

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Sermon on the Mount

The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life

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*Dedicated to the Parishioners of
Holy Family Parish, Davidson, Maryland,
followers of Christ in the way of discipleship,
whom I have been privileged to serve from 1990 to 2012.*

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Preface

The Sermon on the Mount is a classic text, by which I mean that it can be read repeatedly without exhausting its meaning. Exactly why this is so, I am not sure; but I suspect that it has something to do with the one who first spoke its words. In this sermon Jesus teaches with an authority that derives from his unique relationship to God; he speaks with the authority of the Son of God. Perhaps this is why, even though the sermon has been commented on by numerous authors, we always find something new in it.

It was Professor Jean Gribet who first introduced me to the Sermon on the Mount in his lectures on the Synoptic Gospels at the University of Louvain nearly fifty years ago. Since then I have taught the Sermon on the Mount as part of my own course on the Synoptic Gospels for nearly thirty years, and more recently I have taught a graduate seminar on the sermon with my colleague, Professor William Mattison, a theologian of moral theology, who has been exploring the ethical dimension of the sermon for several years. That seminar taught me that the sermon can be read in different ways. This volume is my attempt to read it in a manner that makes it accessible to a larger audience of those who want to know what it means for their daily life.

The theme of this book is as follows: *the Sermon on the Mount calls us to single-minded devotion to God*. It invites us to be perfect as God is perfect by being wholehearted and undivided in our allegiance to God. It is a call to perfection for all Christians to

be lived out in the whole of life. It is not a new set of rules and regulations; it is a call to discipleship in light of the in-breaking kingdom of God. It is, as the subtitle of this book indicates and Augustine said long ago, the perfect measure of the Christian life.

While this book is informed by critical scholarship, I have not written it for the members of the scholarly guild, although I hope that some of them will read it. I have written it for all who seek to live the Christian life. Accordingly, I have tried to write with a sense of passion and urgency about this topic since my concern is for living rather than analyzing the Christian life. While the sermon has a long and complicated critical history that I will briefly describe in the introduction to this work, my primary concern has been to focus on what it means today. This is not to say I have forgotten or neglected what the sermon meant. But that is not my primary concern. What I wish to accomplish is quite simple: provide readers with a reading of the sermon that will enrich and nourish their lives as disciples.

I am indebted to many people who have generously taken the time to read and comment on this manuscript. Among them I single out my colleagues at the Catholic University of America: Christopher Begg, William Mattison, and Regis Armstrong, and my friend and colleague Ronald Witherup, the Superior General of the Society of Saint Sulpice. All have made important contributions to this text. Most importantly, they have encouraged me—and for this I am grateful.

Frank J. Matera

June 1, 2012

The Feast of Justin Martyr

The Catholic University of America

Washington, DC

Introduction

The Sermon on the Mount and the Christian Life

Some years ago, I read *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the renowned German Lutheran pastor whom the Nazis executed in the final days of the Second World War for his involvement in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The heart of that volume is Bonhoeffer's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.¹ Although I had taught the sermon in my course on the Synoptic Gospels for many years, Bonhoeffer enabled me to hear it in a way I had never heard it before. In Bonhoeffer's commentary, Christ's call to discipleship sounded forth in a powerful way. It is that reading of Bonhoeffer's commentary that has inspired this small volume, which I hope will enable others to hear the Sermon on the Mount in a new way as well. For here, in the Sermon on the Mount, we discover an outline of what it means to follow Christ in the way of discipleship.

At the outset of his own great commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, St. Augustine writes, "If anyone piously and earnestly ponders the Discourse which Our Lord Jesus Christ delivered on the Mount—as we read in the Gospel according to Matthew—I believe that he will find therein, with regard to good morals, the perfect standard of the Christian life."² Since Augustine, generations of commentators have endorsed this judgment. Here is the

perfect measure of the Christian life, the norm by which disciples ought to live. To be sure, there have been long and intense debates about the practicality of the sermon. Can believers really live in the way that Jesus describes in this sermon? Is Jesus presenting his disciples with a realistic ethic or with an impossible ideal?

During the medieval period some theologians distinguished between precept (what one must do) and counsel (what is recommended for those seeking to be perfect), and they assigned the sermon—or parts of it—to the realm of counsel intended for those seeking the way of perfection. In reaction to this approach, which could suggest that the sermon is not intended for all believers, Martin Luther developed his teaching on the two kingdoms (one kingdom representing the public sphere of life and the other the private sphere of life). He argued that while all Christians are bound to fulfill the sermon in the private sphere of life, they are not necessarily obligated to do all of its prescriptions in the public sphere of life where they hold particular offices such as being a soldier or magistrate. Each approach to the problem of the practicality of the sermon is partly right and partly wrong. On the one hand, the sermon is a call to perfection, but it is a call for all who follow Christ in the way of discipleship rather than a counsel for a chosen few. On the other hand, the sermon is intended for all, but its claim upon the Christian is not limited to the private life of the believer but extends to the whole of life. Put another way, *the Sermon on the Mount is a call to Christian perfection intended for every believer to be lived in every sphere of life, the public as well as the private.*

Saint Augustine understood this, as did most of the early church. It was simply assumed that this is how believers ought to live. To highlight the importance of doing the sermon, Augustine quotes from its conclusion in which Jesus tells those who have just heard his words that if they hear his words and do them they will be like a wise builder whose house was not destroyed because it was built on rock. But if they hear his words and do not do them they will be like a foolish builder whose house was utterly destroyed because it was built on sand. In other words, Jesus expects those who hear the sermon to do what he teaches.

He is not presenting an impossible ideal. Nor does he intend his sermon for a chosen few. As I will argue throughout this volume, Jesus intends the sermon for all of his disciples, without exception. It is not meant for an inner circle of disciples seeking perfection. It is intended for all who follow him on the way of discipleship. It is not a private morality limited to one's personal dealings with others; it is meant to inform the whole of life.

The Sermon on the Mount as the Norm of Discipleship

Although great crowds of people hear the sermon, Jesus delivers it to his disciples. This distinction between the crowds (who form the outer circle of those who hear the sermon) and the disciples (who form the inner circle of those who hear the sermon) is crucial for understanding how to interpret the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus delivers the sermon while seated on a mountain in the hearing of the great crowds who have been following him because of the mighty deeds he has been performing on their behalf. His teaching is not secret or esoteric. It is heard by many people, even as it is today. The sermon, however, is not directed at the crowds any more than it is directed at the world. It is spoken to those who have embraced the message of the kingdom. It is spoken to those who have responded to the call of discipleship in order to provide them with a way to live within the community of disciples who follow Jesus.

While the crowds, like the world, admire Jesus' words and are amazed at the authority with which he speaks, they do not follow him in the way of discipleship. They are hearers of the word but not doers of the word. They have heard the message of the kingdom, but they have not responded to it by becoming Jesus' disciples. Accordingly, while they find the words of the sermon attractive and powerful, they have not committed themselves to Jesus as his disciples. Consequently, they do not do the words of the sermon as Jesus intends; they do not belong to the community of his disciples.

Jesus' disciples, although characterized by "little faith," have taken the initial step. They have responded to his call. They have seen the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven in his words and

deeds, and they now belong to the community of disciples that will be the church of the risen Lord. The sermon is not an impossible ideal for them because they have entered the realm of the in-breaking kingdom of God. The sermon is not an impossible ideal because they belong to a community of like-minded disciples. The practicality of the sermon is a question only for those who are not his disciples. Apart from a community of like-minded disciples, the sermon will always be impractical and idealistic. For those who do not live in the sphere of the in-breaking kingdom of God, the realm of God's grace, the sermon will always be impractical and idealistic since the sermon is intended for disciples.

In saying this, I am not excluding others from listening to, admiring, and even learning from the sermon. But I am insisting that Jesus is not just another Hellenistic philosopher. He comes as Israel's Messiah, the one who speaks with the authority of the Son of God. In doing so, he reveals the full meaning of God's will as revealed in the Law and the Prophets. What he proclaims, then, presupposes faith in his proclamation of the in-breaking kingdom of God.

