

# A Summary of Understanding the Sermon on the Mount

by  
Greg Herrick, Th.M.  
gregh@bible.org

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## Introduction

The Sermon on the Mount has held a primary place in the teachings of the church throughout the centuries (11). But, even though it has enjoyed such popularity, it has not always been understood in the same way. Various authors have regarded the Sermon from numerous and even quite different, conflicting points of view.

The point of our discussion is simply to summarize the main teachings of Harvey K. McArthur's book entitled, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*.<sup>1</sup> His book has seven major sections, including the prologue and the epilogue. The outline of the paper will follow the outline of the book as I work my way through it, noting what I feel are the most important points for later referral as well as commenting in areas where I feel the author has done an especially good job or in other instances missed the mark.

## Prologue

### The Sermon as Problem

#### General Introduction

The author says that the sermon has been widely accepted and quoted within the Christian tradition as well as outside of it. Chapter 5 has been quoted by the Fathers far more than any other in the entire Bible and 5-7 more than any other three successive chapters. This trend continues into the 20th century. Augustine said it was "a perfect standard of the Christian life" and John Donne stated that all one's sermon find their origins in this section of Scripture.

Some from without have truly admired the sermon (Ghandi and Jewish scholar, G. C. Montefiore [*The Synoptic Gospels*] ) while others have trashed it along with the rest of Scripture (cf. Nietzsche) and attacked it for it's 'love thy neighbor ethic' (Robinson Jeffers).

Still a third group has arisen which (most notably the German Fr. Naumann) says that the ethic taught in the sermon is itself impossible to be lived out in a capitalistic society like we have. Thus he struggled with the essence of what Jesus taught as did Luther, who found the sermon difficult to fathom and often mishandled.

The most significant contribution of this section is the fact that the sermon has itself been well read and in many ways understood differently. This is true no matter what the theological persuasion in which one finds oneself. It is a most interesting and compelling portion of Scripture.

#### The Four Problems

McArthur's first statement in this section is his purpose statement for the book: "to deal with the basic practical, historical and theological problems raised by a thoughtful reading of the Sermon on the Mount." The author does not disparage detailed analysis of the sermon, but says that such analysis, as valuable and necessary as it is does not "solve those problems."

The problems of the sermon are dealt with in the succeeding chapters. Chapter one deals with the relation of the sermon to the Mosaic tradition, touching upon such questions as, "Was the New Law implicit in the Old?" and "Is revelation progressive?" Chapter two deals with the relation of the sermon to the Pauline tradition. I know from dispensational circles that this is a major question that we ask in one form or another. Paul seems to decry a works mentality, but Jesus seems to be reinforcing it in the sermon. Chapter three addresses the difficult problem (as if the others aren't) of the relation of the sermon and in particular it's ethics to the eschaton or end of all things. McArthur asks, "If He [Jesus] expected God to bring human history to a swift close what affect did this expectation have on His

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<sup>1</sup> The following material is a brief condensation (with interaction) of Harvey K. McArthur's Book *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper, 1960). While the present writer disagrees with some of the McArthur's Christology, in general, the book is an excellent overview of the history of discussion surrounding this great portion of Scripture.

ethics?" Finally, chapters four and five will deal with a single subject, namely, the relation of the ethic of the sermon to daily living. "Has anyone ever fulfilled it or is it even meant to be lived out?"

The final section of the book will reflect on the results of the study with special attention to the relation of the sermon to the Christian.<sup>2</sup>

## Literary-Historical Notes

In this section McArthur attempts to bring a historical understanding to the development of the sermon in the light of the synoptic problem. He sees, given the probability of Markan priority, that Matthew used two other sources: Q and M. (M stands for sources used by Matthew other than Q and Mark and not common to Luke.) His point is that this information serves to remind us that "the original words of Jesus come to us veiled by the language of the primitive church." I suspect that to this very few would disagree, but this only poses problems for exegesis, not inspiration.

McArthur reveals the importance of the five sermons (and the formula, "and when Jesus had finished saying those things") of Matthew drawing attention to the sermon on the mount as the most carefully constructed of all of them (i.e. by Matthew) and that it represents, not a single sermon given at a single time, but a "construct of the evangelist and his sources" (23)<sup>3</sup>. He cites Calvin as one who held this view, stating also that it was widely acknowledged by Catholic and Protestant scholars.

## The Literature

The purpose of this section is simply to state some of the most important literature written on the sermon with respect to the problems at hand. Due to the condensed and factual nature of the information given here (which means I cannot summarize it to any helpful level without really just repeating what the author has already said) I suggest that the book be consulted directly.

