

Approaching the Sermon on the Mount

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The Sermon on the Mount is probably the most famous sermon ever preached, and for good reason. Its speaker is the Lord Jesus Christ; its location on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee is unique; and its language is both beautiful and profound. Even non-believers are familiar with many of the words Jesus spoke in this sermon.

Yet, for as well-known as the Sermon is, it is often misunderstood and misused. Therefore, as we begin to study this passage of Scripture, we should look at three common, but misguided ways to approach the sermon.

1. The Liberal Way

Now, the word liberal used in this context is not a political term, but a theological term. Liberal theology is an approach to Christian doctrine and especially the Bible and the person of Christ, which denies the miraculous, rejects the supernatural claims of the Bible, and explains away the full deity of Christ---to list only a few credentials of Protestant Liberalism.

With respect to the Sermon on the Mount, therefore, a liberal approach extracts this passage from the rest of Matthew's Gospel. It sees Jesus as a great teacher, but only as a teacher or rabbi. It fails to see how the Gospels present Jesus as God's Son, and how Matthew shapes his Gospel to highlight the humanity and deity of Christ.

In other words, it fails to see how Jesus's teaching about the kingdom of God (in Matthew 5-7) is presented in combination with his miracles of healing (in Matthew 8-9). Instead of seeing the full portrait of Christ, the liberal way of reading the Sermon on the Mount makes it a "pamphlet" (HT: [Tim Mackie](#)) with Jesus as a superlative moral teaching.

Clearly, such a reading mischaracterizes who Jesus is, who Jesus said he was, and what the eye witnesses testified about Christ. But honestly, Bible-believing Christians can also fall into a liberal reading of the Sermon, if we miss the connection of Jesus' words with his deeds in Matthew 8-9. In other words, if we only read the Sermon as a corpus of his teaching, disconnected from the rest of Matthew's Gospel, we are preparing ourselves to misread the Sermon.

Therefore, we must understand the Sermon in the context of Matthew's Gospel, and specifically in the context of Matthew 4:23-9:38, which is the first of five blocks in Matthew that is composed of Jesus' speech and Jesus' actions. For more on the whole book of Matthew read [this](#).

2. The Legalistic Way

In contrast to the liberal way of reading the Sermon, the legalistic way takes the words seriously. In fact, it reads Jesus so seriously that it seeks to apply the radical demands of Jesus as the regulations of the Christian life.

While there is something to this plain reading, passages like Matthew 5:48 ("You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect") make it sound like we must be perfect in order to please God. Yet, such a reading fails to understand the meaning of this word (*teleios*) and the wisdom genre Jesus is employing in this sermon. More on this in a minute.

Under this legalistic category, the Sermon has been used in church history as a standard for monastic orders and the creation of special classes of Christians. The trouble with this, of course, is that Jesus addresses his disciples (5:1), and he tells these same disciples in Matthew 28:19 to teach all disciples to obey all that he had taught them.

So, the Sermon on the Mount is not just for some followers of Christ; it is for all of us. Yet, a straightforward reading, especially one that does not understand the original meaning of the word *makarios* ("blessed") in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12) and or *teleios* ("perfect") in Matthew 5:48 will incline Christians to read the Sermon as a legal document, outlining the rules they must obey.

In response to this sort of legalism and the rewards based on such Christian works-righteousness, we find a third way to read the SM, which is theologically better but also misguided.

3. The Lutheran Way

Martin Luther, as you may know, was the man God used to ignite the Protestant Reformation. And it was the goal of this German Reformer to stand *against* anything that looked like the works-righteousness of the Catholic church, which is why he often questioned the book of James.

Yet, because the Sermon on the Mount is very similar to the book of James---[some scholars believe the book of James "echoes" the Sermon on the Mount](#)---and because Luther was so committed to justification by faith alone, he failed to understand the purpose of Jesus' words in Matthew 5–7. Thus, when he read the call for righteousness in Jesus' sermon, he understood it as an "impossible ideal" that was meant to lead him and us back to God's grace in Christ.

As Jonathan Pennington puts it in his [commentary](#), Luther saw the Sermon with its "impossibly high demands" as goad "meant to make all people aware of their sin and poverty before God and thereby turn to Christ in faith" (p. 6). Theologically, Luther's approach has great merit. But in the end, it fails because it does not rightly perceive the way Jesus is fulfilling the law, bringing the good news of the kingdom, and speaking to disciples who have already been brought within the bounds of this kingdom.

In other words, Jesus is not giving a new law for us to obey, nor is he aiming to afflict us with God's high ideal, so that we would flee to him for grace. Rather, Jesus is announcing the fulfillment of the law (5:17), the arrival of the kingdom (6:33), and the gracious message that God's people now have access to the Father through the arrival of the Son.

Jesus is not preaching law; he's announcing the good news of the law fulfilled. And, as we'll see, Jesus sermon's is a message of apocalyptic wisdom---which is to say Jesus is revealing

(hence *apocalypse*) God's kingdom and bringing healing to the nations. As Matthew 4:17, 23 indicate, he is teaching about the kingdom and fishing for disciples who will join him in the kingdom he is bringing.

Getting Into the Sermon on the Mount

In short, the Sermon on the Mount is filled with grace and multiple invitations to walk with him in righteousness. Jesus has not come to destroy the law, nor to double-down on its demands. Rather, he's come to bring his disciples into his Father's presence and to bring heaven to earth! For that reason, we should pay close attention to what Jesus says in his Sermon and how he is saying it.

This Sunday we will begin our summer series on the Sermon on the Mount, where we begin by looking at the whole sermon to get a sense of what Jesus says. Before then, let me encourage you to read Matthew 4:23–8:1.

You can also find help by reading these blog posts and watching these two videos:

- [The Artistic Evangelist: Seeing the Structure of Matthew's Gospel](#)
- [The Significance of the Sermon on the Mount: 10 Reflections from Herman Ridderbos](#)
- [Seeing the Mountain-Like Structure of the Sermon on the Mount](#)

Soli Deo Gloria, ds

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