

The Sermon on the Mount

The King's Gospel of His Kingdom

I. Introduction

A. Initial Considerations

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is one of the most familiar and best loved passages in the entire Bible. It stands as the first and longest of Jesus' recorded discourses and arguably provides more insight into His person and message than any other New Testament context. The Sermon on the Mount is an obvious highlight of the gospel witness and, for this reason, its content and themes have been the subject of countless sermons and numerous scholarly works. The upside of this is that there is no lack of reference material to draw upon in studying the Sermon on the Mount; the downside is the wide divergence of opinion regarding the passage's meaning and role in the New Testament and the broader biblical canon.

1. Some in past generations (and still today in connection with the various contemporary forms of liberation theology) have understood the Sermon on the Mount to articulate and exalt a "social gospel" which establishes as the chief calling of Christ's people the pursuit of societal equity and justice. In other words, Christ's "gospel of the kingdom" expresses God's overarching concern for social reform and reparation. In certain constructs, this gospel is virtually synonymous with the social system of Marxism.
2. Others, particularly within early twentieth-century Dispensationalism, have regarded this passage as Christ's proclamation of the ethic and practice that will characterize the future millennial kingdom said to be promised to the nation of Israel. A crucial consequence of viewing the Sermon on the Mount in this way is that it is eliminated as direct revelation to Christ's Church in the present age. C. I. Scofield's comments are illustrative:

"The Sermon on the Mount has a twofold application: (1) Literally to the [millennial] kingdom. In this sense it gives the divine constitution for the righteous government of the earth... In this sense the Sermon on the Mount is pure law, and transfers the offence from the overt act to the motive... For these reasons the Sermon on the Mount in its primary application gives neither the privilege nor the duty of the Church. These are found in the Epistles... (2) But there is a beautiful moral application to the Christian."
(Scofield Reference Bible)

3. Even among non-dispensationalists, the tendency has been to view the Sermon on the Mount in ethical categories. Many who roundly reject the notion that this passage pertains to Israel's legal/ethical obligation during the future millennial kingdom nonetheless insist that it sets out the ethical standard that governs Christ's kingdom and its citizens in every age. As Vos has noted, it is common for Christians to regard Jesus as here calling men into a "school of ethics" rather than a "kingdom of redemption" – an observation clearly supported by a survey of commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount. Human as well as cultural/historical factors underlie this tendency.

- a. First of all, the central feature of fallen humanity's *religious sensibility* is the insistence upon establishing one's own righteousness before God. What was true of Israel in Jesus' generation is true of every human being in every age. Alienated from God, isolated within their own minds and constrained by a self-centered frame of reference, all people conceive of righteousness and their obligation to it in personal and behavioral terms. That is, righteousness pertains to a person's conduct in attitude, word and deed as measured against his accepted moral/ethical standard. This thinking is innate to fallen man, and it finds expression in human religious systems as much as human social structures. Thus it's not surprising that the Sermon on the Mount is commonly interpreted as a code of Christian ethics.
 - b. The notion of *Christendom* has also contributed to this way of reading the Sermon on the Mount. For most of church history the Christian Church has been defined in terms of outward conformity rather than inward renewal. For well over a thousand years leading up to the Reformation, a person became a Christian by the act of *christening*, and from that point forward he was obligated to order the practice of his life around a system of Christian ethics promoted by the institution of the Church. Though modified at certain points, this perspective was perpetuated by the magisterial reformers and continues to this day, particularly in many European Protestant traditions (and some of their American counterparts).
4. In the end, the answer to interpreting the Sermon on the Mount is the Bible itself. The Scripture must form the lens through which it is read and understood, *and this requires that the Sermon on the Mount be viewed according to its proper place and role in biblical revelation as it records and interprets the history of God's redemption in Christ.*
- a. As a first principle, Jesus Himself repeatedly insisted that all of the Old Testament scriptures testify of Him such that His person, words and work stand as their fulfillment. He affirmed the same truth as fundamental to interacting with and interpreting His instruction in the Sermon on the Mount (ref. Matthew 5:17).
 - b. So it is that all four of the gospel writers, whatever their individual priorities and orientation, had as their primary goal demonstrating the truth of Jesus' assertion that the Scripture – and therefore salvation history itself – had now found its preordained fulfillment in Him.
 - c. This demonstration is the very marrow of what it meant for the gospel writers to show their readers that Jesus is indeed the *Christ* of God. If this man, Jesus of Nazareth, were in fact the promised Messiah, then there should no component or detail of the Scripture's disclosure of that figure that can't be attributed to Him.

