A Reading of the Sermon on the Mount: A Restoration Perspective

Andrew C. Skinner

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

MATTHEW 5:17

Human expression cannot fully capture the meaning and significance of the Sermon on the Mount. One of the greatest and most profound of all of our Lord's discourses, the Sermon on the Mount was and is many things, reflecting truth as a multifaceted diamond reflects light.

The Sermon signaled the inauguration of a new dispensation of the gospel. It provides a window into the Savior's personality and character. It summarizes the essence of Christ-like behavior. It describes the characteristics and makeup of those who will inhabit the celestial kingdom. It compares the old law with the new. It teaches all people how to live and how to pray, yet it was addressed to a specific group of individuals and constitutes one of the most significant training sessions ever presented to teach the newly called disciples how to fulfill their stewardships. It continues to testify of Jesus' divinity, godly wisdom, and unsurpassed teaching skills. Truly, it is a discourse given by God Himself.

A New Dispensation

Ancient Israel, as a whole, lived life in the throes of apostasy from the time of Moses until the coming of Jesus Christ. As a result of unadulterated rebellion at the very time Jehovah desired to sanctify His people so they might behold His face following their release from Egyptian captivity, the nation of Israel forfeited that unparalleled opportunity while encamped at Mount Sinai. Therefore, “the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fulness of his glory. Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also; and the lesser priesthood continued, which priesthood holdeth the key of the ministering of angels and the preparatory gospel” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:24–26).

For more than a thousand years after Moses was taken away, the people of Israel, as a whole, lived without the Melchizedek Priest-hood and the higher law, including the ordinances associated with the endowment (see JST Exodus 34:1–2). Only the lesser law and lesser priesthood, including the law of Moses, continued among the general population. All of that changed with the coming of Jesus Christ. He was the Elias who would restore all things (JST John 1:24–28). He restored to Israel the Melchizedek Priesthood and the higher law. His ministry of restoration followed a long period of apostasy, just as did Joseph Smith's ministry eighteen hundred years later.

Thus, by delivering the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, first and foremost, signaled the restoration of doctrines, ordinances, and powers long withheld from the children of men. The Sermon on the Mount constituted, as it were, the keynote address of restoration in the meridian dispensation.
Second, in delivering the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus announced that His restoration of higher principles was a fulfillment of what had gone before. “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets,” He said. “I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil” (Matthew 5:17). The Greek term, *plērōsai*, from which the English word “fulfill” is derived, means “to fill completely, to make complete, to render perfect, to complement, to make up a deficiency.” In Matthew 5:17 specifically, and in the entire sermon generally, Jesus was, among other things, affirming His mission of restoration. The doctrines, principles, and ordinances He was teaching, as reflected in the Sermon on the Mount, completed or made whole the lesser law by bringing back what had been lost centuries earlier (which loss and restoration we understand so much more clearly through the revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith).

In support of this view, it is important to note that almost immediately following Jesus’ announcement of His mission of “fulfillment” or restoration, He listed several significant examples of the way in which His higher-order teachings rounded out, completed, or made whole the principles and requirements of the old order. One of the best known or most graphic examples of this higher law, as taught by Jesus, demonstrates the Savior's increased emphasis on spiritual and mental behavior above and beyond mere physical or corporeal compliance with the outward signs of the law. “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:27–28). A higher standard of behavior and elevated level of thought were now restored to Israel’s consciousness.

The Sermon on the Mount, then, causes us to reflect on two preeminent symbolic mountains in Israel’s theological history—Mount Sinai, where the higher law was suspended and the law of Moses was revealed, and Mount Eremos (the traditional site of the Beatitudes and great Sermon), where the restoration of the higher law was announced. The Sermon on the Mount symbolically parallels the giving of the law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1ff). But one mountain represents apostasy and the old law, whereas the other represents restoration and the new law. The Sermon on the Mount is a discourse both of contrasts as well as parallels.

The Master Teacher at Work

The opening verses of Matthew 5 disclose the setting for the Sermon: “And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them” (Matthew 5:1–2).

Great crowds had been following Jesus because of His spreading fame, owing to the many miracles He performed. People from all over the Holy Land—Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem and all Judea, and the area east of the Jordan River called Transjordan—had become part of the entourage (see Matthew 4:24–25). Matthew 5:1 is a continuation of the report in the previous verses, a fact sometimes obscured by the chapter break. However, unlike those commentators who see the language in Matthew 5:1 as merely “a literary link with the foregoing. . . for the Sermon was apparently intended only for the disciples,” we believe that it describes what actually occurred on that occasion and was not simply editorial transitioning. It is true that the Sermon was meant “only for the disciples,” but precisely because great crowds were following
him, including the disciples, Jesus chose that moment to instruct those who would be responsible for leading the Church and teaching the unconverted multitudes in the future.

