

PENRALLT BAPTIST CHURCH, BANGOR
NOTES FOR THEOLOGY STUDENTS: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Introduction

Studying theology is meant to be fun and these notes aim to bridge the gap between lecture room and church by explaining where I stand on the issues you are likely to encounter in your theological studies. Unfortunately many of those issues bear little relevance to the life of most Christians, so I do not spend time discussing them in the sermon series. In this series my life has been made much easier by D. A. Carson who tackles these subjects at the back of his Spring Harvest commentary, *The Sermon on the Mount*.ⁱ I have used much of his material for this study and at less than five pounds I commend his commentary to you. At that price you can hardly afford not to buy it. The difficulties involved in close study of the Sermon on the Mount are mainly concerned with how we should apply it to our lives, but before we come to that, let us start with the easier questions surrounding the text, its relationship with the Synoptic Gospels, and the historicity of the event.

A) Critical Questions about the Sermon on the Mount

1) The Relationship between Matthew and Luke: the sermons on the mount and on the plain.

The first questions which spring to mind surround the relationship between Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke 6:20-49, the sermon "on the plains" Is this the same sermon? Or is it Luke's account of the Sermon the Mount? Why is it shorter? Why are there only four beatitudes? Why is the wording different? Why is the Golden Rule in the middle not at the end like Matthew? Why does Luke not report "this sums up the Law and the Prophets"? Why is there no Lord's Prayer in the sermon? Why are many of the other verses from Matthew 5-7 found scattered around the Gospel of Luke and not in his "sermon"?ⁱⁱ

Both bodies of teaching are presented as sermons, although whether this is just a literary device or a record of Jesus' historical sermons I will examine in the next part. After both of them Jesus is portrayed as entering Capernaum. There seems to be little or no mileage in arguing that their sources were independent. If Matthew is the Apostle of that name, then he was present at the occasion, while Luke would have gleaned it from his own researches. But they are too similar to have been independent. The majority of commentators used to contend that both writers used "Q" as their primary source, but these days the "Q" theory is falling out of favour and I am far from alone in being incredulous about its existence. In the absence of any early documents than the Gospels themselves we can probably not go much beyond R. T. France's conclusion that "it is likely . . . that Matthew's collection has been structured around an existing sermon 'outline' which Luke also knew."

Personally, however, I find myself drawn towards the possibility that in fact Luke used Matthew's Gospel. The Early Church was of the opinion that Matthew was written by him in the Hebrew (i.e. Aramaic) language. This derives from Papias (ca. 135 A.D.) quoted by Eusebius (III.xxxix.16). The same view is found in Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Jerome, Epiphanius, and Augustine. However, Papias called the book the *logia* and may not have meant by it our Gospel of Matthew. Yet our canonical Matthew is in Greek, and uses the LXX for quotations, so it seems unlikely to have existed first in Aramaic. What exactly Papias meant by *logia* and what relationship they have with our Gospel and their sources must be considered as shrouded still in mystery, but it could suggest a Matthean priority.

Ultimately, I do not think it is of great importance. The scriptures are the authoritative, inspired Word of God in the form we find them in. Their authors clearly based their accounts on some other documents, most of which are lost in the murky depths of time, and our principal task as theologians is to find out what they are attempting to say in the literary organization they manifest. If Matthew and Luke did both draw on some anterior source, our main concern should be to consider what use they make of it, rather than try to reproduce what their sources were and said.

2) Did Jesus actually preach a Sermon on the Mount?

We know that the Evangelists used literary devices to create their accounts of the life of Jesus. Indeed, we have works of literature in our hands, not an oral tradition, and it is the task of a serious Bible student to handle the books as literature. This is what God chose to bequeath to us, so we must approach them with due respect for the medium of literature. There is not necessarily a problem in their using the format of a sermon to present the teachings of Jesus. In fact, we assume that the Lord's teaching was transmitted in sermons or private discourses in the first place, so their re-organization into one sermon should not raise a major objection. However, it seems to me that there are two worries with this view: firstly, there has been a tendency among theologians to dismiss the Biblical accounts as just material created by the Evangelists or by the Early Church, and secondly we have to acknowledge that both Luke and (especially) Matthew set the teachings in an apparently historic setting.

