

Title: Matthew 5: The Sermon on the Mount

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Craig Keener examines Matthew 5 and the Sermon on the Mount, defining Jesus' teaching as the radical ethics of the kingdom. It outlines various historical interpretations of the sermon, advocating for an inaugurated eschatology framework where believers strive to live out the future perfection of God's reign today. Through the lens of ancient Jewish rhetoric, Keener discusses how Jesus utilizes graphic hyperbole and Jewish teaching devices to transform the human heart rather than merely enforce outward compliance. Ultimately, Jesus is presented as both the divine authority and the perfect model for a lifestyle defined by humility, integrity, and sacrificial love.

Outline

- **I. Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)**
 - **A. Preceding context (Matthew 4:17)** – Repentance in light of the coming kingdom
 - **B. The five discourse sections in Matthew's Gospel:**
 - **1.** Ethics of the kingdom (ch. 5–7)
 - **2.** Proclamation of the kingdom (ch. 10)
 - **3.** Parables emphasizing the presence of the kingdom (ch. 13)
 - **4.** Relationships in the kingdom (ch. 18)
 - **5.** Future kingdom and judgment (ch. 23–25)
 - **C. Significance of Chapters 5–7 and 23–25** as the longest first and last discourses
- **II. Historical Interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount**

- **A. Literal approach** (Desert Fathers, St. Francis, Anabaptists) – Emphasis on extreme sacrifice and strict adherence to civil laws
- **B. Medieval approach** – High ethic (counsels of perfection) reserved strictly for the clergy
- **C. Law versus grace approach** – Impossible standards designed solely to expose sin and drive individuals to grace
- **D. Liberal social gospel approach** – A moral blueprint for transforming secular society
- **E. Dispensational approach** (traditional) – Relegated the sermon's application to a separate dispensation rather than the current church
- **F. Interim ethic** (Albert Schweitzer) – Radical rules intended only for a brief period before an expected, imminent eschaton
- **G. Existentialist approach** (Rudolf Bultmann) – A direct, radical demand for immediate personal decision
- **H. Inaugurated Eschatology** (Keener's preferred view) – Combines strengths; recognizes the kingdom is "already" here but "not yet" fully consummated, urging believers to live out the future perfection of God's reign today
- **III. Ancient Jewish Rhetoric and Teaching Style of Jesus**
 - **A. Deliberative rhetoric** – Aimed at persuading hearers to adopt specific behaviors
 - **B. Narrative context** – Conditioned with grace for the introspective, and serves as a humbling equalizer for the proud
 - **C. Arrangement of sayings** – Standard ancient practice in biographies, epitomes, and rabbinic recitations where chronology was not strictly followed (explains differences between Matthew 5–7 and Luke 6)
 - **D. Synthesis of Old Testament and Jewish rhetorical forms:**
 - 1. Proverbs and parables (style of a sage)
 - 2. Pronouncing "woe" and judgment (style of a prophet)
 - 3. Midrash (exposition of Scripture and debates)

- **E. Distinctive features of Jesus' authority:**
 - 1. Prefacing statements with "Amen, I say to you" (unprecedented authority)
 - 2. Refusing to cite earlier rabbinic chains of tradition (speaking directly on His own and the Father's authority)
 - 3. Implicitly hinting at His own divinity
- **F. Common Jewish teaching devices:**
 - 1. Hyperbole (rhetorical overstatement to grab attention, e.g., the 10,000-talent debt)
 - 2. Humor (e.g., splinter vs. log in the eye)
 - 3. Graphic imagery (e.g., gnashing of teeth, cutting ministers to pieces) to appeal to the imagination without visual aids
 - 4. Literal vs. rhetorical interpretation (e.g., the rich young ruler and selling all possessions)
- **IV. Context and Audience of the Sermon (Matthew 5:1–2)**
 - **A. The Mountain setting:**
 - 1. Physical: Hill country and plateaus in Galilee/Judea
 - 2. Theological: Echoes Moses delivering the Torah on Mt. Sinai (Jesus as the greater lawgiver)
 - **B. Posture of teaching** – Sitting down as the standard custom for respected, advanced teachers
 - **C. Target audience** – Jesus directly addressed the disciples (followers inside the community, rather than imposing these values on outside secular society)
- **V. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12)**
 - **A. Structure and Rhetoric:**
 - 1. Follows common Old Testament and Jewish poetic structure ("How blessed/happy is...")
 - 2. Alliteration: The first four beatitudes begin with "P" (Pi) in Greek

