

Outline

- **Overview**
- **Five questions**
- **Historical highlights**

The Sermon on the Mount is found only in Matthew yet has some of the most memorable passages of the NT

- **Overview:**
 - **The nine beatitudes (5:3-12)**
 - **The salt & light metaphors (5:13-16)**
 - **Greater righteousness is required of Jesus' disciples (5:17-20)**
 - **Jesus' teaching vs. the law: six *antitheses* (5:21-48)**
 - **True vs. hypocritical piety in almsgiving, prayer (and the Lord's prayer), fasting (6:1-18)**
 - **Social issues, with various commands regarding money and true riches: serving two masters; the birds of the air; etc. (6:19-34)**
 - **Three further commands on how to treat others: the speck in your neighbor's eye; pearls before swine; ask and it will be given to you (7:1-12)**
 - ***Conclusion*—three illustrations of the Two Ways: the narrow gate; the tree and its fruit; not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord'. (7:13-27)**
- **“Although Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is often assumed to be a summary of the ethical teaching of Jesus, this is mistaken: there are important ethical sayings of Jesus which are not included in Matthew's Sermon, and not all of the traditions in these chapters are ethical” [DJG]**

The Sermon on the Mount has had no fewer than 36 different interpretations over the past 2,000 years

- The Sermon' has many potentially challenging sayings, including:
 - The beatitudes: blessed are the persecuted? The meek? Those who mourn?
 - “not one stroke... will pass from the Law...” (5:17-20)
 - “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the... Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (5:20)
 - Don't call your brother or sister or “you will be liable to the hell of fire” (5:21)
 - “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off” (5:27)
 - “Do not swear at all” (5:34)
 - “Do not resist an evildoer” (5:39)
 - “Be perfect” (5:48)
 - “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...” (6:19)
 - “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink...” (6:25+)
 - ““Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom”” (7:21)
- These have led to a wide range of interpretations

“The injunction ‘Do not be like them’ (6:8) encapsulates the tone of the whole Sermon. A sharp contrast is constantly being drawn between the standards of Jesus and those of all others. Here we meet a distinctive lifestyle, with radically different values and ambitions. Everything is at variance with the life outside the kingdom.” (M. Green)

Tim Collins:

“The Sermon as we now have it makes an important contribution to the development of Matthew’s story...”

“[The Sermon] depicts the teaching side of Jesus’ messianic mission. Early in his Gospel, the writer of Mark also speaks of Jesus’ new and powerful teaching (Mk 1:21-22, 27). For Matthew, however, it is not enough to simply tell us that Jesus taught with authority. Instead, he presents the Sermon as an exhibit of Jesus’ teaching, allowing readers to experience the breadth and power of Jesus’ word.” (Richard B. Gardner)



Tim Collins:
The Sermon on the Mount, 1656, Claude Lorrain (1600-1682), France, Baroque

Five questions have dictated the way the Sermon is read

1. Was Jesus reinterpreting the Law of Moses?

- Or does he present radically new teaching? Is Jesus portrayed as the ‘new Moses’ who ‘goes up the mountain’ (5:1) in order to present on a new Mt. Sinai a new Law for a new people?
 - “‘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. ” (5:27-28)
 - “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (5:17)

Five questions have dictated the way the Sermon is read

2. What is the relationship between the Sermon and Paul's gospel of grace?

- Is the Sermon (as law) intended to make the readers or listeners aware of their need for grace? Or does the Sermon presuppose God's forgiveness and acceptance of the sinner and therefore set out demands for true discipleship?
 - "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." (5:22)
 - "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (5:48)
 - "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ...the measure you give will be the measure you get." (7:1-2)
 - Jesus threatens hell, "prison" and judgment several times. Where is the grace?

Five questions have dictated the way the Sermon is read

3. To whom is the Sermon addressed?

- To men and women in general or to those committed to the way of Jesus?
 - The *crowds*:
 - “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain” (5:1a)
 - “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching” (7:28)
 - Or the *disciples*:
 - “...and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them...” (5:1b-2)
 - While many parts of the Sermon seem to set out an ‘ethic of Christian discipleship’, the final verses of Matt imply the teaching of Jesus is part of the message to be taken to “all nations” (28:18-20)
 - At stake: Are the beatitudes describing *entrance requirements* for the kingdom?

Five questions have dictated the way the Sermon is read

4. Are all parts of the sermon to be taken at face value, as some have claimed?

- Or do some sayings contain hyperbole? Does the Sermon set out a code of ethics or principles and attitudes appropriate for members of the kingdom?
 - “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 ” (5:39-40)

But also:

- “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” (5:43-44)
- Do we take one literally and not the other?

Five questions have dictated the way the Sermon is read

5. Should we read the Sermon in light of the approach of the *end times*?

- For example, does Jesus teach a casual attitude toward food and clothing (6:25-34) because the end is near, or because that's a right attitude to have at any time?
- Is every petition of the Lord' Prayer (6:9-13) to be interpreted eschatologically?
- If so, when we pray 'Give us this day our daily bread' we are not asking for the basic necessities of life, but requesting a partial anticipation now of the 'feast of heaven'—the 'bread of heaven'.
- Does the petition 'lead us not into temptation' concern the time of testing expected in the end times or everyday temptations?