Accordingly, Matthew took great pains to exhibit that the full scope of messianic revelation – which is contained, not in a number of scattered details, but in the very fabric of the totality of the Old Testament scriptures – pointed to and has been fulfilled in Jesus the Nazarene. Thus his characteristic fulfillment phraseology (cf. 1:22, 2:15, 17, 23, 3:15, 4:14, 8:17, 12:17, 13:14, 35, 21:4, 26:54-56, 27:9, etc.).

B. Contextual Background

The New Testament writers – and the four gospel writers in particular – were determined to show that Jesus is the predicted and long promised Messiah. But implied in this is the crucial truth that Jesus fulfills the Scriptures as they actually are, not as any given person might perceive them. Nothing is more clearly evident than that the Jews of Jesus' generation believed that the Old Testament portrayed and predicted a messianic savior, *but their misperception of that revelation led them to conclude that the man Jesus of Nazareth wasn't that individual.*

- In order to recognize Jesus as the Christ, a person must first have a foundational discernment of the Scripture's messianic portrait.
- But that bare recognition is only the starting point: The scope and breadth of one's knowledge of Jesus is directly dependent upon the fullness and correctness of his knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures.

In terms of the previous sacred space series, if the structures and patterns discovered in that study are biblically correct, they should be central to the New Testament writers' presentation and interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth. (The reason, again, is that all the Scriptures – rightly understood – testify of God's Christ, and the New Testament's claim is that Jesus is the Christ.) Matthew's account, in fact, fully meets this expectation.

The core motif in the Gospel of Matthew is the *kingdom of God* (alternatively, the *kingdom of heaven*, which phrase is common in Matthew but entirely unique to him). Matthew's understanding of salvation history paralleled Paul's two-age conception: Matthew regarded the era preceding Jesus' coming as the time of *promise*, and the era subsequent to His incarnation as the time of *fulfillment*. The Christ event, then, is the hinge of salvation history such that the promissory, preparatory age terminates in Him and the age of fulfillment flows out from Him.

Thus Matthew's account is best viewed as being christologically structured in three distinct sections focusing on Jesus' person and work. Each section is demarcated by a transitional superscription that directly introduces what follows (ref. 1:1, 4:17, 16:21):

- The first section introduces the person and significance of Jesus of Nazareth as the promised messianic King (1:1-4:16).
- The second section deals with the nature, content, and effect of the King's proclamation of the gospel of His kingdom (4:17-16:20).
- The third and final section addresses the messianic work of the King by which He inaugurates His kingdom (16:21-28-30).

In each section Matthew's focus is Christ Himself, but specifically as He and His message and work provided irrefutable testimony that God's long-standing promise of His coming kingdom – His promise to recover sacred space – had now reached the time of its ordained fulfillment.

1. The Identification of the King (1:1-17)

This orientation is evident from the outset with Matthew's presentation of Jesus' genealogy (1:1-17), which is conspicuously *Davidic*. Unlike Luke, who traces Jesus' lineage through his mother Mary, Matthew's genealogy is built upon Joseph (1:16). Both were descendents of David, but Joseph's descent was through David's regal line (1:6).

- a. Matthew's opening statement identifies Jesus as the *son of David*, and his subsequent genealogy shows that he intended by this identifier not merely to assert Jesus' descent from David, but the fact that He was the royal son promised to David in the Davidic Covenant. After consolidating the Israelite kingdom, conquering Jerusalem and establishing Yahweh's throne there, David sought to build the Lord a permanent dwelling. God's response was to grant that work to one of David's offspring, and thus his son Solomon constructed the Jerusalem temple. But the larger issue in the covenant was the Lord's promise to build a house for David: He would establish forever David's dynastic house and kingdom in another Davidic son of whom Solomon was but a prototype (2 Samuel 7:1-17).
- b. Given David's centrality in the prophetic promise of the kingdom, Matthew appropriately drew attention first to Jesus' descent from him. At the same time, Matthew recognized that this Davidic ancestry and its significance presupposed Jesus' status as a *son of Abraham*. For what God brought to full fruition in David's kingdom and promised to him regarding the perpetuity of his dynasty and dominion had their origin in His ancient covenant with Abraham.

