



## Summary Outline of Study

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- 2) Comparative studies of gospels
- 3) History of interpretation of the Sermon

### 2. History of the study of the Sermon on the Mount:

- 1) What is assumed about the nature of the commands in the Sermon?
- 2) Does the commentator assume the Sermon applies to individuals or to groups of people?
- 3) What is the assumption about Jesus by the commentator?
- 4) How relevant to Christians today is the Sermon?

### 3. Methods of Study

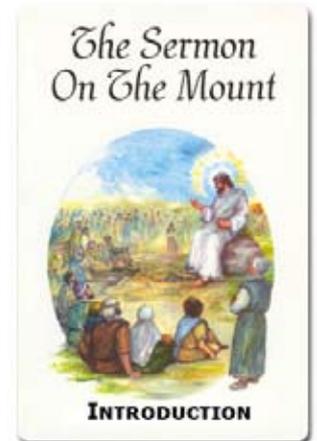
- 1) Literary Aspects
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## The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>

Welcome to this beginning study of the most read and widely known part of the Bible, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Over the next twenty-seven studies we are going to take a close look at what Jesus had to say, primarily in the Gospel of Matthew chapters five through seven. We will also give careful consideration to Luke's version of this sermon in Luke 6:17-7:1 and other related passages. From this intensive work my prayer is that you will gain tremendously greater understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ living in faithful commitment to Him. The Sermon, or die Bergpredigt in German, contains the heart of the teaching ministry of Jesus while He was on this earth. Thus it stands as a natural starting point for anyone wishing to know what Jesus taught and practiced during His earthly ministry.

### 1. Goals of our study:

I have several things in mind that I pray will be achieved through this study:

1) First and foremost is that every one of us come away with a much deeper understanding and appreciation for this marvelous scripture text found in Matthew five through seven and Luke six. These two passages are some of the most important ones in the entire Bible. For a believer to become a growing, spiritually healthy disciple of Christ, there must be both understanding of and commitment to the principles of Christian living contained in these two scripture passages. Together they form a summary of the very heart of the earthly teaching of Jesus. Through our study our desire is **to gain a detailed understanding** of this vitally important material.

2) Also, we need to learn better how to study the gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. Beyond the basic procedures of doing Bible study in general, the four gospels present some additional challenges for Bible study. We at once are confronted with four different accounts of the life of Jesus. Although much common material exists among the four documents, significant differences are present as well. And this is especially true in the interpretive perspective about Jesus presented by each writer. Matthew sees Jesus



<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

largely as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy of the coming Messiah of Israel. Mark, however, sees Jesus along the lines of ancient Roman Bios, i.e., ancient biography, as a decisive man of action with a clear sense of personal goals that he moved toward achieving without interference from others. Luke, on the other hand, sees Jesus as the universal Savior of all humanity, especially of the forgotten and fringe elements. In contrast to the Roman emperor who held the title Savior of the World, Jesus came to genuinely deliver all humanity from the curse of their sinfulness and miserable life. Finally, John saw Jesus in more cosmic terms as the divine Logos who as the divine Glory of the Heavenly Father revealed the true character of God to not just the Jewish people but ultimately to all the world.

When placing the two accounts in Matthew and Luke of the preaching of Jesus along side one another in comparative studies, one comes to an enormously richer and more profound understanding of the Lord. Studying a gospel account in isolation from the other accounts is to impoverish one's study as well as to risk distortion and misunderstanding of Jesus.

Thus our goal is to **learn how to do comparative studies of the gospel narratives** so we can obtain this deeper understanding of our Lord's teaching.

3) Additionally, we need to **understand how the Sermon on the Mount has been interpreted** over the centuries. No other single text of the Bible outside the Ten Commandments has been studied as intently, and has been written about so extensively as the Sermon of Jesus. Literally thousands of books and countless thousands of journal articles have been produced over the centuries of interpretive history. In this mass of interpretive commentary on the Sermon, an astounding array of understandings of the Sermon have been generated. The majority of this material reflects severely flawed interpretive method and thus the conclusions reached by the commentator are worthless and often dangerous heresy. When the Bible study is done with some understanding of the interpretive history of the Sermon, die *Wirkungsgeschichte der Bergpredigt* in German, most all these mistakes can be successfully avoided. Also, this awareness creates greater sensitivity to using solid, authentic methods of interpreting the Sermon. This will help insure better, more accurate understanding of the Sermon by the Bible student.

This introductory study in Lesson 01 will survey the interpretive history. But further insights will come in comparing different interpretive conclusions of specific texts in Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6. Through this we will gain the ability to understand both legitimate and false reasoning used by different commentators in exegeting the text.

