

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, October 10, 1993, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

## **MATTHEW 5:1-2**

“Now when Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him and He began to teach them.

### **INTRODUCING THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

This morning we begin a series of sermons on “Beatitudes” which, as you know, comprise the first portion of our Lord’s “Sermon on the Mount” as recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew, chapters 5 through 7.

At the outset, let us clear the ground by noting certain misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the Sermon on the Mount:

**1. At the turn of this century there arose what was called the “Social Gospel” movement.** Under the leadership of such men as Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden, this movement here in America sought, quite rightly, to challenge the Church to the need for proclaiming social justice. Working conditions in many parts of this country in those days were appalling, as you will discover if you read a book like Upton Sinclair’s “The Jungle”, written in 1906; the story of a family of Lithuanian immigrants who worked in the stockyards of Chicago. Dr. Rauschenbusch, himself an evangelical Christian, had a passionate desire to apply Christ’s ethical principles, as enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount, to the social and economic conditions of his day. But unfortunately, the Social Gospel movement had one great and ultimately fatal defect. It idolized Christ’s ethic, as contained in the Sermon on the Mount, but it tried to preach that ethic to people who had never experienced the new birth in Christ, and who therefore did not possess the life of Christ within them. It was therefore like commanding a corpse to clean out a stable. “Put into practice the ethical teaching of Jesus,” they said, “and you will produce the Kingdom of God on earth. Wars will be banished, and all our troubles and woes will be ended.” Such a misinterpretation of the Sermon was doomed to painful failure. Four major wars in this century, together with the increasing moral chaos of our age, have shaken, the Social Gospel philosophy to its very foundations.

As we shall endeavor to point out, no one can live the Sermon on the Mount by his own unaided efforts, but only through that supernatural life bestowed by Christ and received through the “new birth.”

**2. Another misunderstanding of the Sermon on the Mount is found in a certain type of evangelistic preaching which identifies the Sermon with legalism.** According to this teaching, the Sermon on the Mount is basically a carryover from the Old Testament Law, and as such, is opposed to the gospel of salvation by faith in Christ alone, and to His atoning work on the Cross.

This view is, in fact, blasphemous, because it simply does not take our Lord’s teaching

seriously. Some evangelical Christians so emphasize the fact that our salvation is all the result of God's grace in Christ, and that we ought never to try to imitate His example in order to make ourselves Christians, that they virtually, as believing Christians, ignore His ethical teachings altogether, and say that His ethics have nothing to do with us because we are "under grace".

Hal Lindsey, author of "The Late Great Planet Earth", wrote this nonsense; he said, "The Law holds as little obligation for Christians as the highway God holds for birds"! The birds, of course, are quite free to fly where they please. With the prevalence of this kind of false teaching, is it any wonder that a Gallop Poll has revealed that the moral behavior of the average church member in America today is not appreciably different from that of non-believers?

Now it is true that we are not under the Law in the sense that the Law condemns us. It no longer pronounces condemnation upon us because Christ has Himself borne that condemnation by His atoning death on Calvary. Nevertheless, although the Law does not condemn us, we are meant, as Christians, to obey it, to live it, and even to go beyond it; for did not Jesus, Himself, say, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and the Pharisees (the great keepers of the Law of Moses), you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven"? (Matt. 5:20)

The old Gospel hymn says,

"Free from the law, O happy condition;  
Jesus has bled, and there is remission."

Someone wrote a parody of those lines —

"Free from the law, O happy condition;  
Sin if you please, for there is remission"!

If Christians refuse to face up to the moral imperatives of Jesus and live the life He commands us to live, such shameful disobedience can only lead to backsliding of the most serious and soul-destroying kind.

In this connection some Christians have said, "Surely the Sermon on the Mount teaches that our sins are forgiven only if we forgive others. (Matthew 6:15) Isn't that law? Where is the grace of God in that? Where does faith come in?"