- **3. Inclusio:** Verses 5:3 and 5:10 both end with "theirs is the kingdom of heaven"
- **B. Counter-cultural message** – The kingdom belongs to the broken, humble, hurting, and lowly (the *anawim*), not those seeking political/military violence
- **C. Eschatological promises with present foretastes:**
 - **1.** Comfort for mourners (eschatological consolation from Isaiah 61)
 - **2.** Satisfying hunger (the future banquet of Isaiah 25; feeding miracles as foretastes)
 - **3.** Receiving mercy (vital for final judgment; healings as foretastes)
 - **4.** Called children of God and seeing God (Exodus themes; disciples called brothers/sisters)
 - **5.** Meek inheriting the earth (Psalm 37:11, expanded from the land of Israel to the entire world)
- **D. Climax of Persecution (Matthew 5:10–12):**
 - **1.** Suffering on account of Jesus equates Jesus' name with God's name
 - **2.** Rejoicing in persecution due to heavenly reward
 - **3.** Jesus as the ultimate model of the Beatitudes (meek, mourning, showing mercy, suffering ridicule)
- **VI. Salt and Light: Character and Identity (Matthew 5:13–16)**
 - **A. Focuses on identity and character** ("who one is") rather than just behavior ("what one does")
 - **B. Tasteless Salt** – A ridiculous paradox; Rabbi Tarfon's joke about salting with mule's afterbirth highlights that a non-practicing disciple is worthless and thrown out
 - **C. Invisible Light** – A lamp under a bushel; a city set on a hill (like Jerusalem) stands out
 - **D. Mission** – Fulfilling the "light to the nations" from Isaiah 42 and 49
 - **E. Paradox of Visible Works (Matthew 5:16 vs. 6:1):**

- 1. Standard Jewish sage paradox (similar to Proverbs 26:4-5)
- 2. The distinction lies in heart motivation: Let works be seen to glorify the Father, not oneself
- **VII. Jesus and the Law (Matthew 5:17–20)**
 - **A. Absolute Permanence of the Law:**
 - 1. Jesus came to fulfill, not destroy
 - 2. Not a single stroke (*yod* or horn) of the law will pass away
 - 3. Rabbinic illustrations: The *yod* removed from Sarai's name, and King Solomon being uprooted before a single *yod* passes
 - **B. Surpassing Righteousness (Matthew 5:20):**
 - 1. Exceeding the scribes (teachers of the law) and Pharisees (meticulous interpreters)
 - 2. Outward precision (tithing, fasting) must be matched and exceeded by internal heart-transformation
- **VIII. The Radical Heart-Ethics: Six Developments (Matthew 5:21–48)**
 - **A. Linguistic context** – Jesus uses Greek *de* ("but/and/now" as development) rather than *alla* ("but" as strong contrast) – showing development, not destruction
 - **B. Anger vs. Murder (Matthew 5:21–26):**
 - 1. Anger and insults (*raka* / empty head, *moreh* / fool) are equivalent to murder
 - 2. Liable to the heavenly Sanhedrin (court of God) and fiery Gehenna (hell)
 - **C. Lust vs. Adultery (Matthew 5:27–30):**
 - 1. Mental lust (coveting a neighbor's wife) is equivalent to adultery in the heart
 - 2. Placing full moral responsibility on the lusting man rather than blaming the woman

- **3. Radical solutions:** Hyperbolic commands to gouge out eyes or cut off hands to prevent stumbling (apostasy)
- **D. Integrity in Marriage (Matthew 5:31–32)** – Prohibition of unfaithful divorce as a betrayal of the spouse
- **E. Oaths and Integrity (Matthew 5:33–37)** – Living with such perfect truthfulness that oaths are completely unnecessary
- **F. Non-retaliation (Matthew 5:38–42)** – Forgoing legal or physical resistance ("turning the other cheek")
- **G. Love for Enemies (Matthew 5:43–47)** – Loving and actively helping even persecutors and enemies
- **H. The Ultimate Standard: Perfection (Matthew 5:48)** – "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" – the ultimate, ongoing goal of grace-filled transformation