In fact, as the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible indicates, the whole of the Sermon was not specifically intended for all disciples; rather, important portions were pointedly directed at the Twelve Apostles and Seventy (see JST Matthew 5:3–4; 6:25–39; 7:6–17). Elder Bruce R. McConkie confirms this view:

With some major additions, corrections, and improvements, the Sermon on the Mount as preserved by Matthew was given over again by Christ to the Nephites (3 Nephi 12; 13; 14), showing that the material recorded in Matt. 5; 6; 7 is all one continuous discourse. The Nephite version was given after the call of the Nephite Twelve, and portions of the sermon are addressed expressly to those apostolic ministers rather than to the multitude in general (3 Nephi 13:25). In Matthew's account, as found in the Inspired Version, the Prophet [Joseph Smith] adds a considerable amount of material that applies to those called to the Twelve rather than to people in general.4

As the Master Teacher, Jesus chose that time and place to provide an important training session for His Church leaders and disciples. Others, many others, may have been listening to the Sermon on the Mount, but Jesus was teaching the Twelve and the Seventy, giving them a kind of Missionary Training Center experience, as it were.

To those who might object to this idea on the grounds that the mission of the Twelve Apostles is not discussed until a later chapter, Matthew 10, I emphasize the following: Matthew does not describe the call and ordination of the Twelve or Seventy at all. Neither does he present the events of this part of Jesus’ ministry in any kind of purposeful, chronological sequence. However, Luke does, placing the call of the Twelve (Luke 6:12–16) just prior to his version of the Sermon on the Mount, the so-called Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17–49). In Luke, the Twelve are sent forth later (Luke 9:1–5), as they are in Matthew, after they have been given some training, which includes the Sermon on the Mount (Plain).

For didactic and symbolic purposes, Matthew presents material according to patterns recapitulating the life and ministry of Moses.5 Rather than present the Savior's life in strict sequential order, Matthew is trying to show that Jesus is the “new Moses,” such as was prophesied in Deuteronomy 18:15–18. Finally, as mentioned by Elder McConkie, the Book of Mormon provides a helpful model: the Nephite version of the Sermon on the Mount was given after the call of the Nephite Twelve, and portions were addressed expressly to them. This is an important parallel to help us understand both the intended audience of certain portions of the Sermon on the Mount in the Old World and the relative timing of its delivery. It came after the Twelve had been called, and Luke's relative chronology is correct.

There is much to learn from Matthew's description of the setting of the Sermon. Jesus was in charge. Circumstances did not dictate to Him. Rather, He began to teach only when “he was set” (Matthew 5:1); He “opened his mouth, and taught them” (Matthew 5:2) when He was ready. Jesus was ever the perfect example of the Master Teacher.
Jesus chose an open-air setting for His instruction, which differed from the usual rabbinic practice of choosing an indoor venue for significant instruction, such as the synagogue or academy. Notable exceptions to this rule are presented in rabbinic literature, but they usually involve the greatest of the rabbis: “It was related of R. Johanan ben Zakkai that he was sitting in the shadow of the Temple and teaching all day” (Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 26a).

Jesus purposely chose to be seated when He began his teaching. This also contradicted rabbinic norms for the way in which major instruction was to be delivered, at least in the first half of the first century. From the Babylonian Talmud, we read, “Our Rabbis taught: From the days of Moses up to Rabban Gamaliel, the Torah was learned only standing” (Babylonian Talmud Megillah 21a). Maybe this is one more reason why Matthew makes a special point of noting, at the end of the Sermon, that Jesus “taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:29). Not only was His doctrine different but also His method of teaching and manner of delivery were different.

Jesus did not teach after the manner of rabbis. He did not say the things the rabbis usually said. The scribal or rabbinic method of teaching was based on precedent. One always cited previous rabbinic authority to lay the foundation for subsequent instruction—“Rabbi so-and-so used to say...” Jesus, on the other hand, specifically overthrew and dismissed this method of referring to previous rabbinic or scribal authority.

Jesus made oblique reference to this way of teaching by acknowledging that His audience had heard it before, but He then spoke as though He was the sole authority to be reckoned with: “You have heard that it was said by them of old time... But I say unto you...” Jesus spoke this way by divine right. He was the sole authority of instruction. He was Jehovah who gave the law (3 Nephi 15:5). He alone was the Judge of correct principle, doctrine, and behavior. He spoke as God. No wonder that when He “ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:28–29).

Beatitudes

The first, and perhaps most famous, section of the Sermon on the Mount comprises the Beatitudes, long regarded by many as a hallmark of Christian teaching. However, the Beatitudes were not simply nice, ethical exhortations to the world at large. Nor were they expressions of “attitudes” that people should cultivate, not “be-attitudes” as is occasionally said, not samples of Jesus saying, “You should be this or be that.”

