

Go & Make Disciples:

The Biblical Foundation for Discipleship in the Way of Jesus

Ryan May

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2021

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

Dr. Dave Adams, D.Min.
Thesis Chair

Dr. Donald Fowler, Th.D.
Committee Member

Christopher Nelson, M.F.A.
Assistant Honors Director

Date

Abstract

What are Jesus' foundational teachings that lay the groundwork for discipleship in the church today? Within this paper, I will seek to work through the initial section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to distill the essential theological lessons of Christ on discipleship. After introducing some important cultural realities concerning the state of discipleship in the church today, Matthew 5 will be thoroughly engaged. Beginning with a discussion on cultural, literary, and theological backgrounds, the passage will be broken down section by section to discern key truths expressed for the modern church. The paper will conclude with further reflection questions for church leaders as they seek to practically apply this teaching in their setting.

Go & Make Disciples: The Biblical Foundation for Discipleship in the Way of Jesus

Discipleship is a term that gets thrown around a lot in the modern church. “Go and make disciples” was the final phrase of Jesus before He ascended; this surely is an important concept. Despite this, the Western Church seems to be in a “discipleship crisis.” The Church, especially in the West, has lost much of its understanding on what it means to enter God’s Kingdom and grow into a disciple. In many ways, modern Christianity has shifted from a “gospel culture” to a “salvation culture.” To put it another way, much of the focus in many Western Evangelical churches today is getting someone saved into a personal relationship with Christ (which is extremely important) but often without a subsequent focus on developing believers into mature members of the Kingdom of God.¹ Believers in the West have lost the beautiful reality that salvation is not only about being forgiven of sin; it is also about growing in deeper and deeper fellowship with God through experiential intimacy and transformation.²

The Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20 is often minimized to only preaching the Good News and bringing someone into initial relationship with Christ. This is vitally important, but Jesus also speaks of “baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” as well as “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded.” He also promises His presence as disciples are formed, grown, and reproduced. Believers are not only saved from wrath, sin, and evil when they trust in Christ as Lord and Savior; they are also saved

¹ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2011), 28-33.

² Hank Hanegraaff, *Truth Matters, Life Matters More: The Unexpected Beauty of an Authentic Christian Life* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2019), 90-91.

into the Church. They are saved into union with Christ and His Body.³ It is in learning to obey the teachings of Jesus, as empowered by the Holy Spirit, that believers fully experience the beauty of salvation. Discipleship is about restoring the image of God lost at the Fall, through the empowerment of the Spirit in reflection of the Son to the glory of the Father.⁴ This beautiful picture of discipleship needs to be recovered in the Church, especially in an age where many fail to see their own need for salvation and sanctification. There is no better place to establish these theological and biblical foundations than in the preeminent teaching of Jesus Himself, the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.

This paper will explore Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount exegetically, establishing the biblical foundations for a practical discipleship model for the church today rather than attempting to fully articulate one. This is operating under the conviction that the Scriptures are infallible and authoritative as the very foundation for church doctrine and practice. Though the entire Sermon on the Mount is beautiful, due to the brevity of this paper, Jesus's teachings on the Beatitudes, the commission of the Church, and the Kingdom community's relation to the Law (Matthew 5) will be exegeted. Appreciating the limited nature of such an endeavor, this should be seen only as one of the first steps in crafting a fully orbed discipleship theology which can then be applied in a practical way to the modern church.

Exegesis of Matthew 5

³ Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Nashville: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2012), 288-290.

⁴ Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 265-276.

Background Information

Before diving into the specifics of the sermon itself, a few key points should be noted about the historical and theological backgrounds to this text. First, it is important that this teaching finds itself in Matthew's Gospel. This gospel is thoroughly the most Jewish of the four, some likening it to the "Christian Torah."⁵ This gospel is structured around five key teaching discourses of Jesus, some claiming a parallel to the five-book structure of the Jewish Torah itself.⁶ The discourses are designed in part to guide this early Jewish-Christian community to learn what it means to follow Jesus.⁷ Discipleship to Jesus, lived in communal devotion to Him and His Kingdom, is a central theme running throughout this book.⁸

The establishment of the church of Jesus Christ is key to understanding the nature of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel of Matthew is the only Gospel which mentions the term *ekklēsia*, the New Testament term for the gathering of believers in local assemblies (in Matthew 16:18 and Matthew 18:17)⁹. In the first passage (Matthew 16:13-20), Jesus establishes that the foundation of the Church will be profession of faith in Jesus as Messiah. In the second passage (Matthew 18:15-19), Jesus establishes that a high standard is to be taught and upheld through

⁵ Fr. Lawrence J. Farley, *The Gospel of Matthew: Torah for the Church*. The Orthodox Bible Study Companion Series (Chesterton: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2009), 15.

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 36-38.

⁷ Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*. Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2006), 31-32.

⁸ Jeanine K. Brown and Kyle Roberts, *Matthew*. The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 19.

⁹ Verlyn Verbrugge, "Ekklesia" in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Abridged ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017).

accountability in the local bodies. In essence, the local assemblies of the church will be built upon disciples' faith which will produce faithfulness. If Jesus is truly believed to be the Messiah, the King who has been given divine rule by the Father Himself, obedience to His teachings should follow. Discipleship is thus a community effort to teach, understand, and obey the teachings of Jesus through dependency on the Holy Spirit. It is believers once again appreciating their place as servants under God's Kingship.¹⁰ As seen in the book of Acts, local assemblies are called to hold one another to a high standard as they together learn how to follow the Way of Jesus.

