

Matthew 4-8: The Sermon on the Mount

With a focus on chapter 5

Matthew's account moves quickly from the story of the beginning of the ministry of Jesus (ch. 4) to the first great block of teaching (ch. 5-7), which is followed by stories of miraculous healing.

Withdrawal and Engagement

Prior to his public ministry, Jesus withdraws to the desert for forty days where he is tempted by Satan. Mark reports that action (Mark 1:12-13), but Matthew, like Luke (4:1-13), has a longer version of the encounter, with dialogue between Jesus and Satan, conducted with the aid of dueling scriptural texts. Satan's efforts to tempt Jesus to betray his mission lend themselves to more sermonic application. He suggests that Jesus seek to fill his physical needs (4:3-4); to force God's hand to protect him from any harm (4:5-7); and to gain wealth and power by worshiping him. After Jesus deftly responds, the devil departs.

After his experience, which echoes the experience of the wandering Israelites, Jesus, learning that John the Baptist has been arrested, goes to Galilee (4:12). Matthew marks that movement by one of his characteristic citations of scripture (4:15-16), construed as prophecy "fulfilled" in the events of Jesus' life. The text that Matthew cites, from Isaiah 9:1, addresses the northern Israelite tribes of Zabulon and Naphthali, in "Galilee of the Gentiles," on whom light has shone. The quotation from Isaiah does not reflect the situation in Galilee in the time of Jesus, when adherence to Jewish traditions was strong. Like the story of the gentile Magi, it does serve Matthew's purpose in hinting at the universal implications of the message of Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount

Teaching is for Matthew an essential dimension of who Jesus is and what his followers do. The cornerstone of that teaching is found in the great sermon that extends from 5:1 to 7:29. The sermon begins with an introductory section in three parts: a series of beatitudes (5:3–11), exhortations to be “light” and “salt” (5:13–14), and an explanation of the relationship of this teaching to the Mosaic Law or Torah, ending in a call to “higher righteousness” (5:17–20). The rest of the sermon also falls into three major sections. The first (5:21–48) consists of a series of “antitheses,” contrasting what was said in the Torah with what Jesus teaches. The second (6:1–18) focuses on practices of piety. Then follows a series of ethical teachings reminiscent of the book of Proverbs and other traditional Jewish wisdom teaching (6:19–7:29).

The Introduction to the Sermon (5:3–19)

Beatitudes are words of praise and congratulations, declaring someone to be “blessed” or “happy” for some reason. The grounds for such positive declarations might be situations or conditions over which one has no control, or they might be habits or virtues that one might cultivate. Examples of both types of congratulatory formulas are found in Israel’s sacred writings. Ps 127:4–5 congratulates a man on having a large number of sons:

“Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one’s youth.
Happy the man who has his quiver full of them.
He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.”

The implication of this Psalm is “Lucky you, man with many sons!” The beginning of the Psalter (Ps 1:1), exemplifies the other, more hortatory, type of “beatitude”:

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked
or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord
and on his law they meditate day and night.”

The implication of this latter beatitude is “Go meditate on the Law and abide by it!”

The beatitudes in Luke’s gospel (Luke 6:20-22) are more like the first type, congratulating those who are actually poor, hungry, or in mourning, because their condition will soon be changed, no doubt as the kingdom of God comes into being. Luke’s beatitudes are also paralleled by “woes” (Luke 6:24-26), which function as words of judgment on those who are wealthy, well fed, and prosperous by earthly standards. The beatitudes in Matthew, which do not have any corresponding woes, generally work like the beatitude in Ps 1:1. They encourage certain virtues or forms of behavior, poverty “in spirit,” meekness, thirst “for righteousness,” mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking. The virtues and actions encouraged here will be paralleled in the “antitheses,” which will give them further definition. The final two (Matt 5:10-11) depart from the pattern in offering words of congratulation on those who are persecuted, either “for righteousness” (v 10) or “because of me” (v 11).

Two vivid images continue the exhortation. Both “salt” (v 13) and “light” (vv 14-16) encourage disciples not simply to cultivate personal virtue, but to reach out and have an effect on others. Here as elsewhere in the gospel, mission is essential to the life well lived.

The introduction to the sermon concludes with a comment about how Jesus’ teaching relates to the Jewish Torah. This saying, found only in Matthew, probably reflects the concern of this evangelist to define himself and his community in relationship to his Jewish contemporaries. It strikes a note similar to the saying attributed to Jesus only in Matthew, at 23:2-3, which admonishes his disciples to do as the scribes and Pharisees teach, but not to do as they do.

