

Introduction: The Right Approach

Matthew 5:1-2

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TRANSCRIPT:

If you turn with me in your Bibles this morning to the Gospel according to St. Matthew Chapter 5, I read verses 1 through to verse number 12. Matthew Chapter 5, verses 1-12:

"And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'"

Let us pray. We come before You, O God, asking You for Your word which is everlasting, declared to be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul. And I pray, Lord God, that You would send Your Holy Spirit to take the word of God to press it deep upon the hearts of Your people and to give life to those who are in darkness, that they might come to the Savior who is the light of the world. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I want us to begin over the next few weeks a series in the Beatitudes, in consideration of this section, the first section of the Sermon on the Mount. Whether this will morph into a whole series on the Sermon on the Mount, I cannot tell you, but I only have as much peace as to go through with the first 12 verses at this stage. But I desire to take us on a journey through the Beatitudes, the beginning part of the Sermon on the Mount, with the importance of helping us understand how it is that we are to live as dis-

ciples of Jesus Christ, having considered who disciples are and what that looks like in terms of commitment. This is what it looks like on the ground, if we could say, in terms of practice, in terms of lifestyle, in terms of the way that the subjects of the Kingdom of God ought to behave themselves in godliness and in true holiness.

But today, I want us to at least consider an introduction to the Sermon, even though we may not consider the whole Sermon; this is the first part of the Sermon, and so what is relevant in the introduction to the whole Sermon is relevant even to the first 12 verses. And I want us to consider the way in which we should approach the Sermon. How is it that we should interpret the Sermon? How is it that we should apply the Sermon? There is an interpretive approach, but there is also a way in which our hearts, our spiritual lives, must be also prepared in the approaching of these texts of Scripture.

This Sermon is Jesus' most lengthy Sermon that covers three chapters, which spans more than even some of the New Testament epistles, if not longer than a lot of those epistles that only contain three or four chapters. This Sermon itself has a wide breadth. The subject matter in this Sermon covers a large range of things. This Sermon is perhaps one of the most challenging Sermons of our Lord Jesus Christ, one where externalism is targeted and smashed, if I could say, in a way like never before in any other Sermon that He has preached.

Some have suggested that the Sermon itself perhaps was taught for many days as people came up also on the Mount to hear Jesus, and He sat down and taught them. It is likely that it wasn't just a matter of as long as we read the Sermon, 15 or 20 minutes. It would have been much longer than that, of exposition and application and whatever it may be. But here is the substance of the Sermon. Here are the words of the Lord that has been kept for us to learn from.

What we are looking at here is what not only the Bible will show as one of the greatest Sermons ever preached, but what the history of the church has also recognized as the greatest Sermon ever preached. A man by the name of John Donne said, "All the articles of our religion, all the canons of our church, all the injunctions of our princes, all the homilies of our fathers, all the body of divinity is in these three chapters, in this one Sermon on the Mount." And obviously, he speaks with a hyperbole here, but he is suggesting that what is contained in this is in essence the heart of the Christian life, the heart of what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God. His great truths unfolded here.

Thomas Watson, who in his introduction on the Sermon on the Mount

or his commentary on the Beatitudes, says this to his readers: "Christian reader, I here present you with a subject full of sweet variety. This Sermon on the Mount is a piece of spiritual needlework, wrought with diverse colors. Here is both usefulness and sweetness. In this portion of Holy Scripture, you have a summary of true religion, the Bible epitomized. Here is a garden of delight, where you may pluck those flowers which will deck the hidden man of your heart. Here is the golden key which will open the gate of paradise. Here is a conduit of the gospel, running wine to nourish such as are poor in spirit and pure in heart. Here is the rich cabinet wherein the pearl of blessedness is locked up. Here is the golden pot in which is that manna which will feed and revive the soul unto everlasting life."

Here is a way chalked out to the holy of holies. And in this flowery language of Thomas Watson, he puts it well that so much is in this sermon, so much is there, and beauty is to be found in its pages. But how then should we approach this garden of delight? How should we come to this great charter of the Christian faith and of the Christian profession, this great truth outlaid in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Well, let's consider how we are first not to approach it, by the errors perhaps of people of the past. Many commentators have sought to handle this passage and have done so in such a way to reduce its forcefulness to those that should hear it. The first problem that we find in the way that an erroneous handling of this text of scripture is that some believe that this text of scripture was given for the purpose or should be used primarily for the purpose of social reform. Found mainly in the liberal theologians that simply try and say that this is the social gospel. This right here is what society needs: turning the other cheek. We need to apply these things in our society day to day without consideration of who it is written to and the power of the gospel that is necessary in order for those things even to be possible.

