

The Sermon on the Mount from an Exegetical Perspective

WILLIAM B. TOLAR, THD



INTRODUCTION

Great multitudes began following Jesus when they saw his miracles and heard his magnificent parables (Matt. 4:23-25). While many were genuinely committed believers, others were probably curiosity seekers. Jesus wanted to make it perfectly clear that following him demanded more than superficial infatuation. A crucial issue in the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is the identity of Jesus' audience. Was he speaking *only* to true followers or was he addressing a congregation which included non-believers? This becomes a critical hermeneutical matter especially in Matt. 7:13-27.

In 5:1 we are told that "His disciples came to Him" (NASB). Jesus never called his followers "Christians." His favorite word was "disciple." This is the English translation of the Greek word *mathetes* which can also be translated as "learner," "pupil," or "student."

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Christians call this a “sermon” but Matthew actually uses the Greek word for “teach.” Jesus literally began “to teach” them (5:2).

CHARACTERISTICS OF KINGDOM CITIZENS

The early verses of the sermon or teaching are indelibly imprinted in the minds of many Christians because of the repetitious use of “blessed.” The word “blessed” used in 5:3-11 translates a Greek word which can be rendered “fortunate” or even “happy.” In Greek it is *makarios*.

2

In 5:3 Jesus was not telling a spiritually lost crowd that they could be saved by “feeling” poor in spirit. This was not a call for self-generated self-depreciation. Jesus was principally speaking to his disciples. Fortunate are we when we come to the realization of our own spiritual bankruptcy and turn in total dependence to God. When we do, Jesus gives us his spiritual adequacy and thus the “kingdom of heaven” becomes ours. Notice the present tense of the verb. Genuine followers of Jesus *are* characterized by “poorness of spirit.”

There may be a two-fold dimension in 5:4 to the blessedness of those who mourn. It surely must begin with and include a mourning for one’s own personal spiritual need. Some interpreters see this as primarily a mourning over the lostness of unbelievers. People do not “mourn” about the spiritual condition of others until they first become burdened for their own sins.

The lost world has never regarded meek persons as “blessed” but Jesus does (5:5)! The Greek word translated “meek” can be rendered as “gentle” or “humble.” Jesus says they will inherit the earth. The world’s opinion is that the aggressive, the ambitious, and the highly-motivated “go-getters” are the ones who will inherit the earth. But Christlikeness will ultimately triumph!

Jesus used a powerful and meaningful teaching tool in 5:6 when he talked about “hunger and thirst.” Hunger haunted the ancient world. Drinkable water has always been scarce in the hot, arid Middle East. Jesus used these strong biological drives as metaphors to describe a craving for righteousness. When we desperately crave righteousness, we will be satisfied. In fact, our Lord is teaching that such a powerful craving is the mark of a true Christian!

In interpreting 5:7 we must remember that all human beings are guilty of sin and deserve the just punishment of a righteous God, and so we all stand in awesome need of God’s mercy. We can receive his mercy if we are willing to admit our sins, repent, and throw ourselves upon his goodness. Then, because we have received his mercy, we will be

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

merciful. There is some kind of a cause-effect relationship. This is not crass and legalistic, but is moral and spiritual. Those who claim to be disciples of the infinitely merciful One, must show themselves merciful.

In 5:8, Jesus declares that we must be pure in heart in order to see God. Sin pollutes the human heart and blinds the spiritual eye. Our lives are polluted with greed, lust, hate, and unbelief. Only through the purifying power of Jesus Christ can we “see” God as we ought. We need to pray daily for his cleansing power so that we can continually see his majesty, glory, and will.

Jesus is the prince of peace. When he comes into a person’s life, he brings an end to the enmity between the sinner and God, producing true peace. Since Jesus is the peace-maker and the peace-bringer, is a person a true disciple if that person is not a peace-maker? Those who profess to be his followers are to be peace bringers also. They are “blessed” in so doing.

Verses 10-12 are closely connected. Each one has the word “persecute” or “persecuted” in it. Some interpreters see 5:10 as a separate beatitude from 5:11, but others see them as one beatitude even though the word “blessed” occurs in both verses. The reader will want to study the tense of the verbs in 5:11. Some reviling and persecuting were going on contemporaneously and some would happen in the future. It was not a matter of *if*, but rather a case of *when*.

Jesus did not tell his followers simply to “grin and bear it” when they were persecuted. He commanded them to “rejoice and be glad!” To suffer righteously and joyfully for one’s commitment to Christ is to join the company of the great prophets of old.