The earliest witnesses read the Sermon as valid for them and applicable to their readers

- **The *Didache***, or the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* from the 90s or early 2nd century quotes freely from the Sermon, reading it “straight”—so, e.g.:

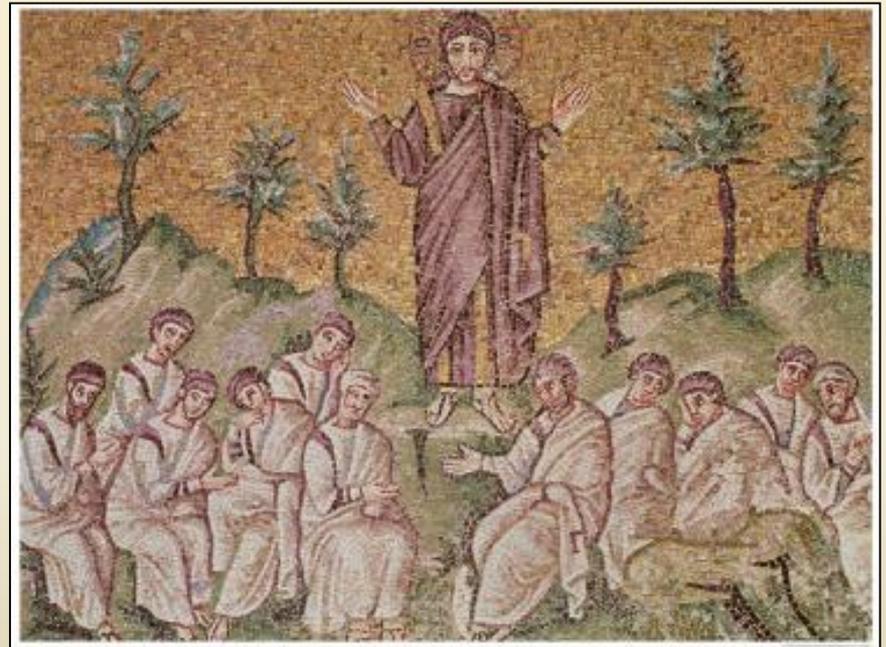
My child, flee from every evil and everything that resembles it. Be not angry, for anger leads to murder, nor jealous nor contentious nor wrathful; for of all these things murders are engendered... But be meek, since the meek shall inherit the earth. Be long-suffering and pitiful and guileless and quiet and kindly and always fearing the words which thou hast heard. (3:2-3, 12-13)

- **Irenaeus** (2nd cent.) uses the Sermon to argue that the Gospel fulfills the law, and requires more of the individual, in that we are responsible not just for our deeds but for our words
- **Tertullian** (2nd cent.) uses the Sermon to refute Marcion’s attempt to jettison the OT
- **Origen** (3rd cent.) writes the first commentary on the Sermon. Only a fragment survives today

The two most important early expositions of the Sermon were by Chrysostom and Augustine

- **Chrysostom** (4th cent.) argues against Gnostic and Manichean uses of the Sermon to argue that the flesh is evil, using such passages as the eye-plucking verses
- **Augustine** (4th cent.) with Chrysostom insisted the Sermon was the perfect pattern for the life of all Christians.

“Augustine drew attention to the sharp discontinuity between the ‘old Law’ and the ‘new’ by distinguishing between the ‘lesser precepts given by God through his holy prophets and servants to a people who still needed to be bound by fear’ (i.e., to Israel before the coming of Christ) and ‘the greater precepts given through his Son to a people now ready to be freed by love.’” (DJG)



Sermon on the Mount, Scenes from the Life of Christ; Byzantine mosaic

The medieval period saw the introduction of the two-level system

- **Thomas Aquinas** stressed the “discontinuity between the old Law (‘the Law of bondage’) and the new Law (‘the Law of liberty’) but without conceding that the latter contradicted or abrogated the former. In his interpretation of the Sermon he used the analogy of the tree (the new Law) which is in a sense contained in the seed.” (DJG)
- Aquinas also introduced the two-level ethic or double standard:

“In addition to the commandments of the new Law, which are necessary in order to gain salvation, there are also optional counsels which ‘render the gaining of eternal bliss more assured and expeditious.’ The latter are intended for those who strive for perfection; they are based on poverty, chastity and obedience and are therefore primarily for those who join the religious life.”

This isn’t really to be found in the Sermon but is echoed in passages like Mt 19:11-12 where Jesus advises renunciation of marriage, saying “Let those accept it who can.”