This understanding of the Gospel of Matthew's purpose is important because this Sermon only finds proper understanding and application when it is lived out in a community of fellow disciples. As the initial teaching of Jesus, this Sermon acts as the pre-eminent New Testament teaching on what a citizen of the Kingdom of God is supposed to look like. For the original hearer of this message, the calling must have been shocking. The reader must not forget what a radical thing it is to follow Jesus and what a radically set apart community the church should be. The later Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine epistles will build upon these theological concepts for how this great teaching plays itself out amid human sin and brokenness. As the reader engages the rest of this paper, he should appreciate these teachings as an authoritative standard by which the believer, in the context of a local community, is to assess himself and progressively work towards. The Sermon is thus perpetually relevant to every believer and necessary to consistently reflect upon as a proper tool of discipleship in the gathered Christian community.

¹⁰ McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 157-158.

Jesus' specific role as the bridge figure between the Old Covenant community of Israel and the New Covenant community of the Church is also very important. Jesus, as a Jewish figure, is recapturing known symbols of Judaism and recasting them in a new light. He is not merely a great teacher, a miracle worker, or an eschatological prophet, Jesus is the Messiah who has come to enact Yahweh's victorious reign over the earth and His church is then called to continue that vocation via the Spirit.¹¹ The fledgling Jewish-Christian church is beginning to grasp its own unique role (distinct from mainstream Judaism) as "true sons of the Kingdom" called to declare the way of salvation through the Risen Messiah.¹²

Second, it is important that this specific discourse falls in line as part of Matthew's brilliant literary typing of Jesus as the New Israel. In the Evangelist's eyes, He is the One who fulfilled Israel's Scriptures, and because of this, His life is cast in parallel to the key moments/figures of the Hebrew Bible.¹³ Primary among these types, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, is Jesus acting as the New Moses; He is the one who would lead God's people into a New Exodus and establish a New Covenant community who would fulfill the Story of God that has been laid out in Scripture.¹⁴ This picture is captured in multiple ways in Matthew's gospel. Just as Moses was

¹¹ N.T. Wright, "The Historical Jesus and Christian Theology," *Sewanee Theological Review* 39, 1996, <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/the-historical-jesus-and-christian-theology/> (Accessed February 23, 2021.)

¹² Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*. New Cambridge Bible Commentary, ed. Ben Witherington III and Bill Arnold. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.), 5-7.

¹³ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament Series, ed. Clinton E. Arnold. (Nashville: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2010), 36.

¹⁴ Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*. The Story of God Bible Commentary, ed. Tremper Longman III and Scot McKnight. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 20-28; Charles L. Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew: Jesus Revealed as Deliverer, King, and Incarnate Creator*. Explorations in Biblical Theology, ed. Robert A. Peterson. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2013), 47-69; For an in-depth study of New Moses Typology in the Book of Matthew see Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

sent by God as an agent of salvation for the Israelites out from the oppressive rule of Pharaoh, Jesus was sent by God as the Messiah who would liberate humanity from the oppressive rule of sin and spiritual darkness. Just as Moses established the way that the covenant people of Israel were to live under God, Jesus establishes the way His Kingdom people will now live by the power of the Spirit who will be poured out to all who believe. The key difference is that Jesus is not simply mediating a Law from Yahweh; instead, He is speaking with the very authority of Yahweh.¹⁵

Third, it is important to note that this teaching is thoroughly situated within the milieu of the Jewish Scriptures while simultaneously looking forward to their ultimate fulfillment. The Sermon on the Mount is situated within four paradigms. Being well aware of the Hebrew Bible's tri-patriate structure (the Law, Prophets, and Writings/Wisdom or *Tanak* for short), Jesus' message beautifully enters into each stream of literature while also moving beyond it.¹⁶ It contains a "word from above" (Law), a "word from beyond" (Prophets), and a "word from below" (Wisdom).¹⁷ Beyond the confines of the Hebrew Bible, Jesus also moves Israel's story to its completion, speaking a word as the Messiah who inaugurates a new end-times Kingdom Community energized by the Spirit.¹⁸ To put it simply, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount can be seen

¹⁵ Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew*, 47-69.

¹⁶ Gary M. Burge and Gene L. Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament Within its Cultural Contexts*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 95; McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1-17.

¹⁷ McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1-17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

as a brilliant piece of eschatological wisdom; it is a teaching on a life of flourishing, wholeness, and inside-out righteousness rooted in the reality of the God's Kingdom breaking into earth.¹⁹

As a final note before beginning, it is important to understand two key ideas within this Sermon, those of *makarios* and *teleios*. These two lay the groundwork for the theological underpinnings of this message. First, the term *makarios* should be understood as “good, happy, blessed.” This term denotes one who has experienced a fullness of life through submission to God.²⁰ Second, the term *teleios* should be understood as “wholeness or completion.” This term denotes in a heart-felt, singular devotion to God which results in peace.²¹

Matthew 5:1-12

The Sermon on the Mount begins with Jesus ascending to a mountainside, sitting down, and beginning to teach (verses 1-2). As insignificant as this may seem, even here there is a great deal of theological details to appreciate. Though it is often lost on modern Christians who tend to miss the deeper literary structuring of many biblical texts, the New Testament authors wisely wrote their texts with an eye for both history and theology. These texts were meant not only to teach the historical events of the life of Jesus and the early church but also to expose the reader to the theological significance of such events.²² As discussed earlier, Matthew utilizes the motif

¹⁹ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 50-81; For a more in-depth study of these words, see Verlyn Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Abridged ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017).

²⁰ Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 50-66.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 70-81.

