

The Sermon on the Mount from a Kingdom Perspective

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May 24, 1999

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Sermon on the Mount* contains some of the most well known passages in scripture -- and some of the most difficult to interpret and apply. The Sermon deals with so many diverse issues that a unifying theme is not immediately apparent. However, it is clear that the gospel of the kingdom of Heaven forms the back drop to and is an integral part of this teaching.

The purpose of this essay to examine the Sermon from a kingdom perspective and explore its implications for Christian living today. The concept of the kingdom of Heaven will be briefly discussed before the content of the Sermon is analysed.

II. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

The term "kingdom of Heaven" is identical in meaning to the term "kingdom of God." The different names probably arose because Matthew, like many Jews at that time, avoided using the word "God."¹

Caragounis notes that the concept of the kingdom of Heaven is synonymous with the Johannine concept of "eternal life" and the Pauline concept of "salvation."² Therefore, the kingdom is primarily dynamic rather than geographic -- more of a "kingdomion" or reign.³ Entrance into the kingdom is not confined by a covenant or limited to the Jews⁴ but is open to all (cf. Matt 24:14).

The call to repent "for the kingdom of Heaven is near" is first proclaimed by John the Baptist.⁵ Later, Jesus Himself began to preach the same message⁶ and commanded His

¹ D A Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994) 13.

² C C Caragounis, "Kingdom of God/Heaven" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* eds J B Green, S McKnight & I H Marshall (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 425.

³ Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 13.

⁴ Caragounis, "Kingdom of God/Heaven" 420.

⁵ Matt 3:2.

⁶ Matt 4:17.

disciples to do the same.⁷ During Jesus' ministry, the kingdom of God is always spoken of as a future event. There appears to be no explicit reference to it as having come.⁸ Carson, on the other hand believes the New Testament clearly presents the kingdom as already here.⁹

Matt 12:28 (and parallel Luke 11:20) is the only saying in the synoptics that could possibly be construed to mean the kingdom has already arrived. However, the use of the aorist tense for the word translated "has come" (Gk. ἐγένεσθαι) does not necessarily imply a completed or perfected event. Caragounis points out that the aorist tense is sometimes used to emphasise the certainty and immediacy of a future action by describing it as though it had already occurred.¹⁰ In essence, this verse implies that the coming of the kingdom is so imminent that it may be considered as *virtually* here.¹¹ In addition, Jesus merely states that the kingdom has come upon the Pharisees -- He did not say or imply that the kingdom has come in all its fullness.

The present consensus is that the kingdom of God is both present and future. Those who emphasise the present aspect also allow for a future perfection or consummation,¹² and those who emphasise the future aspect also allow for some kind of present effect manifested in the ministry of Jesus.¹³

Thus the kingdom of Heaven was not some vague future hope, but definite and imminent, demanding immediate response.¹⁴ This is indicated by the preaching of John the Baptist¹⁵ and Jesus Himself:¹⁶ "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is near." ἤγγικεν ("is near"¹⁷) is in the perfect tense which suggests it is pending, waiting for people to respond. Therefore, the translation "at hand"¹⁸ seems to communicate the thrust of the verse much better. This means that the Kingdom of God has not yet arrived but is close by -- close enough for people to experience its impact and respond to its call. Already it is possible to have righteousness, peace, joy, health and the Spirit. When the kingdom comes there will be complete righteousness, absolute peace, overwhelming joy, no sickness or death and fullness of the Spirit.

To many Jews at the time of Christ, the kingdom meant a restored Israel free from Roman rule.¹⁹ But Jesus transformed the concept of the kingdom from a nationalistic hope to a universal spiritual order in which all humanity can find the fulfilment of its

⁷ Matt 10:7.

⁸ Caragounis, "Kingdom of God/Heaven" 425.

⁹ Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 16.

¹⁰ C C Caragounis, "The Kingdom of God, Son of Man and Jesus' self understanding", *Tyndale Bulletin* 40, 1989, 12-23. This is known as a *proleptic* or *futuristic* aorist. See D B Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan 1996) 563-564.