Perhaps with this biblical text as with few others, the maxim, "**methods determine outcome**," is relevant. What we assume about the Sermon before we begin interpreting it will pre-determine what we come to understand it to be saying. *Thus starting out with solid methods of interpretation is essential to coming to the right conclusions about the teachings of these two biblical texts.*

## 2. History of the study of the Sermon on the Mount:

The interpretative history of the Sermon on the Mount is massive in terms of the publications that have produced, just since the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, not to speak of what had been written in hand written form prior to that.<sup>2</sup> Surveying such a massive amount of literature is an daunting task, and can't be done justice in a couple of paragraphs. But this study is intended more to alert the reader to the mass of available literature out there. With such awareness, better understanding of the interpretive method employed by individual commentators and the reasoning used becomes possible.

When one works his/her way through large portions of this material several categories of interpretive assumption being used become apparent. An older effort to summarize these can be found in A.M. Hunter, *A Pattern for Life: An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953.). Also helpful in the German is Georg Eichholz, *Auslegung der Bergpredigt* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984).<sup>3</sup>

Let me summarize these into four categories of presupposition that will typify each approach. The Bible student should then be alert to how different assumptions in these four areas impact the conclu-

<sup>2</sup>For the most comprehensive bibliography on the Sermon on the Mount through the 1970s, see Warren S. Kissinger, *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975). Also see the bibliography in Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 423-431. Also see my *Bibliography on the Sermon on the Mount* at Cranfordville.com, which contains several hundred listings.

<sup>3</sup>Also very helpful for twentieth century understanding is Berner, Ursula. *Die Bergpredigt: Rezeption und Auslegung im 20. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979.

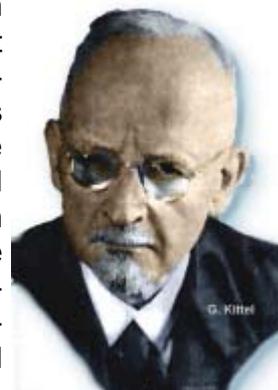
sions drawn by individual commentators. As you read through the literature keep these four questions in mind. Answering them will help you assess the value of various commentaries etc. on the Sermon.<sup>4</sup>

### 1) What is assumed about the nature of the commands in the Sermon?

In the centuries of interpretation commentators have not been certain how to take the admonitions contained in the Sermon. When Jesus said, “Do not swear at all...” in Mt. 5:24, was He stating absolute Law or putting forth moral admonition as a goal that His followers are to strive to obey? The range of assumptions here is extensive.

#### Absolute Law.

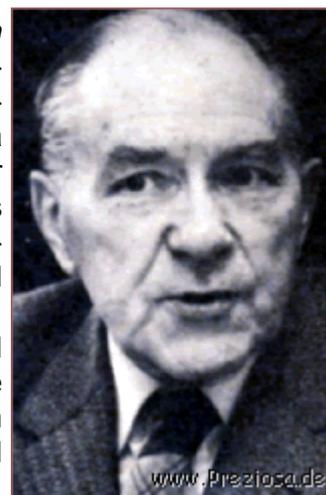
On the right hand side of extreme interpretive literalism stood the German Lutheran scholar **Gerhard Kittel**.<sup>5</sup> In his comparison of the ethics of Jesus and that of Judaism, Kittel came to several conclusions. *First*, Jesus had almost no originality in developing new concepts distinct from existing ones in the Judaism of His day. *Second*, and most importantly, the distinction of the ethical teaching of the Sermon from somewhat similar teachings in contemporary Judaism was the level of absolute demand inherent in Jesus’ principles. Jesus set forth an impossibly high standard with the intention that every precept had to be perfectly obeyed in the Kingdom of God. Of course, no one would be able to do so. In desperation, the sinner would flee to the arms of the Teacher of the Kingdom for salvation and deliverance from his sinfulness which the absolute demands of the Sermon had revealed to him.<sup>6</sup> Thus the admonitions of the Sermon are to be understood as *absolute* Law.



So the Sermon stands as an evangelistic tool, rather than as a discipleship teaching tool. Thus there is little relevance of the Sermon to the believer once he has committed his life to Jesus as Lord.

#### Attitudes.

On the other left hand side of this spectrum lay the view of **Wilhelm Herrmann** who reflects late nineteenth century Classical Liberalism in its approach to the sermon. Herrmann proposed an interpretive approach that he labeled a *Gesinnungs-ethik*, i.e., an ethic of intention. Jesus wasn’t laying down a new Torah to replace the one given by Moses. Rather he was setting forth inner attitudes that should reflect the disposition of Jesus’ followers. The emphasis was on what believers should be rather than what they should do. By assuming Jesus’ words were loaded with paradox, hyperbole etc., Herrmann effected denied any moral behavioral ‘teeth’ in the admonitions of Jesus.



Additionally one must realize another central view in the Classical Liberalism of the late 1800s. While historically the teaching of Jesus on the Kingdom of God had been viewed as ‘eschatological,’ that is, the Kingdom will be established in supernatural fashion at the end of time, European liberal understanding saw the Kingdom in terms of a present, and not a future, reality. Jesus’ was focused on how God expects people to live with one another now.

This was the viewpoint of most liberal scholars of the nineteenth century. The debates within this view over the application of the Sermon centered over whether this was a plan for the church or whether this was a plan for the structuring of human society and governments universally, with the latter usually dominating.