# Chapter 1

## The Sermon and the Mosaic Tradition

### Patristic and Medieval Views

McArthur asks, what is an essential question when trying to understand the sermon, "What was the relation of the ethic in the Sermon on the Mount to that proclaimed by the Mosaic tradition in Judaism?" In reference to the Church Fathers, of which this section deals, McArthur cites the work of Augustine (*Reply to Faustus*) as the most extensive.

Augustine claimed that Christ fulfilled the Mosaic Law in at least six ways and did not destroy it as Faustus claimed. First, Jesus fulfilled the Law by obeying it. Second, Jesus fulfilled the Law by giving the Holy Spirit to His followers so that they could obey it. I take it the point here is that Jesus urged obedience to it among his followers, therefore, He did not desire to break it at all. Third, Jesus fulfilled the Law by bringing out its true and full meaning. Fourth, Jesus fulfilled the Law by fulfilling its Messianic predictions. Fifth, Jesus fulfilled the Law by transforming its ceremonial aspects thus revealing their true significance. Sixth, Jesus fulfilled the Law by giving certain additional commands which furthered the intention of the original law. Augustine claimed that Christ, by His teaching, *secured the design intended by the Law*. This appears to be the emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount. His teaching was in large measure *corrective* (in reference to the Pharisees et. al. religious teachers). The sixth point is very similar to the third point, but the sixth indicates that according to Augustine, Christ did add something not there already,

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<sup>2</sup>McArthur also mentions a sub-purpose to demonstrate throughout the book the history of thought surrounding the sermon, especially that of the early church Fathers.

<sup>3</sup>On this point, McArthur raises the question as to whether the sources have accurately reflected the sayings of Jesus. I am not well trained on this subject, but I can only step back and suggest that any attempts to make such judgments must, at the very, very best, be only placed on par with conjecture with no attendant means of falsification.

but in his desire to refute Faustus, Augustine clearly states that what was added was only to clarify the original design in the Law.

Augustine's position was indeed the position of the early church. Irenaeus and Tertullian (*The Five Books Against Marcion*) and Origen all appear to be in sympathy with his proposals. McArthur also says, "that it will be remembered that none of the Church Fathers cited admitted that any part of the Law was abrogated."

The medieval church, as demonstrated most thoroughly by Aquinas, basically followed Augustine. Aquinas claimed that the additions made by Jesus were indeed additions to the Old Law, but in no way contrary to them. Cornelius A. Lapidus (ca. 1600) says that Matt 5:17 is teaching that Christ came to fulfill the moral precepts of the Law by teaching and expounding them more fully.

## Reformation and Modern Views

"The position taken by the Protestant Reformers was in sharp contrast with that of the Roman Catholic tradition." The Reformers claimed that Jesus' interpretation of the Mosaic Law was the sole true and correct one; not a new one in any way (which the Jews had obscured). Calvin reacted strongly against the Catholic notion that the Sermon was to be considered "counsels" for the clergy and not precepts for all to obey (Ints. II 8:56). Luther denied that the New Law contained anything not already in the Old. Both Calvin and Zwingli arrived at the same conclusion.

The Anabaptists fell closer in some ways to the Catholic interpretation, feeling that the Sermon represented a Law which was truly new. They differed from the Catholics in that they taught strict adherence to the commands for everyone, not just the clergy. Thus, their view has been called the Absolutist view of the Sermon on the Mount.

The debate in modern scholarship revolves around two questions and there are equally competent men/women on either side of the issue. The two questions are: 1) "Did Jesus, in fact, merely interpret the Law of Moses, or did His teaching (and acts?) move beyond it?" and 2) "If His teaching went beyond the Mosaic tradition did it involve any abrogation of that tradition?" The majority of scholars appear to fall in alignment with the idea that Jesus did indeed move beyond the O.T. law. Both camps cite good exegetical and theological reasons for their views.

McArthur suggests four ideas in an attempt to demonstrate the relationship the Sermon on the Mount bears to the Mosaic Law. First, the ethic of Jesus involved the abrogation of some aspects of the Mosaic tradition (=Pentateuch). This is best illustrated by Jesus' teaching on divorce, swearing and retaliation.<sup>4</sup> McArthur goes on to show that no matter how one tries to reconcile certain statements of Jesus with the Pentateuch, one is left with the fact that Jesus abrogated certain things.

Second, the ethic of Jesus was a legitimate development from the Mosaic tradition. McArthur says this must of necessity be true because Jesus was born and bred a devout Jew, the Reformers did indeed see parallel between the Sermon and Pentateuchal legislation and most of Jesus' distinctions are found in extant Rabbinic literature.

