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The Need for a Unifying Interpretation

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CHAPTER 2

THE NEED FOR A UNIFYING INTERPRETATION

Despite the Sermon's acclaimed preeminence and apparent simplicity, it is paradoxically inscrutable. What kind of a text is the Sermon on the Mount? What is its main theme or message? What should it mean to readers today? Is it a coherent speech or a collection of unrelated sayings? Traditional approaches have failed to answer these questions satisfactorily.

The meaning of the Sermon on the Mount seems unfathomable and inexhaustible to most Bible scholars. Despite endless commentaries, the Sermon on the Mount has simply defied summarization. After centuries of New Testament scholarship, no adequate distillation or coherent logic of the Sermon on the Mount has been convincingly identified. As Hans Dieter Betz has summarized, "New Testament scholarship up to the present has offered no satisfactory explanation of this vitally important text."[1] "There is no section of the Bible which has been so quoted (by non-Christians as well as Christians), worked over, commented upon, argued about, taken apart and put together, preached and taught, praised and scorned, as has the Sermon on the Mount."[2]

Seeking Coherence

The Sermon on the Mount has been variously interpreted since the earliest days of Christianity.[3] It has been viewed practically, ethically, spiritually, ecclesiastically, personally, and ascetically. In modern times, it still remains possible to "understand and interpret the Sermon on the Mount in a thousand different ways."[4]

Every possible tool of critical scholarship has been brought to bear on the Sermon on the Mount, and yet it still eludes and transcends explanation. It has been examined in great detail by textual critics who specialize in comparing the early New Testament manuscripts in their variant forms. For example, famous scholars such as Wellhausen, Bultmann, Klostermann, Dodd, and others have asserted that the third beatitude (Matthew 5:5) was not originally part of the text of the Sermon on the Mount since it switches places with the second beatitude in some early New Testament manuscripts, while others argue that such a conclusion is unwarranted.[5]

Analyses of the structural composition of the Sermon have also varied: "Concerning the overall structure of the first Gospel, nothing close to scholarly unanimity has yet been achieved."[6] Dale Allison focuses especially on triadic structures in the Sermon and finds similar three-part structures in the Mishnah.[7] Joachim Jeremias sees basically a three-part structure in the Sermon (covering issues regarding the manner of interpreting scripture, controversies concerning the righteousness of the Pharisees, and instructions about the new righteousness of the disciples).[8] Luz sees it centering on the Lord's Prayer.[9]

Individual sections are equally baffling. Regarding Matthew 5:21–47, Betz concedes: "There clearly appears to be a rationale behind the six antitheses and their arrangement

in the [Sermon on the Mount], but that rationale has so far eluded scholarship."[10] The organizing principle behind Matthew 6:19–7:12 has been declared "most difficult to explain,"[11] even seemingly nonexistent.[12]

Likewise, source criticism has yielded a kaleidoscope of possible designs[13] and authorship. For example, some have proposed that Matthew was personally responsible for writing the five beatitudes in Matthew 5:5, 7–10 that are absent in Luke 6:20–22.[14] The text has been combed for clues of Jewish or Hellenistic influences. David Flusser points out parallels between the *Thanksgiving Scroll* 18:14–15 from the Dead Sea community and Matthew 5:3–5, Erik Sjöberg expounds at length upon the Judaic backgrounds of Matthew 6:22–23, while Betz finds in the same passage Hellenistic ideas and ancient Greek theories of vision.[15]

The theology, meaning, intended uses, and purposes of the Sermon in early Christian piety have been pondered. Betz and Jeremias both see the Sermon on the Mount as an early Christian *didache,* or set of instructions, that was taught to all new converts. In their view (and I basically agree with them on this point), it was used to instruct baptismal candidates or newly baptized Christians.[16] Betz classifies the Sermon on the Mount as an *epitome,* "not intended for outsiders or beginners, but for the advanced students [to help] 'those who have made some advance in the survey of the entire system . . . to fix in their minds under the principal headings an elementary outline of the whole treatment of the subject.'"[17] Krister Stendahl has somewhat similarly concluded that the Gospel of Matthew was produced for use in "a school for teachers and church leaders" and that for this reason its sermon "assumes the form of a manual for teaching and administration within the church."[18]