¹¹ Caragounis, "Kingdom of God/Heaven" 423.

¹² eg. Don Carson writes: "The New Testament makes it clear the kingdom of God has already arrived. A person may enter the kingdom and receive life now. Yet, the New Testament also makes it clear the kingdom of God will only be inherited in the future at the return of Christ." *The Sermon on the Mount* 16.

¹³ Caragounis, "Kingdom of God/Heaven" 422.

¹⁴ Ibid 420.

¹⁵ Matt 3:2

¹⁶ Matt 4:17

¹⁷ NIV.

¹⁸ KJV, ASV, RSV, NASB.

¹⁹ cf. John 6:14-15

ultimate desires for righteousness, justice, peace, happiness, freedom from sin and guilt, and a restored relationship with God.²⁰ The kingdom was not meant to come after a violent revolution, but to appear in a quiet, gentle and unobtrusive manner.²¹

The kingdom of Heaven was to a certain extent present in the ministry of Jesus, and since we are Jesus' disciples, the same effects should also be manifested through us. The Sermon on the Mount is essentially Christ's instructions to His disciples in regard to performing this task. Christians are meant to be ushering in the kingdom which, as Caragounis notes, "...functions as a precursor of the coming, perfected kingdom of God."²² Indeed, the kingdom of Heaven forms the heart of Jesus' teaching, and is one of the main themes of the Sermon on the Mount.²³

III. THE MESSAGE OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Pentecost argues that the Sermon on the Mount should be viewed as revealing God's holiness and therefore is still applicable as a guide for today: "...it is a revelation of the righteousness of God and reflects the demands that the holiness of God makes upon those who would walk in fellowship with Him."²⁴ Carson argues that it is concerned with entering the kingdom²⁵ which is equivalent to entering into life.²⁶ Ultimately, however, it describes the kind of behaviour that Jesus expects of His disciples who are citizens of the kingdom.²⁷

1. *The Beatitudes (5:3-12)*

In contrast to the parallel in Luke 6:20-23, where Luke appears to focus on the current physical state of the citizens of the Kingdom, Matthew focuses more on the current attitudes of those who will be citizens of the Kingdom and how God will reward these people. The Beatitudes affirm that the disciple of Christ is "blessed" *now*,²⁸ and promises rewards in both the present and the future to those who display these attitudes.

But what does it mean to be "blessed"? This word has also been rendered as "happy" but neither gloss really communicates the depth of its meaning. Rather, *Makaríoi* describes the deep sense of contentment that comes from experiencing God's approval and favour.²⁹

²⁰ Caragounis, "Kingdom of God/Heaven" 429-430.

²¹ Ibid 420.

²² Ibid 422.

²³ Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 17.

²⁴ J D Pentecost, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah, 1980) 17.

²⁵ Matt 5:3, 10, 7:21

²⁶ cf. Mark 9:45, 47. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 14.

²⁷ J R W Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Leicester: IVP) 24.

²⁸ *Makaríoi* stands in the predicate position.

²⁹ "pertaining to being happy, with the implication of enjoying favorable circumstances" J P Louw and E A Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989); "blessed, fortunate, happy, usu. in the sense privileged recipient of divine favor." W F Bauer, F W Gingrich and F W Danker, *A*

The “poor in spirit” have a deep sense of contentment because the Kingdom of Heaven is in their possession. The “poor in spirit” are those who are humble before God. It is not those who stoop lower than they really are, but those who stand at their real height against the majesty of God and recognise the smallness of their own greatness. True citizens of the kingdom are those who are truly humble before God. The kingdom is given to such people because they know they can offer nothing and do not try.³⁰

Those who mourn have a deep sense of contentment because God will eventually comfort them.³¹ In this context, “mourn” does not refer to mourning for the dead, but to being broken with grief over one’s own sin and the sins of others.³² These people will be comforted because Christ will eventually return to save His people from their sins once and for all.

