

## **The Sermon on the Mount**

### **Preface**

#### **The Interpretation of the Sermon**

“If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn to them the other cheek also,” states Jesus in Matthew 5:32.

Usually this statement is pronounced as if it is an eternal principle. Is it an eternal principle to be pulled out as a single verse given a life on its own apart from its context?

The larger question is; did Jesus do this Himself? The answer is, “yes.” When Jesus was imprisoned, persecuted, had His beard torn out, accused of blasphemy against God, He did not take physical vengeance against His persecutors. But, will Jesus always do this? The answer is, “No!” The day will come when Jesus will not turn the other cheek and will return in judgment against those who struck Him. Even in the Old Testament God’s anointed ones did not turn the other cheek. Joshua, David, Solomon eliminated those who opposed them.

#### **The Nature of Story**

##### **The Setting**

“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that” is the opening line of the great novel, “A Christmas Carol” by an English author named Charles Dickens. That statement launches the reader into the story where he is very quickly introduced to the opening scene and the characters. Ebenezer Scrooge, as the evil miser, oppresses his clerk, Bob Cratchit, who works to feed his wife and children, one of whom is physically handicapped.

##### **The Tension**

But just as the reader has settled in to the relative calm of the setting and briefly gotten to know the characters, the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, has his life rudely interrupted by the appearance of the dead Marley. “In life, I was your partner, Jacob Marley” speaks the apparition to Scrooge in his bedchamber. From that moment the story takes a turn and Scrooge, as well as the reader, will never return to the stability once enjoyed in the early stages of the story. Following Marley’s sudden appearance and departure, Scrooge can never again return to his former state. He will not have that choice. For the ghost, Marley, has introduced a problem, a tension into Scrooge’s life. That tension is knowledge; knowledge that will keep Scrooge from returning, knowledge that requires a choice. That choice will forever affect Scrooge, either for good or for evil. What the apparition had shown the miserly Scrooge was that no one would ever regard him with any fond memories at his death, nor even attend his funeral.

##### **The Response**

As the main character, Scrooge will have two choices. He may reject Marley’s invitation to change and attempt to return to his former greedy ways. But he cannot return with satisfaction, for now Marley’s input will haunt him. He will hear Marley’s voice each time he ignores the

begging orphan or spurns a widow. Marley's vague form will cause him guilt as he continues to persecute others.

But the other choice, that is to change his character, is no less daunting. In fact, it is more daunting. To heed Marley's advice requires Scrooge to blaze a trail unknown to him, a trail of generosity in place of his miserly ways. The first step on that trail is the public admission that he was wrong, and had been wrong his whole life, a thought most reprehensible to the man who had made a lifetime of defending self-centered choices.

### The Resolution

Yet Scrooge does choose wisely. As the story proceeds unabated to its conclusion, the reader naturally wonders what will be the outcome of Scrooge's choice to make the most of the rest of his life. And the author does not let the reader down. The rest of the story heads pell-mell in the direction of the conclusion, a segment called the "rising action." It is in these series of events that Scrooge will attempt to establish a change in his life and the world. Finally, it is in the conclusion that the author will reveal the result of Scrooge's choice. The author's final words contain that reward, an acclaim by those who had formerly cursed him.

“. . . and it was always said of him, that he (Scrooge)<sup>1</sup> knew how to observe Christmas well, if any man possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, "God Bless Us, Every One!"

Here in the resolution the author resolves the tension. The problem that Marley had introduced long ago during those dark hours in his bedchamber had now been resolved in a "they lived happily ever after" ending."

### The Philosophy (the moral) as the deliverer of the message of the story

All this is well and good, and necessary. But knowing the parts of the story has not given the reader any ability to accomplish any benefit to himself by reading the book. He has not learned one thing that he can apply. Should the reader identify with the self-centeredness of Scrooge, he cannot count on being confronted by Marley or some other apparition from his past. The reader may not have the resources of Scrooge that allow him to donate to the care of a physically challenged child like Tiny Tim. The setting, tension and resolution are unique to Scrooge's situation, locked into his unique history, not identifiable by the average reader. In other words, the story is unique. It is about a unique person in a unique situation which will never occur again. It cannot be copied.