The Beatitudes are both characteristics of, and conditions enjoyed by, the exalted—those who are or will be recipients of eternal life. The word “beatitude” is derived from the Latin beatus, meaning, “to be happy, prosperous, abundant, rich, or blessed,” which is the equivalent of the Greek makarioi and the Hebrew ʻashrē. The latter is found in some of Israel’s ancient psalms: “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful” (Psalm 1:1). In one sense, Jesus was adopting the language of ancient Israel’s great lyric prophet-kings and inspired poets to teach His profound message. Beatitudes, as a literary form, are also found in intertestamental and rabbinic literature. But Jesus put a different twist on them.
We can immediately see the irony in some of Jesus’ statements in the Sermon on the Mount precisely because several of the attributes He lists—“the poor in spirit,” “they that mourn,” “the meek,” and “they which do hunger and thirst”—do not immediately connote happiness, prosperity, richness, or blessedness as the world measures such conditions. Our Lord is talking about the happy, blessed, rich condition that pervades, permeates, and exists eternally in the celestial kingdom—God’s kingdom. All worldly characteristics and conditions must be totally and completely eradicated in God's environment and exalted state. And God’s perfect, righteous, exalted status is the ultimate goal to which the Beatitudes and the whole Sermon point us: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,” said Jesus (Matthew 5:48). These are not idealistic, isolated words; they hark back to the Beatitudes.

The characteristics or attributes that must be possessed by each individual who desires to obtain the condition of blessedness, happiness, and abundance of which Jesus speaks are, in fact, a reflection of Jesus’ own character and personality. President Harold B. Lee taught:

Christ came not only into the world to make an atonement for the sins of mankind but to set an example before the world of the standard of perfection of God's law and of obedience to the Father. In his Sermon on the Mount the Master has given us somewhat of a revelation of his own character, which was perfect, or what might be said to be “an autobiography, every syllable of which he had written down in deeds,” and in so doing has given us a blueprint for our own lives.10

Hence, the Beatitudes embody “the constitution for a perfect life.”11 This view of the Beatitudes makes it impossible to regard the attributes described therein (poor in spirit, mournful, meek, and so forth) as anything but the most profound expressions of discipleship, ones that cannot be arrived at in a moment. Rather, these characteristics are developed after a person is baptized and receives the gift of the Holy Ghost, after a significant price has been paid, and after a period of loyalty to the Lord and service in His Church have been offered. In fact, the more complete expression of the Beatitudes, as found in 3 Nephi 12:1-12, makes it clear to this writer that the Beatitudes pronounced by Jesus in the Old World were intended for those who had or would participate in the first principles and ordinances of the gospel and who heeded the words of the prophets. After calling the Twelve,

he stretched forth his hand unto the multitude, and cried unto them, saying: Blessed are ye if ye shall give heed unto the words of these twelve whom I have chosen from among you to minister unto you, and to be your servants; and unto them I have given power that they may baptize you with water; and after that ye are baptized with water, behold, I will baptize you with fire and with the Holy Ghost; therefore blessed are ye if ye shall believe in me and be baptized, after that ye have seen me and know that I am.

And again, more blessed are they who shall believe in your words because that ye shall testify that ye have seen me, and that ye know that I am. Yea, blessed are they who shall believe in your words, and come down into the depths of humility and be baptized, for they shall be visited with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and shall receive a remission of their sins. (3 Nephi 12:1-2)
That the King James and earlier biblical versions of the Beatitudes, as well as the entire Sermon itself, are deficient in many particulars should not really surprise us. All accounts of the Sermon—whether Matthew, Luke, 3 Nephi, or the Joseph Smith Translation—“are abridgements only, and the same truths were not abridged in every particular into each of the accounts.”

Elder Bruce R. McConkie feels that “the most comprehensive and complete report” of the Sermon as a whole is the JST Matthew account.

Characteristics and Rewards

The first essential characteristic possessed by the blessed or exalted, according to Matthew’s version, is “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). This expression is not found in either the Massoretic Text or rabbinic literature. Presumably, it means those who are “poor in pride,” those who are devoid of pride, or those who are “poor in the spirit of the world.” The Greek term for “poor” used here by Matthew, ἄρτας, originally denoted “begging,” but in this passage the term means “dependent on others for support” or even “those who are poor in the world's estimation.” This fits perfectly with the fuller accounts of this beatitude in 3 Nephi and in the Joseph Smith Translation, wherein the poor in spirit are blessed or happy if they come unto Christ (3 Nephi 12:3; JST Matthew 5:5), on whom all of us are dependent. In fact, all of the Beatitudes may be read more profitably by inserting the phrase “who come unto me,” for, in truth, that is the implication in all of them. We are dependent on Jesus for exaltation and lasting happiness.