But if you say that, then you will have to tear pages out of your New Testament. Remember, for example, how in Matthew 18:21-35 our Lord told the parable about the obnoxious servant who was forgiven a debt of ten million dollars by his lord, yet he would not forgive a debt of twenty dollars by a fellow servant; with the result that his master withdrew his forgiveness and punished him with life imprisonment. And our Lord's comment on the story is inescapably plain — "This is how My Heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." (Matt. 18:35)

This is precisely the same teaching that we find in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:15. But does it mean that I am forgiven only because I have forgiven? Not at all. It simply

means that if I do not forgive, then I have never been forgiven. Look at it in this way. If you know yourself to be a guilty sinner, helpless before God; and if you know that God has forgiven you freely because of what Christ did for you on the Cross, then your heart is broken, and you could never refuse to forgive someone else, since you yourself have been so wonderfully forgiven, even though you didn't deserve it.

So, the person who does not forgive someone else, has never experienced forgiveness himself. The person who is truly forgiven and knows it, is the person who, himself, forgives. This is the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount at this point, and in no way does it deny the Gospel of free grace.

**3. A third misunderstanding of our Lord's Sermon is to the effect that the standards He sets out are impossible to keep, and are, therefore, not to be taken seriously by Christians.** This heresy at least recognizes the ineffably high standards that Christ demands from His people, but it does not understand that Christians are called to live that kind of life through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit Who alone can enable them to achieve Christ's standard.

We believe that "all Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). And continually we hear ringing in our ears the words of the resurrected Lord, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:19-20)

**4. The final misunderstanding of the Sermon on the Mount is what we might call the older "Dispensational" view of Scripture,** a view popularized by the original edition of the famous Scofield Reference Bible published in 1909. Their position was that the Sermon on the Mount had nothing whatever to do with present-day Christians. They said that our Lord began to preach about the Kingdom of God, and that this Sermon had to do with the setting up of that Kingdom of righteousness and truth. Unfortunately, they said, the Jews did not believe His teaching. They rejected Him so that He could not establish His Kingdom. Therefore, almost as an afterthought, the death on Calvary took place. As another afterthought, the Church was established and will continue to exist up to a certain point in history. Then our Lord will return from heaven to establish, successfully this time, His Kingdom for one thousand years; and then again, the ethical precepts of the Sermon on the Mount will be valid and imperative. But in the meantime, it has nothing whatever to do with Christians in 1993!

Now this teaching is, of course, patently untrue, and most Dispensationalists today do not believe it. It is untrue for the simple reason that Christ preached His message to His followers for all ages to come. He said, "You are the salt of the earth." (Matt. 5:13) He said, "You are the light of the world." (Matt. 5:14) But if the Sermon has no application today, why should we even bother to let our light so shine before men that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father Who is in heaven"? (See Matthew 5:16.)

The plain fact of the matter is that our Lord gave His sublime moral teaching to His followers who were meant to practice it then and always to the end of time. This is timeless teaching.

Notice too that there is no teaching to be found in the Sermon on the Mount which is not found also elsewhere in the New Testament. So, you see, it is utterly repulsive and exceedingly dangerous to say that the Sermon on the Mount does not apply to Christians in 1993.

Let us now ask ourselves the question — Why should we study the Sermon on the Mount? There are at least three good reasons.

**1. It shows me the absolute necessity of “the new birth,” and of the work of the Holy Spirit in my life.** The Beatitudes batter me to the ground. They show me how utterly incapable I am, in my own strength, to live the life God requires. Show me someone who claims that by his own innate goodness and by his own unaided ability he is living up to the standards of the Sermon on the Mount, and I will show you a man who either does not understand what our Lord is teaching, or else he is lying. The Sermon condemns me for falling short of God’s righteousness. It is a mirror into which I look, and it shows me what I really look like in God’s sight; and it drives me in desperation to the foot of the Cross. Paul says in Gal. 3:24 that “the law (of Moses) was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.” Now those words “was put in charge” is a noun in the Greek. It is the word “paidagogos,” and it means “an elderly and trusted slave who daily escorted his young master to and from school.” So, if the Old Testament Law was an escort to lead us to Christ, how much more is this sublime teaching in the Sermon on the Mount our escort to Jesus; showing us that we can only be made righteous before God, and given the power to live a godly life by faith in the crucified and risen Lord, Himself. So, the Sermon on the Mount describes an uncompromising righteousness that can issue only from a regenerated heart.