#### Levels between the above extremes.

Between the ends of the ethical spectrum set forth by its polar opposites above lays most of the

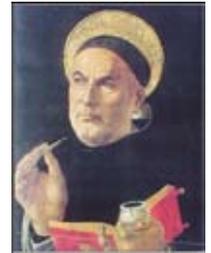
<sup>4</sup>For a detailed listing of various approaches by specific individuals with selected quotes from their works or else from those describing their view, see Greek 496 Lesson One at cranfordville.com.

<sup>5</sup>*Gerhard Kittel*, “Die Bergpredigt und die Ethik des Judentums” (*ZST* 2 [1924-25] 555-94),

<sup>6</sup>A.M. Hunter, *Pattern*, p. 97, describing Kittel’s view: “The ethic’s absoluteness springs from the absoluteness of Jesus’ own person, and we shall only understand it as we remember the unique place Jesus knew himself to hold in the Kingdom of God. Now, it is of the very existence of Jesus’ demand in the Sermon that we can never fulfil it. So long as we are sinners in a fallen world, we can never rise to its heights. The purpose of the Sermon is to show man the futility of all his moral striving and his need for repentance. So he is prepared to receive the Gospel of God’s forgiveness declared in the Cross.”

commentators and interpretive assumptions.

**Thomas Aquinas.** The Roman Catholic approach to the Sermon was largely shaped by the middle ages theologian Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa Theologicae* (part 2.1, quest. 108, art. 4), he distinguished between “precepts” and “evangelical counsels” in regard to Christian ethics. In relation to the Sermon, what Jesus did was add counsels to the already existing Ten Commandments, i.e., ‘precepts.’ Then he defined ‘counsels’ in the Sermon:



The difference between a counsel and a commandment is that a commandment implies obligation, whereas a counsel is left to the option of the one to whom it is given.” He added, “In the New Law, which is the law of liberty, counsels are added to the commandments.... We must understand the commandments of the New Law to have been given about matters that are necessary to gain the end of eternal bliss, to which the New Law brings us forthwith: but that the counsels are about matters that render the beginning of this end more assured and expeditious....”

Thus the ‘counsels’ found in the Sermon provide optional aids for the Christian in gaining eternal life. Although somewhat modified today, the work of Aquinas continues to play a major role in official interpretive perspective in the Roman Catholic Church even into our day.

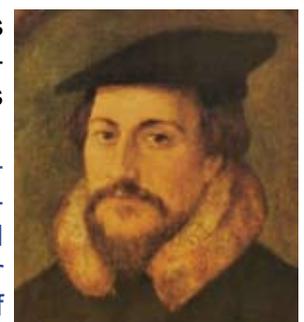
**Martin Luther.** Luther’s approach to the sermon was more reactive than anything else. On the one hand, he railed against the ‘papists,’ i.e., Roman Catholic spokesmen, for their ‘false distinction’ between commandment and counsel stemming from Aquinas. On the other hand, he also vigorously attacked the ‘enthusiasts,’ i.e., the Anabaptists from whom we as Baptists descend, for their excessive literalism in interpreting the Sermon, especially at the point of their views against military service, oath making, non-violent retaliation etc. based on the Sermon. Luther’s approach grew out of his famous *zwei Reiche*, i.e., two-Kingdoms, view in which the sacred and the secular were distinguished from one another. The moral demands of the Sermon were to intended to be fully obeyed by the believer. But at times human circumstance, such as military duty, necessitates the Christian remaining committed to the demands of the Sermon “in his heart,” on the spiritual side although in actuality the secular demands of life prevent him from obeying what Jesus taught. While Aquinas distinguish different levels of obligation for obedience philosophically, Luther achieved something similar through splitting life into the sacred and secular and excusing disobedience on the secular side while supposedly remaining faithful on the spiritual or sacred side in one’s heart.



**Anabaptists.** This label applies to a very diverse group of Christians in seventeenth century Europe who held some basic beliefs in common and thus came to labeled by the one heading of Anabaptists. One of those commonly held convictions was a very literal interpretation of the Sermon. It was the standard for obedience set by Jesus for His followers. They sought therefore to strictly adhere to the literal meaning of the scripture texts. Consequently, for example, no making of oaths was permitted, leading to denial of military duty obligations. Because oaths were commonly associated with serving in other government agencies, most Anabaptists refused to work in government service of any kind. Additionally, influenced by Luther’s sacred and secular division, government in their view belonged to the secular, while the church made up of believing Christians belonged to the sacred. Thus Christians were to distance themselves as far as possible from anything secular.

