

# The Sermon on the Mount

## IS IT FOR THE CHURCH TODAY?

Is the Sermon on the Mount for Church Age believers? The answer to this question is both “YES” *and* “NO”!

## IS THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT FOR CHURCH AGE BELIEVERS? YES!!!!

1) It is profitable for us.

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). All Scripture, including Matthew 5-7, is profitable for the believer! We would not dare say that Deuteronomy is not of profit for believers today. We would not dare say that the Psalms or Proverbs are not profitable for believers today. Likewise, how could we ever say that the Sermon on the Mount is not profitable for us? God has included it in His Word, and everything in the Bible is of immense value to us! Thank God for it!

2) It is to be preached.

“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Timothy 2:4). “For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). All the Word is to be preached, including the Sermon on the Mount. Dispensationalists have been known for expository preaching of God’s Word, preaching through books of the Bible verse by verse.<sup>1</sup> When they preach through Matthew they do not skip chapters five through seven! All of God’s Word is important. Man should live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4).

3) It is precious and valuable.

The Sermon on the Mount contains priceless spiritual gems which ought to be precious to the heart of every believer. There is rich spiritual application in the Beatitudes (5:1-12), in the model prayer (6:9-15), in the passage on needless anxiety (6:25-34), and in the parable of the two builders (7:24-27). What true Bible lover can deny the preciousness of verses such as the following:

- ! “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (5:16).
- ! “Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him” (6:8).
- ! “But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (6:20-21).
- ! “No man can serve two masters” (6:24).
- ! “Behold the fowls of the air....consider the lilies....be not anxious....seek ye first...” (6:26- 33).
- ! “Be therefore not anxious about tomorrow” (6:34).

We need to beware of the ultradispensational approach which says that only the Prison Epistles are of any real value for us

today. True dispensationalists have been known for their love of the entire Bible. They have long recognized the rich spiritual value found in the Sermon on the Mount. The original *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) stated that the Sermon on the Mount “clearly has a beautiful moral application to the Christian” (p.1000). An early dispensationalist, Arno Gaebelein, devoted two pages in refuting the teaching of those who refuse to consider the Sermon as having any reference to Christian believers at all “as if there is no application to be made in this direction and the believer could afford to pass them by entirely and not be concerned about it” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, pages 109-111). He argues strongly that Christians may rightly find rich application from the Sermon. Concerning the Beatitudes, Gaebelein says, “The blessings in themselves are most wonderful in their scope and inexhaustible in their meaning” (p. 112). John Walvoord said that Christian believers should not push aside the Sermon as though it were unimportant: “The Sermon on the Mount is clearly intended to be a definitive statement of Christ’s teaching and should not be pushed aside lightly by unnecessary stricture which would relegate it to unimportant truth” (*Matthew—Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 45). The Sermon on the Mount contains truths which are precious and valuable and of extreme importance to every child of God. May we never neglect this portion or any portion of God’s Word.

4) It contains principles which are for all saints of all times.

There are some things that are true for all saints, regardless of when they live on earth. Here are some examples:

- # Believers of all dispensations are to recognize their own spiritual bankruptcy (5:3).
- # Believers of all dispensations are to rejoice in spite of adverse circumstances (5:10-12).
- # Believers of all dispensations are to abound in good works (5:16).
- # Believers of all dispensations struggle with sexual lust (5:28).

- # Believers of all dispensations need to pray in secret (6:6).
- # Believers of all dispensations need to sanctify God’s holy Name (6:9).
- # Believers of all dispensations need to pray, “Thy will be done” (6:10).
- # Believers of all dispensations need to lay up treasures in heaven (6:20).
- # Believers of all dispensations struggle with the sin of worry (6:25-34).
- # Believers of all dispensations need to put God first (6:33).
- # Believers of all dispensations need to build their lives upon God’s Word (7:24-27).

5) It contains truths which are trans-dispensational, truths which cut across all dispensations.