The meek have a deep sense of contentment because they will eventually inherit the earth. The word translated “meek” (Gk. *praieij*) means “gentle”³³ -- those who are humble and free from malice. These people will eventually inherit the new earth.³⁴

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness have a deep sense of contentment because God will eventually satisfy their craving. These people constantly strive for both personal and corporate righteousness and will not give up until righteousness is achieved and justice is done. With so much unrighteousness and injustice in the world, such people are in desperate need.

Those who show mercy have a deep sense of contentment, because God will show them mercy. Mercy is the withholding of judgement that has been thoroughly deserved. Since everyone is sinful and deserves death³⁵ God expects His people to show mercy to one another in the same way He has shown *us* mercy. If we are not merciful to others who are no more sinful than we are, how can we possibly expect God to show us mercy?³⁶

The “pure in heart” have a deep sense of contentment because they see God more clearly. The term “pure in heart” refers to the inner core of a person -- their thoughts, desires and motives.³⁷ It is only when our thoughts are pure, desires are wholesome and motives are righteous, that God will reveal more of Himself to us. Without personal holiness, one cannot expect to see God.³⁸

Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

³⁰ cf. D A Carson, *Matthew* (EBC)(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984).

³¹ *parakl hqhōntai* is a divine passive - God will comfort them.

³² cf. 1 Cor 5:2. “to experience sadness or grief as the result of depressing circumstances or the condition of persons.” - Louw and Nida.

³³ “pertaining to being gentle and mild” - Louw and Nida.

³⁴ cf. Rev 21:1

³⁵ cf. Rom 3:23, 6:23

³⁶ cf. James 2:13

³⁷ D A Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (WBC) (Dallas: Word, 1993) 94.

³⁸ Heb 12:14

The peacemakers have a deep sense of contentment because they will be called God's sons. Not only is peace a constant concern of both testaments,³⁹ Carson points out that it also carries messianic overtones.⁴⁰ Indeed, Jesus is clearly identified as the "Prince of Peace."⁴¹ The term "sons of God" communicates the idea of people who reflect the character of God. The peacemakers reflect God's character and to this extent, they will be identified as God's very own.

Those who are persecuted because of righteousness have a deep sense of contentment because the kingdom of Heaven is in their possession. In today's world righteousness is not only rare it is intolerable and those that stand up for it will inevitably be persecuted for doing so. Yet we are in good company when this happens. Persecution has always fallen on the righteous and it appears to go hand in hand with Christianity. If a Christian is not experiencing some form of persecution, then it can be legitimately asked whether that person is behaving as a Christian should behave. Carson rightly comments: "if the disciple of Jesus never experiences any persecution at all, it may fairly be asked where righteousness is being displayed in his life."⁴²

2. *Salt and light (5:13-16)*

Salt is preservative and flavour enhancer. The picture here is that the world will not be preserved if Christians are not acting as salt. In other words, it is likely to get more and more rebellious. Rather, Christians are meant to be hindering spiritual and moral decline. If Christians consistently live out the beatitudes, then they will inevitably have a significant influence on society.⁴³ However, as Carson warns: "The purpose of salt is to fight deterioration and therefore it must not itself deteriorate." If this happens the salt will have no affect and is basically useless.⁴⁴

Christians are also meant to be "the light of the world." In places far from built-up areas, the darkness is often total⁴⁵ but if a city or large town is nearby, the light it generates is often reflected off the clouds, enhancing visibility. The metaphor is similar to that of salt. Christians are meant to be people that show the way and illuminate the truth. Living such a life brings praises to God because people will recognise that your good deeds are done as a result of your Christian faith.

3. *The Law and righteousness (5:17-20)*

Jesus affirms that He did not come to abolish the Law. He adds that not even the smallest element will disappear until everything is accomplished. Yet other New

³⁹ Prov 15:1, Isa 52:7, Luke 24:36, Rom 10:15, 12:18, 1 Cor 7:15, Eph 2:11-22, Heb 12:14, 1 Pet 3:11

⁴⁰ Carson, *Matthew*.

