

The Sermon *on the Mount*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matthew 5–7, Rom. 7:7, Gen. 15:6, Mic. 6:6–8, Luke 6:36, Matt. 13:44–52, Rom. 8:5–10.*

Memory Text: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (*Matthew 7:28, 29, NIV*).

In the book of Exodus, we see God lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, “baptize” them in the Red Sea, bring them through the wilderness for 40 years, work signs and wonders, and meet with them personally on a mountaintop where He gives them His law.

In the book of Matthew, we see Jesus come out of Egypt, be baptized in the Jordan River, go out into the wilderness for 40 days, work signs and wonders, and meet personally with Israel on a mountaintop where He amplifies this same law. Jesus walked the history of Israel, became Israel, and in Him all the covenant promises were fulfilled.

The Sermon on the Mount is the most powerful sermon ever preached. His words have profoundly influenced not only its immediate listeners but all who would hear its life-changing messages down through the centuries and even to our time.

And yet, we must not just listen to this sermon; we also must apply it. This week, along with studying what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5–7*), we will study what Jesus said in Matthew 13 about *applying* His words to our lives.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 16.

Principles and Standards

Skim through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. Summarize on the lines below what stands out the most in your mind about it, about what it says to you.

“Perhaps no other religious discourse in the history of humanity has attracted the attention which has been devoted to the Sermon on the Mount. Philosophers and activists from many non-Christian perspectives who have refused to worship Jesus nevertheless have admired His ethic. In the twentieth century, Mohandas Gandhi was the sermon’s most famous non-Christian devotee.”—Craig L. Blomberg, *The New American Commentary: Matthew* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), vol. 22, pp. 93, 94.

This sermon has been viewed in many different ways. Some see it as an impossibly high moral standard that drives us to our knees and causes us to claim the righteousness of Jesus as our only hope of salvation because we all have fallen far short of the divine standard that God calls us to as revealed in the Sermon on the Mount. Others see it as a discourse in civil ethics, a call for pacifism. Some have seen in it the social gospel, a call to bring the kingdom of God to earth by human effort.

In a sense, probably everyone brings something of himself or herself into this sermon because it so powerfully touches us in crucial areas of our lives; thus, we all react to it in our own way.

Ellen G. White writes: “In the Sermon on the Mount He sought to undo the work that had been wrought by false education, and to give His hearers a right conception of His kingdom and of His own character. . . . The truths He taught are no less important to us than to the multitude that followed Him. We no less than they need to learn the foundation principles of the kingdom of God.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 299.

Thus, whatever else we bring to it, the Sermon on the Mount gives us the foundation principles of God’s kingdom. It tells us what God is like, as the ruler of His kingdom, and tells us what God calls us to be like, as subjects of His kingdom. It’s a radical call from the principles and standards of the fleeting kingdoms of this world to the principles and standards of the one kingdom that will exist forever. (See *Dan. 7:27*.)

The Sermon Versus the Law

Some Christians view the Sermon on the Mount as a new “law of Christ,” one that replaced the “law of God.” They say that a system of legalism was now replaced with a system of grace, or that Jesus’ law differs from the law of God itself. These views are misconceptions about the Sermon on the Mount.

What do the following texts say about the law and indirectly about the idea that, somehow, the law (i.e., the Ten Commandments) was replaced by the Sermon on the Mount? *Matt. 5:17–19, 21, 22, 27, 28; see also James 2:10, 11; Rom. 7:7.*

Craig S. Keener writes: “Most Jewish people understood the commandments in the context of grace . . . ; given Jesus’ demands for greater grace in practice . . . , he undoubtedly intended the kingdom demands in light of grace (compare *Matt. 6:12; Luke 11:4; Mark 11:25; Matt. 6:14, 15; Mark 10:15*). In the Gospel narratives, Jesus embraces those who humble themselves, acknowledging God’s right to rule, even if in practice they fall short of the goal of moral perfection (5:48). But the kingdom of grace Jesus proclaimed was not the workless grace of much of Western Christendom; in the Gospels the kingdom message transforms those who meekly embrace it, just as it crushes the arrogant, the religiously and socially satisfied.” —*The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 161, 162.

Read Genesis 15:6. How does this help us to understand that salvation has always been by faith?