²² Burge and Green, *New Testament in Antiquity*, 208.

of Jesus as the New Moses to establish His authority here. Just as Moses ascended the holy mountain of Sinai to receive the Law from God before delivering it to God's people, Jesus now ascends the holy mountain to give His teaching to God's people.²³

Jesus begins His teaching with the well-known and foundational Beatitudes. These teachings clearly flow from both a Jewish and Greco-Roman wisdom tradition as well as the Jewish eschatological vision of the day²⁴. Many of these individual "heart attitudes" describe the internal virtues necessary to follow Jesus under Yahweh's reign and rule into a life of wholeness and flourishing. These are rooted clearly in a powerful hope of God's ultimate redemption of all things. As a result, that which is seen as "good" (especially within the wider Greco-Roman world) is flipped on its head.

The first beatitude centers on an individual's poverty in spirit. This specifically centers on the acknowledgment of one's own need before God. To enter the Kingdom of God, one must first appreciate the fact that he is completely unable of achieving wholeness outside of a desperate dependency on the grace of God.²⁵ Jesus thus critiques the supposedly powerful individuals of the day, both religious and political, who assume that through their own strength they are made whole. He flips this idea on its head and claims that it is the weak and desperate who experience the rule and reign of God in their own lives.²⁶ There is both an "already"

²³ Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew*, 33-69.

²⁴ Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 75-76.

²⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*. Preaching the Word Series, ed. R. Kent Hughes. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 19-20.

²⁶ Jack R. Lundbom, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: Mandating a Better Righteousness*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 96-99.

dimension to this as one begins to experience God's reign through faith; there is also a "not yet" dimension to this where these dependent individuals will experience ultimate fulfillment in the everlasting establishment of God's Kingdom in the New Creation.²⁷

The second beatitude centers on an individual's mourning. The true followers of God are broken before God over the sinfulness inside their own hearts as well as the caustic effects of evil and sin in this world. Rather than boasting pridefully in having it all together, believers mourn in their weakness and sympathize with the weakness of others.²⁸ This internal heart disposition drives this person to an active relationship with God through prayer, primarily via confession of one's own sin and intercession on behalf of others. Again, there is a clear dependency on God here and an acknowledgment that He is the One who brings wholeness and life. Through this process, there is comfort offered from God, primarily in an eschatological sense. Though God will comfort His people through His abiding presence in prayer, the ultimate comfort comes in His final victory to free people from their own sinfulness and the powers of darkness in the consummation of His Kingdom.²⁹

The third beatitude centers on one's meekness. This idea denotes a gentle, humble, and self-controlled person.³⁰ Desperate dependence on God and deep mourning over brokenness

²⁷ Lundbom, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount*, 99-100.

²⁸ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*. The NIV Application Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2004), 206-207.

²⁹ D.A. Carson, *Matthew*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary Series, ed. Tremper Longman III and David Garland. (Nashville: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2017), 201.

³⁰ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*. The Bible Speaks Today Series. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 26.

within and in the world lead to a secure identity from God that is neither prideful nor weak. This meekness drives one to live boldly, respectfully, and confidently as a disciple, knowing God's continual closeness and His ultimate sovereignty. Even when the powerful of the world boast, the Christian disciple remains gentle and controlled which ends up being quite powerful to the world. One can operate with such confidence due to the promises of God; they will "inherit the earth."³¹ The meek disciples of Christ will calmly and confidently rule over the Promised Land of the New Earth one day with Christ as King.³²

The fourth beatitude centers on righteousness. The true disciple of Jesus and follower of Yahweh has a desperate desire to live rightly. As one remains desperate for God, broken over sin and its effects, and meek in the face of the world, he will desire righteous living. Just as a starving person needs food or a thirsty person needs water, the disciple of Jesus desires more and more to see the Kingdom come through his own life. As he seeks to learn what it is to honor God and others, God will supply him the ability to live that way.³³ This person will be "filled" as he acts out in righteousness and experiences the true life of flourishing associated with that. There is a sense in which the disciple is being filled now and will be filled at the end of the age.

The fifth beatitude centers on mercy. A genuine follower of Jesus extends mercy to others in response to the mercy he has been shown by God. As one acknowledges his own desperation, sees his own brokenness, walks in meekness, and desires righteousness, it becomes

³¹ Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 27-28.

³² Osborne, *Matthew*, 169.

³³ McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 43-44.

clear that all truly beautiful living is a wonderful gift extended out of sheer mercy. Man does not deserve to receive the good life he can have through a relationship with the Father, especially after the consistent rebellion he has undertaken against God. Even still, God extends forgiveness and restorative grace to that person due to love. As one experiences such a beautiful reality in his life, it inevitably leads to that same extension of mercy towards others.³⁴ If God was willing to forgive and restore a broken sinner bent against Him, surely his disciple can do the same towards someone else.

The sixth beatitude centers on purity of heart. This is a necessity for the life of a follower of Jesus. If one is to experience the fullness of Kingdom life promised by God, he must be fully devoted to God. His singular devotion in heart is directed towards honoring God.³⁵ As he has appreciated his poverty, mourned over brokenness, walked in meekness, desired righteousness, and extended mercy, it is now clear to him that all right living flows from a singular devotion to Yahweh as God. The disciple of Christ is then able to see God clearly due to all other things rightly moving to the periphery. There are ties to a current reality where one more fully grasps the beauty of God in his current life and there is the eschatological reality where one sees God in full at the end of the age.³⁶

The seventh beatitude centers on peacemaking. Here, Jesus is making a strong critique on the zealous sect of the Jewish religion. Some in his day believed that the way to establish God's

³⁴ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 208-209.

³⁵ Brown and Roberts, *Matthew*, 57.