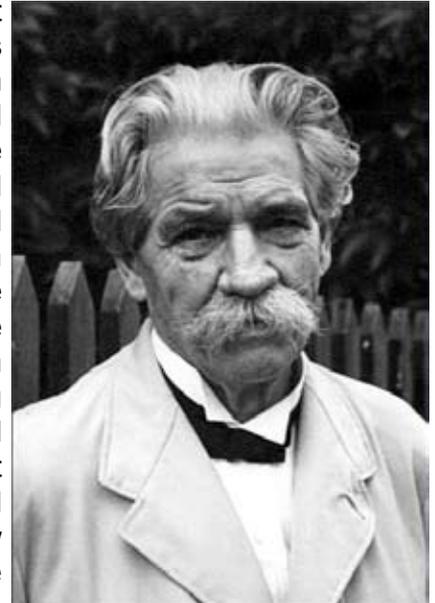
**John Calvin.** This reformer had a more balanced approach to the Sermon, as reflected in several of his writings. The moral demands in the Sermon were understood to amplify implications contained in the Decalogue of the Old Testament as a continuation of God’s expectation upon His people. As Guelich (p. 17) notes,

Consequently, Calvin held no brief for the “schoolmen” of the Roman Catholic interpretations, who distinguished between “optional counsels” and necessary commandments, since all of Christ’s demands applied to all believers. But he also took issue with the Anabaptists because of their rigorous application of the Sermon without regard to its larger context of



Scripture. Using his hermeneutical method of *analogia fidei*, Calvin argued that the prohibition of all oaths, judging, and nonresistance represented a failure to perceive the intent behind these particular demands as determined by the larger Scriptural context. For example, in his *Commentary* on Matt 5:33-37 he noted that the prohibition of oaths “meant nothing more than this, that all oaths are unlawful, which in any way abuse or profane the sacred name of God....” He then supported his conclusion by the positive use and teaching of Scripture elsewhere regarding oaths. Thus, for Calvin, the applicability of the Sermon’s demands involved a hermeneutical concern stemming from the fundamental, theological question regarding Jesus’ demand and its relationship to the Law and the Old Testament promise.”

**Albert Schweitzer.** This famous missionary/biblical scholar set forth a radical view at the end of the nineteenth century. He saw Jesus as setting forth a thoroughly eschatological understanding of the Kingdom of God in the tradition of Jewish messianic expectation. Jesus desired -- in Schweitzer’s view -- to establish a Jewish kingdom in which He would rule over Israel from Jerusalem after purging the Promised Land of all foreign elements. The establishment of this would signal the end of the world as understood in Jesus’ day. God’s Kingdom would begin with Israel and then gradually extend to envelop the entire world. The place of the ethical demands for holy living set forth in the Sermon were then seen by Schweitzer as an ‘interim ethic.’ The Sermon set forth Jesus’ expectations for His disciples under the cataclysmic beginning of the supernatural Kingdom of God. Schweitzer’s views were radical in the late 1800s and he was in large part responding to the dominant view of Classical Liberal thinking of the time that the Kingdom of God was a ‘here and now’ reality setting forth an ethical blueprint for how human society should function. Schweitzer viewed this as nonsense and sought to refocus attention on Jesus as preaching an eschatological Kingdom of God. This refocusing of Jesus’ teaching on the theme of end times became the lasting contribution of Schweitzer to biblical scholarship, although his views would undergo drastic modification and restructuring by subsequent scholars.



The ethical demands of the Sermon were understood as radical demand for absolute obedience to God. They did not stand in conflict with the Decalogue of the Jewish Law but complemented it and re-enforced it by extension and reinterpretation. But in Schweitzer’s view, these demands were temporary and would be replaced, once Jesus set up His Kingdom at Jerusalem during the Passover celebration in 33 AD. But Jesus -- in Schweitzer’s view -- failed in this mission when he reached Jerusalem and instead ended by dying as a martyr supremely committed to his failed teachings. Thus the Sermon’s relevancy is extremely limited, largely to the original disciples during Jesus’ earthly ministry, and not beyond.

In a rather strange variation of Schweitzer’s views are those of C. I. Scofield, a major influence in the establishment of the Bible Church movement in the U.S, representing one of the more intensive fundamentalist branches of Christianity. Dallas Theological Seminary was founded by him. Scofield produced a study Bible in 1909 based on the King James Version that has been widely influential in promoting his fundamentalist viewpoint. In the early editions of this study Bible while under Scofield’s editorial control the Sermon was viewed as setting forth ethical standards relevant only to the supposed thousand year reign of Christ between the so-called Rapture of the church and the second coming of Jesus at the end of this thousand years. The Sermon had little or no application to Christians living prior to this supposed Rapture of the church. After Scofield’s death in 1921 when his study Bible came under new editorship, especially the more recent editions, this extreme viewpoint has virtually been erased from the study notes in favor of less radical viewpoints.

**Hans Windisch.** This German scholar in the first half of the twentieth century reflected much of the thinking of this era among European scholars. Although Lutheran officially, his understanding of the Sermon did not reflect his Lutheran heritage. In his work *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount* (English translation), He saw the ethical demands of the Sermon as setting forth the requirements for salvation in the teachings of the early church.