Here are some examples:

- # Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be filled (5:6).
- # God shines and showers His goodness on all men (5:45).
- # God sees what is done in secret (6:1-6).
- # God knows the needs of His believers (6:8,32).
- # What a man treasures reveals his heart (6:21).
- # No man can serve two masters (6:24).
- # Those who honor God will be honored by God (6:33).
- # Before we can righteously judge, we must first judge ourselves (7:1-5).
- # Those who truly seek will truly find (7:7).
- # Men are evil and depraved (7:11).
- # The majority are headed for destruction; few will be saved (7:13-14).
- # A tree is known by its fruit (7:17-20).
- # Mere profession does not necessarily mean true possession (7:21-23).
- # Our lives need to be built on a rock solid foundation (7:24-27).

**CONCLUSION:** The Sermon on the Mount is a valuable portion of God's Word which should be precious to every Bible-loving person. Its spiritual principles are life-changing and its timeless truths are for all generations.

But there is another side to this question:

## **IS THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT FOR CHURCH AGE BELIEVERS? NO!!!!!!**

1) The Lord gave this sermon to the Jews, not to the Church.

The Church was not even in existence at the time this sermon was given (see our paper, *When Did The Church Begin?*). It was a pre-cross message given to Jews who were told that the kingdom was near (Matthew 4:17).

We can understand why Reformed men believe the Sermon was delivered to the Church. Reformed theology teaches that the Church is made up of the saints of all ages. Thus they teach that the Church existed in the Old Testament period and also that the Church existed during our Lord's earthly ministry. They believe that there is but one people of God, and therefore that the Sermon applies equally to the one people of God no matter when they live on earth.

2) The Sermon does not set forth distinctive Church truth.

The Sermon contains truth that is useful to the Church and precious to the Church but not truth that is distinctive to the Church. Distinctive Church truth is found in the Upper Room Discourse (John chapters 13-17) and in the New Testament epistles. We are therefore not surprised to find the Sermon on the Mount totally silent about the following truths which were later revealed to the Church by its apostles and prophets:

- # The truth about the body of Christ (Ephesians 1).
- # The truth about the building of Christ (Ephesians 2).
- # The truth about the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5).
- # The truth about the baptism ("YE IN ME")—see John 14:20. We are IN CHRIST!
- # The truth about the indwelling ("I IN YOU")—see John 14:20. Christ is IN US!
- # The truth of the mystery.<sup>2</sup> See Eph. 3:1-12; 5:30-32; Col. 1:26-27; etc.
- # The truth of the believer's identification with Christ in His death and in His life (Romans 6).
- # The truth of the believer's heavenly position and standing (Col. 1:1-4; Eph. 2:6; Heb. 3:1).
- # The truth of the believer's deliverance from the law and death to the law (Gal. 2:19; Rom. 7:1-6).

In light of this, it would be wrong to call the Sermon on the Mount the *Magna Carta* of Christian Living. It would be far more appropriate to call Romans chapter 6-8 or the Book of Ephesians by this title.

Arno Gaebelein made the following keen observations: "We cannot put into the discourse exclusively church teachings and say that all found here is to be applied to the church, and that it is the guide for the church, as some have said. If the Lord had had the church in her heavenly calling and character in mind, the place given to the discourse would be all wrong. The Lord mentions the church the first time in the sixteenth chapter, and if following the sixteenth chapter He had spoken these words we might say that we should find in it the church....Not here (in the sermon on the mount), but in the Epistles, written after the death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ and after the Holy Spirit had come down from heaven, do we find all about the church. The magna charta of the church is in the Epistles of Paul, to whom the full revelation of the church was given. Out of this misconception has sprung a good deal of error" (*The Gospel of Matthew*, pages 108-109).

3) The purpose of the Sermon was not to reveal Church truth.

The purpose of the Sermon was not to reveal Church truth but to condemn the Jews and to show them that they were not fit to enter the kingdom which was announced to be “at hand.”<sup>3</sup> The key verse in understanding the purpose of the Sermon is Matthew 5:20—“For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” The Jews were very excited about the prospects of the kingdom. They loved the material benefits that it promised them. They had just seen the Lord’s healing miracles and they were astounded (Matt. 4:23-25). It resulted in a great multitude following Him (Matt. 4:25).

