

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

A. Significance for Anabaptists and Mennonites

Howard Loewen wrote a book that analyzed 37 Mennonite and Anabaptist confessions of faith, going from the 1527 Schleitheim Confession to the 1975 MB Confession of Faith.¹ Loewen discovered that the Gospel of Matthew was the most quoted scripture. In addition, he states:

“Chapter 5 (Sermon on the Mount) by far is the most extensively referred to; Chapter 25 (on eschatology), Chapter 28 (the great commission) and Chapter 18 (church discipline) follow Matthew 5 in that order in frequency.... Within Matthew 5 the section on love for one's enemies (vv. 38-48) receives the strongest emphasis by a margin of almost three to one. It is followed by the section on integrity and the oath (vv. 33-37).”²

For Mennonites and Anabaptists studying the Sermon on the Mount is serious business.

B. Various Approaches

The SOM makes uncompromising demands. For example:

Matt 5:48. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. However, in the LXX, "to be perfect," means to be wholehearted, complete or whole. Hence, 5:48 is an injunction to have wholehearted focus on God's will.³

Matt 5:41. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

Christians have handled these demands in a number of ways. McArthur list twelve different approaches to SOM.⁴ Here are eight.⁵

1. Impossible Ideal

Some have argued that the SOM is an impossible ideal. Joseph Klausner argues that the SOM presents an “extremist morality,” one that “has not proved possible in practice,” and has “too high an ideal” for ordinary people.⁶

“Is it realistic to ask people to love their enemies?... What is the harm in taking an oath in the courtroom? Should one stay married to an abusive husband just because he is not known to have committed adultery? Can Jesus really have been so obtuse as to imagine that he could banish the sexual impulse with an imperative?”⁷

2. Absolutist view

¹Howard J. Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God, Mennonite Confessions of Faith* (Elkhart: The Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985).

²Howard J. Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God, Mennonite Confessions of Faith* (Elkhart: The Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985) 31.

³So Warren Carter, *What Are They Saying About Matthew's Sermon On The Mount?* (Mahwah, N. J.: Paulist, 1994) 95.

⁴Harvey K. McArthur, *Understand the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960) 120-22.

⁵McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, 120-22; C. Milo Connick, *Jesus: the Man, The Mission, And The Message* (Second Edition, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 261-4. Also see Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 1-7.

⁶Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 1.

⁷Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 1.

The commands of the SOM are to be taken literally and applied absolutely. This is the view of St. Augustine, St. Francis, the Anabaptists, Tolstoy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and John Howard Yoder.

For example, Tolstoy argued that since Jesus prohibited taking oaths, Christians should never take an oath; since Jesus said love your enemies, war is never justified; since Jesus said don't store up treasures on earth, all possessions should be given away.

3. Modification view

Some Christians have toned down the demands of the Sermon by modifying it. That is, they have inserted phrases. For example, Luther interpreted Mt 5:42 to mean that one should give to a beggar *only if* the beggar is a genuine seeker and not a vagrant.

Matt 5:42 Give to everyone [every Christian] who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone [any Christian] who wants to borrow from you.

4. Hyperbole view

Some Christians believe that Jesus used exaggeration to dramatize his demands.

- If Jesus were taken literally, social life would be impossible.
- If we followed Mt 5:29, who would have any eyes to see with.

5. Attitudes-Not-Acts View

Some Christians believe that Jesus' real concern was not with deeds, but with attitudes or intentions. In this view, the OT condemned adultery (i.e., the act), but Jesus condemned the lustful look (i.e., the intent to commit adultery). In support of this view, 6:1-18 requires right intention in almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

But, according to Allison, “the Sermon does not separate the inward from the outward, being from doing, intention from performance... it addresses being who are psychosomatic wholes.”⁸

6. Roman Catholic View

The traditional Roman Catholic Church—sometimes called “the double-standard view”—follows Thomas Aquinas and divides the SOM into two types of teaching: (i) “precepts” or commandments and (ii) specific “counsels”.

- Obedience to the precepts is necessary for salvation.
- Obedience to the counsels is only necessary for perfection.

In this view, Jesus' teaching in SOM are only “counsels” and not “precepts”; hence, SOM is not necessary for ordinary people to keep. In contrast, the pious few—priest

⁸ Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 7.

and the religious—are to keep the councils as a means of perfection. This is often referred to as the “double standard view.”