The Anabaptists chose a particularly muscular interpretation

- “**Anabaptists** [and the **Waldensians** before them, and later the **Quakers**] claimed that the sermon should be interpreted literally and that Christians should therefore never use violence (Mt 5:39), never swear oaths (5:34) and never hold office as a judge or ruler (7:1). Their literal interpretation of the Sermon left them to opt out of secular government completely.” [DJG]
- The modern **Mennonite** pacifist movement (e.g. John Yoder) is based on this view
- Many Anabaptists applied the sermon’s ethics in an extremely literal fashion to the civil sphere and endorsed full-fledged pacifism

Luther repudiated the Scholastic two-level system while inventing his own school of interpretation

- “In **Luther’s** widely influential approach, the sermon functions as the law does for Paul—God’s impossible moral demands disclose the depths of our sinfulness and drive us to our knees in repentance.” (Craig Blomberg)
- Luther developed from the Sermon a theory of the “two realms,” the spiritual and the secular
- The Christian lives in both realms—the life in the Church, where the Sermon applies, and the secular sphere, where “natural law or ‘common sense’ must prevail.” E.g., Luther writes of these verses,

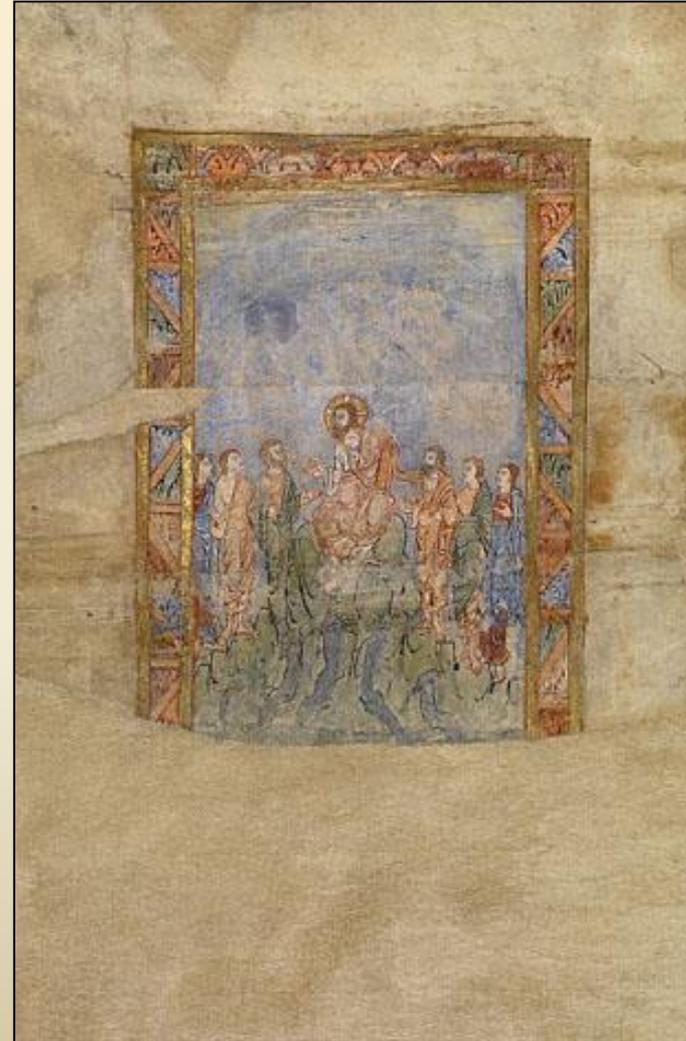
“Christ is not tampering with the responsibility and authority of the government, but he is teaching individual Christians how to live personally, apart from their official position and authority. A Christian should not (use violence to) resist evil; but within the limits of his office, a secular person [i.e. a Christian in the secular realm] should oppose firmly every evil.”
- Luther wrote that Mt 5 had “*fallen into the hands of the vulgar pigs and asses, the jurists and the sophists, the right hand of that jackass of a pope and his mamelukes*”

Calvin refuted both the double standard and the literal reading

- Of the Scholastics' "evangelical counsels", **Calvin** wrote
"These commandments—'Do not take vengeance; love your enemies,' which were once delivered to all Jews and then to all Christians in common—have been turned by the Schoolman into 'counsels', which we are free either to obey or not to obey. **What pestilential ignorance or malice is this!**... Either let them blot out these things from the Law or recognize that the Lord was Lawgiver, and let them not falsely represent him as a mere giver or counsel." (Institutes, p. 419)
- Neither were the Anabaptists spared. Writing about whether the "give him your cloak as well" passage forbids law suits:
"None but a fool will stand upon the words, so as to maintain that we must yield to our opponents what they demand, before coming into a court of law: for such compliance would more strongly inflame the minds of wicked men to robbery and extortion"
- Calvin didn't see Jesus as adding anything new to the Law in his Sermon

Next time...

- More *historical highlights!*
- The **CURIOUS RELATIONSHIP** between *James* and the Sermon on the Mount!
- The Sermon in the context of Matthew, and the tale of the *lost document* from which the Sermon was taken!



“Christ Teaching”, Unknown, Anglo-Saxon, possibly Canterbury, about 1000, Tempera colors and gold leaf on parchment