This reminds us of John 6 when the Lord’s healing miracles (v.2) and the Lord’s feeding miracle (verses 5-14) caused the multitude to want to take Jesus by force and make Him their King (v.15). The idea of having a King who would eliminate sickness and disease and who would be capable of feeding them was very appealing to them. The problem, however, was that they were not spiritually prepared for such a kingdom. When the Lord Jesus taught them that it was necessary for them to have a personal relationship with Him, based on His death, then they lost interest and walked away (John 6, see verses 60-71).

In Matthew 4 the kingdom was announced as being very near (Matt. 4:17 and compare 3:2). Indeed, the King was personally present among them. His healing miracles (Matt. 4:23-25) demonstrated that He was indeed the Messiah (compare Isaiah 35:5-6). Great multitudes followed Him because of His healing miracles (Matt. 4:25). In view of these multitudes, the Lord gathered His disciples together to instruct them concerning the spiritual requirements that were necessary for entrance into the kingdom (see Matt. 5:1). It is probably best to understand these “disciples” in a broader sense as including many more than the

twelve who are later named in Matthew chapter 10. In Matthew 5:1 the term “disciples” is probably a general term for those who followed Christ, similar to the way the term “disciples” is used in John chapter 6 (see verses 60,61,66) where it included more than the twelve. It even included disciples who later “went back and walked no more with Him” (v.66). These were unsaved disciples (compare John 6:64-65)! The Sermon on the Mount was addressed to such followers of Christ. The main purpose of the Sermon was to set forth the righteousness that was necessary in order to qualify for entrance into the kingdom.

The Sermon is of a legal character. Its purpose, like the law, was to convict and to condemn. By the law is the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20), that is, by the law I come to know how sinful I am. By the Sermon on the Mount is the knowledge of unrighteousness. By the Sermon the disciples could learn how unrighteous they were and how unfit they were for the kingdom. The Sermon, in some ways, was even more condemning than the law. The Jew might be able to say, “I’ve never committed adultery.” But Jesus said, “Have you ever lusted after a woman in your heart?” The Jew might be able to say, “I’ve never murdered anyone.” But Jesus said, “Have you been angry with your brother?” See Matthew 5:21 ff.

To see how condemning the Sermon is, consider the following personal questions:

1. Have you ever been guilty of sinful anger? (5:22)
2. Have you ever looked at a woman to lust after her? (5:28)<sup>4</sup>
3. Have you measured up to God’s perfect standard? (5:48)
4. Do you ever worry? (6:25-34)
5. Do you always put God first? (6:33)
6. Are you ever oblivious to your own faults? (7:1-5)
7. Do you always live according to the rule of Matthew 7:12?

An honest Jew would have to admit this: “Lord, I fail to measure up to the righteousness that you require. I am spiritually bankrupt (compare Matt. 5:3). I am totally unfit and unworthy to enter Your kingdom. Lord, be merciful unto me, an unrighteous sinner.” Such a Jew is learning that he lacks the righteousness that is required and therefore he must seek HIS righteousness (Matt. 6:33).

**CONCLUSION:** The Sermon on the Mount was addressed to Jews who had followed Christ and who had seen His astounding healing miracles. They had been told by John the Baptist and by the Lord Himself that the kingdom promised by all the prophets was near at hand. The Lord, in this Sermon, set forth the kind of righteousness that was required in order to be fit to enter the kingdom. The Sermon was legal in character and condemnatory in effect. Though the gospel is not revealed in this Sermon, the Lord did make it clear that the solution for those who lack the needed righteousness is found, not in SELF, but in HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS (Matt. 6:33). Thus we have the first beatitude (Matt. 5:3) showing the blessedness of the person who recognizes his own spiritual bankruptcy.

The Sermon was not addressed to the Church (although there were certainly some in the audience who would later become members of Christ’s body). It did not set forth Church truth. The revelation of Church truth and mystery truth would come later, with Paul as God’s chief instrument in conveying this revelation. There is nothing in this Sermon which sets forth the great distinctive truths of this Church Age. There is much in this Sermon which is profitable and precious to the heart of every Church Age believer who loves God’s infallible Word.