³⁶ Hughes, *Sermon on the Mount*, 50-52.

Kingdom was through war with their Gentile oppressors; they even had historical precedent for this as seen in the Old Testament.³⁷ Amazingly, Jesus is turning this ethic on its head. The way to life is not through fighting but through making peace. Because of God's ultimate victory over evil, God's people need not fight against their enemies. Justice is God's prerogative; His people's prerogative is seeking peace and restoration of those outside His family.³⁸ It is in this act of trusting God deeply with His future vindication of the righteous that individuals are called God's children. There is a present reality in that disciples of Jesus are adopted as God's children through faith and there is a future reality where God will reign with His children in a Redeemed world.

The eighth beatitude centers on the value of enduring persecution. Jesus is flipping a commonly held belief on its head yet again with this statement. Despite the natural desire to escape persecution and trying times, Jesus reminds his listeners that it is through these very experiences that his disciples are shown to be Kingdom citizens. He makes an important note that it is persecution "because of righteousness." This denotes that this is one who already is living in light of the previously mentioned virtues (a dependent, repentant, humble, righteous, merciful, pure, peace-making follower.) Ironically, genuine righteousness produces persecution in a world enslaved to sin.³⁹ Jesus goes so far as to call his disciples to joy amid deep pain due to

³⁷ Carson, *Matthew*, 204.

³⁸ Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 33-34.

³⁹ Carson, *Matthew*, 204.

“a great reward in heaven.” When good works are met with opposition, it serves a sign of the righteousness of God in His people brushing up against the darkness of the world.⁴⁰

The beatitudes lay the groundwork for the rest of Jesus’s sermon. These heart virtues and individual dispositions allow one to live out the high calling of the Jesus community. The hope of God’s Kingdom being fully established, His vindication of the righteous, and His judgment of the wicked are all foundational to a disciple of Jesus’ daily outlook on life. It is thoroughly a life of trust in God, both in His empowering presence now through the Holy Spirit and His eventual fulfillment of His promises. This trust begins in the “inner man” and transforms the very way that one operates in this world. Rather than being one whose existence is concerned with self-sufficiency, boasting, power, selfishness, achieving one’s own version of justice, achieving one’s own version of success, fighting for one’s rights, and upholding one’s own security, the disciple of Christ is freed to love God, self, and others through humility, a pursuit of justice and righteousness as well as a desire for peace.⁴¹

The Beatitudes & the Modern Church

If these Beatitudes act as the foundational bedrock of the Christian life, how can churches act as the training ground where these virtues are developed? How can the ministry of the body of Christ move beyond mere head knowledge and penetrate hearts? It begins with shifting our understanding of church altogether. Pastors need to remind their congregations that the church gathering is not merely listening to a message, singing a few worship songs, and returning to life

⁴⁰ Osborne, *Matthew*, 171-172.

⁴¹ McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 51.

as normal. Instead, the church is a gathering of the Body of Christ, a spiritual gymnasium where many together “work out their faith,” and a place where believers are empowered by reflection on the cross and resurrection.⁴² If the church wants a dedicated body of disciples, pastors must communicate that the gathering of the body is so much more than attending a service.

The body needs to see these things on display and have opportunities to step into these realities. If learning takes place more in the realm of experience and practice rather than pure knowledge acquisition, the church needs to rediscover the value of corporate and gathered disciplines (such as prayer).⁴³ Guided prayer, when done in a proper context, can go a long way in teaching a growing disciple how to be formed into the kind of person Jesus has described.

As it pertains to poverty in spirit and mourning, the church can institute a time of guided confession into its service to instill in people the realization that they are needy sinners before a gracious God. As it pertains to meekness and righteousness, the church can establish a time of guided intercession into its service to instill in people their need to seek God for growth in humility and right living. As it pertains to mercy and purity of heart, disciples can be guided through prayers of reconciliation, regularly forgiving others from the acceptance of God’s forgiveness. As it pertains to peace-making and enduring persecution, a regular prayer of intercession for the broken world and the persecuted church can serve to remind believers of the powerful gospel. Prayer is arguably, the most impactful means of spiritual transformation.⁴⁴ The

⁴² Hanegraaff, *Truth Matters, Life Matters More*, 130-131.

⁴³ James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 18-19.

⁴⁴ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 33.

Church needs to revitalize its roots as a praying body both gathered and scattered if it wants to see genuine heart change in its people.

Along with this, the body needs to be challenged to place its life before the measures of Jesus. Rather than upholding a church culture that primarily sees one's spiritual maturity through the lens of his adherence to a set of practices, the virtues expressed here, succinctly summarized as love of God, love of self, and love of others should act as the mirror by which all believers assess their own lives.⁴⁵ Sermons should be directed towards these realities; accountability groups should be drilling into these heart-level issues, and the church should be creating opportunities for each of these loves to grow.

Matthew 5:13-16

As Jesus closes out the Kingdom characteristics which His people are called to internalize and embody, He moves next to their vocation. Disciples of Jesus are not called to simply exist as individuals in relationship to God nor as simply a group of individuals in fellowship under God, they are called to be salt and light to the world around them. The motif of Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's story and His followers as the New Israel is taken up here. The mission given to Israel through Moses was for them to be a "nation of priests" who would uniquely mediate God's presence to the world, a "holy people" set apart from the nations for God's work, and a "light to the Gentiles" who would show all people the glory of Yahweh.⁴⁶ Jesus is now declaring that His followers are to take up that vocation which Israel failed to fulfill.

⁴⁵ McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 51-52.

⁴⁶ Brown and Roberts, *Matthew*, 58; Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 67-81.