Matthew's recollection of Jesus, in other words, encourages disciples to be good observant Jews. Matt 5:17-19 makes the same point. Jesus did not come to abolish Torah but to "fulfill" it (v 17). The verb used here is the same as the one Matthew regularly uses to introduce scriptural texts that serve as prophecies "fulfilled" in the life of Jesus, but here "fulfillment" has a different sense. The requirements of Torah are, in effect, intensified, in the teaching of the rest of this chapter. As v 20 states, the "righteousness" required of followers of Jesus is greater than that of the "scribes and Pharisees."

Before engaging in that teaching, Matthew has Jesus offer a word of criticism of anyone who "breaks" one of the least commandments of the Torah and teaches others to do so (v 19). It is interesting that such a person is not condemned or expelled from the fellowship of disciples, but is only to be "called least in the kingdom of heaven" (v 19). It is possible that the evangelist, writing sometime late in the first century, has in mind here teachers such as the apostle Paul, who famously taught that gentiles did not need to become circumcised in order to become part of God's new people.

The principle defined in this passage raises an interesting historical problem. How is it that Matthew's gospel, whose message seems to reaffirm traditional Jewish observances, became a gospel respected and valued by a Church that by the second century was composed predominantly by Gentiles who did not observe laws of kashrut or circumcise their children? We shall have to consider that question again as we learn more about Matthew's understanding of the Church.

The Antitheses

One answer to the question of what practices followers of Jesus should observe might be provided by the next section of the Sermon, which opposes a series of verses from scripture and teachings of Jesus. The opposition seems at first sight to contradict the principle of v 17 that Jesus came to “fulfill” the law or that of v 20 that a “greater righteousness” is required of his disciples. Yet the opposition does not generally deny the validity of the requirement of Torah. It instead enacts a principle of rabbinic teaching, enshrined in the Mishnah, a compilation of rabbinic teaching from the first centuries of the common era, produced in the early third century. Mishnah, Tractate *Pirke ’Avot* (“Sayings of the Fathers”) 1:1 reads:

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah.

The teachings of Jesus in this section of the Sermon “make a fence around the Torah.” Abide by his teachings and one will never transgress the Torah. One will never murder (Exod 20:13, cited in v 21) if one does not get angry or speak ill of another (v 22). One will not commit adultery (Exod 20:14, cited in v 27) if there is not lust in the heart (v 28). One will not swear falsely (Lev 19:12, cited in v 33) if one does not swear at all (vv 34-37).

Each of these first three antitheses is expanded with other sayings that enlarge on the basic principle. So the prohibition on anger is expanded with a call to reconciliation, which must take precedence over cultic observance (vv 23-26). Here too, Matthew presents Jesus teaching a principle enshrined in the Mishnah, in its reflection on what should happen on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Mishnah, Tractate *Yoma* 5:9, reports the opinion of R. Eleazar ben Azariah:

“From all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord” (Lev 16:30). – for transgressions that are between man and God, the Day of Atonement effects atonement; for

transgressions that are between a man and his fellow, the Day of Atonement effects atonement only if he has appeased his fellow.

Similarly the prohibition on lust, which will prevent adultery, is expanded with two other more general principles, an arresting saying that one should “cut off” a part of the body that causes offence (v 27–30). The second is a prohibition on divorce (vv 31–32).

The sayings that are added to the basic principle of the “fence” all probably enshrine traditional teachings that in some form go back to Jesus himself. The highly provocative, even hyperbolic saying about the offending member displays a characteristic feature of the teaching of Jesus and has an intriguing parallel in the saying about eunuchs in Matt 19:10–12. That Jesus prohibited divorce is attested in all the synoptic gospels (Matt 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18), and is a principle known to Paul as well (1 Cor 7:10–11). All of those who passed along Jesus’ strict saying wrestled with it in some way. Paul does so most explicitly, when in direct contravention to Jesus, he allows divorce in the case of the failed marriage of a believer and an unbeliever (1 Cor 7:12–16). Matthew, here and in ch 19, provides an exception clause; divorce is allowed in the case of “unchastity,” whatever precisely that means.