Third, as was already stated, advances of Jesus are seen to be paralleled by other Jewish leaders. McArthur quotes a number of Rabbinic parallels to Jesus' statements in the Sermon on the Mount to support his thesis (most of the material is from *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and *Slavonic Enoch*). Many of McArthur's examples parallel Jesus' statements, but are from a later date. The question I have is, "What is their historical relation to the teachings of Jesus?" And, if they were popular statements, then what is the significance of the formula, "You have heard that it was said... but I say unto you?"

Fourth, McArthur states that "the total impact of Jesus' ethic differed significantly from that of his contemporaries." Four reasons are suggested for this: 1) Jesus focused on the critical, eliminating the non-essential; 2) His demands were always radical in nature; 3) His ethic was for a new community composed of "heroic" individuals and 4) He had incredible personal authority.

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<sup>4</sup>I think McArthur says this about retaliation because he misunderstands the ethic of love that is really underlying the apparent discrepancies between what Jesus taught and what Moses taught on this subject.

## Chapter 2

### The Sermon and the Pauline Tradition

#### Introductory Comments

The Sermon on the Mount appears to emphasize what one needs *to do* to find life. However, Paul seems to teach that Christianity is a religion of grace, not effort or achievement. This tension has existed within the church since the beginning.

#### Patristic and Medieval Views

The attitude of Irenaeus, Augustine and Chrysostom, as indicative of their time period was that the sermon was emphasizing the way of life for one already saved by the grace of God through faith. Aquinas was in complete agreement (*Treatise on Grace*) as well as the Roman church as understood from the Council of Trent, "Decree Concerning Justification."

#### Reformation and Modern Views

Luther held the same view as those before him, claiming that faith and grace must presuppose and attempt to obey the Sermon (cf. his lectures on *The Sermon on the Mount*). Calvin held the same view, attempting to prove it from the sermon itself.

At the present time (at least in 1960 when the book was written) there are still many Catholic and Protestant scholars who uphold the traditional view, namely, that faith must precede the golden rule ethic of the sermon. However, the bulk of Protestant scholars reject the idea that the sermon presupposes a salvation by grace through faith model. Windisch, in *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount* sees no relation whatsoever between the sermon and the teachings of Paul, saying, "The theological character of the Sermon on the Mount has thus been defined. Its doctrine of salvation is pre-Christian and pre-Pauline." I think that Windisch, while trying to deal honestly with the sermon and the teachings of Paul, has made much of the accidents between the two and little of the essential unity of substance. His comments imply a disparate unity between Jesus and Paul on the crucial issue of salvation. The soteriological emphasis in Scripture, though more clearly taught in some ways by Paul and the apostles, was no less a clear and dominating concern to Jesus Christ (cf. Matt 1:21, 4:19 and Luke 19:10). And the Sermon on the Mount must fall in line with that emphasis.

McArthur's comments on dispensationalism (68,69) reflect an uninformed bias regarding the diverging views on the sermon as held by those in that camp. His response lacks sophistication. Perhaps this is due in part to his writing in 1960. To him, "modern Dispensationalism relates the sermon to its own theological system by affirming that the ethics of Jesus was intended for the Kingdom Age (which has not yet come)."

#### Seven Observations on the Problem

The purpose of this section is to attempt to harmonize, or propose a solution to the two views explained above. Seven observations follow: First, both the sermon and Paul require a total life commitment to God. Jesus demanded total commitment to the ethic and Paul to the "act of God in Christ." Second, the contrast between Paul and the sermon does not concern the content of the ethic taught, but the presuppositions of that ethic. Romans 12-15 parallel the ethic on the sermon. This is an excellent point which was essentially missed by Windisch above. Third, the audience for the sermon is important. Jesus may only have had disciples in mind and Matthew believing Christians in the Church, in which case it is possible to see a Pauline backdrop for the sermon. But, there are problems with this, for who knows if Matthew thought of the disciples as those transformed by the Spirit. Since the audience is difficult to determine, it cannot be a decisive factor in arguing for congruity between Jesus and Paul. Fourth, those who understand the sermon to be teaching solely a religion of achievement, have misunderstood major parts of it, including the beatitudes (5:4-11) as well as sections like forgiveness (6:12, 15, 16). These sections emphasize the grace of God which definitely moves the sermon in a Pauline direction. Fifth, "the total teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Synoptics heightens the paradox in which achievement and grace are in apparent conflict." Jesus demanded incredible standards, but yet forgave the repentant "sinner" unable to meet them. The major difference between Jesus and Paul at this point is that Jesus often appealed to God's general mercies, while appealed to them specifically in