Inasmuch as Jesus embodies the sermon that he preaches, his sermon is the norm by which disciples measure themselves against Jesus. The sermon is the measure of the Christian life, the norm for discipleship. This does not mean, however, that Jesus presents a new set of rules and laws in the sermon. To view the sermon as a set of laws and rules, as if the beatitudes were to supplant the Ten Commandments, is to miss the point of Jesus' sermon. To reduce the sermon to a set of rules and laws, albeit better than the old, is to misunderstand Jesus' intent. Jesus calls disciples to single-minded devotion to God. He calls them to be perfect as God is perfect by being whole and entire in their allegiance to God. To do this, Jesus shows his disciples how to live a superior righteousness: conduct in accord with God's will because one is wholeheartedly devoted to God. The sermon teaches disciples how to do what God commands.

The sermon is not a compendium of ethics. It does not address the many complicated ethical problems that contemporary

Christians face, and yet it remains the norm of discipleship. It is the perfect measure of the Christian life because it shows disciples how Jesus lived and summons them to adapt the pattern of their life to the pattern of his life. It provides a model to imitate creatively and imaginatively, while remaining ever faithful to Jesus' words. The sermon is the norm for discipleship because it teaches disciples to live in the sphere of God's kingdom. It instructs them to do God's will with single-minded devotion to God.

The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain

Although I am concerned with the Sermon on the Mount as found in the Gospel according to Matthew, the Gospel of Luke also records a great sermon that is usually referred to as the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49) because Jesus delivers it on a level plain, after coming down from a mountain where he has spent the night in prayer before choosing his twelve apostles (Luke 6:17). The two sermons are similar in many ways. Both begin with a series of beatitudes that function as an introduction to the body of the sermon, and both conclude with similar warnings about the importance of doing Jesus' words. The themes that are developed in the two sermons, however, are different. Whereas the Sermon on the Mount focuses on the need for disciples to practice a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, the Sermon on the Plain focuses on the need for disciples to love their enemies and to refrain from judging each other. Instead of discussing topics that would have been of interest to an exclusively Jewish audience, in the Sermon on the Plain Jesus devotes its attention to topics that would have been of interest to Gentiles as well as to Jews.

The Sermon on the Plain is about one-fourth the length of the Sermon on the Mount. Consequently, it does not contain all of the material found in the Sermon on the Mount. Much of the material in the Sermon on the Mount, however, is found in other parts of the Gospel of Luke, especially the section that recounts Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:46). The chart below

compares the two sermons. The column to the left lists the topics of the Sermon on the Mount in the order in which they occur in that sermon. The column to the right shows where the topics of the Sermon on the Mount occur in the Gospel of Luke. While many of these topics occur within the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49), others occur in the section that recounts Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:46).

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3-7:27)

	Matthew	Luke	
The Beatitudes	5:3-12	6:20b-23	
Salt of the Earth	5:13	14:34-35	Journey Section
Light of the World	5:14-16	8:16	Galilean Section
Law & Prophets	5:17-20	16:16-17	Journey Section
Murder & Anger	5:21-26	12:57-59	Journey Section
Adultery	5:27-30	----	
Divorce	5:31-32	16:18	Journey Section
Oaths	5:33-37	----	
Retaliation	5:38-42	6:29-32	
Love for Enemies	5:43-48	6:27-28, 32-36	
Almsgiving	6:1-4	----	
Prayer	6:5-6	----	
Lord's Prayer	6:7-15	11:1-4	Journey Section
Fasting	6:16-18	----	
Treasure in Heaven	6:19-21	12:33-34	Journey Section
Sound Eye	6:22-23	11:34-36	Journey Section
Serving Two Masters	6:24	16:13	Journey Section
Anxiety	6:25-34	12:22-32	Journey Section
Judging Others	7:1-5	6:37-42	
Profaning the Holy	7:6	----	
God's Response to Prayer	7:7-11	11:9-13	Journey Section

Golden Rule	7:12	6:31	
Two Ways	7:13-14	13:23-24	Journey Section
Good & Bad Trees	7:15-20	6:43-46	
Saying Lord, Lord	7:21-23	6:46; 13:25-27	Journey Section
House Build on Rock	7:24-27	6:47-49	

In the chart below I have again compared the two sermons, but this time the chart lists the topics of the sermon in the order they occur in the Sermon on the Plain. It shows that except for the four woes (Luke 6:24-26) all of the material in the Sermon on the Plain has a parallel in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49)

	Luke	Matthew
The Beatitudes	6:20b-23	5:3-12
The Woes	6:24-26	—
Love for Enemies	6:27-36	6:38-48
Judging Others	6:37-42	7:1-5
Good & Bad Trees	6:43-45	7:15-20; 12:33-35
House Built on Rock	6:46-49	7:21-27

These two charts indicate that even though the Sermon on the Mount is much longer than the Sermon on the Plain, most of the material in the Sermon on the Mount can be found in the Gospel of Luke, if not in the Sermon on the Plain then in the section that recounts Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. This difference between the two sermons raises a series of questions. Why are there two sermons? Did Jesus deliver two different sermons? Does the present form of each sermon originate with Jesus, or did Matthew and Luke play a role in the composition of the two sermons?

The questions I have posed require careful investigation, and the results of such research are often hypothetical and disputed.

Most contemporary scholars, however, would acknowledge that the content of the two sermons has its origin in the teaching of Jesus. They would also acknowledge that Matthew played an important role in the composition of the Sermon on the Mount and Luke in the composition of the Sermon on the Plain. So how did the two sermons come about? Why do we have two different sermons?

I offer the following hypothesis, to which you need not subscribe in order to read this book. First, Jesus preached about the kingdom of God on a regular basis. On certain occasions he preached memorable sermons about the ethical demands of the kingdom, which his disciples remembered. Next, after his death and resurrection, in the period before the gospels were written, the church handed on his teaching orally. That teaching took on specific forms as it was used in the catechetical and liturgical life of the church. Finally the evangelists, Matthew and Luke, employed this material in the composition of their gospels. In doing so they shaped the material to respond to their needs. Matthew, for example, organized the sermon around the themes of righteousness and the Law. His concern was to show that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. Luke too was interested in showing that Jesus fulfilled all that the Law and the Prophets had said about the Messiah, but he was also concerned with the great reversal that the kingdom of God was bringing. Accordingly, he balanced the four beatitudes with four woes to show that those who are first will be last, and those who are last will be first when the kingdom arrives. Luke was also interested in the demands of love, especially love for foreigners, as can be seen in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Accordingly, the body of his sermon focuses on the need to extend love to all, even to one's enemy. Thus each evangelist shaped the sermon to the needs of his audience.

Does this mean that the sermons are the compositions of the evangelists rather than of Jesus? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, the present form of each sermon is indebted to the particular evangelist who wrote the gospel. No, the content and the material

of each sermon belong to Jesus rather than to the evangelists. Put another way, if we could ask Matthew and Luke if the sermon belongs to them or to Jesus, I suspect they would be surprised by the question and answer as follows: “To Jesus, of course! He is the one who spoke the words. The ideas and the concepts are his. My role was to gather the material and organize it in a way that would make it accessible and understandable to those who read my gospel.” This is how I will approach the Sermon on the Mount. The present literary composition of the sermon is indebted to Matthew, but the ideas, the spirit, and the content of the sermon belong to Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount within the Gospel of Matthew

Although Jesus is at the origin of the words that we find in the Sermon on the Mount, we no longer know the historical circumstances in which he spoke them. Indeed, the words may have been spoken several times in different circumstances, each new setting giving the words a slightly different nuance. What we do know, however, is the *literary setting of the sermon*. We know where the sermon occurs in the Gospel of Matthew within the canon of the New Testament, and it is this literary and canonical setting that provides us with the appropriate context for interpreting the sermon today. If we want to understand the sermon as Matthew intended us to hear it, then, we must read it within the context of his gospel. So where does the sermon occur within the Gospel of Matthew, and what does this setting mean for its interpretation?