Daniel Patte extracts from the Matthean Sermon and its context in Matthew 4 distinct views of Christian discipleship.[19]

Moreover, the Sermon on the Mount has been interpreted typologically. One view sees it as reflecting the five dimensions of the early Christian church and the main themes of its ecclesiastical history.[20] These five themes, formulated by Gerhard Ebeling and supposedly exhaustive of early church history, are (1) the mystical ("seeing God," "seek and find"), (2) faith and theology, (3) orthodoxy versus heresy, (4) persecution and mission, and (5) Christian sin and ecclesiastical repentance. Going off in a much different but fascinating typological direction is W. D. Davies, who suggests that the Sermon on the Mount is none other than the new law of God given at a mountain, replicating the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai, set in a five-part structure that mirrors the five books of the Pentateuch.[21]

Questions have been raised about the intended audience of the Sermon,[22] some suggesting that Jesus addressed himself only to the disciples, not to mankind in general.[23] Others have puzzled over which early Christian communities might possibly have played a role in producing the Sermon on the Mount,[24] as well as the potential targets against whom its critical statements may have been aimed.[25]

Beside these various historical treatments, the Sermon on the Mount has been given an astonishingly wide variety of practical applications and interpretations in contemporary theology and religion. For some, the Sermon on the Mount makes nothing less than a demand for ethical perfection;[26] for others, it proclaims a set of ideals impossible to fulfill and is thus "a call to the Mercy Seat."[27] David Greenwood argues that the imperatives in the Sermon should not be thought of as law, for "a good law should be worded in such a way that at least the majority of those on whom it is

imposed are capable of obeying it in all normal circumstances," and obviously the high demands of the Sermon on the Mount do not meet this criterion.[28] For Duncan Derrett, the Sermon is nothing short of an ascetic discourse—somber, austere, and even "masochistic."[29] For still others, it preaches an urgent and expedient interim ethic relevant only to the supreme apocalyptic crisis of the world at hand.[30] No wonder Joachim Jeremias has asked,

> What is the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount? This is a profound question, and one which affects not only our preaching and teaching but also, when we really face up to it, the very roots of our existence. Since the very beginning of the church it has been a question with which all Christians have had to grapple, not only the theologians among them, and in the course of the centuries a whole range of answers has been given to it.[31]

This variety of approaches to the Sermon is pervasive. It is also prescriptive, for most of these interpretations reveal far more about the beliefs of the interpreters than about the meaning of the Sermon itself: "What each believes Jesus was, did, and said, determines the method by which each interpreter builds his bridge between Jesus and the twentieth century."[32]

Any study dealing with the Sermon on the Mount, therefore, enters into a soberingly vast field of exegesis and interpretation. Easy answers to any of the questions raised about the Sermon on the Mount are few in number and hard to come by. One way to view this array of opinions is to acknowledge that the living pliability of the Sermon on the Mount is both a great strength and a great weakness. Whoever a person is—from curious investigator, recent initiate, or committed disciple—the Sermon on the Mount can communicate a wide range of ideas and feelings, from

technical or practical concerns to pertinent eternal truths and moral imperatives.

Consequently, little consensus has emerged out of this diversity about the original purpose and organization of the Sermon on the Mount: "When one turns to questions about the Sermon's meaning and relevance, there is far from unanimity of opinion."[33] Some have concluded, for example, that the Sermon on the Mount is an eclectic collection of isolated sayings of Jesus, which Matthew or early followers of Christ gathered together without a single theme or organized development. This argument receives some strength from the fact that certain verses in the Sermon on the Mount are also found in other Gospels but in different settings. Others, unsatisfied with that assessment, for it fails to explain the obvious strength of the Sermon as a whole, have attempted to bring all the disparate parts of the Sermon on the Mount under unifying main themes, such as Jesus' fulfillment of the law of Moses, the golden rule, freedom,[34] prayer,[35] love,[36] or the attainment of greater righteousness.[37] The main problem with the unifying approaches offered so far, however, is that no one of them can account completely for all of the text, for each of the suggested distillations selectively ignores many parts of the Sermon that do not happen to fit its particular theme, scheme, or constraints.