So what is it that the reader must draw from the story in order to affect his own life as the author has desired? It is everyone knows from childhood as the "moral of the story."

But where is the "moral of the story" to be found? It is found in the philosophy of the main character, the philosophy that allowed him to change his character and thus the outcome of his life. It was what enabled him to make the proper choice in response to the problem, and finally to proceed on to the victory.

Knowing the parts of the story may point the reader to the place where the knowledge may be found. But it is not enough to know the place where the knowledge is found. One must know precisely what that knowledge is. The philosophy that enabled Scrooge to be victorious was given to him by Marley and the accompanying night visitors in his bedchamber. They had

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<sup>1</sup> Parenthesis mine.

given him knowledge; knowledge of what was to come if he pursued his present errant philosophy. Thus Scrooge had emerged from the night with a new philosophy, a philosophy that determined that Christmas was an opportunity to help others. This is the philosophy that enabled him to change and emerge victorious by the end of the book.

The moral of the story for the reader is the philosophy that enabled Scrooge to change. That philosophy is not time-bound nor unique to any character or place. It is a timeless truth that worked for Scrooge and will work for the reader. The reader is able to thus adopt the message of the author. It is a simple conclusion. The reader should use Christmas (and indeed every day) to help others. Knowing this philosophy enables the reader to profit from the story in his own life. In other words by riding through time with Scrooge, the reader will hopefully adopt the right philosophy and avoid learning the hard way as Scrooge.

### **Matthew as Story**

#### The Setting

“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham, the son of David . . . Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows . . .” begins a greater story by a relatively unknown author named Matthew. The reader is then launched into the story, perceiving relative calm, and the happy expectation and arrival of a very important baby on this earth.

#### The Tension

This setting proceeds and comes to its ultimate state as God Himself finally introduces the baby to the world, “This is My Son in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17 which is a quote from Psalm 2:7 where God was to give His Son the nations of the earth). But then another voice, the voice of the great antagonist Satan, interrupts the narrative with the tension of the story, “All these things (the nations of the earth) will I give You, if You fall down and worship me” speaks the great tempter of all time. And the story takes a turn never to return again. From that point on, the situation for the Main Character, Jesus, will never be the same. No longer will the Main Character be able to return to the relative silence of the last thirty years of His life. No longer will He be under the wise protection of His adopted father, Joseph. Now He is faced with a decision. On the surface it appears to be a simple decision to follow God, the Father, instead of this stranger. But this decision will place the Hero on an untraveled path, a path on which no one has been and no one will join him. It is the path in which He will oppose the great killer, a path that will lead most surely to His death at the hands of this most nefarious character.

#### The Response (“the rising action”)

To those who know the story, this Main Character, Jesus, responds to identify with God instead of the evil Satan’s deceitful offers. Jesus continues to persevere in His decision and is faithful to God even to His painful and humiliating death as a criminal. His faithful journey would be made alone with only His Father, God, to support Him.

#### The Resolution

The story proceeds until the stranger is able to accomplish his evil deed and expunge the life of Jesus. Satan had to eliminate Jesus since He opposed Satan’s continued reign over this earth. But Jesus continued to be faithful to God even to His death. That choice is rewarded as God gives Him back His life by restoring His body back to Him – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The return of His body would enable Him to rule forever following a delay when He would return

to this earth. Rule over the nations was what Satan had offered Him, but that rule was a rule of death and lies. Now Jesus will rule for His Father over the nations, a rule of life and truth.

#### The Philosophy (the moral)

The setting (the birth scenes), the tension (Satan's confrontation) and the resolution (the resurrection) are all small but integral parts of a larger story. No interpretation of any part of the story can be assured without knowing the full story. But these parts are all simply story. One must know the philosophy that enabled Jesus, the Main Character, to win. The story itself is historical. The reader cannot duplicate it. To understand the "moral" of the story, one must find the "philosophy" of the Main Character that enabled Him to win.