Those who follow Him are often judged as “poor” or misguided in the world's estimation. Through another Book of Mormon prophet, Moroni, the Lord promises to those who will come unto Him that He “will show unto them their weakness,” explaining, “I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27). The natural and expected reward of those who are poor in the spirit of the world and come unto Christ is nothing less than the riches of the kingdom of heaven.

The second essential characteristic of those who are blessed or happy has to do with mourning. “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). Of all the Beatitudes, this one may appear to be the most difficult to comprehend at first glance. It seems completely contradictory to a state of happiness or blessedness. To mourn is to show grief or pain at the loss of something precious, whether the death of a loved one or the loss of the Spirit of the Lord because of transgression. However, the Lord promised His disciples on another occasion that He would give rest and comfort to all who labored and were heavy laden if, again, they came unto Him (Matthew 11:28–30). As Elder Robert E. Wells has noted:

It may be that pain and suffering at the death of loved ones is an essential part of our mortal experience that obliges us to face the question of the reality of the spirit world and the hope of the Resurrection. It is through suffering that we discover what is eternally important.

It might be that it is a blessing for us to become more fully aware that God's ways are not always our ways, and that we must trust him when things don't go as we believe they should. When we
can see the Lord's purposes fulfilled in our sorrowful moments, the Holy Ghost can console us and the Atonement and Resurrection can become the cornerstones of our faith.15

What is true about mourning for the loss of a loved one is also true about mourning over our sinful actions. “Godly sorrow,” says Paul, “worketh repentance to salvation” (2 Corinthians 7:10). In other words, when we come unto Christ, we will become more sensitive to, and feel godly sorrow for, sin. His atonement becomes the cornerstone of our faith, and we continue to become more like Him as we repent.

The third characteristic of those who will enjoy the state or condition of true blessedness is meekness. The meek are not weak, for Jesus was the meekest of men. This quality might be defined as poise under pressure, patience in the face of provocation. Peter's first epistle tells us that though Jesus was reviled, He did not revile in return (1 Peter 2:23). Meekness is one of the clearest reflections of how closely a disciple's personality or makeup, or even reactions, mirror those of the Savior.

The reward for meekness is possession of the earth. Thus, meekness is a celestial attribute, a sanctifying attribute, and it will be found in rich abundance among those who inhabit the celestial kingdom. For, as we learn, the location of the celestial kingdom, at least for those who have lived on this earth, is, in fact, this earth. As the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith:

The redemption of the soul is through him that quickeneth all things, in whose bosom it is decreed that the poor and the meek of the earth shall inherit it. Therefore, it must needs be sanctified from all un-righteousness, that it may be prepared for the celestial glory; for after it hath filled the measure of its creation, it shall be crowned with glory, even with the presence of God the Father; that bodies who are of the celestial kingdom may possess it forever and ever; for, for this intent was it made and created, and for this intent are they sanctified. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:17–20)

Our understanding of the fourth characteristic of those who enjoy an eternal condition of blessedness is greatly enhanced by Restoration scripture. Matthew reports that Jesus said, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6). Both 3 Nephi and the Joseph Smith Translation add that intense seekers of righteousness will be filled “with the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 12:6; JST Matthew 5:8).

The Holy Ghost is the great comforter and testator and is only one of three who can really satisfy our emotional and mental hunger and quench our spiritual thirst (John 14:16–18, 26). He operates under the direction of Jesus Christ (John 16:13–16). The Greek word used by Matthew that is translated as “filled” originally meant “to feed or fatten an animal in a stall” and carries the notion of eating till completely full, “to eat one's fill, be satisfied, to gorge.”16 Such is the Lord's promise to those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. He will feed us more than we can possibly imagine or desire initially.

Beatitudes five through eight describe characteristics that seem to be the essence of Jesus' personality. “Blessed are the merciful” (Matthew 5:7). Jesus is filled with mercy. He does not merely extend mercy through His atoning sacrifice. He is mercy personified. We know from His
statement in the fifth beatitude that He understands that those of like minds and actions will associate with each other. The merciful will obtain mercy because “intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; wisdom receiveth wisdom; truth embraceth truth; virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light; mercy hath compassion on mercy and claimeth her own; justice continueth its course and claimeth its own; judgment goeth before the face of him who sitteth upon the throne and governeth and executeth all things” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:40).