Jesus would fulfill this in His own death and resurrection, later calling His followers to continue with it by heralding the message of the Good News.⁴⁷

The first concept Jesus uses to communicate this concept of reaching the world is that of salt. This analogy works in a few different ways. First, it serves as a means of establishing the disciples of Jesus as God's unique covenant people. Just as God had made a "covenant of salt" with Israel, He was now doing the same with these disciples.⁴⁸ Second, salt was a very important purifying agent in antiquity. Salt was used to cleanse impurities and preserve foods like meat by preserving their cleanliness. In essence, Jesus calls His disciples to be the ones who purify a corrupt world through genuine righteousness and the proclamation of the Good News.⁴⁹ Lastly, he speaks of "salt that loses its saltiness." Those who do not remain dependent on God nor submit to His righteousness eventually find themselves losing the ability to transform the world for Christ; instead, their hypocrisy only heightens their own demise.⁵⁰

The second analogy Jesus uses to communicate the idea of His people reaching the world is that of light. This concept draws back to the role of the Servant in Isaiah. Israel was called to be this light that would manifest God's goodness to the world, yet in large part, they failed to be faithful worshippers to Yahweh.⁵¹ Jesus is calling His disciples to allow this internal

⁴⁷ R.T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Vol. 1. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Series. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 54-56.

⁴⁸ Brown and Roberts, *Matthew*, 58.

⁴⁹ Charles L. Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church*. New American Commentary Studies in Bible and Theology Series, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 64-67.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 66-68.

⁵¹ France, *Matthew*, 54; Brown and Roberts, *Matthew*, 58.

transformation, brought about through dependency upon God, to manifest itself in good works to others. The people of God are given the task of “lighting up the darkness” by allowing the love of God they have experienced to drive them to love others. The Kingdom of God is not limited to individual personal piety; it inevitably moves out into believers’ relationships. The church must be visible to the world, actively engaging in transforming it through the power of the gospel rather than retreating to “religious ghettos.”⁵² Through the Beatitudes, Jesus has laid the groundwork for the internal values a member of His Kingdom must possess; through the Salt and Light analogies, He has laid the groundwork for the Kingdom vocation of His people.

“Salt & Light” and the Modern Church

In the modern context, the church must rediscover its role as a unique people set apart to know God and make Him known by the character displayed and the Good News proclaimed. This can be accomplished in a few different ways. First, pastors can make a contended effort in their sermons to engage non-believers by addressing culturally relevant topics and apologetic sidebars. This will teach the congregants what it looks like to graciously engage non-believers with the hope of the gospel.⁵³ Second, pastors can consistently point their people to the glory of the gospel within their messages. As their people learn how to see Christ in all of the Scriptures, they will be changed by the Good News and be charged to share it.⁵⁴

⁵² Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 106-107.

⁵³ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2016) 110-114.

⁵⁴ Bryan L. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 470-474.

Outside of the sermons themselves, churches can be intentional about engaging the community through a present witness which seeks to make a positive contribution to the surrounding city.⁵⁵ Missional outreaches through the church (whether it be in small groups or separate ministries) should seek to provide physical needs unto spiritual ones. Believers can learn what it is to be salt and light by meeting the needs of non-believers and sharing Christ through word and deed. On top of this, hosting platforms for seekers/skeptics to engage the gospel with their questions and recent converts to establish their faith through introductory Christian classes will go a long way to show believers their vocation of reaching the local community with the gospel.

Matthew 5:17-20

Jesus begins this next section by clearly describing His role in relation to Israel's history. He has not come to throw away the Law and the Prophets; Jesus, as a Jewish believer, is surely not anti-Torah. On the other hand, though, He is not merely a restoration preacher who has simply come to restore what the Torah has already laid out. No, Jesus is the One to whom the Torah was pointing. He is the One who fulfills the Law and brings it to its intended end. At times, He is willing to set aside the literal observance of certain commands but always so that His people will obtain a "greater righteousness" which lies at the very purpose of the Law itself.⁵⁶ The Law is not set aside but it is shifted. The whole will not be set aside until the fulfillment of all things; nonetheless, aspects of the Old Covenant have been fulfilled and are no

⁵⁵ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 166-179.

⁵⁶ France, *Matthew*, 51-52.

longer necessary in light of the new inbreaking of God's Kingdom through Jesus.⁵⁷ The laws which upheld one's Jewish identity over against Gentiles (circumcision, food laws, purity laws, and Sabbath) were no longer necessary because faith in the Messiah has become the new identifying factor which defines who constitutes the people of God.⁵⁸

Jesus is clear from the start that His commands (which bring the Law to its fullest extent) are no mere requests, they are central to entering the Kingdom of God. He goes so far as to say that one who would refrain from practicing or teaching just one of these commands will be "least" in the Kingdom. The one who practices and teaches the following commands will be "great" in the Kingdom. The inside-out righteousness of a follower of Jesus should result in obedience. This obedience should not be mere externalism as displayed in certain Pharisees and teachers of the Law. It should be internal transformation lived out in external actions. If one did not possess such inside-out righteousness yet only had a veneer of external zeal, his faith would be insufficient for entrance into the Kingdom in the present and the future.⁵⁹

After establishing this important piece, Jesus then engages specific moral issues to drive home the point that a true disciple has been changed in the very depths of his heart. As he goes issue by issue, Jesus is not subverting the Law but rather offering an authoritative interpretation of it. He is getting to the true heart of what the Torah truly means for God's people (in keeping

⁵⁷ Witherington, *Matthew*, 127.

⁵⁸ Archie T. Wright, "Jewish Identity, Beliefs, and Practices," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, 310-324.; France, *Matthew*, 57-58.