THEIR INFLUENCE IN THE WORLD

After describing the characteristics of his true followers in 5:3-12, Jesus next uses two metaphors to show their influence in the world. They are to be salt and light. Both of these are active agents. Whereas earlier his followers were “to be,” now they are “to do.” Their nature as kingdom citizens will show itself in their actions.

Salt (5:13) is essential to life. Few things are more basic to human existence. There are many characteristics of salt which Jesus could have had in mind. In Jesus’ day, salt was associated with many qualities.¹ Did he have one primary quality in mind or a combination of qualities?

¹ Salt was an extremely valuable commodity in the first century. It was called divine by the Greeks, and the Roman soldiers were often paid their wages by being given rationed amounts. In fact, the English

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Salt had religious significance for the Jewish people. Their sacrificial system required it according to Lev. 2:13 and Ezek. 43:24. Salt was used in binding covenants and indicated loyalty, commitment, and fidelity.

Surely part of what Jesus was intending to teach was based on the fact that salt adds flavor to food. Some interpreters think flavor is the most obvious quality of salt. Was Jesus therefore saying that his followers were to be the spiritual seasoning or flavoring element in a pagan world? While many interpreters would answer “yes,” John Broadus states the idea that Christians are to save life from being flat and stale seems “strained” and in little harmony with the general tone of the sermon.²



While acknowledging that Jesus was thinking of flavor, most commentators insist that he also had in mind the preserving power of salt. Fresh meat in the hot Mediterranean climate quickly spoiled unless it was eaten, salted, or dried. In order to preserve meat from decay, the salt had to come into direct contact with the meat and had to lose itself in the process. Thus Jesus could have had in mind that Christians were to be the life-saving element in a spiritually decaying society. But to be so, they had to lose themselves in direct, self-giving contact with that society.

Two other factors about salt have not been given much attention by most commentators. There is the idea of purity³ and the capacity to create thirst.⁴

In 5:14 when Jesus declared that his followers were to be the light of the world, his statement was actually more startling than when he declared them to be salt. All ancient people revered light and saw darkness as dangerous and foreboding. Light and darkness had cosmic and mysterious dimensions about them and symbolized good and evil (and knowledge and ignorance). Obviously the primary purpose of light was, and is, to illuminate.

word “salary” comes from the Latin word for salt, *sale*. Salt was included with wine and olive oil as basic food staples in the Mediterranean world. For more information, see *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5:220 and *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 4:167.

² John A. Broadus, *Matthew*, An American Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Alvah Hovey (Philadelphia: American Publication Society, 1886), 95.

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, the Daily Study Bible Series, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 1:119. Many commentators scarcely mention the quality of purity, if they mention it at all, but Barclay makes much of this idea. He draws the conclusion that if Christians are to be the salt of the earth they must be examples of purity.

⁴ Howard F. Vos, *Matthew*, A Bible Study Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 50. Vos writes that Christians by their exemplary lives are to create a thirst among non-Christians for the higher life in Christ.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Jesus' declaration that his disciples were the light of the world did not imply that they could produce their own light. They could shine only because he dwelt within them and produced light. Only as his followers were like him could they be the light of the world, for in both John 8:12 and 9:5 he declared, "I am the light of the world." It is only as Christ lives within our hearts and radiates his grace and love through us that we can be the light of the world.

5

There may be missionary or evangelistic implications here. A lamp existed for one purpose—to give light. Thus the implications may be that our supreme purpose as Christians is to share the truth of God's love revealed in Christ with all who live in spiritual darkness.

The exegete faces a challenging question in 5:16. What are the "good works"? Jesus gives a basic principle in a clear mandate but does not spell out the specific details or define his terms. While these "good works" would certainly include humanitarian acts, they probably go beyond them to include such things as witnessing and evangelizing the lost.⁵ The Greek word translated "good" seems to mean something not only good in quality but also something attractive. Some would also use the words winsome and beautiful. Thus good deeds are to be done in a winsome manner.⁶

Notice that the good deeds of Christians are to draw attention and praise to God and not to the Christian. If done for self-glory, then the deeds do not glorify the heavenly Father. Christians not only do the right things, but they do them in the right spirit for the right purpose!