The earliest reference to this distinction is *Didache* 6:2, “For if you are able to bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you are not able to do this, do what you are able.”

7. Two Kingdoms Approach

The two kingdom view was advocated by Martin Luther. He distinguished between two spheres or kingdoms—the private (spiritual) order and the public (civil) order. The Christian lives in both spheres. In this view, the SOM primarily is concerned with private matters and not public policy.

- In the private sphere, Christians must obey all the Sermon’s demands.
- In the public sphere, this is not so. Everything that pertains to the civil government—military, property, taxes, etc.—is not address by the SOM.

Following Luther, “Personally, I am to act as Jesus would have me act, but to the extent I have the responsibility for maintaining [the public] order I am obligated to use violence in the name of that order.”⁹ Allison says this approach is “not without merit” and some of his exegesis on the SOM harmonizes with it.¹⁰

From Luther’s perspective, the purpose of the Sermon was not to give rules for living ethically, but to make people aware of their sinfulness and lead them to repent.

8. Dispensationalist View

All Scripture and history is divided into seven periods or dispensations of time:

- (1) Innocence; ended with expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden
- (2) Conscience; Gen. 3:23
- (3) Human government; Gen. 8:20
- (4) Promise; Gen. 12:1
- (5) Law; Ex. 18:8
- (6) Grace; Jn. 1:17
- (7) Future Kingdom; Eph. 1:10

The ethical demands of the Sermon are intended for the future kingdom; not now!

C. Allison’s Exegetical Guidelines

1. SOM embodies parallel teaching

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John Howard Yoder” in *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries, From the Early Church to John Paul II*, edited by Jeffrey P. Greenman, Timothy Larsen, and Stephen R. Spencer (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007) 218.

¹⁰ Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 5.

The SOM embodies Jewish, Greco-Roman parallels, and occasionally sayings and teaching that resemble teachings from other religions. Although SOM has unique elements, “an inordinate desire to emphasize Jesus’ alleged uniqueness will lead to misinterpretation.”¹¹

SOM stands in continuity with what has been taught by others, especially Jewish tradition. “Jesus came not to abolish the moral awareness of humanity as a whole but to fulfill it.”¹²

2. SOM coheres with OT

We must take seriously 5:17-20. The law and prophets are still in force. Jesus and the OT are in continuity. According to Allison, this hermeneutical key “proves fatal for the absolutist approach of Tolstoy and like-minded others. For their interpretation of 5:21-48 lands one in fundamental, irreconcilable conflict with the Hebrew Bible, which accepts armies, courts, and oaths as necessary.”¹³

3. SOM must be read in context of Matthew’s whole gospel

SOM “belongs to a book apart from which it was never intended to be read.”¹⁴ SOM illuminates other verses and passages and vice-versa (see Allison 9-10 for examples).

4. SOM offer principles and inspiration, rather than rules

Allison shows that the SOM uses a variety of images, metaphors, hyperbole, and allusions. SOM is hardly the language of precise rules or legislation. At best, the SOM provides principles, not rules. Principles are great truths that embody the character of a broader worldview. Rules prescribe certain behaviors for certain situations. Principles are inspirational, rules are pragmatic.

SOM is not just ethical instruction for human relationships, but includes guidance for prayer, worship, and piety. SOM is concerned with the vertical (5:3, 4, 5, 6; 5:33; 61-18; 6:24; 6:33; 7:7-11) as well as the horizontal (5:21-26; 5:27-30; 5:38-42, etc.).

The SOM is not mean to save us from thinking. “The Sermon’s primary purpose is to instill principles and qualities through a vivid inspiration of the moral imagination.”¹⁵

5. SOM reflects Jewish eschatology

a. Jewish restoration eschatology

SOM has often been divorced from its historical Jewish context. SOM must be viewed in the context of first century Jewish hopes that God would forgive Israel and restore the kingdom to Israel.

¹¹ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 8.

¹² Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 8.

¹³ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 8.

¹⁴ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 9.

¹⁵ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 11.