⁵⁹ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 230-233.

with the practice of many rabbis of His day.) The key difference though was that Jesus was not speaking as one scribe amongst many; rather, he was making authoritative judgments.⁶⁰

Matthew 5:21-26

The first topic Jesus engages is that of murder. The Law held that one should not murder and all who murdered would be judged severely. Jesus expounds this law to its fullest extent; the seed of murderous action is anger in the heart. Jesus says that anyone who is angry with a fellow disciple is subject to judgment. Continuing with His connection between internal heart disposition and external action, Jesus teaches that those who blurt out words of anger and contempt are under judgment, first before man and ultimately before God.⁶¹ It is not just the external actions of anger but the inner life of anger that needs to be purged in the disciple

This naturally flows into the next section of Jesus' teaching: the vital importance of reconciliation in relationships. A disciple of Jesus needs to be willing to set aside his gifts at the altar to first reconcile (as best as he can) with his fellow brothers and sisters to avoid the potentiality of a growing seed of anger. Considering the importance of the Temple to Jewish observance of the day, Jesus was insisting that reconciliation with other brothers and sisters of the faith was very important.⁶² If a disciple seeks to use his worship to God as a means of diverting his relational conflicts with others, he is missing the whole point of spiritual growth. Religious practices are empty if they are not leading to genuine life change in the believer. After

⁶⁰ Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 181-182.

⁶¹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 192-196.

⁶² Wilkins, *Matthew*, 243.

someone had been reconciled to his brother or sister, he can then return to offer up his gift to God, focusing solely on appreciating Him as Father, not as a means of avoiding life's problems.

Whereas the last section dealt with reconciliation between brothers and sisters in Christ, this section centers on settling matters with an adversary. The disciple of Jesus should do his best to bring about reconciliation as quickly as possible before one's adversary may move along the process of judgment. A follower of Christ should be marked by a peaceable disposition which is eager to find resolution in conflicts and bring about reconciliation in relationships with fellow disciples and non-disciples alike.⁶³ The disciple is not simply called to avoid hate, which results in the death of relationships but to seek love, which results in the life of new ones. Along with this, the concept of a person being imprisoned for his wrongs against another and "not getting out until he pays the last penny" is akin to one who has allowed anger to so taint his heart that he ultimately finds himself in the "eternal prison" out of God's love at the end of the age.⁶⁴

Matthew 5:27-30

The second topic Jesus engages is that of adultery. In the Mosaic Law, the command given by God was that Israel was to refrain from committing adultery in the external act of sexual infidelity. Jesus expounds this law to its fullest extent; the seed of adultery is looking on another with lust (adultery in the heart.) Jesus is inviting people into a Kingdom that is so appealing that the lusts of the flesh are subservient to its allure. Willpower cannot achieve this, only beholding the greater beauty of God and His Way can.⁶⁵ To lust after another is a form of

⁶³ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 243-244.

⁶⁴ Farley, *Gospel of Matthew*, 74.

⁶⁵ Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 117-118.

idolatry and it shows a lack of affection for and contentment in Yahweh. The follower of Jesus is to see all things in light of his singular devotion to God.⁶⁶ Therefore, his sexuality is to be directed towards honoring God by living into His one-man, one-woman design for sex as a means of binding two into one flesh under a marriage covenant. The marriage relationship uniquely reflects the relationship of Yahweh and Israel, and eventually Christ and the Church. This wholeness in dedication and commitment to a spouse in both heart and deed is to serve as a picture of the people of God's relationship with Him.⁶⁷

The subsequent set of commands by Jesus must be understood as hyperbolic language meant to shock his audience and show the severity of such sin's devastating effects.⁶⁸ As seen with anger, Jesus shows that lust, when left unchecked will eventually deteriorate a man away from the image of God into eternal death. Due to this, His disciples are to ruthlessly eliminate any potential stumbling block that may lead them down this path. If the right eye causes one to stumble, it should be gouged out and thrown away; if the right hand causes one to stumble, it should be cut off and thrown away. These graphic images are used to show the listeners the severity of lust's effects. Jesus is in essence saying, "You think gouging your eye out is gruesome? You think cutting off your hand is gruesome? Why don't you just let this sin of lust continue to grow in your heart and not repent, then you will see what something truly gruesome looks like." A disciple is to grasp the severely destructive realities of sin, especially sexual sin, and do all he can to avoid it by refraining from even going near areas of temptation. This will

⁶⁶ Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 76-79.

⁶⁷ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 244-245.

⁶⁸ Brown and Roberts, *Matthew*, 60.

often include sacrificing something that seems important for the sake of the greater reward.⁶⁹ The listener is brought back to the question of devotion again; is it worth it to give up everything, even one's former pleasures, for a sole pursuit of God or is the pleasure of the world too important to give up, even with sin's caustic effects?

Matthew 5:31-32

The third topic Jesus engages is that of divorce, which clearly flows from the prior issue of adultery. Under the Mosaic Law, divorce was permissible in many cases; the main issue was that one must give his wife a certificate of divorce. Jesus responds by working from God's original design for marriage, a lifetime covenant of commitment between a man and a woman.⁷⁰ As seen in other parts of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus looked at divorce as a temporary concession given by Moses due to the "hardness of your hearts," rather than God's original intention.⁷¹ As the Messiah who is restoring God's people to their original vocation, He reinstates this high standard for marriage. He states that a man who divorces his wife commits adultery (making the woman a victim of adultery) and a man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. The only exception Jesus makes is sexual unfaithfulness, whereby one would be justified if he chooses to divorce his wife. Past sexual immorality, some argue that there are other cases (such as physical abuse or abandonment) where divorce would be justifiable on moral grounds.⁷²

⁶⁹ Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 67-71.