Christ (cf. Rom. 12:1). Sixth, even after one has done everything to build a bridge between the Sermon on the Mount and Paul, still some distance remains to be covered. Two concerns are mentioned: 1) Matthew does not seem to imply that a complete transformation of one's nature is necessary before he can begin to do the good. Paul does, 2) Paul bases grace and forgiveness solely upon the work of Christ and Matthew does not even hint at this. What appeared to Paul to be an enormous theological truth, was for Jesus in the sermon, not to be considered. Seventh, there are essentially two conclusions when trying to resolve the conflict between Jesus and Paul: 1) to follow the way of nineteenth century liberal Christianity (in their quest for the "historical Jesus") and men such as Harnack. He felt that the sermon laid the foundation for all of Christianity and the teachings of Paul must be brought into conformity with it or 2) to see the revelation of God in Christ as including not only the words and works of Jesus Christ, but also the response of the believing community to those words and works, i.e. His Person. Thus, while there may remain a gulf between Paul and Jesus this can be bridged by understanding that "the Sermon may originally have been proclaimed without any thought of certain distinctively Pauline doctrines, but it [must be] understood today, by the Christian community, in the framework of the total faith that emerged in response to these events." On one hand, this seems to undo what was previously stated about the genuine differences between Paul and Jesus, focusing on a more canonical approach, but on the other hand is their ultimately any other choice for those committed to the interpretation of the faith as communicated by the apostles and prophets (Eph. 3:5)?

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Sermon and the Eschaton**

#### **Introduction to the Problem: Five Questions**

Eschatology has long been a major category within systematic theology. It was brought into focus in Biblical studies by such men as Albert Schweitzer and C. H. Dodd. Schweitzer understood Jesus' teachings to be couched in the expectation that the Kingdom was to come very soon through catastrophic divine intervention. Dodd taught that the kingdom of God had already come with the advent of Jesus and His ministry. McArthur sides with Schweitzer, feeling that the Synoptic evidence is in favor of Jesus understanding the end of history to be imminent; the kingdom was very near. Where one lands on this question will determine one's view of the Sermon on the Mount. McArthur poses five essential questions to further the study: 1) "Was eschatology in the foreground of Jesus' thought?" 2) "Was the general urgency of Jesus' demand for repentance related to his eschatological expectations?" 3) "Were specific precepts in the Sermon related to eschatological sanctions?" 4) "Was the nature of his precepts conditioned by belief in the imminence of the eschaton?" 5) "Can first-century eschatological concepts be translated into twentieth-century terms?" As is obvious, these questions build on one another. I feel that the most important ones are #3 and #4 because they most directly relate to the Sermon itself.

#### **Survey of the Sermon**

**The Beatitudes.** These are held in most N.T. circles to be eschatological in nature. The present tense verbs in 3 and 10 may simply posit a gnomic kind of idea, and the chronology is to be taken from the future tenses in the others. In general the Church Fathers recognized the future character of the beatitudes.

**The Two Houses.** McArthur believes that by itself "The Two Houses" may be present or eschatological, but says that in view of its placement it must be eschatological. Therefore, the sermon opens and closes with eschatology in mind. I might add that given the political nature of the kingdom foreseen by the prophets (cf. Matt 6:10) it is not unlikely that Jesus is speaking to that end as well. It is difficult to separate at times, Jesus' soteriology and His eschatology.

Matt. 5:13-16, 17-20. The idea of fulfillment places the passage (as well as those who obey it) in an eschatological context.

Matt. 5:21-26, 27-30, 31-48, 6:1-6, 16-18. All these passages have eschatological warnings with attendant judgments in mind (as well as blessings). McArthur sees them as predominately, though not exclusively eschatological in nature. Chapter 5:31-48 may not be oriented toward eschatology so much, but as directives that one might be a son of his Father in heaven (but cf. 46a).

**The Lord's Prayer.** McArthur relates the whole prayer, minus the "daily bread" to a future time.

Matt. 6:19-34. For McArthur, verse 20 and 33 demonstrate the future nature of these verses.

Matt. 7:1-12. The judgment spoken of in the passage here, is the judgment of God (a typical Matthean circumlocution) and is future.