JESUS' DEMAND FOR A SUPERIOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

In 5:17-20, we have a passage with the verse (5:20) some scholars believe to be the key to a proper interpretation of the whole sermon. These four verses contain a demand for a superior righteousness and possess implications for how Christians should regard the Old Testament. The "good works" about which Jesus had just been talking were in keeping with the Father's will, so they were in harmony with his law. But the scribes and Pharisees regarded themselves as keepers, interpreters, and teachers of God's law. Through the years they had developed a complex system of rules and regulations (their interpretations of scripture) which they equated with God's laws. When Jesus broke their

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today, ed. John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 61. Stott says that Martin Luther understood the good works to refer exclusively to correct doctrine and Christian evangelism rather than ordering acts of love done out of humanitarian motives.

⁶ Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1952), 42.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

rules, they accused him of violating God's laws. The Pharisees had so completely identified their interpretations of scripture with scripture itself, they could not distinguish between the two and therefore regarded Jesus as a dangerous revolutionary and wanted to kill him (see John 5:18). In their bitter and blind resentment of Jesus they had probably started rumors that he was intentionally destroying the laws of God.

In 5:17 Jesus categorically denied that he had come "to destroy" or "to abolish" the "Law" or the "Prophets." The Greek infinitive was a term used frequently for the destruction of buildings. Jesus' actions and teachings appeared to the Pharisees to be doing exactly that to the Law! The words "Law" and "Prophets" designate what Christians today mean by the term "Old Testament."

The word "fulfill" is also a key to understanding this passage. It translates the Greek word *plerosai* which simply means "to fulfill."⁷ The word is not difficult to understand but the method by which Jesus "fulfills" the Law and the Prophets is the issue in question. Luther restricted it to Christ's teaching but most scholars disagree with him and believe it means the person of Christ himself.

The "jot" translates a Greek word which probably represented the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The word "tittle" translates a Greek word which could mean either the stroke that was placed above certain words in Hebrew or the small projection that helped distinguish some Hebrew letters from others. The idea is that not the tiniest part of God's revealed truth will pass away.

In 5:19 there are two sets of three words each of which are important. In the KJV they are "break...teach...least" and "do...teach... great." Jesus is not teaching salvation by works in this verse at all. But he does indicate that true greatness in the Kingdom of God shows itself by a serious dedication to the revealed will and truth of God. In other places Jesus used a child and a servant to teach greatness in his Kingdom; here, he uses the idea of loving, intelligent obedience to the revealed teachings of God.

The words in 5:20 must have fallen upon the disciples' ears like a clap of thunder. Jesus demanded of them a righteousness⁸ which surpassed that of the scribes and Pharisees. These religious leaders were certain that they had the kind of righteousness which pleased God! They self-righteously regarded themselves as being God's "separated" spiritually, superior people. But their righteousness was simply outward compliance to their own rules and regulations. The righteousness demanded by Jesus meant an uprightness of one's heart, of one's character as God saw it. This kind of righteousness,

⁷ It may be the Greek equivalent of the Aramaic verb which means to establish, validate, or confirm.

⁸ The word "righteousness" translates the Greek word *dikaiousune*.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

of course, was and is conferred by God through Christ only to those who come in genuine faith, acknowledge their sinfulness, and commit themselves totally to Christ. The self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (and all other persons) was (and is) not acceptable to God.

PRACTICING A SUPERIOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

7

In 5:20 Jesus gave his “standard” for entering the kingdom of heaven: a righteousness better than that of the scribes and Pharisees. But he did not spell out specific details in that verse. Next he gave a series of six comparisons and contrasts between his standards and those of the rabbis. He did not abrogate God’s laws but did contradict the interpretations, additions, and explanations of the scribes. Jesus, in fact, deepened and heightened God’s commands. He then explained *how* his disciples could practice a righteousness which exceeded that of the religious leaders.

In 5:21 the best translation should use the word “murder.” The rabbis of Jesus’ day restricted this commandment to the *deed* or *act* alone. The Pharisees thought they had kept the commandment if they did not physically murder a person. Jesus knew that God had much more in mind. He knew that God cared about attitudes, intents, and words. The word “judgment” (KJV) might better be understood not as the final judgment, but as the judgment before a human or local “court.” Jesus later in 5:22 makes anger bring one before this “judgment” or “court” and uses the same word as in 5:21.

In 5:22 Jesus makes anger as serious as murder. Having taken one step higher than the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus now takes his second higher step: do not insult people; do not use insulting words like *raca*. He declares this crime as serious enough to bring one before the “council” (KJV) or “supreme court” (NASB), which was apparently the “Sanhedrin” (NIV). Commentators differ on English words which might best translate *raca*, but one thing is clear, it is a term of contempt. It is something close to “emptyhead,” or “stupid idiot!”

