

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 7, Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to our explainer. Today, we're going to tackle one of the most famous, and let's be honest, one of the most challenging, speeches ever given: the Sermon on the Mount. Okay, let's just jump right in.

Be perfect. Love your enemies. If your eye makes you sin, tear it out.

I mean, how is anyone supposed to do this? These commands sound, well, they sound completely impossible, right? It almost feels like they're designed to make you fail. And for centuries, that's exactly what people have thought: that these words set an impossibly high standard. So you have to ask, right? What was the point? If the standard is basically unreachable for normal human beings, why even say it? Was it just a setup to prove that nobody could ever measure up? Well, to get to the bottom of that, we first have to look at all the different ways people have tried to make sense of these demands throughout history.

And as you're about to see, the solutions people came up with are all over the map. Okay, so just look at this list. It's pretty wild how many different approaches there have been.

You've got some folks like the early desert fathers who took it super literally, but saw it as a code for, you know, a spiritual elite, not for everybody. Then the medieval church kind of said, okay, this higher ethic, that's really for the priests and monks. And then you have others who just argued, hey, these rules aren't even for us today.

They're for some future kingdom. Every single one of these is basically trying to solve the same puzzle. How do we deal with the impossible part? Now, a huge piece of the puzzle here is something called hyperbole.

It's a fancy word, but it just means a rhetorical overstatement. Jesus used this tool all the time. It was a common teaching style back then.

So when he says, tear out your eye, the point isn't literally to have a bunch of his followers walking around with one eye. No way. It's to use a shocking, unforgettable image to jolt you awake and make you realize just how serious sin really is.

So what if there's a way to look at this that kind of pulls together the best parts of all those older ideas? Well, a more modern approach, often called inaugurated eschatology, does exactly that. It suggests a whole different way of looking at it. Okay.

So what does that big phrase mean? Inaugurated eschatology. It's the idea that the future kingdom of God has already begun, but it's, you know, not fully here yet. Think of it like this.

The sermon isn't a rule book for some far-off future. It's the lifestyle of that future kingdom that we're called to start living right now. It's about bringing that future reality into our present.

All right. So with that idea in mind, living the future now, let's look at how this all builds up to the central challenge Jesus throws down in the sermon. And trust me, this next part would have absolutely floored the people listening to him for the first time.

He says, for I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Wow. You have to understand this would have been a jaw-dropper to everyone listening.

The Pharisees were the gold standard. They were the most devout, the most religious, the absolute peak of righteousness. So how, how in the world could anyone be more righteous than them? I mean, these guys were meticulous.

They fasted twice a week. They tithed on every little herb from their garden. If they've got all the rules covered, what's left? And here's the brilliant twist.

It's not about adding more rules. It's about going beyond the rules all the way to the heart. The solution isn't to be a better rule keeper, but to become a different kind of person.

So this is how Jesus shows what he means. He takes these well-known laws, laws that everybody knew and agreed with, and he radically deepens them. He pushes past the outward action to get to the inward intention, the thing that's really going on in your heart.

And you'll notice he uses this repeated formula. You have heard that it was said, but I say to you. Now it's super important to get this right.

He's not saying the old law was bad or that he's tossing it out. Not at all. He's fulfilling it.

He's drilling down to its true meaning, showing what the law was aiming for all along. So take murder. He says, you've heard you shall not murder.

Everyone agrees. Easy. But then he says, but I say, don't even be angry with your brother.

See what he did? He just jumped right past the external act and went straight to the root of the problem, the anchor in the heart that leads to murder in the first place. And he does the exact same with adultery. Everyone knows you shouldn't commit adultery.

But Jesus says, don't even look at someone with lust. Again, he's moving upstream from the action to the desire. He's targeting the wanting to sin, not just the sinning itself.

And then comes maybe the most radical one of all. He takes an eye for an eye, which by the way, was originally a law meant to limit retaliation to keep it from spiraling out of control. And he completely flips it on its head.

He says, nope, do not resist an evil person. In fact, love your enemies. So you see the pattern here, right? The law was designed to put a fence around sin to limit its damage.

But Jesus is aiming for something so much deeper. He wants to transform us from the inside out. So we don't even want to sin anymore.

It's a total heart renovation. Okay. So if it's all about this deep internal transformation, what's the end goal? This brings us to the ultimate purpose of the Sermon on the Mount.

It's not just about not doing bad things. It's about a complete transformation of your character. This is where he says, "You are the salt of the earth."

You are the light of the world. Think about that. He doesn't say you should act like salt or you should try to be light.

He says you are these things. Salt fundamentally changes what it touches. Light dispels darkness just by being present.

It's about your very nature, your identity, and the influence that flows out of that. See, the Sermon isn't just about what you do. It's not a to-do list.

No, it's about who you become. It's a call to be transformed so completely on the inside that good works, like loving your enemies, start to flow out of you naturally, not because you're forcing yourself to check a box on a list. And that brings us all the way back to where we started with that seemingly impossible command: be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.

When you see it this way, it's not a command to be flawless by next Tuesday. It's the ultimate goal. It's the North Star for our character, the direction we're supposed to head for our entire lives.

And so the Sermon on the Mount really leaves us with this final challenging thought. If the goal isn't just a checklist, but a completely transformed character, what does that demand of us today? It shifts the whole question, doesn't it? It's no longer, can I keep all these rules? Instead, it becomes something much more personal. Am I willing to have my heart, my desires, my very character completely reshaped?