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five great discourses that Jesus delivers in the Gospel of Matthew. After each of these discourses, Matthew introduces the phrase “when Jesus had finished saying these things” (Matt 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1), thereby indicating the end of the discourse and the beginning of a new phase in Jesus’ ministry. The other four discourses are Jesus’ discourse when sending his disciples on mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 10:1-42), Jesus’ parable discourse about the kingdom of heaven (Matt 13:1-52), Jesus’ discourse

on how his disciples should live in community with each other (Matt 18:1-35), and Jesus' discourse on the coming destruction of the temple of Jerusalem and his return at the end of the ages as the glorious Son of Man (Matt 24:1-25:46). The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1-7:27) is not an isolated discourse, then, but one of five great teachings that Jesus delivers to his disciples to prepare them for ministry. Nonetheless, the Sermon on the Mount is the most important of the five discourses, the quintessential sermon that has captured the imagination of believers. It is not by chance, then, that this is the first of Jesus' five great discourses and that it occurs at the beginning of his ministry.

The sermon comes after a long section (1:1-4:16) in which Matthew introduces Jesus to his audience so that there will be no mistake about Jesus' identity. In the Infancy Narrative (1:1-2:23), Matthew shows that Jesus is the climax of Israel's history, the son of Abraham, the son of David, the long-awaited Messiah born of the virgin through the power of God's Spirit. He is "Emmanuel," the one in whom God is present to his people, the one who will save his people from their sins. Jesus is the "king of the Jews," the one whom the Gentiles—represented by the Magi—already worship, the ruler and shepherd of God's people. He is the one who relives the history of his people by fleeing into Egypt, the Son whom God calls out of Egypt.

In the stories dealing with the preaching of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism and testing in the wilderness, Matthew indicates that Jesus is the one who has come to fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:15), a major theme of the Sermon on the Mount. At Jesus' baptism, the heavenly voice declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). Jesus is the obedient Son of God who, unlike Israel in the wilderness, does not fail when tested because he trusts in the power of God to save him (Matt 4:1-11). He is the light that shines upon those who dwell in darkness (Matt 4:16).

After this extended introduction in which Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming the in-breaking of God's rule, the kingdom of heaven,

and calling his first disciples (Matt 4:16-22). He then teaches in the synagogues of Galilee, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, curing every disease and sickness of his people. Great crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan follow him (Matt 4:23). When Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount, then, there is no doubt about the identity and authority of the one who proclaims the sermon. He preaches the Sermon on the Mount in his capacity as Israel's long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God with whom the Father is well pleased, the one who comes to fulfill all righteousness, the one who announces the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

Immediately after the sermon, which occurs in chapters 5-7, Matthew recounts a series of mighty deeds in chapters 8-9 that Jesus performs on behalf of Israel because the kingdom of heaven is making its appearance in his person. These mighty deeds show that the one who speaks with the authority of God is powerful in deed as well as in word. After Jesus has shown himself to be powerful in word (chaps. 5-7) and deed (chaps. 8-9), he sends his disciples on mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 10:5-6). The disciples are now ready for this mission because they have heard Jesus' great sermon and witnessed his mighty deeds. The literary context of the sermon, then, can be summarized in this way.

- 1:1-4:16 Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God
- 4:17-22 Jesus proclaims the kingdom and *calls his first disciples*
- 4:23-25 *Summary of Jesus' teaching, preaching, and healing*
- 5:1-7:29 Jesus is powerful in word: Sermon on the Mount
- 8:1-9:34 Jesus is powerful in deed: Ten Mighty Deeds
- 9:35 *Summary of Jesus' teaching, preaching, and healing*
- 9:36-38 Jesus has compassion on the crowds
- 10:1-42 Jesus *sends his disciples on mission*
- 11:1 *Summary of Jesus' teaching and preaching*

In light of the literary context of the sermon, I make three points. First, the manner in which Matthew begins his gospel explicitly identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. Consequently, when we come to the sermon there is no doubt about the identity of the one who speaks. Jesus delivers this sermon in his capacity as the messianic Son of God. Second, the sermon occurs shortly after Jesus' initial proclamation of the kingdom of heaven, thereby indicating that it is intimately related to his proclamation of the in-breaking kingdom. The sermon is an ethic for the kingdom of God. Apart from the kingdom, it makes little sense. Third, the sermon occurs soon after Jesus calls his first disciples, and shortly before he sends them on mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, thereby indicating that the sermon is intended for disciples. The sermon is an ethic of discipleship, then, that makes little sense apart from discipleship. Accordingly, as we read through the sermon it is important to remember *who* is delivering the sermon: Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It is important to remember *why* Jesus delivers the sermon: the kingdom of heaven is making its appearance in his ministry. Finally, it is important to remember *for whom* the sermon is intended: Jesus' disciples. Thus, Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, delivers this sermon to his disciples in light of the in-breaking kingdom of God. If we remember these three points, there will be no question about the authority or the practicality of the sermon. The sermon is authoritative because of the one who delivers it, and it is eminently practical because it is intended for disciples who live in the sphere of God's rule.

The Structure and Theme of the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus' great sermon is a rhetorically powerful piece that argues for—and summons disciples to practice—a greater righteousness. This greater righteousness is the central theme of the sermon around which all else revolves. To appreciate the rhetoric of the sermon, however, we must pay attention to its structure and organization. The manner in which I have organized my reading of the sermon is as follows:

The Introduction to the Sermon (5:3-16)

The blessings of the kingdom: the Beatitudes (5:3-12)

The nature of discipleship: the metaphors of salt and light (5:13-16)

The Body of the Sermon: Three Teachings on Righteousness (5:17-7:12)

Introduction: Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets (5:17-20)

Righteousness in doing the Mosaic Law (5:21-48)

Righteousness in practicing almsgiving, prayer, fasting (6:1-18)

Righteousness as single-minded service to God (6:19-7:11)

Conclusion: Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets (7:12)

The Conclusion to the Sermon (7:13-27)

The two ways (7:13-14)

The danger of false prophets (7:15-23)

The two builders (7:24-27)

The structure of the sermon indicates that its central theme is righteousness: conduct that accords with God's will. The righteousness that Jesus requires is a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees inasmuch as it summons disciples to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect. To be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect, disciples must be single-minded in their devotion to God. Accordingly, in his first teaching on righteousness, Jesus instructs the disciples how to observe the Law. In the second he shows them how to practice their piety, and in the third he explains what it means to be single-minded in devotion to God. Before beginning his teaching on righteousness, however, Jesus pronounces the blessings of the kingdom and reminds his disciples of their importance for the life of the world, thereby placing his demands for righteousness under the grace of the kingdom and the rubric of discipleship. Finally, he concludes the sermon by telling his disciples that they must be doers of the word and not

merely hearers of the word, lest they enter through the wide gate and travel the broad path that leads to destruction.

The Text of the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is a carefully structured text that is rhetorically powerful. In order to provide the readers of this volume with some indication of its rhetorical power, I have reproduced the text of the sermon according to the translation of the New Revised Standard Version in a way that seeks to highlight the rhetorical structure of the sermon.

The Setting of the Sermon (5:1-2)

When Jesus saw the **crowds**,
 he went up the mountain;
 and after he sat down,
 his **disciples** came to him.
Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

The Introduction to the Sermon (5:3-16)

The Blessings of the Kingdom: The Beatitudes (5:3-12)

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
 for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
 for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
 for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst **for righteousness**,
 for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,
 for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
 for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted **for righteousness' sake,**
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are **you** when people revile **you**
and persecute **you**
and utter all kinds of evil against **you** falsely
on my account.

Rejoice and be glad,
for **your** reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who
were before **you**.

The Nature of Discipleship: The Metaphors of Salt and Light
(5:13-16)

You are the **salt** of the **earth**;
but if **salt** has lost its taste,
how can its saltiness be restored?
It is no longer good for anything,
but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

You are the **light** of the **world**.
A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,
but on the lampstand,
and it gives **light** to all in the house.
In the same way, let your **light** shine before others,
so that they may see your **good works**
and give glory to your Father in heaven.