As far as the first concern goes, Carson summarises it thus: "In older liberal commentaries, whenever a particular Evangelist left something out, it was common to read such words as these: 'Luke didn't know about that,' or, 'This saying was not in Matthew's source.' Now, however, there is a more sensitive recognition of the fact that an Evangelist might leave out an account or omit certain details simply because it doesn't suit his purposes to put them in. The four Evangelists provide us with a multiform testimony to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought to be grateful that the Spirit of God has overseen their work in such way that we have received a series of portraits of inexhaustible richness."ⁱⁱⁱ You can understand the pressure that the more conservative theologians feel when you read wild statements such as the assertion by W. D Davies that the Sermon on the Mount is "merely a collection of unrelated sayings of diverse origins, a patchwork. . . Thus the impact of recent criticism in all its forms is to cast doubt on the propriety of seeking to understand this section . . . as an interrelated totality derived from the actual teaching of Jesus."^{iv}

The second concern is based on the historical context suggested by Matthew and also Luke. Of course, Jesus is seated on a mountain in Matthew and standing on a level place in Luke, but the suggestion of an historic event is not diminished by that. While you could argue that if the original sermon really was such a dramatically important event it would have appeared in Mark and John as well, arguments from silence are always unsatisfactory. Maybe Jesus began sitting on the hillside, then moved to a flatter place and stood. John Stott tends towards the suggestion that Matthew 5-7 represents a “not a single hour or day, but a period of retirement.”^v Leon Morris suggests that they are two separate sermons because “the itinerant preacher would make “repeated use of his material, often with minor or even major changes.”^{vi} As one who has been an itinerant preacher myself I know all about repeating sermons and sermon material. I cannot possibly imagine that Jesus did not do so also, and so I tend to the view that Jesus preached at least two similar sermons which are recorded here. Although Luke certainly was not there when it happened, I can easily imagine him reading through whatever his source was and being told by someone who was there “Of course, the Lord repeated the sermon pretty much like that on a few occasions. I remember on one occasion, we were out on the plains when he said ‘woe to’” And so Luke’s account has a different setting and four woes linked to four beatitudes. I could easily think up half a dozen scenarios like that and any or none of them may be true. It does not matter. What does matter is that we must not allow these verses to be discounted as inventions of the writers or the early church. There is no good reason at all to doubt them as being the authentic teachings of Jesus.

Concluding this section with a few comments, it is worth pointing out it takes just fifteen minutes to read the Sermon on the Mount. A huge amount of editing and selection has happened. The Evangelists have their own reasons for writing. Our main purpose is to question why the selection, and why the order of items within the sermon (and if it reflects Jesus’ original order, why His order?). For example, the first beatitude (5:3) is listed as first for a reason. We must take seriously the phrase “blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” and consider whether its place at the top of the list is not saying something special to us. Perhaps in other sermons it was not so, but in Matthew 5 it is the opening phrase. This is Scripture as it stands, so discovering its sources is not going to be the main concern. If you want to delve into the critical issues of which verse came from where, I salute your dogged determination and eye for detail. I can’t get quite excited enough to do so myself, but will read your results with genuine interest.

It is vital to read the Sermon on the Mount as a block of material, not a collection of sayings. Matthew has left us no other choice. I dare say that Jesus did repeat all of this on other occasions, but Matthew has given it a special importance by placing it together for us. Carson states: “... the more years I put into the study of the Scripture, the more I find myself under its authority and judged by it, rather than the authority over it with competence to judge it.”^{vii} Exactly!

B) Theological interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount

I am following Carson’s six main categories here, but they are not exhaustive^{viii} My most important decision as a Bible expositor is to decide who the Sermon on the Mount is intended for, how prescriptive it is meant to be, and where it fits in the general body of Christ’s teaching. Is it Utopian ideal, or daily morality? Is it achievable, or just maddeningly unattainable? And I need to be very careful not to water down its radical demands. It is well said that: “the history of the impact of the Sermon on the Mount can largely be described in terms of an attempt to domesticate everything in it that is shocking, demanding, and uncompromising and render it harmless.”^{ix} So here, at least, are some, if not most, of the differing approaches that can be taken.

1) It is an “interim ethic”.

Propounded firstly by Johannes Weis in 1892 and later by Albert Schweitzer this states that Jesus was expecting the final day to arrive shortly. So utter commitment and superhuman righteousness were necessary. It is a kind of “martial law”^x Although this view was popular once, there is no hint of temporary relevance in the Gospel. Jesus does not appear as a fanatic expecting the end of the world in a few days. There is an ongoing tension between “now” and “not yet” aspects of the kingdom right through the NT, and you cannot be in pastoral ministry for very long before the tension begins to exert itself under your nose. Why are some healed and not others? What should be our priority in giving: to the poor or supporting the work of mission.? What standards of morality should we adhere to within the fellowship? At what point has someone “gone too far”? If Jesus’ words will never pass away, this cannot be a temporary (and failed) ethic.