The reader may know that Jesus was born, that He was declared to be the Son of God, tempted by Satan, crucified and resurrected. But none of that by itself will change the reader. He must know what the philosophy was that propelled Jesus undeterred to a certain death. What was the philosophy whereby God would resurrect Him? What is the philosophy that the disciples were commanded to teach to all nations (28:19)? That philosophy is found in Matthew 5—7, in the Sermon on the Mount. Only the Sermon on the Mount will fully reveal this message; a message known specifically as the "Gospel of the Kingdom".

But it is not enough to know where the philosophy of the story occurs. One must know what it states. And one must know that meaning accurately. For it is only here in the Book of Matthew that the philosophy will be clearly and fully stated. To misinterpret it would give the reader a philosophy for his own life that would be errant. To interpret it correctly would enable the reader to have access to life itself, the philosophy, the character, the wisdom of God, displayed in His only begotten Son, Jesus the Christ.

### **Understanding The Sermon on the Mount**

Since the Sermon is part of a larger story it should not be interpreted on its own. To do so assumes that Matthew is not a single progressive plot (story) but a collection of events, each which stands on its own (anthology). But since Matthew is story, interpreting the Sermon while leaving out the rest of the book invites error. If indeed the "Sermon" reveals the "philosophy" of the story, then the events that follow (and precede) must be integrally tied to the "Sermon". In other words, if the Sermon is the "philosophy" that drives the Main Character to victory and the story is the record of the progression to that victory, then the Sermon will control the whole story.

It is in Scrooge's midnight encounter with Marley that contained the philosophy that would enable Scrooge's success. To tell the rest of the story without knowing that segment would leave the reader wondering why Scrooge suddenly acted differently. His ultimate success would not be explained. The reader would be at a loss of what to do following the reading of the story.

Contrariwise, to explain the philosophy he gained from the apparitions without the preceding and following events, would leave the reader unsure of its precise meaning since he would not be able to see the interpretation of that philosophy played out in real events.

### **The relationship of the rest of the story (Matthew) to the philosophy (The Sermon)**

That the story and its outcome can be understood only after knowing the philosophy of the Sermon is apparent in several simple examples.

**Matthew 24:14** "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.

The "gospel of the kingdom" is explained by most commentators as the simple gospel used in evangelism. That gospel is simply the philosophy that allows one to enter the kingdom. Yet most could not tell where that is defined in Matthew. It is not explained in Matthew 24. If one eliminates the Sermon, it is not found in the Book of Matthew. In other words, the "gospel of the kingdom" refers to the philosophy of Matthew's story, found in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapters 5 through 7.

**Matthew 28:19-20**" Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . .

Having come to the end of the story the disciples are issued a command to teach "all that I commanded you." What is it that Jesus had commanded them? What Matthew wants the reader to know is the basic philosophy of His book, the "gospel of the kingdom." Again, the Sermon on the Mount is the place it is found. No other location in the book defines that gospel, those commands.<sup>2</sup>

### The relationship of the philosophy (The Sermon) to the rest of the story (Matthew)

That the interpretation of the Sermon is illustrated in the events following the Sermon is demonstrable by several examples.

For instance, "By their fruits ye shall know them . . ." is a statement Jesus made in the conclusion of the Sermon. Many interpreters state that fruits are equal to one's works. Thus if one does not have good works (whatever those are), one would not be identifiable as a believer. However, a quick tour to the rest of the book would find the characters of the book are relating back to the philosophy (the Sermon) and thus illustrate meanings in the Sermon. And this is the case with this verse. In Matthew 12:33-37, the Pharisees verbally reject Jesus. It is there that Jesus makes a similar statement ("for the tree is known by its fruit," 12:33) and there clearly identifies that "fruits" are words (confession), "for by your words you shall be justified and by your words you shall be condemned." Thus it is clearly seen that in story, the characters in the rest of the story illustrate the philosophy of the Sermon and thus validate a correct interpretation within the Sermon, that fruits are words.<sup>3</sup>

The second point regarding the Sermon's interpretation is that, unlike Dickens' classic, the Book of Matthew (and thus also the Sermon) is part of a larger story written by a greater author than Matthew, the story of the Bible. Without knowing what has gone on before Matthew, one is once again hindered by not knowing the part it plays in the larger story. Without allowing Matthew (and thus the Sermon) to rely on knowledge that precedes it (The Old Testament) the reader is lost since Matthew's assumption of a movement prior to his story is foundational. An illustration of this is in 5:4 where Jesus says, "Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted." This is almost a verbatim quote from Isaiah 61:2 where Isaiah prophesied what would yet come to pass in the future. Jesus quotes from Isaiah to show that He is about to fulfill Isaiah's expectation. Knowing what Isaiah was anticipating will relate precisely to what Jesus is claiming. However, without the knowledge of Isaiah's reference, one is left to interpret "mourn"