## Summary and Evaluation of the Evidence: Windisch, Dibelius

McArthur produces a chart (note the admitted subjectivity to this) indicating that about 40% of the sermon is explicitly eschatological in nature, 40% is implicitly eschatological in nature and 20% is debatable. Dibelius feels that given the plethora of eschatological material in the sermon, the whole of the sermon should be understood in this light. Windisch argues the other way: statements that are not exegetically oriented to eschatology do not need to be so. He attempts to demonstrate his thesis by showing that some of the eschatological statements relate more closely to Wisdom literature than to apocalyptic. McArthur argues that the context in which the statements are found, i.e. eschatological, transforms those statements.

## Replies to the Five Questions

The answer to the first question is a definitive "yes!" The second question concerning repentance must be answered in the affirmative as well. Jesus' relation to John the Baptist (as one who preached repentance), His emphasis on the beatitudes, the call for a new righteousness and seeking the kingdom as well as the sermons link to Matt. 4:17 all show that Jesus related the implicit call to repentance in the sermon to the eschaton. The third question may also be answered "yes." According to McArthur, about half of the precepts have relation to eschatological sanctions, a third have non-eschatological sanctions (or implied sanctions) and the rest have sanctions that can be interpreted otherwise. The fourth question asks whether Jesus shaped His ethic in view of a belief in the imminence of the Kingdom? Such would be the underpinning of the interim ethic view. McArthur dogmatically states that nothing in the sermon (including 6:25-34 where you might expect to hear Jesus mention such an idea) points one in this direction. Jesus may have believed in the imminence of the Kingdom, but there appears to have been no *conscious* shaping of his ethic in that light. However, McArthur overlooks the fact that it was the *King* giving the sermon. Surely there is some urgency given His presence. He had come to fulfill all aspects of the Davidic covenant. The fifth question, "Can first-century eschatological concepts be translated into twentieth-century terms?" The answer to this question is difficult given the genre that eschatology often communicates with, namely, apocalyptic language. McArthur presents four competing theories or answers to the question:

*Reaffirmation of New Testament Eschatology.* Conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics hold this view. The exegetical weakness of this view is that it must deny that Jesus or any other N.T. writer taught the imminence of the eschaton. McArthur says that the revelation of the eschaton was basically the eschaton of the day. Here McArthur slips into a somewhat Neo-Orthodox view of revelation, i.e. as "encounter." "The stories are meaningful as witnesses to that encounter, but their details reflect the current views of the authors' milieu." My question is, "How are they meaningful, if indeed they do not speak to any necessary concomitant reality? Such is inherent in the idea of a "meaningful witness."

*Abandonment of New Testament Eschatology.* In general this is the position of old Liberalism. Harnack is representative of such a view, that is, one who set aside the N.T. eschatology and tried to reconstruct Christianity on his own. McArthur seems to say that if the Bible states in its own way that God will ultimately triumph, we are obligated to restate that same truth in our own language. I agree in principle with this, though it appears at first glance to disagree with what he said earlier about men's thoughts as nothing more than witnesses to the truth.

*Translation into Social-Historical Terms.* This is special reference to the social gospel and men like Ritschl. Other men such as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch tried to see the sermon as a possibility here and now with no necessary attendant eschatology. They, of course, fail to understand the depravity within man—their anthropology was not well thought through, which is interesting since another exponent within their camp, C. C. McCown, wrote in 1945 after having gone through the 2nd world war.

*Translation into Existential Terms.* Bultmann is representative of this view. He says, "The decisive history is not the history of the world, of the people of Israel and of other peoples, but the history which everyone experiences himself. For this history the encounter with Christ is the decisive event, in reality the event by which the individual begins really to exist historically because he begins to exist eschatologically." McArthur's rejoinder to this is to

say that it is an "inadequate translation of New Testament eschatology which has nothing to say about the literal future of man or society. Surely the sweep of the Biblical tradition, in which God spoke to men through history and about history, is not adequately climaxed in view lacking any concern for history." It appears that Bultmann, in my opinion, has forced his understanding of *being* upon the Biblical writers and thus reinterpreted the clear teaching of Scripture as grounded in an ongoing historical reality. But of course, he is an existentialist!

## Chapter 4

### The Sermon and Ethics (Part 1)

#### Introduction

The purpose of this section is to list twelve approaches to the Sermon on the Mount and the manner in which they deal with its precepts.

#### Twelve Approaches to the Sermon on the Mount

*The Absolutist View.* This is the view that maintains that the Sermon must be understood in a crassly literal way. Though some in this camp (e.g. Augustine) allow for figures of speech, many do not. The Anabaptists did not allow for figures of speech and neither did the Russian nobleman Leo Tolstoi. Apparently it was Tolstoi's understanding of "resist not evil" that led him to this position and he died trying to live up to the demands of the Sermon. The strength of the view is that it takes the Sermon at face value, the weakness is that when so taken it poses a threat to family and society.