Jesus next takes a third and higher step even yet. If a person comes to have such contempt for another human being that he or she uses the word “fool” then that person is in danger of a *Gehenna* of fire. The Greek word, *more*, translated “fool” is the source of our English word “moron.” Jesus condemned totally the spirit behind such words. He knew that such angry thoughts and insulting words revealed a sinful inner person and could lead to murder. But even if they did not lead to an overt act, it was spiritual murder and thus violated God’s intent as expressed in the sixth commandment. Because anger and contempt toward others are so serious, Jesus in 5:23-24 demands immediate action to avoid them and requires replacement by right attitudes. Jesus uses two examples to drive home this lesson. The first has its setting at the temple altar. The second, in 5:25-26,

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

teaches the same basic lesson of immediate action. When anger first begins, we had better act decisively or we are already on the road to ruin.

The seventh commandment (Exod. 20:14) forbids adultery. The scribes and Pharisees also limited this concept to the overt act. Jesus in 5:27-30 traces God's law deeper and prohibits the lustful imagination. According to Jesus, adultery can be committed in our hearts and minds. If we would keep God's law, we must deal with internal motives, desires, and intents. This is where we win or lose the battle. Just as Jesus had followed his teaching about murder with two illustrations to urge immediate action, he does the same with the teaching on adultery. Here, he uses two graphic hyperboles to teach the absolute importance of immediate and decisive action when the lustful feelings first come. When Jesus talked about plucking one's eye out (5:29) and cutting off one's hand (5:30), he was not literally advocating bodily mutilation. Jesus was emphasizing in a powerful and dramatic way the imperative of drastic action when the lustful desire first begins.

A third area in which Jesus taught his superior righteousness was in the matter of divorce. This quite naturally followed the subject of adultery. In 5:31-32, Jesus was basically calling for a higher commitment to marriage. The ease with which a Jewish man could divorce his wife and the deplorable situation a divorced woman faced in that male-dominated world demanded a call to God's original purposes in marriage. The rabbis had taken Moses' requirement for a written certificate of divorce as divine approval of it. The fact was, Moses' intention was to slow down divorce proceedings and force a "cooling off" period for the husband. It was not divine approval, according to Jesus. God's intention was that marriage was for life.

There are many other passages of scripture which would have to be studied and included before one could claim to have a broadly based biblical doctrine on this important subject. We do know from these two verses that Jesus took marriage seriously, as did God the Father. The ending of the highest human relationship is no trivial matter. But many of the rabbis had made it so with their rationalized version of Moses' teaching.

Modern Christians need to hold up the ideal, but also remember that Jesus came to love, forgive, and heal. When marriages do fail, there is hope. Jesus still loves and so must we. He was and is redemptive and we must be also.

The real issue in 5:33-37 (taking oaths or vows) is honesty or integrity in what one says. Scriptures such as Lev. 19:12, Num. 30:2, and Deut. 23:21 were very explicit in forbidding the falsification of one's word in an oath or vow. In their desire to get around the high demands of the Mosaic code, the scribes and Pharisees had classified certain oaths as binding and others as not binding. They had come to deny as binding any vow which did not mention the name of God. Jesus saw through this charade and demanded that a

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

person's word be good at all times. Jesus later issued a blistering denunciation of this kind of circumventing of God's laws (see Matt. 23:16-22).

Does 5:34 mean that modern Christians should refuse to take an oath in a court of law? Surely not, since the Old Testament indicates that God swore or took oaths (e.g. Gen. 22:16) and Jesus later was put under oath by the high priest during his trial. The key to understanding 5:34 lies in 5:37. Kingdom citizens are to be so genuine, honest, and true that they do not have to add any additional words of assurance to their promises.



Jesus' audience was familiar with the words "an eye for an eye" and "a tooth for a tooth" in 5:38-42. They were included in the code of Moses (see Exod. 21:24). Unfortunately and incorrectly, the Pharisees used this injunction to justify personal revenge. But the Old Testament scriptures consistently and repeatedly prohibited personal retaliation. Passages such as Lev. 19:18, Prov. 20:22, and 24:29 all testify to this fact but these verses did not stop the scribes from twisting Exod. 21:24 to justify what they wanted to do.

