This passage, like 6:25–34, is tied to God’s character; therefore, the ultimate issue is one of faith. In other words, the way to overcome anxiety over material possessions and the way to learn to properly balance discernment without judging unfairly is to lean on the character and goodness of God. If God takes care of the physical world, he will surely take care of his children. If we need wisdom regarding how to deal with people, we must go to God in faith and he will supply (James 1:5).

As we have been discussing all along, the Sermon on the Mount is training us to be the type of people who bring the kingdom into the present by practicing certain virtues and habits. If that is true, this passage is encouraging us to habitually exist in the world as people who trust God’s character to provide materially as well as socially. This is how we put on social righteousness. Luz sees that our prayer of faith must be paired with virtuous practices. He comments concerning Matthew’s intention here, saying, “For him confidence in prayer is not a substitute for one’s own human action; rather, they belong together.”<sup>40</sup> The collusion of faith and habits brings us to the concluding admonition of both 6:19–7:11 and the entire body of the Sermon from 5:17–7:11.

Matthew 7:12 brings the theme of righteousness full circle in the Sermon on the Mount. The entire body of the sermon is bookended by the mention of “the law and the prophets” in both 5:17 and 7:12. As was discussed in chapter five, Jesus is spoken of in 5:17 as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. This language has implications for

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<sup>38</sup>Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 135.

<sup>39</sup>McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 244.

<sup>40</sup>Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 360.

how we read the OT, but fulfillment language also understands Jesus to have completed the work of Israel by perfectly obeying where Israel failed. This is why in 5:20 Jesus speaks of the righteousness of his followers exceeding that of the scribes and the Pharisees. Matthew 7:12 states the idea of righteousness in a slightly different way, but this restatement helps the reader grasp the concept of social righteousness as well as the centrality of love to the Sermon. According to Matthew 22:37–40, love is the summary of the law. Luz explains how this command clarifies the enactment of our love for others when he says, “Thus for Matthew the golden rule is not primarily a basic ethical principle; it is an aid in helping love become concrete and find the right track.”<sup>41</sup> This track has been discussed and clarified throughout the Sermon, but here we receive a concrete principle to summarize the virtues we are to live out as citizens of Christ’s kingdom.

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<sup>41</sup>Luz, 367.

## CONCLUSION (MATTHEW 7:13–29)

This entire study has been built on the already-not yet understanding of the kingdom of God and the fact that the Sermon on the Mount is a presentation of the ethic of that kingdom. Of course, that kingdom ethic comes to us through the work of Jesus Christ and his authoritative proclamation. If properly understood and obeyed the Sermon holds out a vision of a life well-lived because it presents the breaking into the present of kingdom realities that shape the way we live. Thus, the theme of righteousness has been central to a proper grasp of the message of the Sermon.

Now, at the end of his Sermon, Jesus calls for a response by warning of judgment using the same understanding of the kingdom. He focuses on how we should respond in the present considering the future judgment of God. These final exhortations are built on the anticipation of judgment for those who fail to heed the words of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is calling for radical righteousness, and those who fail to listen will find themselves outside the kingdom. Scot McKnight sums the message of these verses up well when he says, “The gravity of the summons is palpable: Jesus calls his followers to enter into the life of the kingdom in the here and now.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in these final three illustrations we have the pairing of practical righteousness with eschatological judgment. In other words, live out the ethic of the Sermon now or face destruction then.

### **The Two Paths (7:13–14)**

The first of three exhortations drawing the Sermon on the Mount to a close offers a sharp contrast between two paths. One can either choose the narrow gate and

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<sup>1</sup> Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 257.

difficult path or the wide gate and easy path. The overtones of eschatological judgment are explicit as Jesus mentions the result of the choice being life or destruction. But what is the choice that is being made? A very common interpretation of this metaphor is to view Jesus as the gate. Thus, one's belief becomes the deciding factor in what path one is on.<sup>2</sup> While this certainly makes for a powerful evangelistic sermon, this understanding is not in keeping with the major emphasis of the Sermon on the Mount or the remaining two closing illustrations in Matthew 7. Righteousness has been the main theme of the body of the Sermon. Of course, that righteousness is only attainable through Jesus Christ, but as in 5:20, Jesus is calling kingdom disciples to a real righteousness that is worked out in daily life not just a belief in Jesus. Luz points out that when the image of the way is added to the image of the gate, this brings functional, wholeness-oriented righteousness into the picture. He comments, "He singled out the ethical aspect of the eschatology and thus as it were put righteousness next to the kingdom of God.... The difficult way, which under afflictions leads the few to the narrow gate, is the way of righteousness prescribed in the Sermon on the Mount."<sup>3</sup> Jesus here describes two ways of living with the resulting eschatological destinations.

### **The Two Trees (7:15–23)**

The second of three exhortations begins with the focus on false prophets. They are described as people who seem righteous on the outside but inside are morally bankrupt. This reminds the reader of 6:1–21 where the hypocrites are defined as those who are "practicing their righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them." This focus on false prophets pulls the dynamic of internal righteousness into the eschatologically-oriented conclusion to the Sermon. In other words, it is not enough to

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<sup>2</sup>McKnight, 258.