*The Modification View.* Modifications<sup>5</sup> are introduced into the Sermon by just about every interpreter who is not an absolutist. The modifications are good if they are in line with the intention of Jesus (in which case I disagree with McArthur in calling them modifications). One example will suffice. The insertion "without a cause" in the anger passage changes completely the meaning and demand of the passage. This appears to have been a later addition into the text in order to soften it and make it attainable for us mortals. Note: Since Jesus' statements appear to be so one-sided in certain cases (cf. the eye-for-an-eye pericope) we must understand what is driving his thoughts here. The ethic of love, as defined by doing what's right for another (whether that's exacting the justice or offering mercy) is the underlying reality to His statements. But Jesus, knowing our propensity (and that of the religious leaders) to exact as much as the Law permitted and then some, focused on mercy in this case. But, love does not always show itself in mercy, sometimes in judgment.

*The Hyperbole View.* This view contends that Jesus deliberately overstated His demands. Jesus demonstrated this kind of teaching technique outside the Sermon (cf. Luke 14:26 compare Matt. 10:37), but the early Church, especially Chrysostom sounded a warning against treating the Sermon in this manner. However, in the final analysis one cannot deny certain hyperbole in the Sermon (cf. 5:29).

*General Principles View.* This view claims that Jesus was using special illustrations through which to teach general principles. There is certainly truth to this idea, but care must be taken in order that the general principle be less radical than the illustration. "Turn the other cheek" can apply to a host of situations, but it must never lose its demand through reduction into a general principle. This in effect would be to destroy the Sermon.

*Attitudes-Not-Acts View.* This view places emphasis on the heart and attitude behind acts to the exclusion, in some cases, of the acts themselves. Wilhelm Herrmann advocated this view and was severely criticized by Windisch as creating a modernization of Jesus. However, as McArthur points out, some of the specific acts commanded by Jesus were intended more as illustrations of the heart and less as acts to be followed exactly should the precise circumstance occur.

*The Double Standard View.* The Roman Catholics have taught this view claiming that the sermon represents *counsels* (as opposed to precepts directed at every member) for the perfection of the clergy, not for the laity. McArthur states that the Roman Church has defended their position from incidents found in the New Testament—the

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<sup>5</sup>While this statement is true, McArthur is concerned primarily with those who introduce "changes" without literary, historical or theological justification.

salvation and perfection of the rich young ruler (he compares Matthew and Mark to arrive at the two ideas of salvation and perfection); those who have decided to become Eunuchs for the Kingdom of God, according to the Roman Church, further defends their position that the N.T. sees a distinction between laity and clergy in moral matters of perfection. While it might be true that God seems to have different standards for those in authority, this is only descriptive and not prescriptive. All Christians must live up to the same ethical demands and besides the issue of clergy/laity is not found in the Sermon (unless one takes it as only applicable to the disciples). The question then is, "Of what value is the Sermon for Matthew's wider audience; the ones to whom he wrote?" The distinction made by the Roman Church is artificial in order to soften the blow to the laity. And, the clergy could never keep it anyway!

*The Two Realms View.* This is the dominant view espoused by Martin Luther. The essence of the view is that there are two spheres: the spiritual and the temporal. The Christian is to apply the sermon in the spiritual (within the church), but is to live by the standards of the law in the temporal or civic realm. The result of this has been a tendency at times, within Lutheranism, to have two moralities, one for the church (or private sphere) another for the state.

*The Analogy of Scripture View.* This is the hermeneutic (with the presupposition at times that there is one morality taught in Scripture) that seeks, perhaps unwittingly in some cases, to lessen the demands of the Sermon by comparing it with other Scripture. McArthur cites Augustine, Luther and Calvin as guilty of this. But I think McArthur misunderstands what they were doing. They were not lessening the demands Jesus made, they were giving them a broader ethical framework from which to see their uniqueness. The only way McArthur is right in his criticism, is if the premise that Jesus were inaugurating a completely non-contingent, new Law were granted. But McArthur denies that this is ultimately the case.

*The Interim Ethic View.* This view has already been discussed sufficiently under the chapter entitled, "The Sermon and the Eschaton." The view relieves the disciple after the cross of ultimately having to worry about the demands of the Sermon.

*The Modern Dispensationalist View.* This view sees the Sermon as relating to the future Davidic Kingdom. Interestingly, McArthur points out that Dispensationalists are really absolutist in nature, but escape the Anabaptist quandary by relegating the demands of the Sermon to a future age. This comment, though *apropos* for the sixties, at least until '65 and Ryrie's work, *Dispensationalism Today*, accounts for very little of Dispensational interpreters today.