The Body of the Sermon: Three Teachings on Righteousness
(5:17-7:12)

Introduction: Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets (5:17-20)

Do not think that I have come to **abolish the law or the prophets**;
I have come **not to abolish**
but to fulfill.

For truly I tell you,

until heaven and earth pass away,
not one letter,
not one stroke of a letter,
will pass from the law

until all is accomplished.

Therefore, whoever **breaks** one of the **least** of these commandments,
and **teaches** others to do the same,
will be called **least** in the kingdom of heaven;

but whoever **does** them

and **teaches** them

will be called **great** in the kingdom of heaven.

For I tell you, **unless your righteousness exceeds** that of the
scribes and Pharisees,

you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

***The First Teaching on Righteousness: Righteousness in Doing
the Mosaic Law (5:21-48)***

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,

‘You shall not murder’; and

‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’

But I say to you that

if you are angry with a brother or sister,
you will be liable to judgment;

and if you insult a brother or sister,
you will be liable to the council;

and if you say, ‘You fool,’
you will be liable to the hell of fire.

So when you are offering your gift at the altar,

if you remember that your brother or sister has something
against you,

leave your gift there before the altar and go;

first be reconciled to your brother or sister,

and **then come** and offer your gift.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the
way to court with him,

or your accuser may hand you over to the judge,
and the judge to the guard,
and you will be thrown into prison.
Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the
last penny.

You have heard that it was said,
‘You shall not commit **adultery**.’

But I say to you that
everyone who looks at a woman with lust
has already committed **adultery** with her in his heart.

If your right eye causes you to sin,
tear it out and throw it away;
it is better for you to lose one of your members
than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

And if your right hand causes you to sin,
cut it off and throw it away;
it is better for you to lose one of your members
than for your whole body to go into hell.

It was also said,
‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of
divorce.’

But I say to you that
anyone who divorces his wife,
except on the ground of unchastity,
causes her to commit **adultery**;
and whoever marries a divorced woman commits **adultery**.

Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,
“You shall not swear falsely,
but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’

But I say to you,
Do not swear at all,
either by heaven,
for it is the throne of God,

or by the earth,
 for it is his footstool,
 or by Jerusalem,
 for it is the city of the great King.
 And **do not swear** by your head,
 for you cannot make one hair white or black.
 Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No';
 anything more than this comes from the evil one.

You have heard that it was said,
 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'
But I say to you,
 Do not resist an evildoer.
 But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek,
 turn the other also;
 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat,
 give your cloak as well;
 and if anyone forces you to go one mile,
 go also the second mile.
 Give to everyone who begs from you,
 and **do not refuse** anyone who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said,
 'You shall love your neighbor
 and hate your enemy.'
But I say to you,
 Love your enemies
 and **pray** for those who persecute you,
 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;
 for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,
 and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you,
 what reward do you have?
 Do not even the tax collectors do the same?
And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,
 what more are you doing than others?
 Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Be **perfect**, therefore,
as your heavenly Father is **perfect**.

The Second Teaching on Righteousness: Righteousness in Practicing Almsgiving, Prayer, and Fasting (5:21-48)

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them;

for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So whenever you give alms,

do not sound a trumpet before you,

as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets,
so that they may be praised by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

But when you give alms,

do not let your **left hand** know

what your **right hand** is doing,

so that your alms may be done **in secret**;

and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray,

do not be like the hypocrites;

for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at
the street corners,

so that they may be seen by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

But whenever you pray,

go into your room and shut the door

and pray to your Father who is **in secret**;

and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When you are praying,

do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do;

for they think that they will be heard because of their
many words.

Do not be like them,

for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be **your name**.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.
And **forgive us** our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And **do not bring us** to the time of trial,
but **rescue us** from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you;
but if you do not forgive others,
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

And whenever you fast,
do not look dismal, like the hypocrites,
for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that
they are fasting.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

But when you fast,
put oil on your head and wash your face,
so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your
Father who is **in secret**;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

The Third Teaching on Righteousness: Righteousness as Single-Minded Service to God (6:19–7:11)

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,
where moth and rust consume and
where thieves break in and steal;
but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
where neither moth nor rust consumes and
where thieves do not break in and steal.

For **where** your treasure is,
there your heart will be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body.
So, if your eye is **healthy**,
your whole body will be **full of light**;
but if your eye is **unhealthy**,
your whole body will be **full of darkness**.
If then the light in you is **darkness**,
how great is the **darkness**!

No one can serve two masters;
for a slave will either hate **the one**
and love **the other**,
or be devoted to **the one**
and despise **the other**.
You cannot serve **God**
and **wealth**.

Therefore I tell you, **do not worry** about your life,
what you will **eat** or
what you will **drink**, or
about your body,
what you will **wear**.

Is not life more than food,
and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds of the air;
they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns,
and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not of more value than they?

And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span
of life?

And why do you worry about clothing?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow;
they neither toil nor spin,
yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not
clothed like one of these.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field,
which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven,
will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Therefore **do not worry**, saying,

‘What will we **eat**?’ or

‘What will we **drink**?’ or

‘What will we **wear**?’

For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things;
and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all
these things.

**But strive first for the kingdom of God and his
righteousness,**

and all these things will be given to you as well.

So **do not worry** about tomorrow,

for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.

Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Do not judge,

so that you may not be **judged**.

For with the judgment you make

you will be **judged**,

and the **measure** you give

will be the **measure** you get.

Why do you see the **speck** in your neighbor’s **eye**,

but do not notice the **log** in your own **eye**?

Or how can you say to your neighbor,

‘Let me take the **speck** out of your **eye**’

while the **log** is in your own **eye**?

You hypocrite,

first take the **log** out of your own **eye**,

and then you will see clearly to take the **speck** out of your
neighbor’s **eye**.

Do not give what is holy to dogs;

and do not throw your pearls before swine,

or they will trample them under foot

and turn and maul you.

Ask,

and it will be given you;

search,

and you will find;

knock,

and the door will be opened for you.

For everyone who **asks**

receives,

and everyone who **searches**

finds,

and for everyone who **knocks,**

the door will be opened.

Is there anyone among you who,

if your child asks for bread,

will give a stone?

Or if the child asks for a fish,

will give a snake?

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children,

how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Conclusion: Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets (7:12)

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you;

for this is the law and the prophets.

Conclusion to the Sermon (7:13-27)

The Two Ways (7:13-14)

Enter through the narrow gate;

for the gate is wide

and **the road** is easy that leads to destruction,

and there are **many** who take it.

For the gate is narrow

and **the road** is hard that leads to life,

and there are **few** who find it.

The Danger of False Prophets (7:15-23)

Beware of false prophets,

who come to you in **sheep's clothing**

but inwardly are **ravenous wolves**.

You will know them by their **fruits**.

Are grapes gathered from thorns,

or figs from thistles?

In the same way, every **good tree** bears **good fruit**,

but the **bad tree** bears **bad fruit**.

A **good tree** cannot bear **bad fruit**,

nor can a **bad tree** bear **good fruit**.

Every **tree** that does not bear **good fruit** is cut down and
thrown into the fire.

Thus you will know them by their **fruits**.

The Two Builders (7:24-27)

Not everyone who says to me, '**Lord, Lord,**' will enter the kingdom of heaven,

but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

On that day many will say to me, '**Lord, Lord,**

did we not prophesy in your name,

and cast out demons in your name,

and do many deeds of power in your name?'

I will declare to them,

'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

Everyone then who **hears** these words of mine and **acts on them**
will be like a **wise man**

who **built his house on rock**.

The rain fell,

the floods came,

and the winds blew and beat on that house,

but it did not fall, because it had been **founded on rock**.

And everyone who **hears** these words of mine and **does not act on them**

will be like a **foolish man**

who **built his house on sand**.