Is Jesus commanding us not to resist any form of evil in 5:39? It sounds that way in the KJV translation. But modern language translations usually have it as "do not resist an evil person" (NIV). It may be possible or even better, some think, to translate it as "not to resist with evil." The main idea is that we are not to do wrong to someone who wrongs us. To drive home his point, Jesus gives four illustrations. Christian love leads us to turn the other cheek and receive a second wrong rather than do a wrong in return. In Jewish law, a person could sue for the inner garment but not the outer one. Poor people had to have it for covering at night. But Christ teaches his followers to be willing even to give that up rather than hate the person who wants to take it by a lawsuit.

In 5:43-48, we have Jesus' sixth and last contrast in the series between his righteousness and that of the scribes and Pharisees. It involves an actual biblical quotation and the additional logical deduction which the scribes and Pharisees had added to it. The last half of Lev. 19:18 commands God's people to love their neighbors as themselves, but does *not* have "and hate your enemies." In their rationalistic approach to scripture, the rabbis apparently inferred the right to hate one's enemies from the contrast they drew between a neighbor and an enemy. The logical implication appeared to be that if one were to love his neighbor, then he could hate his enemy.

Verse 48 must have hit the ears of Jesus' listeners with the force of an explosion! He commanded them to be "as perfect as" their heavenly Father. The pronoun "you" or "ye" is emphatic in the Greek text. The verb is literally a future tense with the force of an imperative command. The word "perfect" translates the Greek word *teleios*. Broadus says the Greek term has been and can be translated by such words as "complete" and the

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

immediate context is the key.⁹ Jesus was not teaching that unqualified perfection was possible for his disciples in this world. He had already taught them to acknowledge spiritual bankruptcy in 5:3, and later would teach them (6:12) to pray for forgiveness of their sins. But one thing was and is very clear-Jesus' disciples must have no less goal in life than godly perfection (or completeness). Note that the context is about loving others.

RIGHT MOTIVES

10

Having finished six comparisons between his standard of righteousness and that of Israel's religious leaders, Jesus next taught about motives in religious life. The scribes and Pharisees wanted to impress other people rather than to glorify God. Jesus demanded that his followers be motivated by the desire to honor God! If not, religious ritual is meaningless ceremony and not true worship!

Jesus chose three basic religious practices (almsgiving, praying, and fasting-see 6:1-18) to illustrate valid and invalid motivation. Outward forms of religious practice have acceptance with God only if they have the right spirit behind them. If they are done without sincerity, then they are an insult to God. The Old Testament prophets had made this very clear centuries earlier and Isaiah was especially adamant about it (see 1:10-17).

Jesus lays down a basic premise of true religion in 6:1. This verse is actually an introduction to all three practices, although in the KJV it sounds as if it is a part of only the first one, almsgiving. The "do not your alms" is better translated "acts of righteousness" (NIV) or "practicing your righteousness" (NASB).

In 6:2-4, the word "alms" translates the Greek word *eleemosune* which means "acts of mercy."¹⁰ The word actually includes more than almsgiving but in this context it refers to charitable gifts. Kingdom citizens must not only feel compassion but must act with loving deeds such as giving money to help needy people. But one's motives must be right! The Pharisees craved the praise of people. That is what they wanted, and, therefore, Jesus said they had already received their reward. They will receive nothing from God. The Greek word for "have" (*apecho*) was a commercial word which meant that a bill had been received and paid in full.¹¹ The "one hand" not knowing what the "other hand" is doing teaches confidentiality and sincerity.

Not only did the Pharisees give alms so as to be praised by the people, but they also prayed in public places for the same reason. In 6:5-8, Jesus commanded his followers to

⁹ Broadus, 124.

¹⁰ Frank Stagg, *Matthew*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, ed. by Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 8:113.

¹¹ Stott, 129.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

have the high motive of praying to glorify God and not to impress people as did the Pharisees. Verse 6 does not forbid public praying.

When Christians pray in a rote, mechanical way-only saying memorized words void of meaning-we violate Jesus' command in 6:7. Insincere, empty words, however beautifully stated, do not constitute true praying. Many so-called prayers are only verbal attempts to manipulate God, impress others, or to gratify our own egos and thus are not prayers at all but are in fact pagan utterances!

11

In 6:9-13, we have what is usually called "The Lord's Prayer," but the words "Model Prayer" would be more accurate. It was intended to be a guideline for Christ's disciples to follow. A parallel account of it is in Luke 11:2-4.