<sup>3</sup>Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 372.

maintain outwardly moral activities and appear to be walking on the good path. One must have the type of righteousness described in 5:17–48 that does not just avoid bad works but acquires positive virtues.

Once again, the focus in this illustration is on the deeds, or righteousness, required by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Verses 16 and 20 make this clear when Jesus points out that “you will recognize them by their fruits.” Talbert explains, “Good works are fruit that good trees spontaneously produce.”<sup>4</sup> The clear result of not bearing good fruit, or good works, is eschatological judgment, per verse 19.

The problem in these verses is that people can often be deceived by the appearance of good works. Presumably the false teachers in verse 15 are among those who are confident in their relationship with Christ based on their mighty deeds according to verse 21 and 22. The problem, of course, is that mighty deeds are not what the Sermon on the Mount requires. Jesus has explained the attitudes that shape virtue in the Beatitudes (5:3–12); the transformative righteousness that actively pursues wholeness (5:17–48); the genuine righteousness that grows from the inside-out (6:1–21); and the type of righteousness that properly relates in heart attitude to both money and people (6:19–7:12). These are the fruits required and which Jesus describes as “doing God’s will” in verse 21.

### **The Two Houses (7:24–27)**

In the last of Jesus’s closing exhortations, the issue of functional righteousness becomes very clear. Here, he offers a contrast between two types of houses, one built on rock, and one built on sand. Of course, the house on the sand cannot endure as it does not have a strong foundation. The house on the rock can withstand the battering of the storm

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<sup>4</sup>Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 140.

because it is built on a solid foundation. Once again, it is easy for Christians to get confused and imagine that Jesus is the foundation of the house. Luz believes that Protestant interpretation of this passage has been confused on this point. He comments, “What the human being does is of secondary importance. The text is distorted in this way in Protestant exegesis down to the present day.”<sup>5</sup> Amid his story, Jesus highlights the difference between the two houses. The house on the rock is the person who hears the words of Jesus in the Sermon and “does them” (v. 24), and the house on the sand is the person who hears the words of Jesus and “does not do them” (v. 26).

It is vital to remember that these words are not raw moralism. The ethic Jesus is calling his followers to is the same ethic described above and taught throughout the Sermon on the Mount. It is an internal righteousness that comes from being a kingdom citizen. Pennington explains how the focus on the foundation of the house indicates righteousness. He explains, “Thus, in yet another powerful way the contrast of 5:17–20 is highlighted—to be a follower of Jesus means a whole-person, inward-oriented righteousness (cf. 23:25–28).”<sup>6</sup> This is an ethic founded, not on a new law, but on the very person and authority of Jesus. This is why Matthew comments the way he does in 7:28–29 to conclude the Sermon. He draws attention to the authority of Jesus because the ethic demanded here is impossible without Jesus and the breaking in of his kingdom.

### **The Sermon and Sanctification**

As we have just seen, the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount calls the hearers to put the ethic of the kingdom into practice in everyday life. One of the difficulties in interpreting the Sermon has been how this ethic fits into the overall picture of sanctification for the Christian. Some have believed the goal of the Sermon is to show

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<sup>5</sup>Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 387.

<sup>6</sup>Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 281.

us our need for grace by highlighting the extremely high demands of Christ's law. Others have taught that the Sermon is only applicable in the millennial kingdom and so believers generally should not concern themselves with applying it now. Admittedly, studying the Sermon without an eye to the overall picture of sanctification in the Bible can potentially knock one's approach to personal holiness off kilter just enough to be detrimental. For example, the Sermon on the Mount does not explicitly describe the work of the Holy Spirit or even make a direct connection to the way conversion to Christ factors into our moral lives. As has been stressed throughout this work, every text of Scripture needs to be understood within the broader context of what the Bible teaches, and this is certainly true of how the Sermon fits into the personal growth of each Christian. I will place the Sermon's application within the process of sanctification by focusing on three areas; conversion, virtue formation, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

First, one cannot understand the ethic of the Sermon without a clear grasp of the necessity of conversion for living righteously. Ephesians 2:1–10 gives us a magnificent overview of salvation with a strong emphasis on the significance of conversion. Paul begins in verses 1–3 by describing the situation into which every human being is born, spiritual death. One cannot make oneself alive, and so God's gracious initiative is necessary to be "made alive together with Christ" (v. 5). Verse 10 tells us that one of the primary goals of spiritual life is that we would do "good works" and even "walk in them."

Living out the righteous ethic of the Sermon on the Mount is impossible without the gracious initiative of God in bringing dead sinners to spiritual life. Often, people in our culture will pull a principle from the Sermon, such as "whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them", and view it as a wonderful moral guideline for society. No doubt, the world would be a better place if we all, regardless of conversion to Christ, obeyed this principle. However, without true conversion to Christ



by faith through grace, our efforts at becoming the type of person who lives out this ethic are doomed to failure.