His lasting contribution, however, was to strongly condemn the tendency of modern interpretation for *eisegeting* the biblical text through a 'theological interpretation' method. By this he meant that modern scholars all too often read their own modern biases and belief system back into the text and ignore the demands of historical *exegesis* of the text, which necessitates rigorous efforts to understand what the text first meant to its original readers and writers. This historical meaning forms the only legitimate foundation for contemporary application of the meaning of the text. This emphasis continues to have value and importance, although his historical exegesis of the Sermon is quite questionable.

**T.W. Manson.** In the tradition of more conservative British scholarship in the middle twentieth century, Prof. Manson, the Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester 1936 - 1958, set forth an approach representing a healthy balance between the polar extremes above. A.M Hunter (*Pattern for Living*, pp. 98-99) describes Manson's views as follows:

In his book, **The Teaching of Jesus** [cf. chap. 9],<sup>7</sup> T. W. Manson has set down his views on the Sermon and the ethic of Jesus in general. The ethic of Jesus springs from his Gospel. What the Sermon supplies is an ideal picture of life in the Kingdom of God on earth. Its tone is prophetic, not legal. The moral demands of Jesus in the Sermon imply that those who accept them shall have undergone a change of heart--a conversion. What we have in the Sermon number of illustrations of the way in which such a transformed [p. 99] man will behave. Jesus was no legislator. For him, the twin command of love to God and to neighbour, with the Golden Rule added as simple rule of thumb, is the pith of man's duty here below. The moral ideal for Christians lies not in a code or in a social order, but in a life where love to God and man is the spring of every thought and word and action and for the Christian the sum of all morality is to have the same mind which was also in Christ Jesus.

Manson represents the emphasis found among most evangelical scholars with varying modifications today. The ethics of the Sermon represent both attitude and action as moral ideals to which the disciples of Jesus must be passionately committed. They are not Law in the sense of replacing the Law of Moses as a means of salvation. Given the redemptive mission of Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God, these demands chart out the path for discipleship emerging out of salvation encounter with Christ as Savior. The genuine disciple of Jesus is then both obligated and committed to walking this path in his spiritual journey. The demands of Jesus are intense and radical in comparison to other expectations of Jesus' day. But they constitute a moral 'rubber band' pulling us with high tension every upward to the level of Christian maturity and living that Jesus expects of His followers.

**From my perspective**, this last representative of interpretative understanding represents the best and most legitimate approach to interpreting the moral demands of the Sermon. Jesus had no interest in setting a new set of Laws as a means of salvation. Such understanding directly and profoundly contradicts the four gospel writers' view of Jesus' redemptive death on the cross, not to mention the views of Paul and other New Testament writers. But to diminish the ethical demands of the Sermon to options for the Christian to choose or to ignore is just as false. The expectation of Jesus upon His followers for holy living was exceedingly high and uncompromising. And the Sermon makes this abundantly clear.

Plus, the nature of these demands is all inclusive. They require a transformation of both attitude and actions. Without question Jesus concerned Himself with both the inner and outer person. Who we are inwardly defines what we do outwardly. He was the point of His criticism of the Law, especially in the six Antitheses in Mt. 5:21-48: it only addressed the external and failed to focus on the inward disposition as well. This was particularly true of the interpretive handling of the Law by the religious authorities of Jesus' day.

Finally, these moral demands on the disciple assume a life-changing encounter with the Teacher of the Sermon. These requirements are not a means of salvation, often falsely understood. Instead, they grow out of a saving encounter with Jesus who in that experience becomes the Lord and Master of the believer's life. As such then, the demands chart the path of Christian discipleship for every follower of Christ. Obedience to these demands move the believer into ever deeper spiritual maturity and closer relationship with Christ. Disobedience brings the wrath of God and divine chastisement in order to move us back into obedience.

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<sup>7</sup>Also compare *Ethics and the Gospel* by T.W. Manson.

## 2) Does the commentator assume the Sermon applies to individuals or to groups of people?

A second question to always be asked when assessing the views of a commentator, and when trying to formulate one's own understanding of the Sermon, is which emphasis dominates? The Sermon is for individual disciples, or it is for groups of people? And, are these two categories complementary or exclusive of one another?

In the history of interpretation, the viewpoints have been quite diverse. Typically they reflect the cultural mentality of the interpreter much more than serious efforts at historical exegesis of the scripture text.

**Collective Views.** Many scholars assume that the Sermon is either laying down a structure of human society in general or else a set of instructions for the Church. The most extreme of the universalist views is reflected by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy. In his massive *War And Peace* novel, Tolstoy assumed that Jesus in the Sermon was setting forth His vision of human society organized in a theocratic political structure. The 'rules' taught in the Sermon should form the basis for legal legislation and governmental functioning in society. Jesus' statement in Mt. 5:38-42 about non-retaliation was taken to mean that government functioning as it should would have no police force since violence would not be a part of human society living under the Sermon. He envisioned a utopian society being set forth by Jesus. Interestingly, this would be picked up by Karl Marx as foundational to his idea of the Communist utopian state teaching that stood at the heart of Communist ideology.