The faith of Jesus Christ was not a new faith; it was the same faith from the Fall onward. The Sermon on the Mount wasn’t salvation by grace replacing salvation by works. It was *always* salvation by grace. The children of Israel were saved by grace at the Red Sea *before* they were asked to obey at Sinai (*see Exod. 20:2*).

What should your own experience with the Lord and His law teach you about why salvation has always had to be by faith and not by the law?

The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

Read Matthew 5:20. What does Jesus mean when He says that unless our righteousness “surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law” (NIV) we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven?

Though salvation has always been by faith, and though Judaism, as it should have been practiced, was always a system of grace, legalism did creep in, as it can in any religion that takes obedience seriously, such as Seventh-day Adventism. At the time of Christ, many (but not all) of the religious leaders had fallen into a kind of “hard religious orthodoxy . . . destitute of contrition, tenderness or love” that left them with “no power to preserve the world from corruption.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 53.

Mere outward forms, especially those that are man-made, have no power to change lives or transform character. The only true faith is that which works by love (*Gal. 5:6*); that alone is what makes outward actions acceptable in the sight of God.

Read Micah 6:6–8. In what ways is this a summary of the Sermon on the Mount?

Even in Old Testament times, the sacrifices were not an end in themselves but a means to an end, and that end was a life in which followers of God reflect the love and character of God, something that could be done only through a complete surrender to God and a realization of our utter dependence on His saving grace. Despite all their outward appearances of piety and faith, many of the scribes and Pharisees were definitely not a model on how a follower of the Lord should live.

Even if you are a great believer in salvation by faith alone and that only Jesus’ righteousness can save you, how can you be sure that even subtle forms of legalism don’t creep in?

The Principles of the Kingdom

Perhaps the most radical teaching of Jesus is found in Matthew 5:48. Read the text. How are we, especially as sinners, supposed to do that?

Of all the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, this has to be one of the most amazing, the most “extreme.” To be as perfect as “your Father in heaven”? What does that mean?

A crucial component in understanding this text is found in the first word of it, “therefore.” That is, it implies a conclusion, an inference from what came before it. What came before?

Read Matthew 5:43–47. How do these verses, which are then brought to a close with Matthew 5:48, help us to understand better what Jesus meant by Matthew 5:48? See also Luke 6:36.

This isn’t the first time an idea like this is seen in the Bible. Way back in the book of Leviticus (19:2), the Lord says to His people, “ ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy’ ” (NKJV). In Luke (6:36), Jesus said: “ ‘Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful’ ” (NKJV).

The whole context here, in Matthew 5:43–48, is not about an outward conformity to rules and standards, however important that may be. Instead, the whole focus on this section deals with loving people, not just those whom anyone could love but those whom, by the world’s standards, we would not generally love (again, this is about the standards of God’s kingdom, not man’s).

The important thing to remember here is that God does not ask of us anything that He cannot accomplish in us. If left to ourselves, if dominated by our sinful and selfish hearts, who would love their enemies? That’s not how the world works, but are we not now citizens of another kingdom? We have the promise that if we surrender ourselves to God then “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6, NKJV), and what greater work could God do in us than to get us, in our own sphere, to love as He loves us?

How different would your life be, right now, were you to love your enemies?

Receiving the Words of the Kingdom

A mountaintop wasn't the only place Jesus preached. He preached the same message of the kingdom all over Israel. Matthew 13 records Jesus teaching from a boat, "while all the people stood on the shore" (*Matt. 13:2, NIV*). Jesus then told the people parables intended to drive home the importance of not only *hearing* His word but *applying* it.

Read Matthew 13:44–52. What is being said here in these parables that is of particular importance to us in understanding how to apply to our lives the truths revealed in the Sermon on the Mount?

Two points stand out in the first two of these stories. In both, there is the idea of separation, of getting rid of what one has in order to obtain something new, be it treasure in a field or a pearl. The other crucial point is the great value each man placed on what he had found. In both cases, they went and sold all that they possessed in order to get it. Though we cannot buy salvation (*Isa. 55:1, 2*), the point of the parables is clear: nothing we have in this kingdom, this world, is worth our losing out on the next one.

Thus, to apply to our lives what God asks of us, we need to make a choice to separate ourselves from all the things of the world, of the flesh, and let God's Spirit fill us instead (*see Rom. 8:5–10*). This might not be easy; it will require a death to self and a taking up of one's cross. But if we always have before us the value and the worth of what we are promised, we should have all the motivation we need to make the choices that we must.