The rain fell,
and the floods came,
and the winds blew and beat against that house,
and it fell—and great was its fall!

The Reaction of the Crowds to the Sermon (7:28-29)

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things,
the crowds were **astounded** at his teaching,
for he taught them **as one having authority**,
and not as their scribes.

Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 103–97.
2. *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount with Seventeen Related Sermons*, trans. Denis J. Kavanaugh, OSA, The Fathers of the Church 11 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951).

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The Blessings of the Kingdom and the Nature of Discipleship

The Christian moral life is not a matter of observing rules and regulations, although it often appears that way. It is a life lived in response to God's grace; it is a life made possible by the new life believers have received from God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus the nature of Christian obedience—what Paul calls the obedience of faith—is rooted in the gift of salvation. Believers strive to live in a particular way because of the gift of salvation that God has given them in Christ.

Whereas the Pauline letters express this gift in terms of the Spirit, the Synoptic Gospels focus on the salvation the kingdom of God has inaugurated. The kingdom that Jesus proclaimed, and into which he entered by his saving death and life-giving resurrection, opens a new sphere where believers can live in a new way. No longer under the power and rule of Satan, those who embrace the kingdom have entered the realm of God's rule where all things are possible. Having turned from the rule of the one who brings them to sin and death, they have embraced a new way of life made possible by the gift of the kingdom, which is nothing less than God's rule over their lives. This is why Jesus' Sermon on the Mount begins with a series of blessings that assure his disciples of the final beatitude that will be theirs when the kingdom is revealed in all of its power. This is why

it is only after he proclaims the salvation the kingdom brings that Jesus presents the demands of the new life that define the behavior of those who embrace God's rule over their lives. Accordingly, while the sermon is filled with ethical demands, it begins with the blessings of the kingdom (the beatitudes) that reveal the new life Jesus' disciples have begun to enjoy, and will enjoy in its fullness at the end of the ages. It is from this perspective of salvation that I consider the preamble to the sermon: the beatitudes and the metaphors of salt and light (5:3-16). Before doing so, however, it is important to say something about the audience of the Sermon on the Mount.

The Disciples and the Crowds (5:1-2)

Matthew situates the Sermon on the Mount at the start of Jesus' ministry, shortly after he begins his preaching about the kingdom of heaven and calls his first disciples (Matt 4:17-22). The immediate upshot of Jesus' ministry is that people come to him from all the surrounding regions in order to be healed (Matt 4:23-25). Seeing the great crowds that approach him, Jesus goes up a mountain where he sits; his disciples come to him, and he teaches them in the hearing of the crowds. The mountain, then, functions like a pulpit from which Jesus instructs his disciples in the presence of the large crowds that have followed him.

Although the precise location and meaning of the mountain are not specified, it functions as a place of revelation from which Jesus teaches in his capacity as the Son of God with an authority that amazes the crowds. This setting continues to play an important role in the rest of the gospel. For example, Jesus ascends the mountain and is seated when large crowds come to him to be healed (Matt 15:29-31); he ascends a very high mountain where he is transfigured before Peter, James, and John (Matt 17:1-8); and after his resurrection he summons his disciples to the mountain in Galilee where he commissions them to preach the gospel to the whole world (Matt 28:16-20).

But who is Jesus teaching? To be sure, the crowds as well as his disciples hear this sermon. The setting of the sermon, however,

suggests that the disciples rather than the crowds are Jesus' immediate audience, the inner circle to whom he speaks, whereas the crowds form the outer circle of his audience. The crowds will hear the sermon, but Jesus' primary aim is to teach his disciples to whom he will give a share in his authority and send on mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 10:6). Whereas the crowds represent Israel, the disciples are the first fruits of the renewal and restoration of Israel. The disciples have already heard Jesus' initial preaching about the in-breaking kingdom and repented. They have heard his proclamation of the dawning rule of God and left everything to follow him. In addressing his teaching to the disciples, Jesus announces the blessings of the kingdom that will be theirs and describes the higher conduct—the greater righteousness—that must characterize their lives. The crowds will hear this teaching, and many will be attracted to it. For some it will lead to a moment of conversion and renewal; for others it will be too harsh, and they will no longer follow the one who has healed their ills. But for Jesus' disciples, the sermon will be a decisive moment in their lives, defining what it means to be a disciple, describing how to live as a disciple, promising the disciples the beatitude that will be theirs.

The setting of the Sermon on the Mount, then, separates the disciples from the crowds, the Christian from the world, the believer from the unbeliever. Whereas the world hears the sermon with curiosity, interest, admiration, and even approval, it sees no need to follow the one who teaches these words. It examines his words, discusses his teaching, debates what he says, agreeing with some things and disregarding others, but it sees no need to obey his precepts—at least not all of them. The world is free to pick, to choose, and to decide what it will accept and reject. But this is not so for Jesus' disciples; this is not so for those who hear these words in faith. For the disciples and those who will hear these words with a pure heart, they are the teaching of the one who proclaims and inaugurates the kingdom of heaven. They are the words of the Messiah, the Son of God. They are not words to be dissected and analyzed, but words to be lived and obeyed. This is

why Jesus directs his sermon to his disciples; for only those who believe in the dawning of the kingdom and the one who proclaims it can understand the sermon from the point of view of the one who teaches it. Only they can grasp its meaning, not because they possess superior insight or intelligence, but because they have been chosen and elected to hear, to obey, and to live its words.

The Disciples' Assurance of Beatitude (5:3-12)

Jesus begins his teaching with a series of statements that pronounce a blessing upon certain people. But who are they? And what is the nature of this blessing? Are these statements a series of ethical maxims that people must obey in order to enter the kingdom of heaven? Or are they a series of statements that assure those who belong to the kingdom of the final beatitude that will be theirs when the kingdom appears in all its power and glory? The position I will develop can be summarized in this way: *the ethical content of the beatitudes must be interpreted in light of the final beatitude that Jesus promises his disciples*. Instead of viewing the beatitudes as a set of rules and regulations, then, I will present them as a description of the beatitude that Jesus promises disciples who have embraced the kingdom of heaven, the rule of God over their lives. In affirming this, I am not denying or downplaying the ethical content of the beatitudes, but seeking the proper vantage point from which to describe that content so that the demands of the sermon will be grounded in the salvation the kingdom brings.

Although we are accustomed to speak of the eight beatitudes, there are in fact nine, the first eight expressed in the third person plural ("blessed are *the* . . ."), and the ninth in the second person plural ("blessed are *you*"), thereby providing a smooth transition to the metaphors of salt and light, which are also expressed in the second person plural ("*you* are the salt/light of the earth"). But in addition to providing a transition to the metaphors of salt and light, the use of the second person plural reveals that the first eight beatitudes are, in fact, addressed to the disciples. Therefore, while the first eight beatitudes appear to be framed as general maxims,

the ninth beatitude shows that they are addressed to the disciples sitting before Jesus on the mountain.

Each of the beatitudes has two parts. In the first part, Jesus pronounces a blessing on certain people ("blessed are the poor in spirit"). In the second, he provides the reason for this blessing ("because theirs is the kingdom of God"). Those over whom Jesus pronounces the blessing are not blessed simply because of some ethical quality they have attained, however, but because of the final or eschatological blessing that God will bring about in their lives. Their blessedness or happiness, then, is not so much the result of their own effort as it is the result of the gift of final salvation that God brings with the kingdom.

The way in which the first eight beatitudes are set off from the ninth beatitude suggests that the first eight can be divided into two parts. Thus, whereas the eschatological blessing of the first and the eighth beatitude is *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*, the subjects of the fourth and the eighth beatitudes are those who hunger and thirst for *righteousness* and are persecuted for their *righteousness*, respectively. Accordingly, references to the kingdom of heaven (the central content of Jesus' preaching) set the limits for the first eight beatitudes, and references to righteousness (the theme of the sermon) divide the first eight beatitudes into two groups of four. The very structure of the beatitudes, then, points to its central blessing and ethical content: the kingdom of heaven and the righteousness appropriate to it.

