

## Overview of the Sermon on the Mount

*LTBS Magazine article by Rev William McDermott*

The Sermon on the Mount must surely be in contention for the part of scripture which has been most misunderstood. Some teach that it is not for this present day at all, but will be applied in some future Kingdom period, but we must note that all the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are found elsewhere in scripture. To be consistent those other scriptures would also have to apply only in the future, and that will rob us of great parts of God's Word. Clearly this sermon was preached to people in the days of Christ who were meant to obey then and ever after.

Then at one time the so called Social Gospel taught that by applying the Sermon on the Mount in the world the Kingdom would be brought in. The idea was that we can apply these principles to life and produce the Kingdom of God on Earth, war will be banished and all our troubles. The violent history of the twentieth century put almost a complete end to this.

Others have taught "live like this and you will become a Christian". Their view comes to this, "All we need is the sermon on the mount. This is all we need to know. It has no blood theology, no doctrine, only ethics." However, no one can become a Christian by living by the Sermon on the Mount. Rather this sermon will humble us, and convict of sin as it probes our very thoughts and desires, and exposes sinful pride, anger and lust. Rather than correcting the law as some think, the Lord Jesus is restoring the law by removing misunderstandings imposed by tradition and revealing the spirituality of the law. It is not only murder which is wrong but the anger which leads to it; it is not only adultery which is wrong, but the lustful look which prepares the ground for it. Before this probing of the inner man by the law any notion that we can gain heaven by works must fall. Indeed it is those who have been so humbled and who mourn over their sin that are offered the comfort that we find in the beatitudes. So the truth is, we can only live like this because we are Christians and by the grace we find by faith in Christ. People may be misled into thinking that the Sermon on the Mount is an affair of "milk and water." It is far from it. Properly understood the Sermon on the Mount is one of the most searching and profound parts of scripture.

Putting the Sermon on the Mount in its context of the Gospel of Matthew, means that we must see it as speaking to us about the great theme of Matthew - the Kingdom of Heaven.

**Firstly, we can see that the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount describes the Citizens of the Kingdom.** In Matthew 5:1-16 we are told about their character and blessedness. We see that they have a deep sense of their own sinfulness and hunger to stand righteous before God. We see them comforted in the mercy they receive in Christ. We also see their relationship to the world in which they presently live, they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and yet are hated and persecuted by that world. And we must ask if this describes us? Have I seen my great spiritual poverty? Do I long to stand right with God? Am I clear that I can only do so through faith in Christ? And then, what about my relationship to the world?

**Secondly the main part of the sermon tells us of the Righteousness of the Kingdom.**

**(ch 5:17 - 7:12)** This is not a self righteousness as was that of the Scribes and Pharisees, but far exceeds it. It is firstly the imputed righteousness of Christ. It is secondly a righteousness which appears in how we live. The work of Christ for us will not lead us to antinomianism, but will lead to righteousness in our relationship to matters such as murder, adultery, divorce, not only in their fully developed form, but in the early forms of anger, lust and pride. It will also appear in how we speak to and relate to others, even our enemies. It is very easy for true believers to condemn the false interpretation of these teachings by some, but fail to apply them to our own behaviour. And that should be a great shame to us. Moreover we must remember that the righteousness spoken of in this Sermon on the Mount is not be a mere external show put on to impress people, and win their admiration for our giving, praying or fasting, but an unostentatious trust in and devotion to God and submission to his will. And it is all too easy for the best of us to forget this and begin to perform for to impress people. Does it not often affect our attitude to public prayer? We can begin to think more about the people around us than the God we address. Or perhaps we remind silent in seasons of public prayer because we fear not making a favourable impression on others. Oh the spirit of the Pharisee is not yet altogether dead in us. May the Lord help us.

**Thirdly the sermon concludes with earnest exhortations to enter the Kingdom.** From chapter 7 verse 13 to the end this is before us. We are urged to enter in at the strait gate. This is a command and one we should heed. We ought not to linger in indecision for there are many dangers. There is the danger of the false way. There is a wide gate and a broad way. It is very easy to be seduced down that road for it is very popular. And yet see the destination to which it takes you. It is the road to destruction.

There are other dangers before you. We are warned about dangers from false prophets. Some people like to quote the opening verse of the seven chapter which says, "Judge not, that ye be not judged." Yet that can never be interpreted in a way that contradicts this warning in verse 15. Our Lord did not contradict himself within a few verses. We are to beware of false prophets and that will mean we will use our critical faculties. We are to test all things by the scriptures. What Christ condemns is the hypercritical person, the person who almost delights in criticism, and is almost hoping to find something to criticise. We do not have to search very much to find people like that. There are other dangers, for example, that of being mere sayers rather than doers. The last four verses concludes this challenge by the vivid parable of the wise and foolish builders. The wise builder being the person who hears the Word of God and does it. The foolish builder being the person who hears but does not obey God's word. And the question must be this, which are you? Are you resting on Christ, his Work and his Word?