Most Roman Catholic scholars until very recent times have understood the Sermon as applying primarily, if not exclusively, to the Church as a collective entity. Personal relevancy is present, but mostly the sermon is a writing for the Church functioning as a religious group. As such, the ethical demands of the Sermon become critically important principles for gaining and/or keeping salvation. The range of ethical demands provides the conceptional parameters for defining penance responsibilities.

**Individualist Views.** In recent decades the interpretive emphasis, especially among evangelical scholars, has seen the primary emphasis placed on individual disciples. Unlike Kittel who saw the Sermon as a tool for evangelistic making of disciples, most see the emphasis of the Sermon on those already disciples. The thrust of the Sermon is to provide directions for individual followers in their efforts to live in obedience to Christ. Most of the commentaries and individual works on the Sermon itself in the last fifty years will take some version of this basic approach in treating the text of the Sermon.

**From my perspective,** the better approach is to see the primary focus on individual disciples who want to know how to live in obedience to Christ. But it would be a mistake to assume that the church as a collective body of believers is not included in the scope of the Sermon as well. Given the more collective oriented culture of both the Greco-Roman world, and especially the ancient Jewish society, in which Christianity was born, one can never legitimately inject into the biblical text an intense individualistic viewpoint, especially to the exclusion of some sense of group responsibility and accountability. The Bible was absolutely not written from highly individualistic American cultural assumptions, nor even from the milder European perspective. The 'group' always plays a critical role in biblical perspective. To be clear, ancient Jewish culture was in the first Christian century placing much greater emphasis on the individual than had been true in the early eras of the Old Testament period which everything was group oriented. Jesus and the apostles will reflect this growing balance between individual responsibility and group responsibility. And thus the biblical text should be interpreted against this cultural backdrop. Again, interpretation begins with *historical exegesis!* That is, we must figure out the 'then' meaning against the backdrop of the world in which the text was written and initially read. That understanding alone forms the basis for applying the text to our day.

## 3) What is the assumption about Jesus by the commentator?

Especially important to proper interpretation of the Sermon will be the assumptions of the commentator about Jesus as the teacher of the Sermon. The images of Jesus by the various commentators are quite varied. These perspectives will reflect both ***theological understanding of Jesus***, and ***literary narrative understanding***.



**Theologically** the range tends to flow from Jesus as a moral example who died a martyr's death in commitment to His principles of righteous living to Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy of a Messiah as the Suffering Servant of God who would die a redemptive death that would provide salvation to everyone believing in Jesus.

Jesus as moral teacher and example stands somewhat distanced from the text. In this view, he had good ideas for people to live their lives by. And by so doing they would be better people. Soteriological issues<sup>8</sup> stand in the far background of the text, if at all. The Kingdom of God is assumed to be 'here and now' in the vanilla sense of principles of righteous living intended for humanity, either personally or generally as the structure for society and government. In the naive mentality of nineteenth century theology heavily influenced by Romanticism as a philosophical principle many assumed that humans could live by these principles successfully and thereby achieve a virtual utopian society on earth. The two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century utterly destroyed the credibility of this false way of thinking.

The other side of the theological assumptions about Jesus sees Him as God's Savior bringing salvation through His death on the cross. Jesus was consciously aware of this fate increasingly through His earthly ministry and His teaching flow out of this sense of divine mission to die for the sins of humanity. Thus the concept of the Kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching requires a moment of identifiable entrance<sup>9</sup> and coming into the Kingdom means accepting God through Christ as absolute Lord over one's life. In the "already / but not yet" aspects of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom, the reign of God is already present in Christ. But it won't be completely realized until the close of the age with the Second Coming of Christ. at the end of human history.



In this perspective of Jesus, personal commitment to Christ in conversion is essential for entrance into the Kingdom of God. Thus exegesis of the Sermon grows out of the assumption that Jesus' teaching here is for disciples who have experienced this conversion and now are seeking direction on how to live out that commitment to Christ in their daily lives.

The **narrative literary assumptions about Jesus** will function somewhat independently of the theological assumptions, but sometimes a literary assumption will grow out of a particular theological assumption. The range of literary assumptions move from this material being entirely the creation of the early church with Jesus having little or nothing to do with it. These were words 'put in Jesus' mouth' by the writer of the first gospel decades after Jesus' died and reflect almost entirely the later developed ideas of Christian belief that had move way beyond what Jesus supposedly taught while on earth. Justification of this is sought largely through a specific method of interpretive approach to the text.

Negative reaction to this approach tries to see the words of Jesus as the *voca ipsismus*<sup>10</sup> of Christ delivered on one particular occasion to one crowd of people. The pressing of this assumption very far quickly goes beyond what the scripture text can justify and support.

