

Notes for the Ones Called Out to Meet

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Sermon on the Mount: A New Call to God's Kingdom

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“When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And opening His mouth, He was teaching them...”

Matthew 5:1,2

Matthew 5-7, commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount, is the first of five major teaching interludes in the gospel of Matthew (5:1-7:29; 10:1-42; 13:1-53; 18:1-35; 23:1-25:46). **Matthew tailored his gospel record to appeal to Jews**, either new Christians or people interested in finding out more about Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Christians called the Christ (anointed-king) from God. **Thus, in presenting his story of Jesus, Matthew is very careful to emphasize and highlight those aspects of what happened that would have special meaning to his Jewish audience.** For example, **he begins his account by listing out an extensive, stylized genealogy of Jesus' ancestry.** He highlights Jesus' connection to Abraham, the tribe of Judah, and to David's family in particular. **The emphasis is clearly on establishing Jesus' legal lineage as being from David** (1:1-17; cf. I Sam. 7:12,16; Isa. 11:1-10), the greatest king of Israel's past. The stylization of the genealogy may seem obscure to us, but to a first century Jew, it would have been quite clear. Matthew's repetition of “fourteen generations” from Abraham to David, and from David to the exile, and from the exile to Jesus are not meant to be an exhaustive listing of every generation. This was a commonly accepted and recognized poetic technique. The number “fourteen” happens to be the numerical equivalent of the letters of the name, “David”, in Hebrew. Matthew uses this technique to direct the Jewish reader to his main point, that Jesus is the Son of David, the prophesied Messiah. By the time we get to chapter five, we see that **Matthew also identified a number of examples of fulfilled prophecy in the circumstances of Jesus' life** (1:23; 2:6,15,18,23; 4:14-16). **These were key evidences in support of the possibility that Jesus could, indeed, be the promised Messiah.**

As we come to the first of the five extended teaching sections in this gospel, it could be asked, “**Are there other lines of evidence which Matthew knit into his gospel in subtle ways, which would have been more apparent to his Jewish readers, but are not so obvious to us?**” The answer, of course, is that **there are.**

The fact that there are five “discourses” or extended teaching sections, is reminiscent of the Pentateuch, i.e., the first five books of the Old Testament which make up the heart of the Torah. Furthermore, the book of Deuteronomy was Moses' rehearsal of the history of Israel from the time of the exodus until just before his death. *Its purpose was to re-establish the covenant with a new generation.* It also was a collection of five sermons or messages.

Another signal, which would have been obvious to the first century Jew, has to do with the setting of this first discourse, “...He went up on the mountain...”. The Greek phrase which underlies our English NT translation is the *exact* phrase used in the Greek Septuagint translation of the OT in Ex. 19:3; 24:18; and 34:4. All three occasions were references to Moses going up on Mount Sinai. *This parallel would have been too direct to miss.* **In Exodus, the Mount Sinai experience was the offer of God's covenant with Israel to become His own people,** a people who were to be a set-apart nation, a Kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:3-6). Moses went up on Mount Sinai to meet with God, on behalf of the people. No one else was supposed to come near, or even touch the mountain. God came down on the mountain to speak *with him* the terms and conditions of the Kingdom He was establishing with the children of Israel. He was austere, distant, fearsome and separated from them. He spoke, and wrote the Law, or the Torah. In Matthew's account, some 1500 years later, Jesus (God-with-us – Matt. 1:23) went up on the mountain to speak out the words of *His* Kingdom, and to show how He had come to fulfill the Law. He went up on the mountain, but sat down as a teacher, and His disciples gathered around Him. He was *accessible, approachable, and engaged them* face-to-face. Yet, **Jesus was also calling out a people to walk in the power and reality of the Kingdom of heaven.**

The parallelism becomes more clear when you compare the *content* of what Jesus was saying. **He was clearly establishing a new Kingdom, ...or, more accurately, renewing the Kingdom-call to a new generation.** He was calling His followers to *a very different kind of walk* than what they had come to expect, however, in order to *truly fulfill God's plan* for His people. Jesus had been telling the crowds to “repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand”. **Now, He begins to speak more directly about that Kingdom, and what it would mean for those who would dare to identify with it and really pursue living it out.** Unlike Mount Sinai, He begins not with 10 commandments, but with 10 declarations of happiness. **These are not conditions, but promises for those who would be Kingdom-people,** focusing on the upside-down nature of God's Kingdom compared with the expectations of the world.