Blessed are the poor in spirit
 for theirs is kingdom of heaven
Blessed are those who mourn
 for they will be comforted
Blessed are the meek
 for they will inherit the earth
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst **for**
 righteousness
 for they will be satisfied

Blessed are the merciful
 for they will receive mercy
 Blessed are the pure in heart
 for they will see God
 Blessed are the peacemakers
 for they will be called children of God
 Blessed are those who are persecuted **for**
righteousness' sake
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Although Jesus pronounces eight beatitudes, he does not address eight categories of people. The beatitudes describe those who belong to the kingdom and, as we shall see, they describe the one who proclaims the sermon. Accordingly, the poor in spirit are those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is they who will be comforted, inherit the earth, and be satisfied when they enter the fullness of the kingdom. Although Jesus describes those who are blessed and assures them of beatitude in different ways, he is describing all who have embraced the kingdom and wait for its final manifestation.

Blessed are the poor in spirit (5:3). The background to this beatitude, and indeed to all of the beatitudes, is the prophecy of Isaiah 61 that Jesus fulfills through his ministry (Luke 4:16-21).

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me **to bring good news to the oppressed**, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; **to comfort all who mourn**; to provide for **those who mourn in Zion**—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called **oaks of righteousness**, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. (Isa 61:1-3)

The good news that Jesus brings to the poor in spirit is that the kingdom of heaven is making its appearance, and when it arrives

there will be a reversal of fortunes whereby many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. For the poor and oppressed who find themselves on the margins of society, ignored and overlooked by the powerful, this is good news. But who are these poor whom Jesus has in view? They are Jesus' disciples who have believed in his gospel of the kingdom and left everything to follow him. They are the disciples sitting before him and listening to his teaching. They are the men and women of every age who embrace the kingdom of heaven in order to follow Christ as his disciples.

But why does Jesus describe them as "poor in spirit"? Why not simply call them "the poor"? This added description, over which interpreters have puzzled, does not mean that Jesus has spiritualized the meaning of poverty. After all, the disciples who have responded to his call are truly poor; they have left family and livelihood to follow him. This is why Peter says that he and the other disciples have left everything to follow Jesus (Matt 19:27). But poverty of itself is not enough; for even the poor can be mean-spirited. By describing his disciples as poor *in spirit*, Jesus points to their relationship with God. Their poverty has touched their inmost being so that they now depend entirely upon God. Poor and oppressed, having left all to follow Christ, they find themselves utterly dependent upon him, and so upon God. Their poverty is a poverty that touches the deepest core of their being—it touches their spirit—making it possible for them to enjoy a new relationship with God. Because they are poor in respect to their inmost being, they depend upon God in a way they could not and did not before. Is such poverty of spirit possible for those who are rich and affluent? Yes, it is possible, but it is difficult (Matt 19:23-24). Although it is difficult, however, it is not impossible since all things are possible for God (Matt 19:26). Like the poor of Israel who looked to God as their vindicator because they had no one else upon whom to depend, the poor in spirit rely upon God alone.

And so the kingdom of heaven is theirs. What a remarkable statement, so unexpected, so contrary to our way of viewing the world. The kingdom of heaven belongs to disciples who have surrendered everything and now depend solely upon God. This

kingdom is the central content of Jesus' teaching (Matt 4:17). Everything he does and says refers to the in-breaking kingdom of heaven that is making its appearance in his ministry. This kingdom, however, is not a geographical place; it is not even heaven. It is the in-breaking rule of God over the lives of those who submit to God's rule. It is God's rule over a creation gone astray, which finds itself under the power and sway of Satan. This is what Jesus comes to announce: the kingdom is making its appearance in his life and ministry, and those who wish to enter it must turn from an old way of life with which they are comfortable and familiar to a new way of life in order to enter the new creation defined by God's rule. Such a change requires faith on the part of disciples—faith that Jesus is truly the herald of the kingdom, faith that God is bringing about a new creation in and through Jesus. The kingdom already belongs to the poor in spirit inasmuch as they have submitted to God's rule by following Christ. Although the kingdom will not be present in all of its power and glory until the Son of Man returns at the end of the ages, the poor in spirit experience something of its power even now. Thus Jesus' disciples live between the ages, between what has already happened and what has yet to occur.

Blessed are those who mourn (5:4). At first it may seem strange to think of Jesus' disciples as mourning. After all, when the Pharisees ask him why his disciples do not fast, Jesus replies that the wedding guests, his disciples, *cannot mourn* so long as he, the bridegroom, is with them (Matt 9:15). What Jesus' disciples do mourn, however, is the continuing power of sin and death in the world. Like those who mourned in Zion because of the humiliation and destruction that Jerusalem endured at the time of the Exile, the disciples mourn that they are in exile so long as the old age prevents the new age from breaking in. They do not mourn for personal loss and injury, as great as such injury and loss may be. They mourn for what has happened to God's people. And yes, as sinful human beings, they mourn for the disgrace that has come upon God's name because of their sins. Those who mourn,

however, do so in hope of the final appearance of the kingdom that will fulfill the promises God has made to his people.

Those who think of salvation in merely personal terms (the salvation of *my* soul) do not understand the full meaning of this beatitude, which has in view the wider community of believers. Thus, whereas those in Zion wept for the national tragedy that befell Israel at the time of the Babylonian captivity, contemporary disciples mourn for the church that still struggles in the old age of sin and death as it waits to enter into the fullness of the new age. They mourn for the suffering and persecution that afflict the church of every age; they mourn because their sins have prevented the church from being a light to all nations.

Jesus promises that his disciples *will be comforted*. The future passive tense points to something God will do for those who mourn. While others may comfort and console the disciples, only God will be able to wipe away every tear. Those who mourn, then, are not blessed because of something they have done but because of what God will do for them when the kingdom of heaven appears in all its glory. On that day God will comfort them by destroying the enemy of all that is good. But until that day disciples will mourn, not because they are saddened by personal loss, but because they intensely long for the salvation that only the kingdom of heaven can bring: a new and restored Jerusalem in which every tear will be wiped away and God's people will live in perfect obedience to God's will.

Blessed are the meek (5:5). Jesus now describes his disciples in a way that echoes Psalm 37, which promises that the meek will inherit the land. The Psalm begins with an exhortation to the righteous “not to fret because of the wicked” or “be envious of wrongdoers,” for they will quickly fade “like the grass, and wither like the green herb” (vv. 1-2). Instead, the just are to “trust in the LORD, and do good” so that they “will live in the land, and enjoy security” (v. 3). Then, on four occasions, the Psalmist employs the refrain that Jesus uses in this beatitude.

But the meek *shall inherit the land*,
 And delight themselves in abundant prosperity.
 (v. 11)

For those blessed by the LORD *shall inherit the land*,
 but those cursed by him shall be cut off. (v. 22)

The righteous *shall inherit the land*,
 and live in it forever. (v. 29)

Wait for the LORD, and keep to his way,
 and he will exalt you *to inherit the land*;
 you will look on the destruction of the wicked.
 (v. 34)

At the conclusion of the Psalm, the Psalmist says, “The salvation of the *righteous* is from the LORD; . . . he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them, *because they take refuge in him*” (vv. 39-40).

For the Psalmist the meek are the righteous. Like the poor in spirit, they are the ones who take refuge in the Lord. No matter how important they may be, they are not impressed by their own importance. And so they are humble; they are gentle; they are as concerned for the needs of others as they are for their own needs. This is why, when God rises up in judgment, he saves the meek, the oppressed of the earth (Ps 76:9). This is why God lifts up the meek, casts down the wicked (Ps 147:6), and exalts the meek with salvation (Ps 149:4). This is why Moses is described as meek, “more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Num 12:3), for he trusted in God rather than in himself.