In describing the condition or state of blessedness that flows from having a pure heart, the sixth beatitude, Jesus makes the explicit connection to God's presence (Matthew 5:8). The environment in which God resides, the celestial glory, is devoid of any impure person or thing. The resurrected Jesus declared to the Nephites, “No unclean thing can enter into his [God's] kingdom; therefore nothing entereth into his rest save it be those who have washed their garments in my blood” (3 Nephi 27:19). Thus, obtaining the mercy of Jesus referred to in the previous beatitude is a prerequisite for becoming pure in heart, which then allows a person to enter God's kingdom and literally see Him.

The Prophet Joseph Smith was told, “It shall come to pass that every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:1). Thus, the pure in heart are also those who forsake their sins, call on the Savior's name, obey His voice, and keep His commandments.

It is obvious to most readers that when Jesus singled out, in the last two beatitudes, the peacemakers and those persecuted for righteousness' sake, He was speaking out of personal experience. He was the prince of peace in the face of persecution. When He promised, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9), He was teaching unique doctrine for that time and place. “Peacemakers... are nowhere in rabbinic literature called ‘the children of God,’” though they were called blessed by some of the intertestamental writers.17 Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus, on the other hand, referred to peacemakers as the “disciples of Aaron.” Hillel said, “Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace; be one who loves his fellow men and draws them near the Torah.”18

Many of Jesus’ statements make it clear that He intently desires peace (see, for example, 3 Nephi 11:29; Doctrine and Covenants 98:34). Paul admonished disciples to follow after “the things which make for peace” (Romans 14:19). As disciples try their best to emulate their Master, proclaiming peace and living as advocates and makers of peace, they take on His name and countenance and become His sons and His daughters. They have their natures changed and desire no more to do evil (see Mosiah 5:2, 7; 27:24-26; Alma 5:14). As this happens, they become a likeness of Him who presented an outline of His own nature in the form of the Beatitudes.

It has been suggested that when Jesus extolled the blessed state of those who were persecuted for righteousness’ sake (Matthew 5:10), He was really saying “for the sake of the Righteous One”—meaning Himself.19 In Hebrew, the difference between zedeq (righteousness) and zadiq (righteous one) is very small. Either way, disciples are bid to follow Jesus because He is both the Righteous One and the embodiment of righteousness.
A Knowledge of the Father

The Sermon on the Mount speaks much about our Father in Heaven. The expression “Father in heaven” is characteristic of Matthew's Gospel as a whole and is found throughout the Sermon. A profound and critical aspect of Jesus’ role as the Elias of Restoration was His restitution of the knowledge of God the Father, His character, attributes, and concerns. Through centuries of apostasy, this had dimmed. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus brought God the Father back into focus through a series of parables, commands, and explanations.

The first example of Jesus’ desire to have His disciples understand and know God the Father comes immediately after Jesus finished laying out the Beatitudes. He began by emphasizing to the disciples their responsibility to live so righteously and present such fine examples of righteousness that others would see their good words and glorify their Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). The kind of examples Jesus said He wanted His followers to become were symbolized by salt and light: “Ye are the salt of the earth,” He said (Matthew 5:13), and “Ye are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).

Salt and light immediately and unmistakably influence whatever environment they are placed in. It is important to note that salt was a preservative in the ancient world, but it was also a token of Israel’s covenant with God and part of their sacrificial system (see Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19). The sacrificial system was a type, shadow, and symbol of the great and last sacrifice that Jesus Himself would offer (see Hebrews 9 and 10). Salt ultimately points to Jesus.

Light is also a stunning choice for a symbol of discipleship and exemplary behavior. It, too, is ultimately a reference to Jesus Himself. Later in His ministry, Jesus openly declared that He was “the light of the world” and that whoever followed Him would “not walk in darkness” (John 8:12). To the Nephites, He was even more pointed and encompassing: “I am the law, and the light” (3 Nephi 15:9).

It would seem that in pointing His listeners to an increased knowledge and understanding of God the Father, Jesus also pointed them to Himself. In many ways, Jesus taught His students the close connection between the Father and the Son. He seemed to be saying, “When you become like salt and light, you become like me; you will influence your environment, which is the Father's desire.”

Perhaps the greatest attribute of God the Father is love. The Apostle John wrote, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). We can assume He meant by this that perfect love and fairness shape, mediate, and influence all of God's other attributes, “for with all the other excellencies of his character, without this one to influence them, they could not have such powerful dominion over the minds of men.” Thus, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commands His audience to love their enemies, bless those who hurl curses at them, and pray for those who despitefully use them. The reason given: “That you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:45). This is unique in the New Testament, although it picks up the refrain of Deuteronomy 14:1, “Ye are the children of the Lord your God.”
The Greek wording of Matthew 5:45 connotes a rebirth of sorts: “so that you may become [be born] (genēsthe) sons of your Father in heaven.” This idea parallels the doctrine of being spiritually born of God and receiving His image in one’s countenance, as found in the Book of Mormon (Alma 5:14). Disciples must reflect in their lives, in their behaviors, and in their countenances the distinguishing trait of the great Parent of the universe in order to truly become His children and His heirs in every way and to pass the tests of mortality.