It is important to note that **Jesus' listeners were already outwardly part of God's Kingdom.** They were Jews, physically. God had made a covenant with them that, if they continued to walk in His commandments, they

would be His people and He would be their God. *The problem was that no one kept the Law perfectly*, and religious leaders had added literally *hundreds* of extra rules that were meant to clarify the Law, but only made it burdensome. **Many had felt that they could not possibly please God, and had all but given up. The good news Jesus had for them was that they could start over, clean and new ("Repent, and be baptized."), and that the way of God's Kingdom was open to them.** Jesus does *not* tell them to become believers in God, because they already *were!* **What He does call them to do is to follow Him and His teachings. He will not lower the standard of the Law (5:17-20), but He will cut through the religious gobbledy-gook that had added only confusion.**

At the heart of His message is a call to *put aside* the outward practice of religious duties *in order to be seen by other people* (6:1-18). There was too much of that going on. Those looking for human approval, or pride in performance in comparison with others, will *not* have intimacy with God. **What a person does in private, away from the eyes of others, reveals their true heart.** God sees those secret acts, and the longings of the heart. He will reward those who genuinely are seeking for Him. In the same way, materialism is not OK with Jesus (6:19-34). Just as in our time, there was way too much of that going on then, too. **We are not to focus on what money can bring, to inordinately seek wealth, greedily store it up for ourselves, or even be anxious for what material needs we may have.** Our Father in heaven knows what we need. We cannot be devoted to two masters. We cannot serve God and the god of wealth. If we seek God's Kingdom, and the righteousness that comes from Him, He will give us what we need (6:33). **Jesus also calls us to not compare ourselves with others, and to be very cautious about judging others,** knowing that the same standard by which we would judge others will be applied to us (7:1-5). We are to pray with confidence and perseverance, knowing that *our Father* in heaven will act on our behalf (7:6-11).

The focus of Jesus' message is to be doing the good works that come from good hearts. Those who *are* evil cannot *consistently* do good. Eventually their true character will become evident (7:15-20). Those who become followers of Jesus are the salt of the earth. **They must retain their unique flavor, or they will be of no benefit at all.** They are the light of the world, and must not hide their light. **Instead, they are to let their light shine before others so that they may see their good works and glorify God (5:13-16). Doing the will of the Father is the key.** *Knowing* the Scriptures counts for nothing, if one is not *living them*. Even religious behavior, miracles or what appears to be authority over the demonic means *nothing*, if that is only a compartment of a person's life (7:21-23). **Radical obedience to the Father's will, a whole life dedicated and activated for Him, is what Jesus was after.** This was *not* the typical path that most people were pursuing, ...not in the first century, or even now. It was a call to *turn aside from the crowd and get serious in following God, and His will.* Those who do *not* do this will find ruin and destruction. **Those who make the choice to follow the narrow path will find that it is difficult, not easy. For those who press on, however, life and fulfillment await them (7:13,14).**

Let's go back and look at the ten declarations of happiness (5:3-12). In contrast to the ten commandments (Ex. 20:1-17), where there are nine "Thou shalt not" statements, Jesus used the word translated as "Blessed..." nine times in this section of the sermon on the mount. (It was left to the hearers to identify the ten commandments, or the ten "blessings", by the context, because they are not expressed directly.) **Jesus is purposely contrasting what He is saying to His listeners with the very familiar ten commandments. What can we observe?**

First, the tenor of the OT "ten words" was strongly *negative*, and focused on the *person's behavior*. The tenor of the NT "ten words" is very *positive*, and focused on *God's promise*.

Next, with the OT "ten words" was *the warning of exclusion for those who disobeyed*. The NT "ten words" had *the promise of inclusion and blessing for those who seek to live for God*.

Finally, the *motivation for obedience* to the OT commands was *fear*. Those described by the NT "ten words" are *drawn by desire* for God and His Kingdom.

The word translated as "blessed" in this section is the Greek word, *makarios*, meaning "fortunate" or "happy". Because "blessed" has become a *religious word* to us, we tend to miss the actual thrust of what is being said here. "Happy" is a more clear rendering. **It does not necessarily refer to immediate pleasure or enjoyment**, as is evidenced by the first two of these statements, which describe emotional discouragement or pain. **"Happy" is, rather, a declaration of the outcome for those who fit these various scenarios.** In that sense, "fortunate" might be a good word to use, except that **the benefit is not from luck, but the activity of God in answer to His promise.**

As Jesus lists out what brings blessing, it is not at all what people might expect. The people who seem to get ahead in *this* world are polar opposites of what He describes. Those who succeed in this world system are the confident, positive, self-promoting, competitive, and self-sufficient. Often, they care little about God, or who they may run over climbing the ladder of success. **Jesus describes people who are the empty, wounded, unassuming, weak, powerless, broken, ...people who know they are in need, ...and who know they need God! They are the ones who are truly fortunate! As they seek God, they will find what they are looking for. They will be happy!**