An old quote worth repeating:

“In our days more than ever before we notice an astonishing misuse of the sermon on the mount. The saddest of all is that many preachers of various evangelical denominations fall back upon it as the most important document of Christendom; for them it seems to become more and more the Gospel, and the

consequences are that we hear in our times more ethical preaching, more about becoming better, doing good, improving your better self, etc., than ever before. It would require much time and a great deal of space to show up all the errors which are springing from this application. It is the Gospel of works and evolution. And as this is done there is less preaching of the utter corruption of man, his lost condition and utter helplessness to be righteous (that which the discourse makes very clear), and the salvation of God in our Lord Jesus Christ, the absolute necessity of being born again, the reception of eternal life, the new nature. As the teachings of the Epistle to the Romans have been and are being abandoned in Christendom, the false application of the discourse here in Matthew has been taken up. There is therefore a continual increase of teaching about lifting man out of his lost place into a better sphere by means of ethical teachings taken from the sermon on the mount. This is done under the garb of a social Christianity, union of worshipers (?), the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. . . Surely, if evangelical preachers continue to progress in this awful direction by substituting ethical teachings for salvation by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and declare, as not a few have done, that the sermon on the mount is a large enough Bible for us, a general apostasy from the faith will soon be reached.”

—Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew*, pages 107-108

### **PERSONAL TESTIMONY:**

During all my childhood years until age 18, I faithfully attended a Protestant church where the great emphasis was upon the earthly life and ministry of Christ. The Sermon on the Mount received great emphasis. We were regularly told of the Beatitudes and the Golden Rule, etc. The problem was that during all those years, and after hearing hundreds of weekly sermons, I never heard the true gospel. I was never told the significance of the death of Christ. I was never told of my utter sinfulness before a holy God. I was never told of the necessity of being born again (John 3:7). I was never warned about future judgment and the reality of hell.

In short, I was never told how to be saved. I'm reminded of a song written by Theron Babcock on the topic of the ecumenical movement: "They always talk about the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount, but whether you've ever been born again, doesn't even seem to count. I know my sins are all forgiven and I am on my way to heaven. My trust is in the Lord, and **not** the ecumenical movement."

In 1972 I attended Wesleyan University where I met a fellow freshman student who believed the Bible and knew Christ as his personal Savior and through his testimony I was saved. Not long after I was saved, I wrote a song and some of the words were these: "Many talk about Jesus, His life and ministry. They love to think of His sermons, a mighty Preacher was He; but I go back to the cross where for me my Savior died. May I never be ashamed of Calvary and my Redeemer crucified. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so! Sing hallelujah praise His name! Let us shout the Savior's story, may every saint His message proclaim! It is the power of God unto salvation to all who will believe. May I never be ashamed of the Gospel: Christ crucified for me!"

—George Zeller (March 2000)

## Endnotes:

- 1 Speaking of dispensationalists, George Ladd, a non-dispensationalist, said this: "It is doubtful if there has been any other circle of men who have done more by their influence in preaching, teaching and writing to promote a love for Bible study, a hunger for the deeper Christian life, a passion for evangelism and zeal for missions in the history of American Christianity" (George Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*, page 49).
- 2 The mystery passages in the New Testament reveal truths that were once hidden in previous ages but which are now revealed to God's saints. The various New Testament mysteries all pertain to various aspects of church truth. See our paper on "The Mystery of Godliness."

- 3 There is another time, yet future, when the kingdom of heaven will again be announced as near at hand. This will be the case in the future tribulation period when the gospel of the kingdom will once again be proclaimed (see Matt. 24:14). It will be at that time that the message of the Sermon on the Mount will again be very meaningful.
- 4 I have a missionary friend who related a true incident that took place when he was an unsaved student in high school. For some reason, one of the students had a Bible in the cafeteria even though he was not a Christian. The table was full of high school male students, including my friend. The young man with the Bible had it opened to Matthew 5:28 and he was showing it to everyone at the table. One of them made this comment: "This condemns everyone of us!" They were ready at that point for someone to come along with the gospel message! However, no believer was near the scene. Thankfully one of those students later heard the gospel from a godly campus missionary (Donald Fullerton) while a student at Princeton University, and passed from death unto life.

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