"Hallowed" connotes a sense of reverence and being worthy of praise. Because God rules perfectly in heaven, we ought to pray for him to have his perfect rule on earth also. Christians are to want nothing less than God's perfect will to be done, and it must begin in each of our hearts. The words "daily bread" include food, but the concept is broad enough to include all personal needs-but not all our wants and wishes. The word "debts" is a reference to moral debts, hence "sins." Notice the relationship between our forgiveness of others and our receiving forgiveness from God. The word "temptation" in 6:13 translates the Greek word *peirasmos* which also means "outward trial."¹² Many commentators think this latter meaning is the one intended here since God does not "tempt" people to commit sin. The word for "evil" may mean evil in an impersonal or personal sense. If it is the latter, it should read "the evil one."

Verses 16-18 contain the third and last illustration Jesus began back in 6:1 in order to teach right motives in religious activities. The central idea is that his followers are to be sincere when they fast. They are to do it to glorify God and not to impress other people. The Mosaic Code only required fasting one day a year-on the Day of Atonement, but the Pharisees fasted twice a week and felt self-righteousness for doing so. Hence, what was to be an act of self-denial became an occasion for inordinate pride and self-elevation. Jesus did not actually command fasting but said "when you fast." Neither did he forbid it.

RIGHT VALUES

Jesus understood the powerful craving which humans have for material things and how easy it is for sinful mortals to be enslaved by materialistic value systems. He knew this was a degrading tyranny, and in this part of the sermon, Jesus offered freedom from that

¹² R V. G. Tasker, ed. *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 74.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

tyranny. Frank Stagg calls this passage (6:19-34) a “freedom from the tyranny of material things.”¹³

In 6:19-21, Jesus commanded his followers not to make material accumulations the top value of their lives. “Do not store up” (NIV) is a present imperative which means a continuous command. It could almost be translated “do not have this habit.” After the command in 6:19, Jesus went on to give three reasons or illustrations why not to do so. Each one depicts loss or destruction in some form. Verses 19-20 are climaxed in 6:21. Jesus wants his followers to deposit their treasures in heaven so that their hearts will be there rather than upon the things of the earth. “Treasures in heaven” imply to us today spiritual things but to the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, the words conveyed at least two things—deeds of kindness done on earth which become ours in heaven, and also character traits which we take with us when we go to heaven.¹⁴

In speaking about the eye in 6:22-23, Jesus used a word which is translated in the KJV as “single,” as “good” in the NIV, and “clear” in the NASB. The idea is that of clear vision. The truth seems to be that if the eye is healthy, then one sees clearly. The “bad eye” of 6:23 apparently means a diseased eye, or something that causes a blurred vision. A. B. Bruce states that “darkness” may be figurative language for covetousness, greed, and sordid passions.¹⁵

There is a difference of opinion among scholars on the origin and meaning of the word “mammon” in 6:24. While some interpreters believe it is a word of uncertain derivation, Hobbs indicates it is a Chaldean word for the money-god or devil, and its use in this passage refers to the entire system of materialism.¹⁶

In 6:25 Jesus commands his followers not to be “anxious” or to worry. Notice the material things about which he is warning: food, drink, body, clothing. Jesus is not teaching that we are to give no concern at all to these things, but rather we are to live as if these things are not all that there is to living. It is not enough simply not to worry; Jesus now teaches positively in 6:26 that we are to trust in God. Are not humans worth much more than birds? In 6:27 Jesus teaches the futility or uselessness of worry. Can anxiety add a cubit to a human being? The word “cubit” translates the Greek word *pechus*, which is literally a measure of space and can figuratively mean a measure of time.¹⁷ It is likely that Jesus is

¹³ Stagg, 117.

¹⁴ Barclay, 241-42.

¹⁵ A. B. Bruce, *The Synoptic Gospels*, The Expositor’s Greek Testament, ed. by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951), 124.

¹⁶ Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition of the Four Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1956), 1:74.

¹⁷ Tasker, 77.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

teaching that a person cannot add any height to one's body by worry, but it is equally possible he is using the word as a measure of time—to extend one's life.

In 6:28-30, Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater. If God cares this much about simple things like the flowers in the field, which along with grass, live only briefly and are soon gone, will he not care much more for human beings who are made in his image? The answer is obvious!

13

Jesus is not condoning laziness or irresponsibility in 6:31-32. He is teaching his followers to have priorities and to have faith in the loving Father who will properly provide. The word “Gentiles” is not only a reference to nonJews, but also in this context refers to unbelievers and, therefore, pagans. When professing Christians worry primarily about eating, drinking, and clothing their bodies, they are acting just like pagans!