⁷⁰ Hughes, *Sermon on the Mount*, 98-100.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Craig S. Keener, "Remarriage for Adultery, Desertion, or Abuse" in *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views* by Gordon J. Wenham, William A. Heth, Craig S. Keener, ed. Mark L. Strauss. Counterpoints: Church Life Series, ed. Paul E. Engle (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 76-88.

Regardless of where one may fail on that issue, Jesus' teaching here is clear: his disciples are to have a very high view of marriage. It is a covenant before God that should not be entered into lightly because it is permanent. As discussed by Jesus in Matthew 19, it is better that one does not marry than marry when he is not truly committed to upholding his role as husband. Jesus' disciples are called not only to a high ethic in relationships with all people but especially a high sexual ethic.

Matthew 5:33-37

The fourth topic Jesus engages is that of oaths. In ancient Near Eastern religion, oaths were an important part of one's relationship with deity and with others. To make an oath made one's words fully binding before a deity and invoked that deity's wrath if one were to break it.⁷³ The Pharisees of Jesus' day were masterful at contriving ways to "get around" oath-keeping, going so far as to emphasize that only oaths spoken with very specific formula were binding. The focus for them was not swearing honestly but avoiding the name of God itself.⁷⁴ Jesus shows them the foolishness of this thought; heaven, earth, and Jerusalem were all holy things of God since all creation is His. The focus is not on the formula of the oath but the heart behind the oath which is honest before God. Like divorce, oaths were a consolation to man's sinfulness; disciples who were changed inside-out by Christ were now called to simply live as if every word from their mouths were binding before God.⁷⁵

⁷³ Jacob N. Cerone, "Oath," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016)

⁷⁴ Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 79-83.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Matthew 5:38-42

The fifth topic Jesus engages is retributive justice and the new ethic of the Kingdom. He begins by citing the *lex talionis* of the Old Testament Law, “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.” At its core, this command was meant to enforce equal justice for crimes; if one person did something harmful against another, the harmed person would have the right to enact justice by responding with an equal punishment.⁷⁶ Jesus takes this principle of justice and takes it to its extreme, again considering the Kingdom of God. The crazy thing about this is that the principle which in many ways sought to protect the innocent’s rights is now shifted to a focus on restoring the evil person. Because a believer’s future is secured in the future vindication of the righteousness and the wicked person’s future is secured in the future judgment of God, the disciple need not concern himself with “getting even.” Instead, his focus is on showing this person the Kingdom of God through his actions of righteousness (especially in response to injustice) in hopes that this person will encounter the love of the Father and become a child of God.⁷⁷

This principle gets worked out in a few different examples such as turning the cheek after it has been slapped, giving someone more than they sue for, and going with someone an extra mile. Each example is supposed to serve as a hyperbole of the extent to which a disciple of Jesus shows unmerited love to his enemies. The disciple’s deep-seated trust in God’s provision and His ultimate victory (rooted in Jesus’ Resurrection) free him from grasping after the things of the

⁷⁶ Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 195-197.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

world. Though these things seem preposterous at first glance, the call of discipleship to Jesus involves utter sacrifice, taking up one's cross for the sake of others.⁷⁸

This section closes out with a portion on giving and lending to those who ask. The logic of Jesus' teaching is generally parallel to His previous teaching, despite a few differences. Rather than avoiding revenge, this teaching centers on refraining from holding one's possessions closely. Due to the future hope in Christ, future rewards in His Kingdom, and the realization that God will care for His people as Father, disciples of Jesus are to have an open hand when it comes to possessions.⁷⁹ If giving away these possessions can serve as a means of spreading Christ's love and bringing people to the Father, the disciple should willingly give in faith. Genuine care for others and faith in God which manifest themselves in acts of love towards others should be a key defining characteristic of a disciple of Jesus. Amazingly within the very act of sacrifice, the oppressor's attempt at dishonor and humiliation is flipped back on his own head.⁸⁰

Matthew 5:43-48

The sixth topic Jesus engages is love for enemies. This specific issue is so counter-cultural, and it so rubs against common sense that it is hard to accept for all readers and hearers. Jesus begins by citing the Torah's command to "love your neighbor" and certain traditions' admonition to "hate your enemy." Due to the oppression of the Romans and the cultural tension with Gentiles, many Jews of Jesus' day operated with an exclusive "love my fellow Jew only"

⁷⁸ Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 121-125.

⁷⁹ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 248-251.

⁸⁰ Brown and Roberts, *Matthew*, 61-62.

mindset which approached outsiders more often as corrupt enemies than broken people to be set free.⁸¹ Jesus takes the Law of love to its fullest extent; if love is foundational to following Yahweh then that love should be extended to all people. Jesus' call is for His disciples to love their enemies and pray for the very ones who persecute them. Whereas many cultures advocated deep love for friends and many advocated not harming others, Jesus calls His followers to truly seek out good for all people equally, even their adversaries (partially by praying for them).⁸² This is truly revolutionary! The hope is that one's enemies will eventually be so transformed by the love of God shown through action that they too will be saved from sin. It is in treating all with love that one reflects the Father, whose common grace is shown to all in nature itself.⁸³

Jesus then closes out this teaching section by juxtaposing His Kingdom people from the people of this world. The first question He asks concerns his disciples love for only the people who love them back. What reward would come? What would distinguish them from tax collectors? Followers of Jesus have a distinct hope of the coming Kingdom and rewards based on the actions done to build it up. It is a common human reality to love people who love someone back; this was evidenced by the surrounding Greco-Roman society, even in the tax collectors who were Jewish apostates! A truly powerful witness only comes through self-sacrificial love to enemies.⁸⁴ The second question He asks concerns his disciples only greeting their own people. What makes them any different from pagans? Again, there is a high call for disciples of Jesus to

⁸¹ McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 139-141.