It was to Abraham that the Lord first promised a kingdom, evident in the covenant particulars of land, seed, and blessing (12:1-3). That these covenant grants pointed to a kingdom became increasingly evident as God clarified their nature and scope: Abraham was to be the father of a *regal line* of covenant descendents (Genesis 17:1-6, 15-16) who would administer the Lord's rule in His *kingdom-land* (cf. Exodus 15:17, 25:1-8 with 2 Samuel 6:1-18; Psalm 99:1-5; Jeremiah 8:19; cf. also Deuteronomy 17:14-20). And out from that kingdom and its royal inhabitants the *divine blessing* that is the knowledge of the Lord would flow to all the earth's families. In that way God's kingdom would come to embrace the whole creation.

The covenant promise of a kingdom passed from Abraham to Isaac and then to Jacob, and from there it assumed a national dimension as Yahweh ratified His covenant with the twelve tribes of Israel descended from Jacob (cf. Genesis 15:12-21 with Exodus 3:1-17, 6:1-8). In accordance with His oath to the three patriarchs, the Lord took the nation of Israel – descended from the man Israel – to be His covenant son (Exodus 4:21-23) in order to dwell with Him in His sanctuary-land and, as a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:1-6), mediate His blessing to the ends of the earth. God promised a kingdom to Abraham, and a thousand years later David – Abraham's covenant descendent through his royal offspring Judah (ref. Genesis 49:8-10) – brought the Abrahamic kingdom to the fullness of its Israelite expression (cf. Genesis 15:18, 22:15-18; 1 Kings 4:20-21).

- c. David secured the full extent and power of the kingdom of Israel, but his failure as Abraham's seed also insured its downfall. The great privilege entrusted to Abraham's covenant descendents was that they would mediate the knowledge of their God to all the peoples of the earth. As Yahweh's chosen king and representative, this was preeminently David's charge. But rather than using his power and influence to lead the nations to know the God of Israel, David wielded them in the service of his own lust with the result that Israel's neighbors were given occasion to blaspheme and reject the Lord (2 Samuel 12:13-14). David, the quintessential seed of Abraham, had failed to fulfill the Abrahamic calling.

The immediate consequence of David's failure was the fracturing of his kingdom into the two houses of Israel and Judah; what God had unified in David he had now torn apart. *Most importantly, David's dynasty and kingdom continued only in tiny Judah in the south; the larger northern kingdom of Israel was, from its inception, ruled by a dynasty of non-Davidic kings* (ref. 1 Kings 12:1ff). This rending of the twelve tribes brought increasing isolation and enmity among them such that the succeeding centuries saw the sub-kingdoms of Israel and Judah seeking foreign alliances in their wars with one another. The estrangement between Abraham's covenant descendents was further reflected in their increasing estrangement from Abraham's God. Israel's departure from Yahweh was immediate and entire, while Judah's apostasy was more gradual and marked by hopeful seasons of national repentance and recommitment.

But, in the end, the Lord's word of judgment to David was realized: The sword that had come upon his house had at last left it desolate (2 Samuel 12:10-12). David effectively lost the northern ten tribes with their secession under Jeroboam, but in 721 B.C. the kingdom of Israel was conquered and its citizens carried into exile by Assyria. Judah, as the remnant of David's house and kingdom, continued for more than another century, but it eventually followed its northern sister into exile at the hands of Babylon. By 586 B.C., David's kingdom was decimated, his royal dynasty severed, and his subjects in exile. Most importantly, the true King of the Abrahamic kingdom – Yahweh Himself – had departed from His kingdom land, leaving His throne unoccupied and His royal sanctuary burned to the ground (cf. Ezekiel 10-11, 24:1-27; also Lamentation 1:1-11).

Thus the Abrahamic kingdom had come to an end, and yet God's covenant oath to David regarding the perpetuity of his house and kingdom remained. David's royal seed was cut-off, but the Lord had promised that his kingdom would endure everlastingly in a son to come from him; the God who had given His covenant pledge to Abraham and David would yet prove faithful. *This is the salvation-historical backdrop of Matthew's gospel and is the reason he conspicuously partitions Jesus' genealogy around Abraham, David, and Babylon* (1:17). Matthew's overarching concern was to show that God's ancient promise of a kingdom – first covenanted to Abraham, realized in David's reign and pledged to him as an eternal grant, but now a matter of distant longing as David's throne sat unoccupied – was at last being fulfilled. Jesus of Nazareth – son of Abraham and David – had come to take His throne and restore the captivity of the covenant children.