Read the next parable (*Matt. 13:47–50*). This, too, is talking about a separation. In what ways does the separation seen in the first two parables help us to understand what is happening in the third parable?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Sermon on the Mount,” pp. 298–314, in *The Desire of Ages*, and the book *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (available online at <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/mb/mb.asp>).

In the parables of Matthew 13:44–46, the men found something of great value. Given the context, especially after Jesus told the third parable (*Matt. 13:47–50*), what they found was the truth, the truth that leads to eternal life, as opposed to eternal destruction “in the furnace of fire.” This is important because we live in an age where the idea of “truth” itself is considered old-fashioned at best or dangerous at worst. And, unfortunately, this is a false idea that some Christians have bought into. Nevertheless, the message of these parables is that not only does truth exist but that truth will make a difference for eternity in every human life. This shouldn’t be surprising. The Bible is predicated on the idea of absolute truth. After all, Jesus said, “ ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me’ ” (*John 14:6, NKJV*). If that is not stating an absolute truth, what is? Of course, when someone with as much knowledge of the truth as Paul could say that “we know in part” (*1 Cor. 13:9*), it’s obvious that there’s a lot we don’t know. But his mere statement that we know “in part” implies that there’s more truth to know, truth that literally makes a difference, either for eternal life or eternal death. Eternal life or eternal death? It doesn’t get more absolute than that.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What would it be like living in a world where everyone followed the principles found in the Sermon on the Mount?
- 2 Jesus told the parable of the wise and foolish builders (*see Matt. 7:24–27*) in sight of the shores of the Sea of Galilee. In the dry season, the difference in the appearance of the rock and the sand on the shores was almost imperceptible, and a builder could build his house on sand, thinking it was rock. When the rains came, the sandy foundation was revealed, and the house collapsed. Jesus compares those who hear His words but don’t practice them to a sandy foundation. How do the storms of our own lives reveal whether our foundation is of rock or sand? How can we have a foundation that will keep us stable and firm, even amid the worst of trials?

An Amazing Ride: Part 1

Note: The following firsthand stories are from Carol Boehm, wife of Wayne Boehm, former president of the Solomon Islands Mission. He now serves as manager of the Hope Channel in Sydney, Australia.

One of the things I have learned in the Solomon Islands is to plan big for God, no matter how few your resources. Some amazing things have been achieved during the past two years: a huge mission outreach, the setting up of a nationwide radio station, a health program that has reached more than 100 people and is exploding in popularity, smaller missions on every island, and large-scale renovations at Betikama Adventist College.

How was all this achieved with no money? God has moved on the hearts of so many people who have given generously. And He has multiplied; their gifts stretch further than we ever dreamed possible.

Another lesson I've learned is to never be ashamed of God. The Solomon Islanders talk openly about their loving Father. They never hesitate to say grace in public, to pray in a huddle at airports or wharfs, or to invite strangers to meetings or socials. Their boldness has been a silent witness to me.

Exciting things are happening at Savo, our closest neighboring island. We have tried in vain on several occasions to witness to a few of the villages there. The last time our pastor tried, he was expelled from the area. But then the annual Dorcas Federation met in Savo, and things began to change.

Every year dozens of Seventh-day Adventist Dorcas members from area churches visit a remote area where there is much need. They enter the village singing so that everyone knows they are there. They offer workshops on cooking, sewing, dyeing fabric, sewing machine repair, hospitality, and Bible study. One day is set aside for what they call "Highways and Byways." This is when they distribute bundles of clothing and food, and mix with the locals. The ladies turn the region upside down! While the women are being the hands and feet of Jesus, the men cook for them, enabling them to focus completely on their ministry. The women make friends, and the men follow up with meetings and baptisms. They make a fantastic team!

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 7:28, 29*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the central meaning of the Sermon on the Mount.

Feel: Experience the power and demands of the Master Teacher.

Do: Lead one's life according to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Central Message of the Sermon on the Mount

A What is the foundation of blessedness in the Christian life? To what is the Christian life compared (*Matt. 5:3–16*)?

B What is the relationship of Jesus to the law? How should a Christian relate to the law (*Matt. 5:17–28*)?

C What are the principles that should govern the daily life of the Christian (*Matt. 6:14–7:27*)?

II. Feel: Experience Christ's Demand and Power.

A How does one internalize the principles expressed in the Beatitudes? How would such a process affect one's physical, mental, social, and spiritual life?