Jesus is not laying out things here that we should proclaim to unbelievers in such a way as that they would think that they can keep these things. The Bible teaches us that the only way that social reform will enter into a person's heart and ultimately into the society is through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And although the sermon contains the gospel, it is given to those who know God. It is given to those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, for He gathers His disciples together and He instructs them, as we will look at in a moment.

The gospel is not a moral system. It is a message that is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, and the hope of the world and of humanity is the gospel of Jesus

Christ, not necessarily the Sermon on the Mount.

Some consider this as an exposition of the Mosaic law, as if Jesus was trying to reestablish Moses to His disciples so that they might continue in the ways of Moses. And yes, although Jesus does exposit the Mosaic law, although He does expound parts of the Mosaic law and corrects misunderstandings that relate to the Mosaic law, the scope of the sermon goes beyond the Mosaic law. Here, this sermon deals with matters of prayer, matters of persecution, other things that go beyond the scope of the Mosaic law. Here is Jesus talking to those that will be part of the new covenant in His blood. He is talking to those that belong to the new covenant.

Also, some believe that this is a mere schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, and taken from verses like in this chapter, Matthew 5:20, "unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." And others go on to say at the end of the chapter 5, "be you perfect, even as your heavenly Father is also perfect," and say everything Jesus is teaching here is for one purpose: to show us that we are sinners.

And although the law of God and the truth of God and the commandments of God are for the purpose of showing us that we are sinners, Jesus was not giving this sermon so as to say you don't have to do these things. These things are not for you as believers in Jesus, but it's only there to convince the unbelievers that they are not followers and have true righteousness.

We must realize that the sermon, the main purpose of the sermon, is not to bring people to Christ in that way, although it may be used in that way. Jesus had a more specific purpose. And finally, but not least, is some believe that this sermon doesn't pertain to those that are in the church but it pertains to Jews that may be in the future kingdom will one day have this as their law.

And I say this, that there are some—I say some, not all—some, and perhaps some of the older dispensationalists had this view. This is not the view of many modern dispensationalists today, but there is still this view that is held, thinking that this passage of scripture is not for us but for those in one day in the future messianic kingdom. The old Scofield reference Bible says, "The sermon on the mount, in its primary application, gives neither the privilege nor duty of the church." Lewis Sperry Chafer, who was the co-founder of the Dallas Theological Seminary, said, "The Bible provides three complete and wholly independent rules for human conduct. One for the past age, which is known as a mosaic law and is crystallized in the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. One in the future age of the kingdom, which is crystallized in the sermon on the mount. One for the present age,

which appears in the Gospel of John and Acts and the epistles of the New Testament." And so, the one in his view of the future age of the kingdom, the one message for the future age of the kingdom, is this sermon on the mount.

But as I said, that is not held by a lot of dispensationalists today. One of the things that we must realize in this, what is insufficient about all these approaches, is that the sermon itself is directed to the disciples of Jesus Christ. In Matthew chapter 5, verses 1 and 2, let us read that together: "And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him; then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying." This was not addressed to the unbelieving society. Although later on in the sermon, you will find a great multitude that is astonished at His doctrine, that is challenged by His teaching, the primary audience that Jesus was addressing the sermon to were His disciples.

In fact, it could be argued in chapter 4, verse 25, that there were great multitudes that followed Jesus, and it seems like Jesus is trying to get away from the multitudes to address His disciples, so He goes up into the mountain, and His disciples come to Him, and there's no mention of the multitudes until the end. So much so as to indicate that what was happening here is Jesus was sitting with His disciples to instruct them, but hey, everyone comes to hear Jesus, the great teacher, and they came along, as it were, and they sat also to hear Him.