*The Repentance View.* This view, as held primarily by Lutheran and Reformed thinkers, sees the Sermon as basically Law in nature and is therefore designed, as Paul described in Galatians 3:24, to lead unto Christ; to repent of their sins and believe on Christ. Though this be one of the functions of the Sermon it does not appear to be all that the Sermon was designed for. This view can be sustained only when one sees repentance as an alternative to obedience. But, one may question the validity of that assumption.

*The Unconditional Divine Will View.* "This final interpretation of the Sermon assumes that the commands of Jesus were given in absolute, unconditioned, form but that those who follow after must make their own adjustments in the light of the earthly limitations and necessities experienced." Dibelius held this view, believing as Schweitzer did, that the Sermon was eschatologically oriented, but he differed significantly from Schweitzer in that he felt the Sermon was an eternal ethic.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Sermon and Ethics (Part II)**

#### **Preliminary Observations**

The purpose of this section is to evaluate the 12 interpretations just mentioned above. Two preliminary observations are in order: 1) it is not necessary for every verse in the Sermon to be interpreted "by the mechanical application of the same formula." This is true because different types of statements require their own kind of interpretation and the Sermon has many different kinds of statements; 2) the twelve viewpoints are not mutually exclusive. The interpretations of the Sermon (or as McArthur now calls them; attitudes) are listed below with their relative value:

Secondary Value	Primary Value
Modification	Absolutist
Double Standard	Hyperbole
Two Realms	General Principles
Analogy of Scripture	Attitudes-Not-Acts
Interim Ethic	Repentance
Modern Dispensationalism	Uncon. Divine Will

## Six Views of Secondary Value

*Modification View.* The weakness of this view is that in many instances there is no historical, theological or literary reason for the modifications. The strength behind this view is that it recognizes that the Sermon cannot be applied literally in every situation.

*Double Standard View.* McArthur subjects this view to three questions: 1) "Does the Biblical evidence justify this distinction between precept and counsel?" 2) "If the distinction exists, does it parallel the distinction between clergy and laity?" and 3) "Can even members of religious orders actually be said to fulfill the evangelical counsels—for example, the demand of poverty?" The answer, according to McArthur to the first question is, "No." The Roman church has forced the distinction upon the Sermon. The second question requires an answer in the negative as well. There is no suggestion, from the passages used in support of a double standard, that that standard was a higher way for an organized entity. McArthur responds negatively to the third question, being highly suspicious of the possibility that anyone in religious orders per se, fulfills the demands of the Sermon.

*Two Realms View.* Reluctantly McArthur places Luther's thesis here, subjecting it to two questions; 1) "Is there a New Testament basis for Luther's formulation of the distinction between the spiritual and the secular?" and 2) "What is the law that governs the secular sphere?" To the first question the author says that Luther built his whole two realm view upon passages like Matthew 6:24, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." He says the verse will not support the thesis. McArthur goes on, in response to the second question, to argue that Luther "freed the secular sphere from the control of God's law." I think that he overstates Luther though. I also feel that the author in assessing Luther's view by positing two hypothetical situations demonstrates that he has a one sided understanding of love, the ethic of the sermon. He sees it almost invariably as mercy and grace and almost never as justice. This affects his ability to understand the sayings of Jesus. The example of the town that responds in love, characterized by non-aggression makes one feel that love cannot be expressed in a show of force. I am not sure that that is the case. Look at Jesus with the Pharisees in Matthew 23 for an example on an individual level.

*Analogy of Scripture View.* The author says this is somewhat invalidated as far as the O.T. is concerned since the Sermon represents an advance over the ethic therein (the presupposition is that it does). One must also use caution when exegeting the Sermon in light of the N.T. as well. "Thus Paul's use of oaths cannot determine the exegesis of Matt. 5:33-37."

*Interim Ethic View.* The weakness of this view is that Jesus does not say that we ought to live like this because the end is near, but because we are to be like our heavenly Father.

*Modern Dispensationalist View.* McArthur outrightly rejects this form of understanding the Sermon saying that it is incredible for one to believe that Jesus gave this teaching and yet did not indicate that it was not for 'the general run of believers.' The fact that Paul repeated the ethic shows that it was for believers today. I wonder if McArthur would say that we ought to obey the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 10. While I agree with his conclusion, I wish he would have used a little more sophistication than just dismissing the whole position as nonsense.