B How does Christ's teaching of the law differ from that of the Pharisees? What impact does it have on your understanding of law, love, and grace?

III. Do: Pattern Your Life According to the Principles of the Sermon on the Mount.

A What does it mean to "be perfect as God is perfect" (*Matt. 5:48*)?

B How do we build our life around the following principles? Do not worry, do not judge, seek and knock, walk the narrow way, bear fruit, build on the rock (*Matt. 6:25–7:27*)?

► **Summary:** The Sermon on the Mount may be viewed as the constitution of the kingdom of God. In it we find the basic principles that govern the kingdom and a road map for the journey of its citizens. To discover these and live by them is the challenge that confronts the followers of Jesus.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 5:43–48*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The Sermon on the Mount places love as the basic principle of the kingdom of God. Inasmuch as God is love (*1 John 4:7, 8*), and because it is that love that sent the Son (*John 3:16*) to redeem humankind, all men and women are called upon to love the unlovable—“bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you” (*Matt. 5:44, NKJV*). Where there is such radical love, there reigns the kingdom of God.

Just for Teachers: *What is life?* is a question that has preoccupied humans throughout history. Long ago Socrates told the youth of Athens that an “unexamined life is not worth living.” After some examination, the Nobel Prize winning Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote: “I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.” The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, on the other hand, seemed somewhat puzzled, and exclaimed, “Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.” While an Indian mystic of recent vintage exclaimed, “Life is a jar of mixed pickles,” Shakespeare gave vent to the meaninglessness of it all: “Life’s . . . a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” After all these contrary ruminations, and many more like them, life still remains a great puzzle, mystifying human minds, until one meets the Man from Galilee. Jesus defined life in terms of the kingdom of God and set forth the principles of that kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount.

Opening Discussion: Begin the discussion with the quotes given above. Ask your class members if they have any additional thoughts on how life is often defined, either in profound or humorous terms. After a brief review, discuss the approach of Jesus to the meaning and purpose of life as defined in His famous sermon.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What does Matthew 5:2–12 say about life and its meaning?
- ❷ Jesus considered “love” as the center and supreme obligation of life (*Matt. 5:43–48*). What should we do to live life in all its fullness?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: It is hailed as “the essence of Christianity.” It is known as the “Magna Carta of the Christian kingdom.” It is called the “manifesto of the King.” No description, however great, can capture the uniqueness of the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon does not say anything about how we are saved. Its emphasis is on how a saved person ought to live. Approach the study from Christ’s expectation of how a Christian ought to live—blessedly, responsibly, lovingly.

Bible Commentary

I. Be a Christian: Live Blessedly (*Review Matthew 5:1–12 with the class.*)

The sermon begins with the blessedness of the Christian. Having come to the Savior, having experienced His forgiveness and redemption from sin, the Christian enters a new experience—from works that disappoint to grace that saves; from the kingdom of darkness and sin to the kingdom of light and righteousness; from the cursedness of death to the blessedness of life. This new life expects a new character profile that would totally align with the demands of the kingdom.

Jesus paints that profile in terms of eight principal marks of Christian conduct, each one followed by a blessing. These eight traits are not a buffet from which Christians can choose what is most desirable to them but are qualities that should be found in the life of every true disciple. That is to say, a Christian is meek and merciful, poor in spirit and pure in heart, mourns and thirsts, is a peacemaker, and is persecuted. Like Paul’s cluster of nine fruits (*Gal. 5:22, 23*), Jesus describes the ideal citizen of His kingdom as possessing all the eight traits. Thus, the Christian does not have the option of choosing one trait and denying another—all traits of grace must exist in Christians as an ultimate exhibition of true love and Christ’s saving grace. When that happens, blessings follow: believers receive the kingdom of heaven and inherit the earth; they are comforted and are filled; they obtain mercy, and they shall see God; they are indeed the children of God.

Consider This: The Greek word *makarios* is translated “blessed” in some versions and “happy” in others. “Blessed” underlines an objective experience bestowed upon the saved by God Himself. “Happy” is a result of being blessed—a subjective experience of the individual. Christians ought to be happy because they are blessed. We must experience God’s saving activity first; only after that can we be truly happy.

II. Be a Christian: Live Responsibly (*Review Matthew 5:13–42 with the class.*)

The Sermon on the Mount is a call to live responsibly in terms of what one should be and what one should do.