Second, built on the foundation of conversion to Christ, the Sermon begins to factor into the growth process of sanctification as we imitate the character of Christ and develop the virtues presented in Matthew 5–7. In his book, *Renewing Moral Theology*, Daniel Westberg gives a very helpful illustration to guide our understanding of the process of sanctification. He says that if you want to learn to play soccer you must do two things. First, you must know the rules of the game and what will count as a violation of those rules. For example, you must understand what will be counted as an offside violation, and you must know that only the goalkeeper can use his hands. You cannot play the game without knowing what is prohibited, but simply teaching a new player all the rules will not enable him or her to play the game. Second, you must actively engage yourself in a program of training that will teach you the skills necessary to pass, shoot, and score the soccer ball. You must develop skills in practice that will empower you to effectively encounter a variety of circumstances in the game. Acquiring skills through practice means that you will be able to improvise during the game, within the rules, for maximum competency.

By bringing this soccer illustration into the Christian life we can see how vital the Sermon on the Mount is for sanctification. Westberg explains,

As a basic answer, we could say, correctly, that Christ himself, the pattern of his relationships to God and other people, his attitudes and concerns, the qualities of his character are the revelation of God's will for us, provide the perfect and reliable exemplar. But more specifically, the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and especially the Beatitudes, the list of spiritual qualities presented by Jesus as defining features of the Christian disciple, provide a compact summary.<sup>7</sup>

The Sermon trains us to put on virtue and ultimately to become like Jesus. The

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel A. Westberg, *Renewing Moral Theology: Christian Ethics as Action, Character and Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 136.

Beatitudes present an image of the good life that attracts us to embody the qualities or virtues described in them. The images of salt and life present God's people as covenantal representatives, sent into the world to live out the virtues of kingdom life to have an impact. Matthew 5:17–48 tells us, not just to avoid anger, lust, divorce, lying, retaliation and limited love, but to be the type of people who pursue reconciliation, sexual wholeness, biblical marriages, truthfulness, peace-making, and love for our enemies. Matthew 6:1–21 trains us to practice spiritual disciplines in a way that prepares us to dwell in God's presence. Finally, Matthew 6:19–7:12 show us what it looks like to live appropriately with others. We live generously with our material possessions and graciously, yet discerningly with those around us. The entire Sermon is about living as kingdom citizens by practicing these virtues in the present. Notice that Westberg includes the virtue formation of the Sermon as well as the pursuit of Christlikeness through interaction with Jesus in the Gospels.

Sanctification is ultimately about God's disciples growing to look more like Jesus, and this means embodying the Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon in all of life. This paradigm of virtue formation and Christ imitation is described in many places in the New Testament. Colossians 3 provides a clear example. In verses 5–9 we are to act in line with the reality that we have put off the old self and put on the new. The new self is consistently being renewed to look more and more like Christ since he is "all in all." This means that the goal of sanctification is mature conformity to the image of Jesus. Verse 12 goes on to say that conformity to Jesus is about acquiring a list of character qualities or virtues. These qualities, such as patience, kindness, humility and love, become second nature to the disciple.

Of course, this type of transformation does not happen by human effort. It is vital to make this clear as we consider the place of the Sermon in the process of sanctification. A change of disposition like that described in Colossians 3 only happens

through the power and enablement of the Holy Spirit of God. In fact, some of the same virtues mentioned in Colossians 3 are called the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. The Christian embodies these virtues through the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart and life. The same is true for the believer's response to the Sermon. A disciple can only become "poor in spirit" or the type of person who pursues reconciliation by the empowering work of the Spirit. As disciples are formed in Christlikeness and live as salt and light, or as flourishing humans, they bring glory to God (Matt 5:16).

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## ABSTRACT

### PREACHING THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LEARNING TO BE KINGDOM DISCIPLES FROM MATTHEW 5–7

Nathan Timothy Williams, D.Min.  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017  
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

The goal of this thesis is to serve as an aid to preaching the Sermon on the Mount using the principles of biblical theology and highlighting the themes of the kingdom of God, righteousness, and human flourishing. The Sermon on the Mount is a kingdom sermon, proclaimed to produce real righteousness in kingdom disciples, which will lead to human flourishing and well-being. This goal is accomplished through a beginning chapter explaining a basic understanding of biblical theology, and then a series of chapters applying the principles of biblical theology to the Sermon. Each chapter will demonstrate the ways in which the Sermon on the Mount unfolds these three themes of the kingdom of God, righteousness and human flourishing.

## VITA

Nathan Timothy Williams

### EDUCATION

B.A., Bob Jones University, 2004  
M.Div., The Master's Seminary, 2009

### MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Pastoral Intern, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California, 2006–2009  
Associate Pastor, Timberlake Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia, 2010–2017  
Senior Pastor, Woodhaven Bible Church, Woodhaven, Michigan, 2017 -  
Present