After all, God the Father loves all His children, even those who forsake or ignore Him. God the Father is patient and long-suffering. “He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good” (Matthew 5:45), meaning that righteousness and wickedness are not, cannot be, immediately and constantly rewarded or punished. Such constant interference in the lives of men and women would thwart the plan of salvation and the purposes for which earth life was designed—to allow individuals to walk by faith and be tested. It is no accident that Jesus concludes this section of the Sermon by commanding His listeners to be perfect, as their Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48). Patient love and tolerant restraint are the great hallmarks of God's perfection.

Jesus’ command to His disciples given in the Sermon that they love their enemies and pray for those who despitefully use them (Matthew 5:44) may, in fact, be a direct response to a contemporary belief circulating among the Essenes living at Qumran and elsewhere (even in Jerusalem). This sectarian group of Jews is associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls (being their authors, editors, and/or preservers).

It is from the document known as the Rule of the Community that we learn much about the Qumran covenanters’ beliefs and practices, including the very view that Jesus contradicts in the Sermon on the Mount. That document declared, “Love all that He [God] has chosen and hate all that He has rejected” and “These are the rules of conduct for the Master in those times with respect to his loving and hating. Everlasting hatred in a spirit of secrecy for the men of perdition!” Thus, it seems clear that some points of Jesus’ doctrine were an intentional rebuttal of Essene teaching.

The Instruction in Matthew 6

Jesus spent a good deal of the next portion of His Sermon teaching about the nature of our Father in heaven by discussing private daily devotions. Do not, He said, make a public show of doing that which is better done in private—almsgiving, welfare relief, and personal prayer (Matthew 6:1–6)—for “thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:6). Those who “sound a trumpet” or give alms to be seen of men are “hypocrites,” an epithet favored by Matthew to describe those Pharisees who sought prestige above all else. One of the most strident denunciations of the Pharisees as hypocrites is found in another sermon to a multitude congregated during the last week of Jesus’ mortal ministry (see Matthew 23:1–39).

Significantly, this sermon recapitulates some of the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and ends with a beatitude: “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 23:39). Because of Jesus’ use of vocabulary such as “hypocrite” (Greek, literally “play actor, pretender, dissembler”), some authorities see this as evidence to connect Jesus with visits to theatre towns such as Sepphoris, only a few miles north of Nazareth.22
As the Sermon progressed, Jesus continued to emphasize that God the Father cares about proper decorum. His is a kingdom of quiet dignity, and He honors those who behave in like manner. He prefers brevity, sincerity, and intensity in prayer, unlike the “heathen” (Greek, ethnikoi, literally “Gentiles”) who use “vain repetitions” (Greek, battalogēsēte, literally “babble,” or “speaking without thinking”) and “think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matthew 6:7).

Such ideas as Jesus presented correspond, in a remarkable way, to the ideas on prayer as expressed in rabbinic thought. Rabbi Simeon said, “Be careful in reading the Shema [the Jewish confession of faith found in Deuteronomy 6:4–7]. . . . [For] when you pray, do not regard your prayer as a perfunctory act (or fixed form), but as a plea for mercy and grace before God, as it is said: ‘For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and relenting of evil.’”23

Jesus teaches two profound truths about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. First, God the Father knows what things any of us need before we supplicate Him (see Matthew 6:8 and 32). The Father knows all things, which is one reason we may have complete confidence in Him, but it is also why we cannot deceive Him. President Spencer W. Kimball elaborated on this in our day:

In our prayers, there must be no glossing over, no hypocrisy, since there can here be no deception. The Lord knows our true condition. Do we tell the Lord how good we are, or how weak? We stand naked before him. Do we offer our supplications in modesty, sincerity, and with a “broken heart and contrite spirit,” or like the Pharisee who prided himself on how well he adhered to the law of Moses? Do we offer a few trite words and worn-out phrases, or do we talk intimately to the Lord for as long as the occasion requires? Do we pray occasionally when we should be praying regularly, often, constantly? Do we pay the price to get answers to our prayers?24

The second great matter to which Jesus gives considerable attention in the Sermon is the true order or pattern of prayer (see Matthew 6:9–13). That He intended His sample prayer, what has come to be known as the “Lord's Prayer,” only as a sample and not as recitation is clear from His instruction, “After this manner therefore pray ye” (Matthew 6:9; emphasis added). Jesus instructed His disciples to pray to the Father, teaching them that the Father's name is to be hallowed or sanctified (“let all men beware how they take my name [the Lord] in their lips” [Doctrine and Covenants 63:61]) and that God presides over His kingdom and possesses all power (Matthew 6:9, 13).