What should a Christian be? Jesus takes two of the simplest elements of life and commands Christians to be like them: salt and light (*Matt. 5:13–16*). Salt prevents corruption. Light dispels darkness. Both salt and light are given and expended for others, teaching us that the Christian life has no room for pompous self-centeredness: humility takes precedence.

Salt, whether as a preservative or as a flavoring agent, silently permeates the food and does its work. Likewise, Christians must permeate the lives of those within their spheres and be involved in their lives. Social involvement and spiritual witness are the infusing tasks from which Christians cannot escape. They cannot retreat to be hermits or choose to be purveyors of sensational outbursts of emotions.

Second, Jesus commands Christians to be the light of the world—to dispel moral and spiritual darkness; to be clear and transparent in character and confession; never to hide the light of truth, even in the face of hostility and oppression; to so shine in order that those in darkness will indeed see the everlasting Light that is Jesus.

What should a Christian do? is the second question of living responsibly. As the Author of the moral law, Jesus did not hesitate to demand of His followers absolute obedience to the law. “‘Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets.’” He said. “‘I did not come to destroy but to fulfill’” (*Matt. 5:17, NKJV*). “To fulfill” both in its Greek use and in the context of the Sermon on the Mount does not mean “to abrogate” but “to fill it,” “to enforce,” and “to show its full significance.”

Christ used a unique formula to expand and emphasize the requirements of the moral law—“It was said. . . . But I say.” Within that formula, murder is not simply the act of taking a life but being angry, hurting a person’s worth and dignity by calling him or her a “fool.” Adultery is no longer the outward act but also the inner lust. “An eye for an eye” must give way to the new principle not to resist evil with evil (*Matt. 5:17–42*). Thus is defined the Christian’s mandate for responsible living.

Consider This: Why does Jesus use salt and light to describe how believers ought to live their lives responsibly in fulfillment of the moral law?

III. Be a Christian: Live Lovingly (*Review Matthew 5:38–47 with the class.*)

Whichever way one looks at it, the Sermon on the Mount is first and foremost an exposition of love. That God is love is a biblical given. The Bible cannot conceive of God as anything but love. Grace, mercy, justice, providence, and all other qualities that characterize divine being and activity are possible only because of the primary quality of love.

Because God is love (*1 John 4:8*), it is axiomatic that God’s children should reflect that love. Jesus takes this axiom to its highest pinnacle and defines love as a relationship that governs not just those who share with us our faith,

our community, and our hope but those who do not. His teaching reaches a three-peaked summit: “ ‘love your enemies,’ ” “ ‘do good to those who hate you,’ ” “ ‘pray for those who spitefully use you’ ” (*Matt. 5:44, NKJV*). Christ’s definition of love insists not on reciprocity but transcendence—loving the unlovable, completely and unconditionally, and loving in relationship, in action, and in worship.

Discussion Question: Jesus’ command to lead a life of love concludes with one of the most difficult sayings of the Master: “ ‘Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect’ ” (*Matt. 5:48, NKJV*). What does this command to be perfect mean?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The Sermon on the Mount is an extraordinary description of the life of the citizens of the kingdom. In a new exposition of that life, Christ calls upon us to go beyond the letter of the law and live its Spirit. So, the Christian’s moral and spiritual life must transcend “thou shalt not’s” to embrace “thou shalt bes.” With this in mind, have your class discuss the following question for reflection.

Thought Question: What did Jesus mean when He said, “ ‘Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven’ ” (*Matt. 5:20, NKJV*)?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Matthew 6 and 7 contain several powerful truths expressed as negatives and as positives. Divide your class into two groups, one to discuss the negatives and the other the positives. Bring the groups together to share what they have learned from these commands.

Negative commands:

- “Do not lay up . . . treasures on earth” (*Matt. 6:19, NKJV*).
- “Do not worry” (*Matt. 6:25–32, NKJV*).
- “Judge not” (*Matt. 7:1–6, NKJV*).

Positive commands:

- “Pray” (*Matt. 6:5–13, NKJV*).
- “Seek first the kingdom of God” (*Matt. 5:33, 34, NKJV*).
- “Ask, . . . seek, . . . knock” (*Matt. 7:7–12, NKJV*).
- Build “on the rock” (*Matt. 7:24–27, NKJV*).