⁴¹ Isa 9:6-7

⁴² Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 31.

⁴³ Ibid 33.

⁴⁴ Ibid 34.

⁴⁵ Provided there is no moon or it is obscured. This is why viewing the stars is best done in the country.

Testament writers appear to say the opposite.⁴⁶ The question of whether Christians should follow the Old Testament law must be asked, and if not, why not?

Some commentators make a distinction between the ceremonial, moral and civil aspects of the Law, and suggest that Jesus was only referring to the *moral* component. The problem with this threefold distinction is that nowhere in scripture is it ever made and the phrase “not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen” indicates the entire written Law not just the moral parts.⁴⁷ In addition, true morality relates to what is fundamentally right and wrong. As Carson points out, whatever God approves is fundamentally right and whatever He forbids is fundamentally wrong. Therefore if God approves various ceremonial sacrifices then people are morally bound to practise them. If Jesus is referring to law which God *always* approves, the He is arguing in circles, since such law never changes.⁴⁸

Rather, Jesus is referring to the prophetic function of the Law. He has not come to abolish the Law and prophets because they all point to Him. They remain in force until everything to which they testify in regard to Him has been fulfilled.

The reference to “these commands” is not in regard to the Old Testament Law, but to the following instructions regarding the kingdom of Heaven,⁴⁹ Here, Jesus outlines the Christian’s high calling to righteousness and warns that it must exceed the pretentiousness and showiness of the religious leaders.

4. *Polemic against the religious leader’s teachings (5:21-48)*

Jesus is not negating the Old Testament, but the erroneous interpretations and teachings of the religious leaders. This is indicated by “You have heard that it was said...” rather than “It is written...”⁵⁰ Jesus repeatedly summarises a particular teaching of the day and then calls his listeners to go beyond it, in order to meet the supreme righteousness that God demands.

Jesus affirms that there is little difference between hatred and murder. Hatred and treating others with contempt are the kinds of attitudes that lie at the root of murder.⁵¹ People should not think they have satisfied the Law by not physically killing someone. The punishment for those who are consumed with wrath, malice, spitefulness and contempt is the same for those who murder.⁵²

Integrity, unity, purity and love are more important than religious duty or pretentious worship. Matters between fellow Christians should be settled before they go too far. Personal reconciliation should be sought with urgency.

⁴⁶ cf. Mark 7:19, Heb 8:13, 10:1-18

⁴⁷ Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 39.

⁴⁸ Ibid 39-40.

⁴⁹ Ibid 42.

⁵⁰ Ibid 44.

⁵¹ “without cause” (Gk εἰρη) is a textual variant which was most probably inserted early on to soften the command. See B M Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd edition), United Bible Societies, 1994.

⁵² Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 46.

Sin must be dealt with drastically. It must not be pampered to or flirted with, but must be hated and eradicated.

Marriage should not be thought of as disposable. Divorce is unacceptable and those who do so and remarry commit adultery and their new partners also commit adultery.

The discussion in vv. 33-37 is not a prohibition against taking oaths in a court of law or the like, but a denunciation of the Jewish practice of taking oaths that were not always binding. This practice encouraged making evasive oaths or oaths that could be used to justify lying.⁵³

The discussion in vv. 38-42, raises the question of whether an evil person should be resisted? Don't Christians have a moral obligation to resist an Adolf Hitler or a Saddam Hussein, or a rapist or murderer? However, if a person was in view, one would expect an anarthrous noun instead of the articular τῷ ἰσχυρῷ. Therefore, it most likely refers to an "evil deed."⁵⁴ Christians should not repay evil deeds with evil deeds but with kindness and generosity.

But should Christians give to everyone who asks? Obviously, if handouts were given without discrimination, resources would quickly dry up and there would be no opportunity for further assistance. Therefore, the implication here is to give to those with a *genuine* need.