2) Classic liberalism.

The Sermon on the Mount is the real Gospel in a nutshell, more important than the death of Jesus and His atoning sacrifice. It is a map for building civilisation. This viewpoint was one of the casualties of twentieth century wars, but it has continued in a modified form. It would, indeed, be wonderful if the whole of our nation turned to the Sermon on the Mount for a guide to its daily living, but there is nothing to suggest that Jesus expected the general population to attempt this. In practise, he assumed that those who followed his teaching would be the ones who had first chosen to follow him as the Lord of their lives. John Drane states: “Jesus’ teaching was intended as a way of life only for those people who subjected their lives to God’s rule. This is the point at which Jesus’ ethic has most frequently been misunderstood. People who claim to be able to accept the Sermon on the Mount but not the claims that Jesus made about his own person have misunderstood the essential character of Jesus’ teaching. It is quite impossible to separate his theology from his ethics, and to do so destroys both.”^{xi} In any case, the Sermon on the Mount is not the only major discourse in Matthew’s Gospel and we should not treat it in isolation.

3) It is an Existential Challenge.

Post World War II theologians, such as Bultmann and Tillich, have often seen the teachings of Jesus less as a strict code of conduct which we are required to adhere to and more as tentative probing which challenges us to be open to the tensions within us. The tension is between what we are and what we should be, what we do and what we ought to do. The Sermon on the Mount exposes the tensions and contradictions which lurk behind our religious façade. I am rather more sympathetic to this approach than Carson, perhaps because I am more aware of the tensions and contradictions which lurk behind my own (at times) religious façade, but ultimately I must agree with him. The Scripture is the propositional revelation of God and presents itself to us as such. These are the principles of the Kingdom which God expects us to live out. We are called to align ourselves with a very rigorous external moral imperative rather than look into our heart and if it feels good, do it.

4) The Lutheran orthodoxy.

Luther taught basically that the Sermon on the Mount is impossible to live up to, and therefore given by God to make us aware of our sin. While I am sure we fail often enough, and we can never be reminded enough of our sin and dependence on grace, I cannot accept this viewpoint. Luther, in my opinion, held appallingly low expectations for the moral standards of his parishioners. Dear Lord, surely we can do better than that? (although, sometimes, believe me, I wonder . . .). The experience of grace must have more to offer than this. Luther was still a medieval theologian in many ways, still living in a world where God placed the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, and only the religious elites were really expected to comply with Christ's full teaching.

5) The Sermon on the Mount is a teaching to be followed.

There are, as I see it, three main factions here:

i) The Sermon on the Mount is Law. "As Moses proclaimed the Law for the life in the promised land, so Jesus manifested his law for the life in the Kingdom of Heaven."^{xii} As Moses blessed the people and sent them off, so Jesus explained the blessing his followers were to expect in the coming kingdom. It is the Decalogue for the disciples of Christ. The problem with this view is that it can easily generate a contradiction with the free grace of the Gospel, and suggest incompatibility with Paul's theology. While he had higher expectations of morality than the early Church delivered, he insisted that a change in moral behaviour was still a necessary sign of conversion. Nevertheless it was a change brought about by God's power in grace. This view also ignores the element of grace which lies behind the Sermon on the Mount. Nevertheless, it seems to me that there are serious questions to be answered in this respect. Did Jesus' teaching supersede the Mosaic Law, or did he just radicalise it? Did he intensify parts of it and annul others? Did he take it to a higher level or claim that the Law only maintains validity through him?^{xiii} The questions are worth answering, but this is not the place to do so. Matthew nowhere states that the Sermon on the Mount is to be equated with a new Law in the New Covenant.

ii) The Sermon is an accurate reflection of the divine will, to be obeyed both privately and corporately. Often associated with the Anabaptist tradition. This point of view holds that a life saved by grace should be lived by grace in conformity with these principles. Often pacifist in nature, it basically says that there are new standards to be lived by in the Kingdom of God. In the Middle Ages only those in monasteries were expected to observe the Sermon on the Mount rigorously (as if!). The rest of the population were just expected to observe the 10 commandments. It is little wonder that the Radical Reformation reacted strongly against such nominalism and sought to build communities of a gathered church where people actually obeyed the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. The Mennonite, Hutterite and Amish communities, then and now, are good examples of this point of view. Against this, it must be admitted that the standards have been set very high, and those who try to attain them are constantly reminded of how much they fail. John Drane argues that ^{xiv} "a law which cannot be kept is a bad law, and it is no use making a law to put pressure on men and women to become what they are not."

iii) There is a half-way viewpoint which Carson himself takes, suggesting that the Sermon is not the final comment on human morality. We should interpret it wholeheartedly in connection with the rest of Scripture but remember that Jesus often used antithesis in his preaching to force his listeners into reflection (e.g. those who are not for us are against us: those who are not against us are for us). The Sermon on the Mount must be preceded by the experience of God's grace in our lives, and we must compare its teaching with the rest of the body of Scripture before we generalise its demands.