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<sup>2</sup> It might be argued by those who study Matthew that there are five discourses, only one of which is the Sermon, and thus the disciples were to teach all five discourses. The disciples were to teach all five discourses, but the other four discourses do not define the gospel (the philosophy) within their discourse. Each discourse references the Sermon for the philosophy (the gospel) and indicates how it will affect the coming ages.

<sup>3</sup> It is also clear in the context of the Sermon itself that this is the case. It is also to be noted that Jesus is utilizing this verse from a reference in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 13:1-7, where false prophets are identified by their words. A similar reference is in Deuteronomy 18:20-22.

from his own context. This could result in errantly calling one “blessed” when tragic events enter one’s life, as death and sickness, a meaning opposite of the meaning of Isaiah and Christ.

The third point regarding the Sermon is that each verse must be developed in a context, as a typical sermon would be. Quite frequently, the Sermon is likened to the Book of Proverbs, that is, every verse is its own context and cannot be connected to the next or preceding verse to develop the thought. But the lack of ability to use context to interpret each verse leads one to import the readers’ theology into the verse where things are lacking. Even in Proverbs the book has a unity that guides the reader. The beginning statement, “The fear of YHWH is the beginning of knowledge” should guide the reader to know that verses are never to be interpreted apart from the unique and naturally unobtainable knowledge of revelation, and never to be acted on apart from a motivation of love for YHWH. In addition, those who study Proverbs note that most of the verses *are* contextually interpreted throughout (that is they relate to previous and following verses) in sections and in larger portions as Proverbs 1—9 which forms a message from a wise father to a naïve son and is a literary unity. An illustration of this is in Matthew 7:6 where Jesus guarantees “Ask and it shall be given to you.” If one does not relate this into the previous verses and chapters of the Sermon, it might seem that God would give to man whatever he asks. Yet when viewed in light of the single thing that Jesus says that man needs from the previous context, one can find his answer.

### **Application of the Sermon**

Of course, in today’s preaching and teaching, one of the first things that readers want to know is “How does this apply to my life today?” While frequently this is pushed into contexts much too quickly, it is an essential part of the equation. One of the most important things of any writing is that the author has a goal. That goal is to change the mind of the reader from a previous state of ignorance to a place of knowledge. That knowledge should impel him to act.

However, in order to insure application, most interpreters have gone right to the Sermon and doled out specifics for the reader (i.e., Jesus speaks directly to the church) without going through the interpretation phase (i.e., Jesus speaks to men on a hillside as part of the greater story of Matthew), thus requiring hermeneutical gyrations at times. An example of this is in 5:25 when Jesus states, “When you take your offering . . .”, an act that had long since departed from the reading church’s required activities.

Due to this emphasis, most interpreters end up with the Sermon being mostly devotional in nature; each verse being a thought for today. It is not considered with other verses in a continuous reasoning, nor related to the rest of the story of the book, nor is it framed in the progressive revelation of the unfolding story from Genesis to the gospels.

The summary of this is that most interpretations are not contextually validated and thus bear the risk of errant, and even secular, meanings; a practice warned against within the Sermon with severe consequences.

### **The Message of the Sermon**

As a result of the various interpretation methods, most of them application oriented, various applications have surfaced.

Some propose that the Sermon institutes a greater righteousness than that of the Old Testament, thus upping the bar for the New Testament reader over the Old. This is proposed in the “You have heard it said, but I say unto you . . .” formulas that propose that the first statement is the Law and the second is Jesus raising the standard of the Law. But if the Law is “holy and

righteous and good”, one wonders theologically how there could be a greater holiness than holy, a greater righteousness than righteous.