Another key verse is 6:33. Hobbs says this exhortation “encompasses the entire sermon up to this point.”¹⁸ The word “seek” can be translated “continually seek.” God’s rule is to be first in all areas of our lives! The words “all these things” do not mean everything we might wish or like, but rather those things which are actually needed. Both spiritual and material things are implied here. Lenski says “this supreme seeking described as hunger and thirst in 5:6, is the distinctive mark of all true disciples.”¹⁹

RELATING TO OTHERS

True religion is in its essence a right relationship with God, others, and ourselves. Jesus capsuled God’s laws into these three relation-ships when he declared the first great commandment was to love God supremely and the second was to love others as we love ourselves.

In 7:1-2, Jesus talks about relating to others in a censorious fashion. Jesus’ command for his followers not to judge may sound as if he is saying they are not to have an opinion and are to suspend their critical faculties.

Such uncriticalness is not what Jesus intended, because he did both himself, and later commanded his followers not to give valuable things to “dogs” and “swine.” The Greek word for “judge” is krino which means “to decide between two things” or “make a decision.” It may be used of legal matters, values, or persons. The main idea is to weigh evidence and reach a decision. The context clearly indicates Jesus used it here for habitual,

¹⁸ Hobbs, 77.

¹⁹ R C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1961), 285.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

ensorious, carping criticism. Jesus wanted love to be preeminent in his followers' personal relationships, and not a harsh, hyper-critical spirit.

In 7:3-5, the “mote” (KJV) or “speck” (NASB) is translated “speck of sawdust” in the NIV. The Greek word for it, *karphos*, can be translated as “splinter” or “trash.” The “beam” or “log,” which in Greek is *dokos*, indicates an incredibly large object when compared to the tiny speck. Note that Jesus does not command us to refuse to remove the speck from our brother's eye, but demands we remove the log from our own eye first.

14

In 7:6, Jesus appears to be calling people “dogs” and “pigs.” But we need to remember that he was a masterful communicator. He used graphic, striking images to drive home his truths. Such powerful metaphors enhance human memory.

All commentaries describe the wild, untamed dogs of the biblical era. Of course, hogs were strictly forbidden to Jews. Both kinds of animals created intense disgust in Jewish minds. Most interpreters see “pearls” as the truths of the gospel. One reason for this is the meaning of the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price in Matt. 13:45-46. Stagg believes that both ideas refer to “one's discernment, judgment, or message.”²⁰ As another commentator put it, “Verse 6 shows that though censorious judgment is to be shunned, judicious discrimination is not.”²¹

Jesus' followers will not have the power within themselves to resist censorious criticism or have the wisdom to discern between the deserving and the undeserving without earnest prayer. Verses 7-11 teach that kind of prayer. “Ask, seek, and knock” are all present imperatives. They are commands and are to be continuous. There seems to be an ascending sense of urgency in the verb sequence.

These verses do not give us a blank check so we can “name it and claim it”! They do not grant spiritual justification for materialistic greed which masquerades as faith in God's promises. The “good” or “good things” (Greek *agatha*, meaning “beneficial to you”) from God are probably spiritual gifts primarily, although material blessings are not totally ruled out. Luke's use of “Holy Spirit” in his version (11:13) is a key reason why many interpreters think them to be spiritual in nature.

Jesus' teaching about Christians rightly relating to others is climaxed by 7:12. This so called “Golden Rule” may well be the best known statement Jesus ever made! It is known world-wide. One writer calls it the “...Everest of all ethical teaching.”²² Some scholars see it as a general summary of the Sermon on the Mount up to this point. The word “do”

²⁰ Stagg, 120.

²¹ Vos, 64.

²² Barclay, 273.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

actually means “keep doing.” The Greek word *poieite* is durative. This is not a “one shot” or “one time” emotional splurge; it is to be a continuous pattern in our lives.

RELATING TO CHRIST

At this point in the sermon, we come to an important juncture. Many commentators see 7:13 as the beginning of the conclusion (which is an application of the previous teachings), but others (e.g. Lenski) disagree and say 7:13-23 is not part of the conclusion. Lenski believes it begins with 7:24. A key idea in the remaining verses is the necessity of choice. Life forces choices upon us; so does Christ!

15

One thing the interpreter needs to do at this point is to try to decide the nature or composition of the audience who heard these last words of the sermon. Our identification of the listeners will have a profound impact upon our understanding of Jesus’ intended meaning. Was Jesus still speaking exclusively to his followers, or was he now beginning to aim his remarks at the “lost” people in the crowd? Scholars do not agree. They do agree that he was still speaking *primarily* to his disciples.