6) Dispensationalist View.

We are mercifully separated from dispensationalism by the Atlantic Ocean, but we note here that this viewpoint distinguishes the periods of law from grace. The Sermon on the Mount pertains to the millennial kingdom so is not specifically for us, although it does contain challenges and principles which we should not follow too rigidly.

In this series I will be following the Anabaptist line as closely as I can, because that is where my spiritual tendencies lie, but I will drift away from it occasionally. I agree, though, with Carson that we must ground our study in the rest of the New Testament and not isolate the individual sayings from the whole tenet of Scripture. We must soften its demands with reminders of God's grace and we must avoid turning it into a grandiose scheme for the entire world. R.T. France is correct to stress that the Sermon on the Mount is not concerned with ethics but with discipleship.^{xv}

Concluding Comments

I have made no effort to examine the structure of the Sermon on the Mount because I can find none. I will, however, be treating it as a block of material included in the Bible to be studied as a cohesive unity. My first comparisons and commentaries on any verse will be based on the rest of the Sermon the Mount. I will also be considering carefully the Old Testament background because “the best commentary on the beatitudes of Jesus is the Old Testament (the primary source of their imagery) and the full gospel texts in which the beatitudes are found.”^{xvi}

I will also try and temper its frighteningly high demands with reminders of God’s grace. Herman Hendrickx does well to remind us that “the Sermon on the Mount was (and should always be) preceded by the proclamation of the gospel (Mat. 4:17); it was (and should always be) preceded by conversion, by being overwhelmed by the good news that God has turned himself definitively to men in unrestricted forgiveness and love.”^{xvii} The Early Church considered it binding and practical,^{xviii} so did my spiritual forefathers, the Anabaptists, and so do I. Yet what we find are not rules but principles, because the Kingdom is based on what you are more than what you do. T.W. Manson was correct in stating that “Jesus’ teaching is a compass rather than an ordnance map; it gives direction rather than directions.”^{xix}

Peter James Cousins
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- ⁱ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Carlisle: Spring Harvest Publishing Division and Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001).
- ⁱⁱ Most good commentaries have tables which list the shared material and where it is found, e.g. Carson p152,3.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Carson, p 157.
- ^{iv} W. D Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964) pp. 1,5. Cited by John R.W. Stott, *Christian Counter-culture, the message of the Sermon on the Mount. The Bible Speaks Today*, eds J.A. Motyer, J.R.W. Stott (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), p.22.
- ^v Stott, p23. following A.B. Bruce, *Commentary on the synoptic Gospels, Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicholl (London: Hodder, 1897), p. 94.
- ^{vi} L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) p.92
- ^{vii} Carson p162.
- ^{viii} Harvey McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*. (Harper, 1960; Epworth 1961) p.p105-148 suggests twelve different ways to interpret the Sermon, but comments wryly that he may well have subtitled this section *Versions and Evasions of the Sermon on the Mount*. You can read a handy summary for free at the on-line encyclopaedia [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon on the Mount](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon_on_the_Mount)
- ^{ix} Pinchas Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount, Utopia or Program for Action?* trans, Arlene Swidler (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986) p.3.
- ^x Joachim Jeremias, quoted by Stott, p.27.
- ^{xi} John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*(Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1986), p.153
- ^{xii} Dan Liroy, *The Decalogue in the Sermon on the Mount*. *Studies in Biblical Literature* 66 (New York: Peter Long Publishing, 2004), p85.
- ^{xiii} Liroy, p104
- ^{xiv} Drane, p.156,7
- ^{xv} R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Mathew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris.(Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p. 106.
- ^{xvi} Dennis Hamm, *The Beatitudes in Context. Where Luke and Matthew Meet* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1990). p14.
- ^{xvii} Herman Hendrickx, *The Sermon on the Mount*. *Studies in the Synoptic Gospels* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), p.181.
- ^{xviii} Georg Strecker *The Sermon on the Mount. An Exegetical Commentary*. trans O. C. Dean (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) p. 183
- ^{xix} quoted by Drane, p 157