The last two antitheses seem to work in a slightly different way from the first three. Against the principle of retaliation, an “eye for an eye” (Exod 21:24–25), Jesus teaches that one should “turn the other cheek” and “walk the extra mile” (vv 38–42). The antithesis seems to be stronger here than in the first three cases, but the difference is more apparent than real. The principle articulated in Exodus is one of *limited* retaliation. One can only demand an “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth.” Any danger of surpassing that limit is avoided if one follows the advice of Jesus.

Unlike the others, the final antithesis does not involve a prohibition or a limit not to be exceeded. The command to “love your neighbor” (Lev 19:18, cited in v 43) from the Holiness

Code of Leviticus, is connected with a command not found in scripture to “hate your enemy.” While that is not a part of the teaching of Torah, it may reflect the long history of Israel and its struggles against its various hostile neighbors. Furthermore, the command to love the neighbor in Leviticus is focused on the people of Israel (Lev 19:18). The response attributed to Jesus is a command to love even enemies and pray for them (v 44), imitating the divine beneficence (v 45). The final line of the chapter also evokes the opening summons of the Holiness Code (Lev 19:2), which called on Israelites to be holy as God is holy. Matthew, perhaps also echoing the call to be perfectly loyal to God in Deuteronomy 18:13, has Jesus challenge his disciples to be “perfect,” that is to live by the “higher righteousness” that the Sermon enshrines. Luke reports a similar saying (Luke 6:36), but understands it as a call to be “merciful.”

The Practices of Piety

The admonitions about pious practices are framed by a concern to avoid ostentation. One must give alms, but in secret (6:1–4). One must pray, but in private (6:5–6). One should fast, but not with a clean face (6:16–18). The central admonition is expanded with a model prayer, the Lord’s prayer, in the form widely used in Christian worship today (6:9–13), which appears in a shorter form at Luke 11:2–4. Luke’s version of the wording of the petition in v 12, “forgive us our sins (or trespasses)” is often substituted for the Matthean “forgive us our debts,” which uses an image for sin common in Jewish tradition.

Proverbial Wisdom

The rest of the sermon consists of proverbial sayings and evocative images, many of them with parallels in Luke, but not in his Sermon on the Plain. Many call on disciples to keep

their priorities right, to amass “treasures in heaven” (6:19-21 // Luke 12:33-34), or to choose which master to serve (6:24 // Luke 16:13). The image of the lilies of the field grounds the admonition not to worry about earthly matters (6:25-34 // Luke 12:22-31). Somewhat more mysterious is the image of the eye as the “lamp” of the body (6:22-23 // Luke 11:34-36), but the admonition to keep the eye sound resonates with the overall theme of keeping proper values.

The teaching continues with more explicit admonitions, not to be judgmental, with its image of the mote and the beam (7:1-5 // Luke 6:37-42); to pray, with the imagery of the knock that opens the door (7:7-11 // Luke 11:9-13). At the heart of this list stands the golden rule (7:12 // Luke 6:31), expressed in the positive terms of doing to others as you would have them do you.

Warnings balance the positive admonitions. Disciples should not cast “pearls before swine” (7:6). If Jesus or the evangelist had an identifiable group in mind, he does not say so. Disciples should beware of false prophets, trees that do not bear fruit (7:15-20). Matthew may have in mind the messianic revolutionaries who emerged during the years before the revolt of the Jews against Rome, who are probably in view in Matt 24:4-7. Yet the lack of specificity in these warnings has enabled various applications throughout the history of the church. Disciples should also avoid simply bearing lip service to the principles of Jesus. As is generally true for Matthew, actions speak louder than words (7:21-23).

The sermon ends with a reassuring image of the obedient disciple as a house on a solid foundation (7:24-27 // Luke 6:47-49).

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the fundamental values or virtues that you take from the Sermon on the Mount?

2. What is the force of the imagery that appears throughout the Sermon? Does it reinforce or distract from the ethical teaching?
3. What are the most challenging teachings of Jesus in the Sermon?
4. How do you understand the relationship of Jesus' teachings in Matthew to the ethical teachings found in the Old Testament?
5. What is the image of Jesus that emerges from this summary of his teaching?

Recommended Reading:

L. Allen, "The Sermon on the Mount in the History of the Church," *RevExp* 89 (1992): 245-62.

Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination*. Companions to the New Testament; New York: Herder and Herder, 1999), 1-40.

Jerome Neyrey, "Vacating the Playing Field," *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 212-28.

Francois P. Viljoen, "Jesus' Teaching on the 'Torah' in the Sermon on the Mount," *Neotestamentica* 40 (2006): 135-155