For many Jews at that time, Israel's exile, from a theological point of view, continued even after the "post-exilic period," since Israel was still enslaved and sinful.¹⁶ With that in mind, Jesus believed his preaching marked the dawn of God's forgiveness and restoration of Israel and that his followers represented the beginning of YHWH's restoration True or Restored Israel.¹⁷

That means that SOM is inextricably linked and embedded within Jesus' proclamation that God's Kingdom at hand, that Israel's exile was over for those who repent and follow him. Jesus believed that the exile, caused by centuries of Israel's sin and unfaithfulness,¹⁸ was now over for those who repent and loyally follow him.

N.T. Wright says, "Jesus was offering the return from exile, the renewed covenant, the eschatological forgiveness of sin—in other words, the kingdom of god. And he was offering this final eschatological blessing outside the official structures, to all the wrong people, and on his own authority. That was his real offence."¹⁹

That means that SOM is not a general compendium of instructions for how to be good or ethical people. Rather, SOM portrays how the Restored or True Israel must live. SOM "proclaims the will of God as it should be lived in the kingdom, when God's will is done on earth as in heaven."²⁰

b. Characteristics of the Kingdom (Reign) of God

Glen Stassen identifies seven characteristics of the Kingdom (Reign) of God based on Isaiah.²¹ Matthew presents Jesus as the eschatological prophet of Isaiah, so it is natural to see Isaiah view of the "good news" of God's Reign as the backdrop for Matthew.

Seventeen passages in Isaiah the proclaim the good news of the deliverance of God (9:1-7, 11; 24:14-25:12; 26; 31:1-33:20; 33; 35; 40:1-11; 42:1-44:8; 49; 51:1-51; 52:13-53:12; 54; 56; 60; 61; 62). From these passages, seven themes can be discerned.

(1) God is presence as Spirit or Light

Nine passage of 17 refer to the presence of God as Spirit or Light; for example:

Isaiah 60:1-2, 19. ¹ Arise, shine; for **your light has come**, and **the glory of the LORD** has risen upon you. ² For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.... ¹⁹ The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the **LORD will be your everlasting light**, and your God will be your glory. (NRSV)

(2) Deliverance or salvation

¹⁶ See Ezra 9:6-15, Neh. 9:6-37, and Baruch 1:15-3:8. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 271.

¹⁷ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 245-319.

¹⁸ E.g., see Daniel's prayer in Dan. 9:16-19

¹⁹ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 272.

²⁰ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 13.

²¹ Glen H. Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006) 24-37.

All seventeen; for example, Isa. 43:1-4 describes Israel as they are exiled and oppressed in Babylon and wait the coming of YHWH to create a New Exodus. :

Isaiah 43:1-4. ¹ But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have **redeemed** you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² **When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;** and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the LORD your God, **the Holy One of Israel**, your **Savior**. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.(NRSV)

(3) Peace

Fourteen passages of 17 refer to peace; for example:

Isaiah 11:6-13. ⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea... ¹² He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. ¹³ The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, the hostility of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim. (NRSV)

Isaiah 60:17-19.¹⁷ Instead of bronze I will bring gold, instead of iron I will bring silver; instead of wood, bronze, instead of stones, iron. I will appoint **Peace** as your overseer and **Righteousness** as your taskmaster. ¹⁸ **Violence** shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls **Salvation**, and your gates **Praise**. ¹⁹ The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. (NRSV)

(4) Healing

Seven passages of 17 refer to healing; for example:

Isaiah 35:5-6. ⁵ Then the **eyes of the blind shall be opened**, and the **ears of the deaf unstopped**; ⁶ then the **lame shall leap** like a deer, and the **tongue of the speechless sing for joy**. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert (NRSV)

(5) Joy

Twelve passages of 17 refer to joy; for example:

Isaiah 35:8-10. ⁸ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and **come to Zion with singing**; **everlasting joy shall be upon their heads**; they shall obtain **joy and gladness**, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.(NRSV)

(6) Return from exile

Nine passages of 17 refer to the return from exile; for example:

Isaiah 35:8-10. ⁸ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called **the Holy Way**; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰ And **the ransomed of the LORD shall return**, and **come to Zion** with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (NRSV)

(7) Righteousness or justice

Sixteen passages of 17 refer to righteousness or justice; for example:

The Servant of YHWH. **Isaiah 42:1-7.** ¹ Here is **my servant**, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; **I have put my spirit upon him**; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ² He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; **he will faithfully bring forth justice** (מִשְׁפָּט; mishpat). ⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established **justice** in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. ⁵ Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶ I am the LORD, I have called you in **righteousness** (צְדָקָה; tsedek) I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, **a light to the nations**, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. (NRSV)

The Reign of God places justice and righteousness in parallel. The first word is *mishpat*, which is usually translated “justice.” It refers to “decisions of the authorities and practices of the markets that are fair to the poor and the powerless.”²² The second word is *tsedek*, which is usually translated “righteousness.” It refers to “the kind of justice that delivers from slavery and from oppression and restores community relationships.”²³

Stassen argues the *mishpat* means “fairness justice” and *tsedek* means “delivering justice”. Together they refer to “the kind of justice that is fairness to the powerless and therefore restores them from oppression and restores community.”²⁴

6. SOM and “perfection”

Matthew 5:48 says, “Be perfect as God is perfect.” SOM present some very high ideals and we wonder if they are possible to attain by human beings.

Allison suggests viewing high ideals of SOM an invitation to never stop growing in kingdom virtues. It is “a ladder to be climbed, rung by rung.”²⁵ Allison says, “While moral perfection cannot be achieved, nevertheless one’s character is built up as one earnestly struggles, with no relaxation, to reach the unreachable.”²⁶

“The ideal is necessary because, while it may not raise humanity to the heights it can lift us from the depths.”²⁷ In other words, the high ideals of SOM inspire and motivate us.

²² Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, 33.

²³ Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, 34.

²⁴ Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, 34.

²⁵ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 13-14.

²⁶ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 14.

²⁷ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 15.

7. SOM and the person of Jesus

SOM has often been divorced from the person of Jesus. Allison argues that the identity of the speaker of SOM is crucial for its interpretation.

a. Jesus as Isaiah's eschatological prophet

Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as Isaiah's eschatological prophet the Servant of YHWH. This would be the prophet who would usher in the Kingdom of God and restore Israel to God's favor.

For example, when the followers of John the Baptists ask Jesus if he is the one to come (11:3), Jesus answers with a series of phrases that come from Isaiah (11:5):

- The blind see (Isa. 61:1)
- The lame walk (Isa. 35:6)
- The deaf hear (Isa. 35:5)
- The dead are raised (Isa. 26:19)
- The poor have good news preached to them (Isa. 61:1)

Allison gives other examples of how Jesus fulfills the expectations of Isaiah's eschatological prophet. The point is, Matthew's readers would have understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's eschatological prophet.

b. Jesus as the New Moses

The way Matthew framed SOM indicates that he wanted readers to view Jesus as the New Moses.

The beginning of SOM alludes to *Moses' ascent to Mount Sinai*. Jesus goes up the mountain in 5:1, just as Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the law (Exod. 19:3, 12-13). When Jesus sits down, it recalls Jewish tradition that spoke of Moses sitting on Sinai (*Exagōgē* of Ezekiel; *b. Megillah* 21a).

The end of SOM recalls Moses' *descent from Mount Sinai*. Matthew writes, "When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him" (8:1; NRSV), which is identical to Exod. 34:29 LXX A, which describes Moses coming down Mount Sinai.²⁸

Deut. 9:9. When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water. (NRSV)

Dale Allison argues that "an extensive Moses typology runs throughout Matthew's first few chapters" (see his *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993).²⁹

²⁸ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 17.

²⁹ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 17.

	Matthew	Jewish Tradition
1	Joseph is told in a dream that Jesus will save his people (1:21)	Moses was called “savior” of his people (Josephus <i>Ant.</i> 2.228; <i>b. Sota</i> 12b; L.A.B. 9:10)
2	Birth of Jesus accompanied by Herod’s slaughter of infants (2:16-18)	Birth of Moses is accompanied by Pharaoh’s decision to kill male Hebrew babies (Exod. 1:22)
3	Herod learned about the coming savior from the chief priest and scribes (2:4-6)	Pharaoh learned about a future deliverer from the sacred scribes (Josephus <i>Ant.</i> 2.205, 234)
4	Jesus is providentially taken from the land of his birth because Herod wants to kill him (2:13-14)	Moses was forced to leave his homeland because Pharaoh sought to kill him (Exod. 2:15)
5	After Herod’s death, an angel told Josephus to return to Israel (2:19-20)	After the death of Pharaoh, Moses was commanded by God to return to Egypt (Exod. 4:19)
6	Matt. 2:15 quotes Hos. 11:1: “Out of Egypt I have called my son,” which is applied to Jesus.	Hos. 11:1: “Out of Egypt I have called my son,” which is applied to Israel.
7	Joseph took his wife and son and went back to Israel (2:21)	Moses took his wife and his sons and returned to Egypt (Exod. 4:2)