Following His instruction on prayer, Jesus presented a series of doctrinal statements that tell His disciples much more about our Heavenly Father's personality and desires for His sons and daughters. For example, God is forgiving, but He requires that individuals forgive each other or His divine mercy will be held in abeyance (Matthew 6:14–15).

God rewards those who fast with dignity, not with outward showiness and not seeking sympathy (Matthew 6:16–18). Ultimately, said Jesus, if one's eye—one's attitudes, priorities, and motives—were “single” (Greek, aplous, literally “sound, healthy, simple, sincere”), his or her whole body would be full of light. Joseph Smith reminds us that Jesus really said, “If therefore
thine eye be single to the glory of God, thy whole body will be full of light” (JST Matthew 6:22; emphasis added). In a revelation given in 1832, the Lord expanded our understanding of the implication of this verse, saying, “The word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:45; emphasis added). Through single-minded focus on God's will and God's glory, Jesus’ disciples could reap an incredible reward—being filled with light, truth, and the Spirit of Jesus Christ. But anything other than single-minded focus on God would dissipate the light and increase the darkness (Matthew 6:23).

Training His Servants

Jesus changed the focus of His instruction, as well as His audience, for the concluding section of his great Sermon (Matthew 6:24–7:27). He turned His attention to the Twelve and, probably, the Seventy, whose calling was also to go out two by two to teach and testify (see Luke 10:1).

Jesus began this instruction by declaring in stark fashion the necessity of choosing only one master, exclusively. Any thought of devoting time to the acquisition of mammon (Aramaic, literally, “riches”) was not acceptable. Service to God and the pursuit of worldly wealth were mutually exclusive (see Matthew 6:24). Rather, the Twelve and Seventy were told to “trust the Father for what they needed, taking no thought of food, drink, clothing, or even of life itself, for all these were to be supplied by means above their power to control.” Jesus cited the lessons of nature to illustrate His truths. If all creation was in God's hands, how much more so the leaders of His kingdom! They were to seek first the welfare of the kingdom, and all things would be added to them (see Matthew 6:33).

What followed next might well be summarized as a dialogue in which Jesus provided help to the Twelve on how to teach the people and overcome the challenges or objections they would present. This is made clear only in the Joseph Smith Translation: “Now these are the words Jesus taught his disciples that they should say unto the people” (JST Matthew 7:1).

The counsel the Master provided included such things as judging with righteous judgment, calling into question blatant hypocrisy, and cautioning against revealing sacred things or even teaching too much to those who would trample sacred truths underfoot. Here the words of Jesus as reported in the Joseph Smith Translation are quite strong:

Go ye into the world, saying unto all, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come nigh unto you.

And the mysteries of the kingdom ye shall keep within yourselves; for it is not meet to give that which is holy unto the dogs; neither cast ye your pearls unto swine, lest they trample them under their feet.

For the world cannot receive that which ye, yourselves, are not able to bear; wherefore ye shall not give your pearls unto them, lest they turn again and rend you. (JST Matthew 7:9–11)
The corresponding Greek text of these verses indicates that Jesus was probably using a proverbial saying, in vogue at the time, when He referred to dogs and swine. The Greek term translated as “dog,” kusin, can also mean an “unclean animal” or even a “reprobate.” The Greek term, choirōn, refers to a young pig and may imply a combination of immaturity and impurity.26

The Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 7 is much more pronounced in its castigation of Jewish leadership than the King James Version or the Greek text. At one point in the Sermon, Jesus says to His apostolic leaders: “Beholdest thou the Scribes, and the Pharisees, and the Priests, and the Levites? They teach in their synagogues, but do not observe the law, nor the commandments; and all have gone out of the way, and are under sin. Go thou and say unto them, Why teach ye men the law and the commandments, when ye yourselves are the children of corruption?” (JST Matthew 7:6–7). At another point, the Twelve voiced concerns in extremely blunt language about the response of certain Jews to their new, Christ-centered message. Here, the Sermon on the Mount turned into the Dialogue on the Mount:

And then said his disciples unto him, they will say unto us, We ourselves are righteous, and need not that any man should teach us. God, we know, heard Moses and some of the prophets; but us he will not hear.

And they will say, We have the law for our salvation, and that is sufficient for us.

Then Jesus answered, and said unto his disciples, thus shall ye say unto them,

What man among you, having a son, and he shall be standing out, and shall say, Father, open thy house that I may come in and sup with thee, will not say, Come in, my son; for mine is thine, and thine is mine? (JST Matthew 7:14–17)

This is extremely insightful. Nowhere else except in the Joseph Smith Translation do we get the information that Jesus was so careful in helping His apostolic ministers craft their teaching points. And nowhere else do we receive such insightful but disheartening data about the social and religious atmosphere in which the Apostles had to carry out their ministry. The attitudes held in certain quarters of Judaism toward the doctrines of continuing revelation, salvation, and Jesus as Messiah indicate that Judaism was in much sadder condition than might be supposed from evidence in the other versions of the text of the Sermon on the Mount.