And therefore, it is not to unbelieving society, it's not necessarily primarily a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, but this is for those who know God. In fact, what you will find in this sermon is time and time again references to "our Father," "your Father," those that know God, those that belong to Him, that we are to seek first the kingdom of God. In fact, what you find in this sermon is the distinction between the believer and the unbeliever. He says to His disciples, "Do not be like the pagans because they pray like this way, but when you pray, pray like this," and "you shouldn't be seeking after the things of this earth because those things the Gentiles seek after, but you seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

And so we see that this is not necessarily for the reformation of society, but it's for the disciples of Jesus Christ. And secondly, we see that it is not necessarily for a future kingdom but primarily for us now. And why do we say this? Well, the sermon itself presupposes a world of enemies, a world of persecution, a world of anger, a world of adultery, a world in where we need to be praying, and that we do not enter into temptation but are delivered from the evil one. It proposes a world in which we are to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." So to restrict it to

the age of the future kingdom would be beyond even the context itself. In that age, as believed by dispensations, that Satan will be bound, and these things will not be unnecessary, necessarily, that we don't have to pray to be kept from the evil one because the evil one will be bound.

And so this is part of an understanding to this. But why is it important to go through this? What is the meaning or what is the significance of all this? Well, this is the reason why: If we adopt any interpretation that seeks to take us away from the severity of its relevance to us today, we will find that the sermon itself may not come with the same forcefulness that it should come to our hearts. If we think in terms of this was true for them, not for us, therefore we look at it as a third party, as it were, coming to it rather than saying, "This is God's word to us, and we must subject ourselves to its teaching as disciples of Jesus Christ."

And so, how should we approach this sermon? Well, we should approach it as disciples, as those that are Christians. The Christians were first called Christians at Antioch, and this sermon, yes, it was preached in the presence of a multitude, but it was directed towards the disciples. We should approach this sermon in the way the Lord Jesus told His disciples when He was about to ascend into heaven. He said this, "All authority on heaven and earth is given unto me. Go you therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And then He says this, "Teaching them, who? The ones that you make disciples of the nations, to observe what? All things whatsoever what I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Meaning that whatever Jesus taught His disciples was for the disciples after them and for those that will be there when He is with them to help them fulfill these things until the very end of the age.

And so let us come to this text of scripture as those that understand its severity and significance for us. We should come not only as Christians but we should become as ones that are being instructed. And this is the spiritual approach, not only an interpretive approach will help us approach the passage, but how we come in our hearts, how we to consider in the coming weeks the things that we're going to learn, what should be our approach to these things?

Well, if we learn of the master's purpose and we see the response of the disciples, we know exactly where we need to be in relationship to that. Look what it says in chapter 5, verse 1, "And seeing the multitudes, this is the master, Jesus, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him; then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying." What is the master's purpose? His desire is to teach His disciples, to teach them. What happens in this text of scripture is that Jesus sits,

and it's not because His legs are necessarily tired. In the scripture, when a rabbi sat, it means he was about to take an official teaching position. They sat in the synagogue and they taught the people. When Jesus sits in the same way as we would say that the man got up behind the pulpit, in a sense, what is the purpose for official teaching? In the same way, when Jesus sat, it was like a rabbi official teaching.

When Jesus was getting arrested in the garden, He said, "Did I not sit with you in this temple and in the synagogues, and you didn't arrest me then, and I was teaching you the word of God as I was sitting?" It says that in that passage of scripture. Also, in another text of scripture, He says that the scribes and the Pharisees loved to sit in Moses' seat, the idea is that they would teach in the seat of Moses. Jesus says, "I sat daily with you teaching in the temple." And so when we see here that Jesus is seated, He is deliberately trying to be in the posture of instruction, of teaching, of preaching to His disciples that they might understand His wisdom and word regarding the kingdom of God.

The Bible says to us not only that He sat but He opened His mouth. What is the significance? Of course, everyone has to open their mouth before they speak. Why say such a thing? It wasn't just opening your mouth for the sake of it; that is also another rabbinical idiom as to he's about to speak something of severity, he's about to speak something of revelatory nature, and here is Jesus, and it says when He opens His mouth, the idea is when He opens His mouth, you listen to the word of God. So the emphasis on Him sitting and opening His mouth is building upon the deliberation of Jesus to convey a weighty truth to His disciples that they must be ready to hear and to obey.