The sequence of events of Jesus’ life in Matthew 1-5 correspond to the sequence of events in Moses’ life in Exodus.³⁰

Exod:	Slaughter of infants → Return of hero → Passage through Sea → Temptation → Mountain of Lawgiving
Matt:	Slaughter of infants → Return of hero → Baptism in Jordan → Temptation → Mountain of Lawgiving

c. Jesus as moral exemplar

Karl Barth argued that “the Sermon is a way of preaching Christ—this is because it is a self-portrait.”³¹ This reflects the belief that “Jesus alone lived his own words.” For example, throughout Matthew, Jesus is depicted as embodying the beatitudes. Allison gives many such examples (e.g., 5:5 on meekness with 11:29).³²

The imitation of Christ is the implicit SOM.

d. Jesus as Lord

Thirteen times in SOM, Jesus says, “I say to you.” This is a clear indication of authorities. The question is, who can speak to us like this?

The answer is suggested in 7:21-23 where people will say to Jesus, “Lord, lord...” Here Jesus takes the role of the judge at the Day of Judgment.

D. Structure

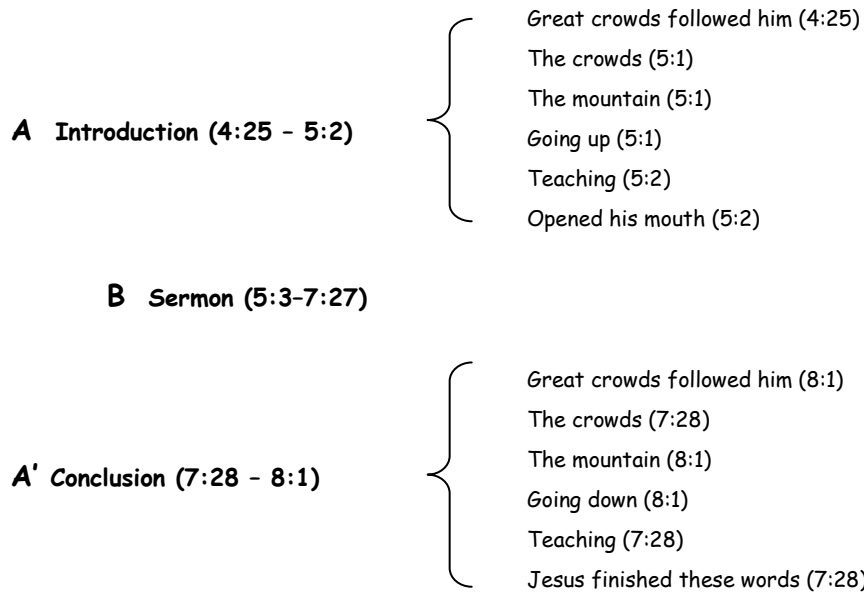
1. Literary framework (4:25 – 5:2 and 7:28 – 8:1)

SOM is bound by an introduction and a conclusion that are structured in parallel fashion.

³⁰ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 19.

³¹ Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 19.

³² Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 19-23.



When we look at the literary framework, who is the audience of the Sermon within Matthew's Story? Jesus' discipleship community.

2. The Pattern of the Sermon

The Sermon focuses on three things—*blessings*, *tasks*, and *warnings*—for the people of God. Specifically, Jesus articulates nine blessings, three tasks, and three warnings for his followers.

See Allison's chart on the triads of the Sermon on the Mount.³³ Students fill-in the blanks below.