Christians must also be prepared to be wronged rather than enter a law-suit with another Christian. Jesus is saying that His followers do not have any right to retaliate, to be selfish with money, time or possessions, or to demand their legal rights.⁵⁵

In regard to loving your neighbour and hating your enemy, Carson points out that nowhere in the Old Testament does it say "Hate your enemy."⁵⁶ Rather, Lev 19:18 says "Love your enemy" and Jesus reaffirms this teaching.

This section climaxes in the exhortation to "Be Perfect" (v. 48) since God our Father is perfect. Thus the moral and ethical standard of the kingdom is set to perfection.

5. *Pretentious and hypocritical spirituality (6:1-8, 16-18)*

In vv. 1-8, Jesus warns that those who do "acts of righteousness" in order to be seen by others, will not be rewarded by God. This appears to contradict 5:13-16, where we are instructed to let our light shine "before men," so that they may see our good deeds. However, what is in view here is the motivation for displaying our good deeds. It is good and right to demonstrate Christianity before men so that God is glorified. But if our motivation is to gain popularity, or to seek others' praises, or to show off, then that is all we will receive.

⁵³ Ibid 53.

⁵⁴ Hagner 130-131.

⁵⁵ Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 57-58.

⁵⁶ Ibid 58.

6. *The model prayer (6:9-13)*

In vv. 7-8, Jesus comments on how the pagans pray: they babble many words because they think God will hear them better. Jesus warns his followers not to pray like such people and presents an example of *how* to pray not *what* to pray. It is a model for prayer, not an institutionalised statutory prayer.⁵⁷

Jesus admonishes us to pray confidently as a son to a father.⁵⁸ Carson rightly notes that if we pray “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” then we are committing ourselves to (1) learn all we can about God’s will by studying the scriptures, and (2) do God’s will!⁵⁹

7. *Forgiving others (6:14-15)*

These verses appear to be an expansion of v. 12 of the Lord’s Prayer. Both verses essentially say the same thing. While v. 14 is phrased positively, v. 15 reiterates the same truth negatively. Hagner notes a form of chiasm present in the verses: in v. 14 *paraptwmatata* is the object of the protasis while in v. 15 it is the object of the apodosis.⁶⁰

Both these observations are indicative of emphasis. How can a Christian who has been forgiven of so much, fail to forgive a fellow Christian for what can only be regarded as relatively insignificant offences when compared with one’s own sin against God?

8. *Singleness of purpose and undivided loyalty (6:19-34)*

The whole body/person is pictured as a room or house. The purpose of the eye is to illuminate the room, making it full of light. Therefore, the eye is the source of light in an otherwise windowless room.

Our eyes must be “good,” but the Greek word is actually *aplouj*, which normally means “simple” or “single.” Since the two metaphors in the surrounding context teach that an undivided loyalty to God is required, Carson suggests the rendering “single-minded purpose.”⁶¹ If our eyes are focussed on a single thing (ie. the kingdom of Heaven) then our whole person will be enlightened. On the other hand, a person who thinks he is full of light when he is not, has an even greater form of darkness.⁶²

⁵⁷ R A Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Dallas: Word, 1982) 308.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 74. See also Guelich 310.

⁶⁰ Hagner 152.

⁶¹ Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 86-87.

⁶² *Ibid* 87.

9. *Judging others (7:1-5)*

This is not a prohibition against making any judgements at all or holding any opinions about right or wrong.⁶³ Indeed, Matthew clearly indicates that judgement is absolutely necessary in various circumstances.⁶⁴ “Judge” (Gk. *krihw*) is used in the sense of passing judgement on someone or adopting a judgemental, condemning attitude.⁶⁵ A judgmental attitude excludes us from God’s pardon because it demonstrates an unbroken spirit.⁶⁶ Note that *krihw* is a divine passive -- it is God who judges and it is His prerogative alone.⁶⁷ Again, this does not mean that we should cease to point out or expose sinful behaviour and attitudes in fellow Christians, but it does imply that we need to deal with our own faults first, before we begin helping others.⁶⁸