Finding Answers in the Temple Context

In the face of this uncertainty, it seems to me that the Sermon at the Temple in the Book of Mormon, with its unifying and coherent understanding of the Sermon on the Mount, provides a welcome new perspective. It offers answers to questions about why the Sermon was given, what was being said, what kind of sermon it was, how all of its

parts fit together, and what it all means. When Jesus first appeared to the Nephites at the temple in Bountiful, he instructed and blessed the Nephites for the entire day. His lengthy Sermon at the Temple enhances our understanding of the masterful Sermon on the Mount as much or more than any other source I know.

The Sermon at the Temple does this primarily by disclosing the *context* in which Jesus spoke these words on that occasion, a context in which the Sermon can be completely comprehended, interpreted, and made relevant.

The context of the Sermon on the Mount has long been a major element missing from our understanding of the text. As Jeremias laments, "The instructions of the Sermon have been torn out of their original context,"[38] and thus he and others have sought to supply needed contexts by importing into the Sermon on the Mount the settings of parallel New Testament passages or by hypothesizing how the early Christians developed the Sermon on the Mount for use in their cultic teachings.

The Sermon at the Temple, however, presents an extensive report, offering a coherent view about the missing contextual setting, or, as Jeremias acutely senses, an understanding of what else preceded or accompanied the sayings in the Sermon on the Mount that is necessary to make them comprehensible.[39] Interestingly, Jeremias concludes that the heavy demands of the Sermon on the Mount make sense only if one assumes that the preaching of the gospel preceded and set the stage for those demands.

In Jeremias's view, five things are presupposed by the Sermon on the Mount: it assumes that its audience is already familiar with (1) the light of Christ, (2) the coming of the new age, (3) the expiration of the old law, (4) the unbounded goodness of God, and (5) the designation of the

disciples as successors of the prophetic mission. These must be taken as givens in order for the Sermon on the Mount to make sense.[40] Strikingly, these are among the main themes explicitly stated in 3 Nephi 9:19 and 11:3–12:2 as a prologue leading up to the Sermon in 3 Nephi 12–14. That prelude to the Sermon at the Temple reports (1) the brilliant appearance of the risen Christ, "the light and life of the world" (3 Nephi 11:11), (2) the commencement of a new era (see 3 Nephi 11:28–41), (3) the fulfillment of the law of blood sacrifice (see 3 Nephi 9:19), (4) evidence of Jesus' atoning suffering and goodness (see 3 Nephi 11:14–17), and (5) the ordination of disciples as servant-ministers (see 3 Nephi 11:18–22; 12:1). Thus, at the outset, the Sermon at the Temple states explicitly these and other similar background elements that only can be presumed to stand behind the Matthean text.

Knowing more about the immediate context of the Sermon at the Temple then adds many insights to our understanding of this text. Essentially, it serves in the establishment of a righteous people who enter into a covenant to become Christ's sons and daughters, to take upon them his name, and to keep his commandments. Further understanding emerges, in this light, by reading and examining the text closely. The result is an understanding of the Sermon as a whole. While it is, of course, true that we can take individual maxims in the Sermon out of context (such as "turn the other cheek" from Matthew 5:39, or "lay not up treasures on earth" from Matthew 6:19) and make good practical sense of them in many applications, doing this severs these sayings from their surroundings and roots. Cut off, they do not thrive. We can discern a greater range of religious significance, however, when we hear and understand them in the context in which Jesus set them. For those

who have ears to hear and eyes to see, the Sermon at the Temple contains more of the fullness of the gospel than anyone has previously imagined, revealing and enriching the profound sacred truths of the Sermon on the Mount.

This contextual information, supplied solely by the Book of Mormon, offers some important keys to the Sermon on the Mount itself—to its internal coherence, purpose, and unity. These keys open new ideas about these words of Jesus, inviting study and reflection for years to come. Just as the Sermon on the Mount has provided fertile ground for spiritual and scholarly research for hundreds of years in Bible studies, the same will undoubtedly be the case with the Sermon at the Temple in Book of Mormon research. The following chapters strive to move in that direction.