In 7:13-14, was Jesus describing the narrow gate and strait road as the path of salvation and the wide gate and broad way as the path of lostness? Or, were both roads for Kingdom citizens, the “narrow” meaning the disciplined and dedicated life, with the “broad” meaning the undisciplined, worldly life? The word “enter” in 7:13 is an imperative and carries the force of a command. The word for “narrow” in 7:13 is *stenes*, which simply means “pressed together, cramped.”

In 7:14, the word “narrow” (translated “hard” in KJV) is *tethlimmene* which is normally translated “afflicted” since it is a Greek word closely associated with persecution and /or opposition. Hobbs states that “life” in 7:14 is not salvation but abundant Christian living!²³ The Greek word for “destruction” in 7:13 is *apoleia*. It does not mean annihilation. But is it “hell”? It can be so understood if one interprets the “broad way” as directed by Jesus to lost persons. If he is speaking to believers, however, it means the destruction of their blessings and rewards.

²³ Hobbs, 84.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Jesus begins 7:15-20 with a stern warning. “Beware” translates the Greek word *prosechete*, which is the same word translated “take heed” in 6:1. It is a present imperative and literally means “keep holding your mind from.” Some interpreters see the “false prophets” in 7:15 as the scribes and Pharisees, but others reject this view because they were never called “prophets.” The words “wolves” and “sheep’s clothing” connote both danger and deception. They were persons who were greedy for gain, power, and prestige.

16

What exactly did Jesus mean by the “good” and “bad” fruit? In the simplest terms, good fruit is Christlikeness (e.g., meekness, gentleness, patience) and bad fruit would be the opposite (e.g., enmity, impurity, licentiousness).

In 7:17-18, “bad fruit” comes from “corrupt” (KJV) or “bad” (NIV) trees. Broadus states that “corrupt” means “decayed” or “rotten.” Lenski and Stagg disagree with him and argue that “bad” is a better word than “corrupt” because the Greek word *sapron* means “wrong kind” and not “rotten kind.” The same word is used for the wrong kind of fish, and not rotten fish, in the Parable of the Net in Matt. 13:48.

CONCLUSION

If Jesus did not begin the conclusion of his sermon with 7:13, he began it with 7:21. From this point on there is not so much instruction as there is a call for response and commitment. In these verses the contrast is between only saying and actually doing. A person who only talks (“Lord, Lord”) but who does not walk (“does the will”) will not enter the Kingdom. Even religious activities (e.g., preaching, casting out demons, performing miracles) do not make one a citizen. Religious activities are the fruit and not the root, but both are present in genuine discipleship as in a good tree!

The Greek word for “never” in 7:23 is very strong. It means not a single moment. Stagg writes, “They were not once known and then forgotten, but had never entered into a saving knowledge of Christ.”²⁴ This is an important verse for the Baptist doctrine of the eternal security of the believer. The words “I will profess” (KJV) translate the Greek word *homologeso* which indicates it will be perfect and truthful.²⁵

Whereas in 7:21-23 the contrast is between their saying and not doing, here it is between their hearing and not doing. This does not teach that salvation is by good works and obedience. It does teach that people who both hear and obey are the true followers of

²⁴ Stagg, 122.

²⁵ A. T. Robertson, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Word Pictures in the New Testament (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 1:63.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Christ. (For other scriptures which teach the same idea, see James 1:22-25; 2:14-20; 1 John 2:4).

Matthew's final remarks in 7:28-29 focus upon two central ideas: (1) the reaction of the crowd and (2) the contrast between Jesus and the scribes as teachers. Jesus taught with "authority" and the original word in Greek is *exousia*, which embraces power as well as authority.

17

While the scribes taught only by quoting previous commentaries and their own traditions, Jesus taught with first-hand knowledge, fresh and relevant for life in its deepest concerns. Jesus's teachings in the sermon were not only ethical, they were also Messianic. They not only told people how to live, they revealed who Jesus was and is—this one who is life and truth incarnate. They did not simply present a program and a philosophy; they revealed a person!

© William B. Tolar, *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, Vol. 35 - Fall 1992. Retrieved August 18, 2026.

NOTE: This post is in compliance with the Fair Use clause of the US Copyright Act of 1976 (17 U.S. Code § 107). The US Supreme Court has issued several major decisions clarifying and reaffirming the fair use doctrine since the 1980s, most recently in the 2021 decision *Google LLC v. Oracle America, Inc.*