**From my perspective**, simple observations argue decisively for a middle ground between these two polar points. First, the Sermon as recorded in Matthew would have lasted no more than fifteen to twenty minutes at best in oral delivery. The one in Luke less than five minutes! People traveled long distances to listen to Jesus teach, and numerous gospel texts indicate that he would talk to them the better part of an entire day -- or longer. The narrative setting of both Matthew's and Luke's Sermon suggest this was one of those occasions. What do we then have in Matthew and Luke? Quite simply, a summation of that preaching of Jesus. Particularly in Matthew, we see in the Sermon a summation both of what Jesus spoke on that particular occasion and more importantly of the essence of what He said all through His earthly ministry [See # 4. 1) below]. This contributes mightily to the critical importance of the Sermon for understanding Jesus. It represents the very heart of what He advocated as He traveled the countryside of ancient Palestine teaching. We do hear the actual voice of Jesus in the Sermon, but as interpreted and summarized for us by both Matthew and Luke. Their interpretive summaries are different from one another primarily because they were writing to different targeted audiences with differing needs for under-

<sup>8</sup>Soteriology means the teaching of salvation. Here the focus would be on Jesus as a Savior who brings personal salvation from sin through his atoning death on the cross.

<sup>9</sup>Note the presence of 'Entrance Sayings' scattered throughout the Sermon, e.g., 5:20, and 7:21-23.

<sup>10</sup>*voca ipsismus* is the Latin term meaning the 'actual voice of Jesus' in a precise reporting of what He said.

standing Jesus. The gospel writers were seeking to apply the meaning of Jesus to meet these differing needs of the two audiences existing several decades after the earthly ministry of Jesus.

#### 4) How relevant to Christians today is the Sermon?

The assumptions here take several different twists. For Tolstoy and a few others the relevancy of the Sermon is to society in general and not just to Christians. As a “blueprint for a new society” they understood the Sermon less as containing distinctive Christian categories, than as setting forth a new divine Law for all humanity to be imposed through governmental decree. The intent was to move toward creating an utopian society, a “heaven on earth” for all people to live in.

In the perspective of Schweitzer and to a lesser degree in dispensationalism, the Sermon has little or no relevance to Christians today. For Schweitzer, it was intended only for Jesus’ disciples prior to the intended establishment of the Kingdom at Jerusalem in 33 AD. For dispensationalists, the Sermon is primarily if not totally for the supposed thousand year reign of Christ after the Rapture and before the Second Coming at the end of that era. Thus, it is either intended for the past, or for the yet unseen future, but not for today.

In traditional Roman Catholic understandings, the Sermon is for the Church and lays out the means of at least retaining one’s salvation by defining categories of penance that help the Christian stay in good standing with God, thus insuring Heaven as the final destination of the church member and minimizing the required time to be spent in Purgatory after death.

In most other approaches, the Sermon is seen as vitally relevant to Christians today in their discipleship commitment as believers. In it, Jesus set forth His high expectations for His disciples to live by. These demands go far beyond the requirements of the Mosaic Law and deal with both inner attitudes and outward actions, that is, the whole person. They constitute no new Law in the sense of legal legislation such as the Law of Moses. Instead, they lay out the ultimate goals of commitment for believers. Out of life-changing encounter with the risen Christ, the believer then moves toward implementing these principles into daily living as a primary expression of commitment to Christ as Lord.

**From my perspective**, this last approach is the only legitimate way to approach the Sermon.

In these four questions one can determine where any commentator is coming from with his baggage of assumptions about the nature of the Sermon. Before approaching the text itself some conclusions should be drawn about one’s own assumptions. Just to wade into the text without this ‘pre-consideration’ is like jumping into the pool without a bathing suit and with no skills for swimming! Trouble most certainly lies ahead!

### 3. Methods of study:

Now attention should be given to interpretive procedure. With some awareness of how the Sermon has been treated down through the centuries we should be better able to avoid most all the mistakes of the past. But we need a method clearly defined as we come to the Sermon text in Matthew and Luke.

1) One critical understanding is the **literary nature** of Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6. **First**, these texts show up in two of the four gospels in the New Testament. What is a ‘gospel’? Robert Guelich (pp. 24-25) borrows from others the metaphor of a picture for describing the nature of the literary form ‘gospel.’ Do Matthew and Luke give us a ‘snapshot’ of Jesus? An ‘abstract painting’? Or a ‘portrait’? He describes these options this way:

The Gospels as a literary genre present their own set of questions today. Perhaps an analogy drawn from another medium will illustrate and explain the options. Historically and for a significant number of contemporaries -- not least of whom is the majority of lay readers -- the Gospels approximate a **snapshot**, an untouched photographlike reproduction of things as they were, with a direct correspondence between what one sees and what actually was. For such, the Gospel in general and the Sermon in particular simply reproduce word for word (thus the red-letter editions of the Gospels) and deed for deed Jesus’ ministry. The difference in the multiple accounts merely indicates a difference in location and/or camera angle.

A more radical form of Gospel studies in recent decades offers the opposite alternative. This approach has treated the Gospels as bearing [p. 25] a resemblance to **abstract paintings** that depict the artist’s perceptions more than the events themselves and actively involve the reader’s or observer’s contribution in understanding the final product. The correspondence between the product and the original object depicted remains oblique, making a reconstruction of

the underlying object all but impossible historically and illegitimate artistically, in view of the artist's intention. For such writers, the Gospel and the Sermon, consequently, bear little resemblance to Jesus' earthly ministry, since they express and intended to express the more immediate needs and perceptions of the early community and the evangelists.