Notes

1. Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), ix.

2. James H. Burtness, "Life-Style and Law: Some Reflections on Matthew 5:17," *Dialog* 14/1 (1975): 13.

3. Robert M. Grant, "The Sermon on the Mount in Early Christianity," *Semeia* 22/1 (1978): 215–29.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. E. Mosbacher (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 115.

5. Robert A. Guelich, "The Matthean Beatitudes: 'Entrance Requirements' or Eschatological Blessings?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95/3 (1976): 423 n. 46; see Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1978), 85.

6. Dale C. Allison Jr., "The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106/3 (1987): 423.

7. Ibid., 423–45.

8. Joachim Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963); see Alfred M. Perry, "The

Framework of the Sermon on the Mount," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935): 23.

9. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 212.

10. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 201.

11. Ibid., 423.

12. Ibid., 426.

13. Neil J. McEleney, "The Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43/1 (1981): 1–3; and C. M. Tuckett, "The Beatitudes: A Source-Critical Study," *Novum Testamentum* 25 (1983): 193–216.

14. J. Dupont, *Les Béatitudes: Le problème littéraire—Les deux versions du Sermon sur la montagne et des Béatitudes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Gabalda, 1969), 1:250–64; Hubert Frankemölle, "Die Makarismen (Matt 5:1–12; Luke 6:20–23): Motive und Umfang der redaktionellen Komposition," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 15/1 (1971): 52–75; and N. Walter, "Die Bearbeitung der Seligpreisungen durch Matthäus," *Studia Evangelica* 4 (1968): 246–58.

15. See, for example, D. Flusser, "Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit," *Israel Exploration Journal* 10/1 (1960): 1–13; Erik Sjöberg, "Das Licht in dir: Zur Deutung von Matth. 6,22f Par.," in *Studia Theologica* (Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1952), 5:89–105; and Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, 71–87.

16. Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, 55–69; and Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, 22–23.

17. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 79.

18. Krister Stendahl, *The School of Matthew and Its Use in the Old Testament* (Ramsey, N.J.: Sigler, 1990), 35.

19. Daniel Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1996).

20. Karlmann Beyschlag, "Zur Geschichte der Bergpredigt in der alten Kirche," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 74 (1977): 291–322.

21. W. D. Davies, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 6–27.

22. Jack D. Kingsbury, "The Place, Structure, and Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount within Matthew," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 131–43.

23. T. W. Manson, *Ethics and the Gospel* (New York: Scribner's, 1960), 50.

24. Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, 19–22, 65–69; and Stendahl, *School of Matthew*, 13–35.

25. Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, 125–51; and David Hill, "False Prophets and Charismatics: Structure and Interpretation in Matthew 7:15–23," *Biblica* 57 (1976): 327–48.

26. Hans Windisch, *Der Sinn der Bergpredigt* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1929).

27. This is the view of Robert Frost in McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, 18.

28. David Greenwood, "Moral Obligation in the Sermon on the Mount," *Theological Studies* 31/2 (1970): 304; see 301–9.

29. J. Duncan M. Derrett, *The Ascetic Discourse: An Explanation of the Sermon on the Mount* (Eilsbrunn: Verlag für Bibel und Religion, 1989), 14.

30. Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, trans. W. Lourie (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1914), 97–99; see the views summarized by Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1–12. McArthur identifies twelve ethical approaches in *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, 105–48; Georg Strecker discusses other types of exegesis in *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 15–23.

31. Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1.

32. Irwin W. Batdorf, "How Shall We Interpret the Sermon on the Mount?" *Journal of Bible and Religion* 27 (1959): 213; see 211–17.

33. Warren S. Kissinger, *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography*, American Theological Library Association Bibliography Series, no. 3 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1975), xi.

34. Peter Stuhlmacher, "Jesu vollkommenes Gesetz der Freiheit," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 79 (1982): 283–322.

35. Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 215.
36. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 205.
37. Kingsbury, "Place, Structure, and Meaning," 136.
38. Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, 30.
39. Ibid., 24–33.
40. Ibid., 26–29.