## Six Views of Primary Value

*Absolutist View.* The strength of this view is that it takes the demands in the Sermon seriously. They are to be obeyed. The early Church understood that the Sermon was to be lived and the exception clauses that were intro-

duced prove this fact. Their intention was to limit obstacles to obedience. However, while this view lays great stress upon obedience to the Sermon, those who hold it have not always applied the Sermon well.

*Hyperbole View.* It is valid to recognize hyperbole in the prayer. For example, surely Jesus was not denigrating prayer in a public place. And surely He did not wish his followers pluck out their eyes, as if that would deal with the problem of lust in the heart and thought-life. The widespread use of such a hermeneutic, though, would render the ethic of the Sermon commonplace.

*General Principles View.* The strength and weaknesses of this view have already been enumerated by McArthur in the preceding chapter.

*Attitudes-Not-Acts View.* McArthur adds nothing new here as compared with his discussion in the preceding chapter. The last paragraph under this view, though, may indicate that McArthur has defined love improperly, as only that which is merciful and gracious. For him it is a surprise that love may mean that we withhold something from someone or give them something different instead from that which was requested. This is worthwhile pursuing because in many cases McArthur has made value judgments about certain interpretations of the Sermon based upon his thought (which is true) that love is the underlying ethic of the Sermon.

*Repentance View.* This view sees the Sermon functioning to bring us to repentance and faith in Christ. While the Sermon may do this as we see our complete want of ability to perform the prescriptions, there is no exegetical support that it was thus designed. Rather, the support falls upon the idea that the Sermon was designed to show believers how they ought to live in relationship with God and others as individuals. The Repentance View often loses sight of this and replaces the intended obedience for repentance.

*Unconditioned Divine Will View.* "The Sermon must be understood as the *Unconditioned Divine Will* proclaimed in the midst of our conditioned existence." The question is then asked, "Is there any evidence that Jesus would have recognized this contrast between the unconditioned will and a conditioned fulfillment?" McArthur supports an affirmative answer through appeal to the issue of the permission of divorce. But, while divorce may parallel in some ways, i.e. the permission to deviate from what was original, it may not in others. The one seeking the divorce is not even trying to fulfill God's will. However, even when I try, I cannot fulfill the demands of the Sermon. In the final analysis, even though, the permission of divorce is not an exact parallel, it does not negate the possibility that Jesus did in fact see a distinction between the Divine will and its realization in the hearts and lives of sinners, redeemed nonetheless.

## **Epilogue**

### **The Sermon and the Christian**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the relevancy of the findings of the study for daily Christian living. The chapter is approached by reviewing the previous material; chapter by chapter beginning in chapter one.

The assertion of the first chapter is that Christ both clarified the Mosaic tradition and also went *beyond it* giving the final revelation of God by which all men are bound. At the same time as God was in Christ giving the entire import (and more) of the Law and thus His demands, He was also expressing once and for all the profundity of His mercy to those who are sinners.

Chapter two dealt with the contrast between the Sermon and the teachings of Paul. We saw that the contrast was at times exaggerated and unfounded (e.g. to say that the Sermon implies no grace, but only achievement— cf. Matt. 5:3). McArthur tears down the idea that there is any real advantage, toward finding a solution to the apparent schism between Jesus and Paul by setting up the notion that there can be discerned a real difference in the "religion of Jesus" (i.e. in the Gospels) as opposed to the "religion about Jesus" (i.e. Paul's teaching). This approach, according to McArthur, does not solve the problem at hand. Granting his thesis, McArthur has thus rendered suspect the work of both Bultmann and Schweitzer.

McArthur's summary of chapter three is straightforward. He understands Jesus to have believed the Eschaton was near and therefore, since it did not come, He was in error. He does not harmonize this thinking with his Christology though. Surely there are more palatable solutions than to think Christ in error. Dispensationalism provides a more adequate response in that it affirms the movement of God from the Jews to the Gentiles. Thus Christ offered the Davidic kingdom to Israel, but after she had rejected His offer, He turned away from her to the Gentiles.

In the end though, the Eschaton inherent in the Sermon makes all of us come to grip with our mortality and the fact that we must all stand before our God someday to be judged. A truly sobering thought!

The summary of chapter five is that the Sermon is pointing us in the way of love. Love is the foundation and goal of the Sermon and in this way is the divine expression of the two great commandments. How then can this be only for the future as some say? It must be for all God's people of all ages.

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Greg Herrick graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary with the Th.M. in 1994 and is working on his Ph.D. Greg and his wife are transplanted Canadians living with their four children in North Texas.