The model of meekness is Jesus who describes himself as meek and humble of heart (Matt 11:29). He does not come as a powerful warrior-king to establish his kingdom by power and force but as the meek and humble king whom Zechariah foretold: “mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Matt 21:5, quoting Zech 9:9). Jesus is meek because he knows that it is the Lord who “overthrows the thrones of rulers, and enthrones the *meek* or the lowly in their place” (Sir 10:14; slightly modified

NRSV). Although this will be the hardest lesson for Jesus' disciples to learn—one they will consistently fail to grasp—Jesus addresses them as the meek because God is their refuge.

The land they will inherit, however, is not simply the land that the rich and powerful already occupy. If that were the case, Jesus would be just another revolutionary promising the poor their share of the land. The land his disciples will inherit is the earth that will be changed and transformed by the kingdom of God—the new heaven and the new earth that will appear at the resurrection of the dead. This is why Jesus tells his disciples that “at *the renewal of all things*, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28).

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6). With this beatitude Jesus introduces the theme of his sermon: the righteousness the kingdom of heaven requires. Although the concept of “righteousness” is strange to most contemporary believers, it plays a central role in Scripture where it can refer to God's own righteousness as well as to the righteousness of those who live in accordance with God's will. Understood in reference to God, it refers to God's own righteousness; that is, to God's uprightness, God's faithfulness to the covenant, God's utter reliability because God always acts with integrity, thereby assuring a just judgment. When predicated of human beings, righteousness refers to a quality and relationship with God that people enjoy when they do the righteousness that accords with God's will as revealed in the Mosaic Law: such people are righteous. The righteous, then, are those who stand in a right relationship to God because they have done God's will; they have done righteousness. God will declare such people “righteous” on the last day.

Whereas the Old Testament understands righteousness in terms of Torah observance, Paul defines it in terms of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, he presents righteousness as the saving gift God bestows on those who believe in Christ. The manner in which Jesus speaks of righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount, however, is

closer to the Old Testament notion of righteousness: *righteousness is conduct that accords with God's will*. Viewed from this perspective, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who seek to do God's will with all their mind, with all their heart, and with all their strength. There is nothing more important for them than to do God's will by practicing righteousness. As Jesus looks at his disciples, he knows they hunger and thirst *to do* this righteousness, even though they do not yet comprehend its full demands.

Before teaching his disciples what it means to be righteous, Jesus exemplifies righteousness in his own life by submitting to John's baptism of repentance. Jesus is the sinless Son of God, but he stands before John and asks to be baptized. Aware that Jesus is the mightier one for whom he is preparing the way, John tries to prevent him from doing so. But Jesus responds, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). By submitting to John's baptism, Jesus shows that he is the one who comes to do all righteousness; he comes to do and fulfill the law and the prophets. Before he teaches his disciples how to live righteously in a way that is pleasing to God, then, Jesus fulfills all righteousness by doing what God requires.

Jesus promises that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness *will be* satisfied. In saying this, he indicates that righteousness is an eschatological blessing that only God can bring to fulfillment. Although disciples hunger and thirst to do God's will, only God can fulfill their longing. Only God can empower them to live in a way pleasing to God. Accordingly, the fullness of a life of righteousness will only be achieved when the kingdom comes in all of its glory. In the time before the coming of the kingdom, disciples will continue to hunger and thirst to live in a way pleasing to God. They will long to live the kind of righteousness that Jesus describes in this sermon.

Blessed are the merciful (5:7). With this beatitude, Jesus invokes the law of reciprocity: disciples will receive mercy to the extent they extend mercy to others. Jesus will reinforce this principle of reciprocity when he teaches his disciples to pray by promising

them that if they forgive others their heavenly Father will forgive them, and by warning them that if they do not forgive others neither will their heavenly Father forgive them (Matt 6:14-15). He will then illustrate this principle through the story of a servant who, after having been forgiven an enormous debt, refuses to forgive the small debt of a fellow servant, leading his master to say: "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" (Matt 18:33). Disciples, then, ought to extend mercy to others because they have already experienced something of God's mercy through Jesus who calls them to follow him in the way of discipleship.

Mercy is one of the distinguishing qualities of God. In revealing himself to Moses, for example, God proclaims, "The LORD, the LORD, a God *merciful and gracious*, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod 34:6). The Psalmist repeatedly echoes this description of God: "But you, O Lord, are a God *merciful and gracious*, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ps 86:15; see also Pss 103:8; 111:4; 145:8). In pronouncing this beatitude Jesus has in view God's own mercy, which his disciples have already experienced in his proclamation of the kingdom. Those who are merciful are those who know that God is merciful, and so they are merciful to others.

Jesus exemplifies the beatitude he pronounces. When the Pharisees complain that he eats with tax collectors and sinners, and when they fault his disciples for violating the Sabbath, he cites the prophet Hosea: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy not sacrifice'" (Matt 9:13; 12:7, quoting Hos 6:6), and whenever those in need call upon him for mercy (Matt 9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31), he heals their ills. Jesus comes to Israel as the merciful Messiah who fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Matt 8:17, quoting Isa 53:4). The most important matters of the law for the merciful Messiah are justice, mercy, and faith (Matt 23:23). Therefore, the mercy that people extend or fail to extend to others will be the criterion by which the Messiah will separate the sheep from the goats when he returns as the glorious Son of Man to judge the nations (Matt 25:31-46).

While the world views mercy in terms of weakness and emotion, Jesus understands it in light of the mercy that God extends to sinners and those in need. Such mercy is not an emotion; it is a quality of God. To extend mercy to others is to imitate God. This is why Jesus commands his disciples, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

Blessed are the pure in heart (5:8). Nothing is more important than standing in the presence of God. What disciples long for is that moment when they will see God. This is why the Psalmist writes, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?” (Ps 42:2). But who can stand in the presence of the all holy God without being consumed by the divine fire? Who can see God and live? Those pilgrims who journeyed to the temple of Jerusalem were deeply aware of their unworthiness to stand in God’s presence, and so the Psalmist asks, “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?” (Ps 24:3). In response, he replies, “Those who have clean hands and *pure hearts*, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully” (Ps 24:4). Echoing the Psalmist, Jesus promises his disciples a still greater blessing. Whereas the Psalmist sought to stand in God’s presence in the temple, Jesus promises that his disciples will *see* God when they enter the fullness of the kingdom of heaven.

But who can stand in the presence of God and live? Jesus can because he is the very Son of God, the one whom the Father sent into the world. He is the one who stood in the presence of the Father. He is the one who can say, “no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt 11:27). He is the one who calls God his Father, and so he can promise the pure in heart that they will see God.

The pure in heart are single-minded in their devotion to God. They are not divided or conflicted in their allegiance to God, trying to please both God and human beings. They have only one goal and purpose—to please God, and so their heart is pure because of its undivided allegiance to God. Since their entire

being is focused on God in a way that is perfect and undivided, Jesus promises they will see God.

Jesus exemplifies the beatitude by his perfect allegiance to God. When John tries to dissuade him from being baptized, he insists upon doing all righteousness (Matt 3:15). When the devil tempts Jesus to use his messianic power to save himself, Jesus trusts in God's power to rescue him (Matt 4:1-10). Rather than insisting on his own will in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus submits to God's will (Matt 26:39, 42); and when challenged to come down from the cross and save himself, he trusts in the power of God to save him (Matt 27:39-44). Because he is single-minded in his devotion to God, Jesus is pure in heart, perfect in his allegiance to God.

Blessed are the peacemakers (5:9). Since Jesus' disciples have already experienced the peace and reconciliation that the kingdom of God brings in the person of Jesus, they work to reconcile those who are estranged from each other. This is why, when he sends his disciples on mission, Jesus instructs them to greet whatever house they enter with an announcement of the peace the kingdom brings (Matt 10:12-13). In announcing the peace of the kingdom, Jesus' disciples anticipate the peace and reconciliation that Jesus brings "through the blood of his cross" (Col 1:20) whereby Christ created "in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace" (Eph 2:17). Those who make peace by reconciling others imitate the Son of God, and so they will be called God's sons and daughters when the kingdom arrives in power and glory.