⁸² France, *Matthew*, 132-133.

⁸³ Osborne, *Matthew*, 222.

⁸⁴ Carson, *Matthew*, 230-233.

distinguish themselves by showing care not only for their own but even those outside their own group. What makes Christians distinct from the world is their love for all and their willingness to sacrifice even for those who oppose them, in full reflection of the cross of Christ.⁸⁵ All peoples, even the oppressive Romans, should be approached with the love of God.

The final phrase of this section calls believers to be “perfect” as the disciples’ Heavenly Father is perfect. There is a challenge here with the translation as this word for “perfect” is likely better translated as “whole, complete, singularly devoted.” There is a clear parallel here to Yahweh’s words to Israel “be holy as I am holy.”⁸⁶ The disciples of Jesus are called to be singularly devoted to the service of God, resulting in a state of good living and a bold witness to a broken world. Their final goal is to ever grow in reflecting the full love of the Father by growing in communion with Him.⁸⁷

In this large section of teaching, it seems that every topic touched seems to get more and more challenging as Jesus goes along. When each command is genuinely lived out, a community of people who are distinct from the world will emerge. A disciple is to live this way of utter devotion driven by love for all.⁸⁸ When these principles are lived out, they inevitably catch the attention of the world and shine light on something greater than the people themselves. These things do not make sense outside of a dependent relationship on the Father and an unflinching hope in the future justice of God’s Kingdom. Evangelism at its finest stems from this lifestyle

⁸⁵ Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 101-102.

⁸⁶ Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount*, 67-81.

⁸⁷ Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 102-103.

⁸⁸ McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 145-147.

being manifested in a disciple who can then explain to others the Good News that allows him to know such life in God, both now and into eternity.⁸⁹

The Law of Christ & the Modern Church

These individual issues all stem from the changed hearts of God's people in Jesus being empowered to live fully holy via the power of the Spirit. It is living set apart lives driven by a genuinely others-focused vision that makes the Way of Jesus truly beautiful for those inside and appealing to those on the outside.⁹⁰ A practical way that the Church can begin to live into these powerful principles is to raise the bar on accountability. If disciples of Jesus are called to practice and teach these commands, they should be continually challenged with this high call as they walk out their lives.

New believers should be taught these commands by mature disciples as part of their process leading to baptism. The church would do well to rediscover the beautiful practice in the early church of catechesis, where new believers were initiated into the church via a process of learning and commitment.⁹¹ Along with doctrine, new converts should be taught what it means to follow Jesus in their lifestyle. They should commit to a discipler or accountability group which can keep them accountable to this high bar of Jesus' commands.

⁸⁹ McKnight, *King Jesus Gospel*, 153-160.

⁹⁰ Mark Scandrette, *Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 22-24.

⁹¹ Ivor J. Davidson, "Catechesis," in *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. MacFarland, David A.S. Fergusson, and Iain R. Torrance. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 86-87.

Accountability can range in its structure, anywhere from individual meetups to small groups. Either way, the important thing is that people are having to do the hard work of putting their lives up before the commands of Jesus and honestly assessing their own stage in discipleship. Along with this, it invites continual constructive criticism from believers to challenge one another to grow more fully into the image of God. One's anger towards others, the state of his relationships, his fight against lust, the state of his marriage, his honesty and commitment, his response to injustices, and his love towards outsiders and enemies should all be laid bare.

The point of these accountability sessions is neither to condemn believers by showing them how much they fail nor is it to let believers fully off the hook. The accountability is meant to consistently challenge disciples of Christ to live out the faith they claim to hold while also reminding them of the finished work of Christ which justifies them before God; there is grace, there is love, there is community together working towards Christlikeness.⁹² Believers are “created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (Ephesians 2:10) so they should appreciate that salvation from sin is not the end goal of the Christian faith. It is just the beginning of restoring the full breadth of the image of God intended for mankind.⁹³

Conclusion

In short, the calling of Jesus on His disciples is surely a high one as shown in Matthew 5. It is no surprise that these words continue to ring with power and conviction about 2000 years

⁹² Bill Thrall and Bruce McNicol, “Communities of Grace”, in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation* by Dallas Willard, Keith Meyer, Bruce McNicol, et al. (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 2010), 43-59.

⁹³ Davison, *Participation in God*, 265-276.

later. If the church desires to reach a world that is in many ways moving further and further from God, it needs to be committed to the ancient Way. The faith handed down needs to reorient itself on Christ. This means embodying the Beatitudes, walking in obedience to Jesus' commands, embracing the spiritual practices, letting go of control, trusting God in daily provision and ultimate judgment, loving enemies, and choosing to submit one's self to a life of self-sacrifice under King Jesus. It is a high call, but through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church can reclaim its special place of witness by being salt and light again.

The great breadth of Jesus' teaching far exceeds the limited engagement that could be given in these pages. This theological exposition, along with a few applicational sidebars, should serve as the springboard from which a practical discipleship structure can be built. In appreciating the kinds of challenges Jesus gives, church leaders should ask the hard questions: "how can these characteristics be formed in our people?", "how can we push them to a deep faith in God's provision as Father?", and "how can we give them opportunities to communally display such attributes as salt and light in our local context?" At the corner of this theological foundation and practical implementation of these principles, there is a beautiful discipleship reality which can once again display the glory of the Kingdom of God.

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