10. *Wasting time and effort (7:6)*

Jesus admonishes His audience not to give dogs sacred things and not to throw pearls to pigs. Given the context, “pearls” and “what is sacred” most probably refer to the kingdom of Heaven.⁶⁹ “Pigs” and “dogs” were Jewish put-downs often used to refer to Gentiles and heretics.⁷⁰ However, these terms cannot be referring just to Gentiles, since Jesus later commands His disciples to go make disciples of all the nations (Matt 28:19). Rather, it concerns all those who are unresponsive to the gospel. Jesus is exhorting His disciples to stay focused and warning them not to waste time and effort on an unresponsive person or group. If people are hostile to the gospel then it is best to move on to those who *will* receive it (cf. Matt 10:14).

11. *Making requests to God (7:7-11)*

God is gracious and generous, and His resources are at the Christian’s disposal. If Christians keep on asking, God will keep on giving. If Christians keep on seeking, they will eventually find what they are looking for. If Christians keep on knocking, God will keep on opening the door. The open-ended form of the statement does not imply that *every* request will be granted, but that God’s capacity to give is unlimited.

If we expected our earthly fathers to give us good gifts, how much more should we should we expect our heavenly Father to give us good gifts?

⁶³ Hagner 169.

⁶⁴ Matt 7:15, 10:11-15, 18:15-17)

⁶⁵ cf. Rom 14:10

⁶⁶ Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* 109.

⁶⁷ Hagner 169.

⁶⁸ Ibid 170.

⁶⁹ Ibid 171. Guelich (354) suggests “what is sacred” refers to food sacrifices in the Old Testament. Others, citing the vague parallel in *Didache* 9:5, have suggested it refers to the Lord’s Supper. However, both alternatives do not fit the context.

⁷⁰ Guelich 355.

12. *The Golden Rule (7:12)*

The *Golden Rule* is one of the most well know verses of scripture and is the benchmark for the ethics of the kingdom. Hagner comments: “To act in this manner, in constant deeds of love, is to bring to expression that to which the law and the prophets pointed. That is, a world where only good is done to others involves by definition eschatological fulfilment...”⁷¹ This the goal of the kingdom.

13. *The wide and narrow gates (7:13-14)*

Jesus exhorts His listeners to go through the narrow gate and take the narrow road. The gates and their corresponding roads refer to the choices we make in life and the general direction in which we head. The terms “narrow” and “wide” imply the roads are “difficult” and “easy” respectively.⁷² Given the great demands of the kingdom, it is not difficult to understand why so few take the narrow road. Those who do, enter the kingdom of Heaven. Those who do not, will ultimately be destroyed.

14. *Recognising false prophets (7:15-20)*

Christians are to watch for false prophets. Although, such people seem harmless on the outside they have the potential to cause great harm. These prophets will ultimately be exposed by the fruit they produce, since it is impossible for a bad tree to bear good fruit.

15. *The true test of a Christian (7:21-23)*

Not everyone who pledges allegiance to Christ is a citizen of the kingdom. Rather, only those who actually obey God will enter the kingdom. It is tragic that many people will stand before God on the day of judgement thinking they are part of kingdom when in fact they are not.

16. *The wise and foolish builders (7:24-27)*

To conclude His sermon, Jesus uses the analogy of a wise and a foolish builder to demonstrate the need to put into practice what He has just taught them. A person who does practice His teaching is like a wise man who built his house on a rock in order to have a firm foundation. A person who disregards His teaching is like a fool who built his house on unstable sands. The rain, streams and wind refer to God eschatological judgement and wrath⁷³ and when they beat upon the houses, the one built on the sand will collapse.

⁷¹ Hagner 177.

⁷² Stott 194.

⁷³ Hagner 191.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Sermon on the Mount presents the high ethical standards of the kingdom of Heaven. There is no room for “cheap grace.” Rather, Christians are called to exhibit exceptional behaviour that clearly distinguishes them from non-Christians. Although the call to “Be perfect” is in reality unattainable, God still expects us to try and get as close as possible. In the same way that the kingdom is “here now” but “still to come,” perfect Christians should also be “here now” but “still to come.”