He opened His mouth; it's not a redundant statement, but it shows that there was something weighty that He was about to say, and then the Bible says, "and He taught them." He began there on the Sermon of the Mount to unfold to them the revelation of God. He there on the Sermon of Mount, with His disciples gathered around Him, to teach them. For Jesus, it wasn't just enough that He had called them out of darkness to be one of His among Him. Jesus saw that His ministry involved more than just saving His disciples but teaching His disciples. Jesus understands that the calling of the New Testament church is more than just making disciples but instructing disciples and teaching disciples, and here Jesus began to teach them. He began to unfold to them.

What was He unfolding to them? He was unfolding to them the revelation of God's word concerning the kingdom of God. The hearts and lives of those who are true followers of Jesus Christ. The mindset, the attitudes that should encompass those who love God. The attitudes and the way in

which we should live in light of the world around us and how we should pray and fast and seek God and live for the kingdom of God. How we should love our enemies and do good to those that spitefully use them. What was He doing? He was unfolding to His disciples that what you see in the lives of the Pharisees that regards externalism is not what it is to be like in my kingdom. But I'm concerned about your heart. All of the Beatitudes deal directly with the disposition of the heart, and Jesus says, "Oh, you say that I don't commit adultery." He says, "But I say unto you, whosoever looks at a woman with lust commits adultery already with her in his heart." He doesn't want the externalism. He wants the heart. He wants to know that the heart is pure. For blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. He wanted to teach them and to unfold to them, to challenge them, to help them see that rending your garments is not enough. But as Joel says, "Rend your hearts and not your garments." He was helping them understand what it was to be and what it is to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ. What that should look like. People under His rabbinical teaching. People under His law. Under the law of Christ. People under His covenant. How would they behave themselves as citizens of His heavenly kingdom?

How did He teach them? The Bible says in Matthew 7, if you want to turn there, how did He teach them? In Matthew 7, it says, "And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Here you see Jesus sitting down, opens His mouth with a weighty word, and He begins to unfold the word of God to His disciples. By the end of the sermon, the people stand in awe and are astonished at what? It wasn't His flowery oratory that was the very thing that satisfied them and made them astonished, was it? It was the fact that when He spoke to them, He spoke to them as one having authority.

What authority did Jesus have? The authority given to Him by God, as God's, as it were, final prophet, as one who was speaking the word of God, but even more than this, He was one empowered by the Holy Spirit to preach the word of God, and they sensed it. They knew it. This man doesn't speak to us like the scribes do. This man doesn't speak to us as the Pharisees do. How did they speak? They spoke as commentators. It was all about, "Yes, this is what the word of God says here, but this commentator says this, and this rabbi says this, and this rabbi says this," and they get into all the nitty-gritties of the controversy, and they spend their whole hours teaching the people of all those nitty-gritty controversies and all the differences of all the rabbis and schools of thought and all these things.

But Jesus wasn't concerned about what Rabbi so-and-so thought about the law. You don't see Him debating with the rabbis or talking about the commentaries. What you see Jesus doing here is proclaiming the revelation

of God as its own authority, ratified by God, and coming forth with power from the Holy Spirit, that the people understand that what is being said is coming with authority from God, and this is how He preached this message.

And where were the people? How were the people postured? This is what Jesus' intention was. This is how He was proclaiming helps us understand how we should approach it. If He is coming this way, how should we then come to His word? I love what it says in Matthew 5:1, "And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him." They knew that He was their Master. They knew that He was sent from God. They knew that He held and had the words of eternal life, and they followed their Master up the mountain and sat down as students under their Master who was seated with His mouth open, who began teaching them.

And there you see the disciples of Jesus sitting down as hungry students, hearing the weighty words of their Master, a readiness of mind. They were disciples. They came, and they sat down. Their Rabbi went up to the mountain; they came to sit and listen to Him. Here, will we not also do the same as we come to the preaching of God's word, as we look carefully at the Beatitudes of our Lord Jesus Christ, the opening portion of this sermon? Should we not approach this text in the same way that the disciples approached the words that proceeded out of their Master's mouth?

They came to Him, and they were seated, ready to hear the words of their Master. Should we not, as the people of God, come afresh to hear His word proclaimed, hear Him speak, as it were, now through the preaching of the word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit to our hearts regarding His truth, regarding His laws, regarding His word for us as His disciples? You say, "The Lord Jesus is not on the mountain; we're not here." He still thunders His voice by the power of the preaching through the heart, for the work of the Holy Spirit from Mount Zion, where He is seated now in heaven. He opens His mouth and teaches His truth.