Inasmuch as he is Israel's Messiah, Jesus is the "Prince of Peace" of whom Isaiah spoke (Isa 9:6), the one in whose days righteousness flourishes and peace abounds (Ps 72:7). The Book of the prophet Isaiah says that the effect of this righteousness will be peace (Isa 32:17), and the prophet exclaims, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace" (Isa 52:7). Jesus' disciples are messengers of peace, and so it is not surprising that Paul describes the gospel as "the gospel of peace" (Eph 6:15) and God as "the God of peace" (Rom 15:33; Phil 4:9).

Making peace requires disciples to live the law in a way that produces righteousness, which James calls the harvest of peace (Jas 3:18). As peacemakers, the disciples must avoid anger, forsake retaliation, and love their enemies (Matt 5:21-26, 38-48). As the nucleus of the new community Jesus is establishing, they must be reconciled to each other and reconcile those who have gone astray (Matt 18:10-20).

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (5:10). This beatitude echoes the fourth beatitude, which Jesus addressed to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and it repeats the blessing of the first beatitude: the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Whereas the ninth beatitude will explicitly address the disciples ("Blessed are *you* . . .") and foretell the persecution they *will* suffer, this beatitude implies that Jesus' disciples have already experienced persecution because they have embraced the righteousness he teaches. True disciples, then, are persecuted for doing the very righteousness for which they hunger and thirst. Having been chosen and elected by Jesus, and having experienced something of the righteousness of the kingdom in the person of Jesus, they hunger and thirst to live as he lives, and the result of such a life is persecution. But the persecution of the world is not the final word, nor is it the final judgment over Jesus' disciples. The final word belongs to God. This is why Jesus promises that the kingdom belongs to those who are being persecuted for living according to its righteousness.

Once more, Jesus is the model of the beatitude he proclaims. Throughout his life and ministry, he exemplifies the righteousness of God's kingdom by living in conformity with God's will. The outcome of this life, however, is persecution that culminates in death on the cross. But it will be God and not the world that will have the final word. The persecuted Messiah—the one who suffers because he lives a righteous life—will enter the fullness of the kingdom when God raises him from the dead.

Before considering the ninth beatitude, I would like to make two points. First, although the beatitudes speak of different people

and pronounce varied eschatological blessings, they find their point of unity in the one who proclaims them: Jesus the Messiah who exemplifies what he proclaims in his life. Second, although the beatitudes speak of different people and blessings, these people and blessings are essentially the same. The poor in spirit are those who mourn. They are the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. They are the merciful, the pure of heart. They are the peacemakers, those persecuted because they live righteously. Therefore the kingdom belongs to them, and because it does they will be comforted, inherit the earth, be satisfied, be shown mercy, see God, and be called sons and daughters of God. In a word, Jesus exemplifies as well as describes the perfect disciple.

Blessed are you when people revile you (5:11-12). On first hearing, this beatitude seems out of place. On the one hand, it is different in form from the first eight beatitudes. On the other, it appears to repeat what has already been said in the previous beatitude. The different form of the beatitude (“blessed are *you* . . . , *rejoice and be glad* . . . , *for in the same way* . . .), however, serves several purposes. First, the use of the second person plural (*you*) indicates that Jesus explicitly directs this beatitude to his disciples, thereby indicating that the other beatitudes were addressed to them as well. Second, by emphasizing that the disciples will be reviled, persecuted, and spoken against falsely *on his account*, Jesus highlights the intimate relationship that exists between him and his disciples: what they suffer for the gospel they suffer for him; and what they suffer for him they suffer for the gospel. Third, the beatitude places the disciples within Israel’s prophetic tradition that Jesus is presently fulfilling by proclaiming the in-breaking kingdom of heaven. The suffering of the disciples is neither unique nor isolated since Israel’s prophets suffered similar revilement. And so, just as the prophets endured persecution because they proclaimed God’s righteous demands, Jesus’ disciples will suffer persecution for proclaiming the righteousness of the kingdom.

Suffering is not to be sought for its own sake. Of itself, it is not a positive value. Rather than encourage his disciples to

seek suffering. Jesus explains the meaning of the suffering they will endure because they are his disciples. In doing so, he relates their suffering to the prophetic tradition of Israel, thereby giving it meaning and significance within the wider scope of salvation history. Such suffering is transformative because it is related to God's plan. Paul, for example, understood that by suffering for the gospel he was being conformed to the crucified Christ. Jesus' disciples must learn something similar: the persecutions they will endure are the birth pangs of the new age.

The Disciples and the World (5:13-16)

Although the world will revile and persecute the disciples for the gospel they bring, it persecutes them at its own peril; for the disciples are to the world what salt is to everyday life. The disciples are the salt of the earth inasmuch as the gospel they bring preserves the world from evil. The disciples are the salt of the earth inasmuch as the gospel they proclaim is the seasoning that gives the world its deepest meaning. The disciples are the salt of the earth inasmuch as the gospel of the kingdom is the proclamation of the new covenant, the salt of the covenant whereby humanity is reconciled to God. But if disciples cease to function as disciples, if they do not take up their cross and follow Jesus, if they proclaim the gospel in a way that accommodates it to the world rather than the world to the gospel, the disciples will no longer be the salt of the earth. If the gospel they preach is no longer a gospel about Christ, the disciples will no longer be the salt of the earth. Having forfeited what it means to be a disciple by accommodating themselves to the world, they will become like salt that has lost its ability to season and preserve. Having lost their purpose for being disciples, they will be thrown out and trampled underfoot by the very world they tried to appease by compromising the gospel.

Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12), and through the proclamation of the kingdom he brings light to those sitting in the shadow of death (Matt 4:12-16). But now, in one of the boldest statements of the gospel, he tells his disciples that they (the very

ones whom the world will hate, despise, and persecute) are the light of the world. They are not the light of the world because of their merits and deeds but because of Jesus, the Servant of God who brings the light of salvation so that God's salvation may reach to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6). So long as disciples do what Jesus has done, therefore, they will be the light of the world, freeing the world from the darkness of sin and death.

Jesus compares his disciples to a city built on a hill. Such a city cannot be hidden. Indeed, the purpose of building it on a hill is to insure that it will be seen by others. Jesus' disciples are to be what Jerusalem was intended to be: a city that manifests the everlasting light of God to the world (Isa 60:3, 19-20). Just as the purpose of a lamp is to dispel the darkness, the purpose of being a disciple is to bring light to those in darkness. Therefore, disciples must be single-minded in their devotion to God so that they will be filled with light (Matt 6:22). Filled with the light and courage that come from the gospel, they are to proclaim in the light what they have heard in the darkness. They are to announce from the rooftop what they have heard whispered (Matt 10:27). Since the kingdom has made its appearance in Jesus' ministry, the purpose of the disciples is to proclaim what they have heard.

Inasmuch as what the disciples proclaim is the gospel, they must manifest their good works to others. Therefore, disciples are not to hide their good works but to do them in a way that others will see them. On first hearing this appears to contradict what Jesus will say when he exhorts his disciples *not* to perform their acts of piety for others to see (Matt 6:1). But whereas in that passage Jesus will criticize those who do their acts of piety to win the praise of others, here Jesus encourages his disciples to do their good works so that others will not praise them but praise their heavenly Father. To be the light of the world means to praise God by bringing the light of salvation to those in darkness.

Who are the disciples and what can they expect? On the one hand they stand in contrast to the crowds that follow Jesus. Jesus has chosen and elected the disciples from the crowds to be the nucleus of a renewed people. They stand in contrast to the world

that dwells in darkness ever ready to revile and persecute them for the gospel they bring, even though it is the gospel that gives meaning to the world and dispels the darkness. On the other hand, the disciples stand in a unique relationship to Jesus who promises them the kingdom because they have entrusted themselves to him and believed in his proclamation of the kingdom. Having described who his disciples are and what they can expect, Jesus is now ready to provide them with a teaching that will allow them to live as his disciples in the world. He will teach them how to live in a way that corresponds to the fullest meaning of God's law.