Remember, won’t you, that the Lord Jesus Christ died and was raised from the dead to enable us to live the kind of life the Sermon on the Mount describes. Why did Jesus die? Titus gives us the sublimely satisfying answer: “He gave Himself for us that He might set us free from all our evil ways and make for Himself a people of His own, clean and pure, with our hearts set upon living a life that is good.” (Titus 2:14 Phillips) What does Titus mean? Simply this — that Jesus, my Savior, died for me in order that I might be able to live the Sermon on the Mount. He alone has made this possible.

**2. The only way to experience genuine blessing in your Christian life is by practicing what the Sermon on the Mount teaches you.** Count the blessings which Christ promises to those who do practice it. For example, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” Do you want to be filled with the power of God? Do you want to be usable in God’s service? Do you want your Christian life to ring true? Then live out the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

Years ago, a humble Chinese farmer was converted and became a radiantly happy Christian and a most successful soul-winner. A missionary who visited his village asked him the secret of his joy and power. The old farmer smiled and said, “Well, I love Jesus, and I memorized the Sermon on the Mount!” “How did you memorize all that Scripture?” asked the missionary. “I haven’t a very good memory,” said the old man, “so I just memorized two verses at a time, and then tried to put them into practice; and when I managed to practice what I had

learned, I went on and memorized two more verses, and then did the same thing.”

That’s the secret. Blessing can be yours only through practicing obediently in the power supplied by the Holy Spirit, the teachings of our Savior.

**3. The Sermon on the Mount is the best means of Evangelism.** Ungodly people often rebel against hearing the Gospel, but they seldom object to seeing it put into practice. Indeed, it is professing Christians who don’t practice it who turn many unbelievers away from Jesus. A young lawyer said once, “I might have become a Christian years ago if I hadn’t met so many people who said they were!” The world today is looking for, and desperately needs, Christians who are “for real.” Jesus said to His followers, “You are the salt of the earth.” What does salt do? It makes people thirsty! Does your life, lived in obedience to the Sermon on the Mount, make your non-Christian friends thirsty for the water of life? Do they say to you, “What is your secret? What is it that enables you to live the way you do?”

An eminent Scottish lawyer was soundly converted. He had been attending, for a short time, a church whose minister was a famous preacher. Meeting the preacher on the street one day, he told him what had happened. Loftily the minister asked, “And which of my sermons was it that changed your life?” “Oh, it wasn’t that at all,” came the reply. “But one Sunday morning, as the crowd was leaving the church, I rubbed shoulders with an old lady who looked up at me, and smiled, and said, ‘Jesus is all the world to me! Do you love Him too?’ “And,” he said, “there was something about that old lady that told me she had discovered something that I needed very much. Deeply concerned, I made my way home, and with every step, God reminded me of all the things my parents had taught me about Jesus, and how He had died for me on the Cross. And that day, in the quietness of my own home, I accepted Jesus as my personal Savior, and committed my life completely to Him, and now He is all the world to me too!”

It has been said that there are five Gospels — those according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and the “Gospel according to YOU”! People seldom read the first four, but they are constantly reading the fifth. Doesn’t that tell us something?

“You are writing a Gospel, a chapter each day,  
By deeds that you do, and by words that you say;  
Folk see what you write, whether faithless or true;  
Say — what is the Gospel according to YOU?”

And here is the last word from our Lord Jesus to us this morning — “If you know these things, you will find your happiness in doing them.” (John 13:17)

**AMEN.**