- a. Nine eschatological blessings (5:3-12)³⁴
 - 1) Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek
 - 2) Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure
 - 3) Blessed are the peacemakers, those who are persecuted, blessed are you
- b. Three tasks for the people of God (5:13 - 7:12)
 - 1) In relation to the law: Keep the law as Jesus instructed (5:17-48)
 - 2) In relation to God: Love God as Jesus instructed (6:1-18)
 - 3) In relation to others: Love others as Jesus instructed (6:19-7:12)
- c. Three eschatological warnings (7:13-27)
 - 1) Two types of gates: "Enter by the narrow gate ..." (7:13-14)
 - 2) Two types of prophets: "Beware of false prophets ..." (7:15-23)
 - 3) Two types of builders: Be like the wise man who built ... (7:24-27)

³³ W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison. *Matthew*. Volume I:I-VII. *The International Critical Commentary*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 64.

³⁴ Although 5:11-12 has a different form than the preceding beatitudes—it is longer, contains imperatives, addressed directly to the reader (the second person is used)—it forms the ninth beatitude. It begins with the same word, *makarioi*, as the preceding beatitudes and it would be strange to begin a new section with the same word. Additionally, Hebrew prayers and other biblical texts, which list a series often, conclude with a longer member than the preceding members and switches from the third to the second person (e.g., Mt 1:2-16; Lk 6:37-38). So Allison, 1987: 429, n. 17.

3. Hermeneutical implications³⁵

a. Uncompromising demands

The structure of the Sermon has hermeneutical implications, particularly with regard to the problem of law and grace. Most of Matt 5-7 issues a series of uncompromising demands.

Some people have concluded, therefore, that the Sermon is advice without help; that is, it makes demands, but offers no hint about how live that way.

However, a closer look at the structure of the Sermon reveals how it is possible to live out the Sermon in everyday life.

b. Uncompromising grace

(i) SOM refers to God's grace in the past.

This is implicit in the gather of the new community (Mt 4:23 - 5:2). The passage just before SOM tells us that Jesus was gathering a community of disciples who were touched by God's grace.

Matt 4:23-25. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him. (NRSV)

Before the crowds hear Jesus' words, they are the object of his compassion and healing. They did nothing, yet received grace. This suggests a pattern: Grace comes before law; healing before the imperative, and salvation before commandment.

(ii) SOM refers to God's grace in the future.

Jesus begins the Sermon with blessings and promises. These are not entrance requirements for the kingdom, but rather they are blessings that will characterize the faithful.

The beatitudes do not make demands so much as offer comfort to the poor in spirit, the meek, those who truly hunger for righteousness. The people that Jesus has called will inherit the earth (5:5), will see God (5:8), and will receive a glorious reward (5:12).

(iii) SOM refers to God's grace in the present (6:25-34; 7:7-11).

In two places, in the middle of SOM, Jesus tells us that God provides for our every need. If God has provided for birds, then certainly God provides for us (6:26ff) and if a

³⁵Much of the following is from Dale Allison, "The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," *JBL* 106 (1987):441-5.

human father cares for his children, then certainly the heavenly Father cares for us (7:9-11).

In summary, SOM must be heard in the context of receiving God's grace in the past, the present, and the future.

4. Outline of SOM

One of the most striking things about SOM is that it displaces a large number of triads. That is, the composition of the SOM is arranged according to threes.

Not only are many units within the SOM arranged in threes, but the overall structure is organized by three topics: Jesus and the Torah, Jesus and the cult, and Jesus and social issues (so Allison).

[See the attached outline.]

This three-part structure may be more than compositional choice. It may also point to contact with and response to early rabbinic Judaism. In *Mishnah 'Abot* 1.1-18, we find 18 sayings from various rabbis. Almost all are grouped in triads. For example:

m. 'Abot 1.1. Moses received the Law from Sinai and committed it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets committed it to the mean of the Great synagogue. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Law.

m. 'Abot 1:2. Simeon the Just was of the remnants of the Great Synagogue. He used to say: By three things is the world sustained: by the Law, by the [Temple-] service, and by deeds of loving-kindness.³⁶

³⁶ *The Mishnah*, translated and edited by Herbert Danby (Oxford University, 1933) 446.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Nine Blessings (Matt. 5:3-12)³⁷

1. Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek
2. Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure
3. Blessed are the peacemakers, those who are persecuted, blessed are you

