

October 26

Matthew 5-7

The Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew 5. It is the most wonderful sermon that has ever been preached. These words of Jesus have burned themselves into the hearts and minds of just about everyone who has ever read them.

The section closes with the words, "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching..." That little literary device signals for us the end of the first great teaching block of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. Each of these five blocks of Jesus' teachings is built around a specific theme. The conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount then brings us to the end of the first teaching block and the end of the first section of the Book of Matthew.

Matthew mentions that this teaching took place on a mountain and he seems to have an interest in mountains that comes through in his book. We have already seen a mountain of temptation. Now we find this mountain upon which the amazing teaching of Christ took place. Later there will be a mountain of transfiguration and a mountain from which Christ makes his farewell to the disciples after the resurrection. If Matthew is consciously drawing our attention to the fact that this took place on a mountain however it would probably be to contrast Christ's teaching with that given to the children of Israel on Mount Sinai.

There are some observations that I want to make that I hope will be of some value to you as you meditate upon the seven different sections of the Sermon on the Mount.

The first observation of this message seems to be that if you are going to be a follower of Jesus, a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven, then it is absolutely imperative that you understand that it will mean being much different than everyone else around you. It will mean living by a different Law, nurturing different attitudes, cherishing different values, pursuing different ambitions and embracing a different code of ethics. If you want to be like me, Jesus says, you have to be different than them!

The Beatitudes, the eight characteristics that Jesus uses to describe the truly blessed people of the kingdom are a wonderful portrait all by themselves of what Jesus Himself was like. The word "blessed" is the very same Greek word that is in most other places translated by our English word "happy." We live in a crazy society that has simply assumed that every human being has some kind of inalienable right to happiness and that the proper and appropriate goal of every human being's life is to be happy. It surely is our American dream -- "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". The most basic lesson emerging from the Beatitudes is that happiness will never come to the person who has made it their ultimate goal. The most unhappy people you can possibly imagine will say all they ever wanted was happiness. Happiness is not the goal for which God made us to strive. Happy it says are the ones who hunger and thirst after righteousness! Do you see it? You can only ever really be happy if you stop chasing happiness and start chasing righteousness. Happy are the poor in spirit, the ones who mourn, the meek, the spiritually hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the

peacemakers, the ones persecuted because of righteousness. When those characteristics of godliness are growing in our lives, then we will find happiness.

Jesus teaching about prayer here is of great importance and value. Pray to your Father. That was a revolutionary thought, for no godly Jew before Jesus would have dared to address the sovereign omnipotent, Holy One of Israel as Father. But Jesus did and He taught us that we can do the same because of the work that He accomplished on our behalf. He taught us to pray "hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven". If we would use this model prayer, it will help to line us up in the proper relationship both to our heavenly Father and to our own desires and make our prayer lives a great deal more productive than perhaps they have ever been before.

Did you notice that Jesus put an equal amount of emphasis in His teaching upon the discipline of fasting? He said, "When you give alms, do it this way, not like the hypocrites who want to be honored by men for their generosity." Then he said, "When you pray, do it this way, not like the hypocrites who loved to be seen and thought righteous because of the way they pray." Then He says, "When you fast do it this way, -- privately, secretly, not like the hypocrites who want to publicize their personal piety." The point is quite obvious -- Jesus clearly expected that all of His disciples in the kingdom would do "acts of kindness", pray and FAST. That is what He expected to be the norm. Christians today do acts of righteousness in His name and they pray, but few who call themselves disciple of Christ in our day ever fast. I'd like to challenge all of us to actually try this discipline. Honestly and humbly fast before the Lord for the sake of getting to know Him better and to humble yourself before Him. Spend the time that would otherwise be spent in the fulfilling of our physical appetites instead in the quest of spiritual food and nourishment. I think it will be an activity that God will abundantly reward.