For some Jews, revelation had completely ceased; and even when it was alive, not all the prophets were heard by God. For some, there was no hope that God would listen to them, let alone answer. For some, there was no humility but rather a pitiful attitude of self-sufficiency. With the coming of Jesus and His apostolic ministers, however, the ax had begun to be laid to the root, and, unfortunately, the tree (Israel in the meridian dispensation) would not survive intact. As Jesus said near the end of the Sermon, “A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither [can] a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire” (Matthew 7:18–19).

It is possible that in this last statement, Jesus was playing off a well-known rabbinic chastisement that used the image of a tree. “He [Rabbi Eliezer ben Azarya] used to say: One whose wisdom
exceeds his deeds, to what is he like? To a tree that has many branches and few roots, so that when the wind comes, it plucks it up and turns it over.”

This saying also reminds us of a similar concept expressed much earlier by the ancient prophet Jacob and seems to corroborate the authenticity and antiquity of such images in the prophetic teaching of the Book of Mormon: “And it came to pass that the servant said unto his master: Is it not the loftiness of thy vineyard—have not the branches thereof overcome the roots which are good? And because the branches have overcome the roots thereof, behold they grew faster than the strength of the roots, taking strength unto themselves. Behold, I say, is not this the cause that the trees of thy vineyard have become corrupted?” (Jacob 5:48).

Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount with a graphic illustration about the need to build our lives upon a solid foundation or “rock” (Matthew 7:24), meaning the Rock of the Redeemer (see Helaman 5:12). If our lives and faith are not built upon this solid foundation, as authorized by Deity, both will fall apart, no matter how many miraculous works we have accomplished (see Matthew 7:22–27).

Concluding Thoughts

Here Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount. Elder James E. Talmage believed that no discourse delivered since that time can match it: “The Sermon on the Mount has stood through all the years since its delivery without another to be compared with it. No mortal man has ever since preached a discourse of its kind.”

The Sermon is filled with doctrine that leads to, and speaks of, exaltation. It both alludes to and speaks explicitly of restoration. It provides a window into the challenges faced by the primitive Church in the context of first-century Judea. It is filled with allusions to the culture and language of its time, but it also shows that that time was not completely different from our own. When Jesus says, for example, “Whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger” (Matthew 5:22), He is warning against our proclivity toward anger against our fellowman. Calling someone a fool or “empty head” (Raca literally means “empty” in Aramaic and may, in modern parlance, be analogous to calling someone an “idiot”) is the outward expression of an inner emotion that Jesus is seeking to change.

For much of what Jesus preached, we can find parallels in rabbinic teaching or intertestamental literature. But Jesus always gave fresh insight or provided new perspective. And, of course, some things were simply unique to Him. There was not then, nor is there now, any question about the significance of all that He proclaimed. He could speak with such power because He lived what He taught, every syllable. The day the Sermon on the Mount was preached was the day God Himself gave a discourse.

Notes

1. Though the learned W. D. Davies argues against seeing too much in such a parallel, he still admits there is something to it. “At first sight it might be argued that the location of the delivery on ‘the Mountain’ in v. I is very deliberate, and designed to suggest a counterpart to Sinai, because in Q, as is clear from Luke vi. 17, the Sermon was ‘delivered’ after Jesus had descended
from the mountain and ‘stood on a level place.’ . . . Taken in isolation, the circumstances described in v. I ff. cannot be made too much to suggest a New Sinai, a suggestion which, as we noted above, only acquires force from other elements in the Gospel which point to this.” See W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 99. Others see a stronger parallel.


3. In support of this view, see Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, 8.


5. See, for example, discussions in Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).


9. Some examples of beatitudes in rabbinic literature include the following: “. . . and R. Johanan b. Zakkai said. . . ‘Happy [blessed] are you, our father Abraham, that Eleazar b. Arakh came forth from your loins’” (Tosefta, Hagigah 2.1).

“R. Jose the priest went and told what had happened before R. Johanan b. Zakkai, and the latter said, ‘Happy [blessed] are you, happy is she who bore you, happy are my eyes that I have seen this’” (Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 14b).

“Happy [blessed] is the king who is praised in his house! Woe to the father who had to banish his children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their father” (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 3a).

All of the foregoing are translated in Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament*, 70. For examples of beatitudes in intertestamental literature, see Psalms of Solomon 5:18; 6:1; 10:1, and Ben Sira 14:1; 25:8, 9.