There are corollaries to this which note that this righteousness Jesus proposes is next to impossible to keep. Thus, Lewis Sperry Chafer and many of the older dispensationalists applied this only to those in the kingdom where one’s sin nature would be gone and perfection would be easier. Others simply relegate the concepts in the Sermon to their understanding of the Proverbs, which makes these practical goals only, not a standard for man to achieve. Of course, it is difficult in light of the fact that Jesus emphasizes that any deviation from this standard, e.g., “annuls one of the least of these commandments” (5:19) has dire consequences for any man as he is put in the rejected category.

And so it goes. Jesus appears to have a very high standard and seems also to paint dire consequences for anyone not keeping it to the perfect fullness. The revelation of God always runs contrary to what man reasons as good enough. So it should not be surprising that Jesus requires more than what man thinks is reasonable.

Years ago, a President of the United States had committed a moral indiscretion which was publicly discovered. He responded that others should not condemn him since everyone has sinned, implying that they should not judge him with the purpose of putting an end to his condemnation. While this seems reasonable to a Westernized culture, Biblically it is wrong. Those without any Biblical knowledge frequently assert this at the secular level. So while one should not judge from their own perspective, to negate one’s sin because everyone has it, is to simply bring in a lower standard or very simply “lower the bar.” This Jesus did not do. To accept one’s sin is to lower the standard Jesus proposes in the Sermon. Note this well. Jesus never accepted one’s sin. He never said that it would be all right. He never overlooked it. He never “lowered the bar.” He condemned it openly and then He died to pay for it.

This is exactly what men seek to do with the Sermon; lower its obviously high standards by saying that since man cannot keep it, it must require less than it seemingly proposes. The way this is done is to make it for another age, another time, either the kingdom, or the day in which Jesus lived. In essence what the President and others had promoted was a lowering of the standard so that sin was acceptable conduct (because no one is perfect). In other words, the acceptable standard is not that of God, but of common self-centered man, and whatever is the best he can do. So since we are all sinners, sin becomes acceptable. This leads to a misunderstanding of God’s righteousness and judgment and a human view of good works leading to universalism (“many ways to God”), a sin so dire that it was to be met with execution under the Old Testament Law.

God is righteous. There is no other standard. The question is how may a man become as righteous as God and meet that standard. The Sermon explains this. The Sermon not only explains this in salvation, but in sanctification. Thus, man must walk and live his life as righteous as God. And, as one might expect, Jesus is the means by which this righteousness becomes the character of a man, only through the gift of imputed righteousness by believing.

This study in the Sermon will show that God’s righteousness is the only standard. It is imputed to man through Christ alone by trusting (“ask”) through imputation. Man then not only is saved (delivered to a relationship with God) but is to walk, producing good works motivated solely on that imputation (“let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven”) and not on his own justification through good works (“Beware of practicing your good works before men to be noticed by them . . .”).

It is this understanding that will provide the reader with an perception of the rest of the Book of Matthew and Jesus’ place in the unfolding canon, but will also provide a theology that is consistent as a basis for understanding the writers who follow (“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”)

A simple word of warning is appropriate at this time. The Sermon does not offer simple proof texts for its conclusions. It is to be contextually studied conscientiously to determine its meaning and that within a whole story of Matthew. To give it less is to lower it below the credibility given to fairy tales, from which no one would proof text to determine their meaning. Thus the reader is encouraged to complete this study before forming quick conclusions.

So welcome to the Story of Matthew, a story which unfolds from the philosophy of Jesus, found in the Sermon on the Mount.

But there is a warning. Like the Main Character can never return to the reverie of the setting, the reader once understanding the story will never be able to return to isolating texts and giving them a non-contextual life of their own. Once understanding the story completely, one can never return again. Matthew has constructed a story in which the Main Character's life will forever be changed.

Interestingly when the reader understands Matthew's story, he also is presented with a tension; that of truth, the truth of the philosophy of Jesus and God the Father, a truth found in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew's point is that the reader understands that philosophy and once knowing it can never return again to ignorance. Should he reject it, its truth will follow him to the Lake of Fire. Should he accept it, his life will forever be changed. It will take him through the suffering of this age into the eternal kingdom to dwell forever with the One who spoke that philosophy on that hill on the north side of the Sea of Galilee on a single day in Israel.