As the Second Helvetic Confession says, "The preaching of the word of God is the word of God," as long as the preaching is faithful to the text of scripture, it is to be received from the faithful as the word of truth. We must come to God's word with discernment, but as we see it unfolded, as our conscience is convinced by the word of God that this is the truth of God, we should receive it as it is in truth, the word of God. Do we believe that the preaching of the word of God is the word of God? Do we believe that this time around, God's word is not necessarily about oratory, it's not necessarily about stylistic differences or intellectual debate or the comparison of commentaries, but as we come to the word of God, each Lord's day, as we gather together, every Bible study, as we come together to hear God's word,

as we share with one another and open God's word together, do we really believe that what we hear from the pages of scripture, faithfully expounded and proclaimed, is in fact God speaking to us today?

I'm afraid the church has settled for a low view of the proclamation of the preaching of the word of God, and we are satisfied with comments and thoughts but unaffected by the preaching of the word of God, without the soberness and sobriety, realizing that when the word is thundered forth, God is speaking, and He will hold us to account on the final day for the things that we have heard that are true that we have not heeded. We'll be judged by the word of truth. And if we hear the word of truth preached and taught, we are under its obligation to do it.

Do we believe that the old faithful word of God still saves and still sanctifies? In one sense, we didn't miss the sermon on the mountain. We didn't miss the sermon on the mountain. It was preserved for us here in the word of God, and God still ministers its very truths into the hearts of His people by the Holy Spirit when they come under the preaching or sound or reading or teaching of this text of scripture. Do we believe that? Sometimes we think, "Oh well, if I was in that day, then the word would have..." This is the word of God that lives, listens, and abides forever. It is the word of God that begets us to new life. We are brought forth by the word of truth. The power of the word has not been diminished, even though it has been unaccepted by people throughout and undermined by scholars throughout the world. The word of God is still God's final word and authority for us, and He still speaks in harmony and under the authority of that same word today by His Holy Spirit to our hearts.

But do we believe that when Jesus ascended up into the mountain and He sat down and He opened His mouth, will you be like the disciples of Jesus who come and open their ears and hear the voice of the Son of God and live? You see, on the mount of transfiguration, the Bible shows us that the excellent glory, God Himself, spoke from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear Him." Hear Him, and that instruction to hear Him is not just for those disciples; it is for us today as we hear Him preaching, as it were, to us the sermon on the mount, ministering by the grace of the Spirit of God to our hearts through the unfolding of the word of truth. But will we come with open ears and hear Him as His disciples?

Let us have ears to hear. Let us be as those that are described in the end of this sermon as those that hear His sayings and keep them, and they are like the wise people, the wise man that built his house upon the rock, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and their house stood firm because it was founded upon a rock. And as we hear the preaching of the word of God

and the sayings of Jesus unfolded to us, these are not nice mere flowery words to just hang on our wall; they are to be in our hearts. They are our life. They are our sustenance, and we must come with that expectancy to hear the voice of God, to hear Him speak.

As wise men, like these disciples, they find themselves sitting at the Master's feet. And as Moses went up to receive the law of God many, many years ago and to bring it down to the people, here the prophet like unto Moses ascends the mount with the revelation of God and tells us, His new covenant people, His disciples, how we ought to live as subjects of His kingdom. Will we hear His voice?

It was Charles Wesley, in closing, that wrote a hymn, and the last verse of that hymn touches on this Mary-Martha relationship that we see in Luke chapter 10, and he says this, he says, "Oh, that I could forever sit like Mary at the Master's feet, be this my happy choice, my only care, delight, and bliss, my only joy on earth be this, to hear the Bridegroom's voice." You're saying, "Oh, that I could forever sit like Mary at the Master's feet, this would be my happy choice. I'd be in heaven. I'd have heaven on earth. This is what it would be like, just to hear the Bridegroom's voice."

Let us come to God's word in the coming weeks, or however long it takes us, even as we come and hear the word of God, let us come like Mary to the Master's feet and say, "Lord, speak to me through the word. I want to hear Your voice." That is the way that we should approach this sermon, with this heart of expectancy. Let us pray.