Three Tasks (Matt. 5:13-7:12)³⁸

1. Summary: Be salt and light in the world (5:13-16)³⁹
2. In Relation to the Law: Keep the law as Jesus instructed (5:17-48)
 - (a) General principles (5:17-20)
 - (1) Negatively: Anticipates an incorrect interpretation of 5:21-48, that Jesus' words contradict the Torah. Then states the truth about 5:21-48, which Jesus came to fulfill the law.
 - (2) Positively: Declares what 5:21-48 is about, that a righteousness greater than the scribes & Pharisees is required.
 - (b) First triad of antitheses (5:21-32)⁴⁰
 - (1) On murder (5:21-26)
 - (2) On adultery (5:27-30)
 - (3) On divorce (5:31-32)
 - (c) Second triad of antitheses (5:33-48)
 - (1) On oaths (5:33-37)
 - (2) On retaliation (5:38-42)
 - (3) On love (5:43-48)
3. In Relation to God: Love God as Jesus instructed (6:1-18)
 - (a) General principle: Do acts of righteousness to please God (6:1)
 - (b) Triad of instructions (6:2-18)
 - (1) On giving: Do not be like hypocrites (6:2-4)
 - (2) On prayer: Do not be like hypocrites (6:5-15)
 - (3) On fasting: Do not be like hypocrites (6:16-18)
4. In Relation to Others: Love others as Jesus instructed (6:19 - 7:12)
 - (a) Triad on true treasure (6:19-24)
 - (1) Exhortation: Store up treasure in heaven (6:19-21)
 - (2) First parable: The good eye [= be generous] (6:22-23; cf 7:3-5)
 - (3) Second parable: The two masters [= serve God] (6:24)
 - (b) Triad of encouragement about God's care (6:25-34):⁴¹
 - (1) Do not worry ... (6:25-30)
 - (2) Do not worry ... (6:31)
 - (3) Do not worry ... (6:34)
 - (c) Triad on one's neighbor (7:1-12)
 - (1) Exhortation: Do not judge (7:1-2)
 - (2) First parable: The log in the eye (7:3-5; cf 6:22-23)
 - (3) Second parable: Pearls and swine (7:6)
 - (d) Triads of encouragement about God's care (7:7-11):
 - (1) Three imperatives: Ask ... seek ... knock ... (7:7-8)
 - (2) Three conditionals: If ... if ... if ... (7:9-11)
5. Summary statement: The golden rule (7:12; cf 5:17, 22:36-40).

Three Warnings (Matt. 7:13-27)

1. Two types of gates: "Enter by the narrow gate ..." (7:13-14)
2. Two types of prophets: "Beware of false prophets ..." (7:15-23)
3. Two types of builders: "Be like the wise man who built ..." (7:24-27)

³⁷Although 5:11-12 has a different form than the preceding beatitudes—it is longer, contains imperatives, the second person is used—it forms the ninth beatitude. It begins with *makarioi* (blessed) as the preceding beatitudes. It would be strange to begin a new section with the same word. Hebrew prayers and other biblical texts which list a series often conclude with a longer member than the preceding members and switches from the third to the second person (e.g., Mt 1:2-16; Lk 6:37-38). So Allison, 1987: 429, n. 17.

³⁸Verses 13-16 function as an introductory summary; thus 5:17 and 7:12 form an inclusion. Both refer to the law and the prophets. Jesus does not come to abolish them (5:17), rather his teaching leads to fulfilling the law and the prophets (7:12). Eschatological blessings (5:3-12) are then balanced by eschatological warnings (7:13-27).

³⁹The statements in 5:13 and 5:14-16 are general, function as a heading for the core, and serve as a transition from promises of future blessing (5:3-12) to the demands of present life (5:17 - 7:12). So Allison, 1987: 431.

⁴⁰The six antitheses form two triads: (1) The adverb *palin* (again) occurs only in verse 33, which indicates another beginning point. (2) The phrase, "You have heard that it was said to *men of old*," appears only in verses 21 and 33, the beginning points of the first and fourth antitheses. (3) In the first three antitheses, the phrase, "You have heard it said," is immediately followed by an *hoti* (that) and a substantival participle. (4) However, in the last three antitheses, the phrase, "You have heard it said," is immediately followed by an imperative. See Allison, 1987:432-3.

⁴¹This division is based on my observation that the word *merimna* (worry) occurs six times in 6:25-34, but only three times with the negative particle *mē* (25, 31, 34), following "the rule of three" throughout Matt 5-7.