The common designation of the former as the uncritical and the latter as the critical approach to Gospel studies implies an either/or situation. Fortunately, there is a third option that strikes a medium between the two alternatives and more adequately accounts for the evidence. Rather than providing us a snapshot or an abstract painting, the Gospels as a genre come much closer to serving as a **portrait** of Jesus and his ministry. A portrait can vary between very precise reproduction that closely corresponds with the object as seen and a very vague reproduction that seeks to convey more an impression than a direct image. Consequently, by designating the Gospel as portraits of Jesus and his ministry, we must seek to determine the degree of correspondence between Jesus' ministry and each Gospel's portrait. This is essentially a historical question.

Matthew's Gospel and the Sermon in particular reflect the portrait artist's freedom to modulate, modify, relocate, rearrange, restructure, and restate as exercised by the community in the traditional process and by the evangelist's redaction. Yet despite the first evangelist's lack of concern for the finer details such as the precise place, time, and verbatim quotation of the tradition, his portrait does closely correspond to Jesus' ministry, particularly as seen in the Sermon. Indeed, as we shall see, the evangelist's primary intention was to portray who Jesus was as seen in his earthly ministry and in his message as expressed in the Sermon.

The Sermon as a portrait of Jesus is the best approach in my opinion. This is the broad **genre** issue of the Sermon.

Additionally smaller literary forms will surface in the content of the text. With Matthew and Luke these smaller units of literary genre are produced from a combination of sources. Not the least of which is the oral tradition of the teaching of Jesus that served as a major way to preserve the story of Jesus from the middle 30s to the middle 60s when the written gospels began to be composed. By shaping the teachings of Jesus in easily memorizable patterns this material could be quickly committed to memory and preserved more consistently in the same expression. The content of the first three gospels bears unmistakable indication of the background. Also, the creativity of the gospel writer will shape the smaller literary forms present in some of the text material. One can clearly detect this in the distinctive style of all three synoptic gospel writers in presenting the parables of Jesus, particularly in the double and triple tradition materials where the same event or saying is presented by the gospel writers.

Additionally attention must be given to the **literary context** or literary setting of the scripture text. Imagine the gospel as a jig-saw puzzle and each pericope as one piece of that puzzle, such as Mt. 5-7. The literary setting of these chapters simply seeks to understand how these chapters contribute to filling out the picture that the puzzle paints. As with a jig-saw puzzle, each pericope is important and makes a distinct contribution to the overall understanding of the gospel document.

The final literary aspect is the internal design of the flow of ideas inside the scripture text, that is, the **literary structure** of the text. Single ideas don't get thrown on to the table without connection of some sort to the ideas both before and after them. The groups of ideas hang together in order to present a 'package of ideas' usually around a central theme. This package is technically labeled a text *pericope*, that is, a natural unit of literary expression. Unpacking this structure in terms of ancient ways of thinking is critical for correct understanding. With the Sermon, and particularly with Matthew's version, this literary structure is especially crucial for accurate interpretation.

2) **Second**, in seeking historical understanding of these words of Jesus, *we must probe two historical layers of the text* if accurate understanding is to be acquired. We need to understand as much as possible about the situation in late first century Christianity that prompted the writing of the gospel accounts. Technically this is known as the **Sitz im Leben Kirche**. Although sources of information for this are rather limited some conclusions can be drawn with considerable confidence, as Werner Kümmel (**Intro to the NT**, p. 117) describes regarding the first gospel:

Mt writes an expanded form of Mk as a 'community book' which is to provide for the needs of a particular Christian community as follows: for its debate with contemporary Judaism, strength in its knowledge of Jesus as the Christ (10:17); for the realities of community life and ethical decisions (18:15 ff; 19:1 ff), advice conveyed through the sayings of Jesus. The assumption is not true

that Mt has abandoned the near expectation of the parousia, as the uncorrected use of such texts as 4:17; 10:23; 16:28; 24:33 f shows. But unremitting expectancy (24:42 ff) demands, in view of the uncertainty of the time, advice for the church and for the individual Christians in the interim ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος (28:20). Mt offers to the church these counsels by pointing back to the OT predictions, which for the church of the present find their complete fulfillment in the authoritative history and teaching of Jesus. But the history and teaching of Jesus are authoritative not because Jesus as a 'New Moses' has proclaimed a 'New Law,' but because the risen Lord has commanded that [p. 119] 'all that I have commanded you' is to be taught to all people, and this teaching has promised his help until the end of the age (28:20).

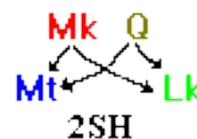
The second layer of historical setting is the *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, that is, the historical setting in which Jesus uttered these words. The time and place references inside the text must be carefully examined so that we understand more clearly the historical setting for Jesus words during his earthly ministry. Jesus wasn't some light headed philosopher traveling the country side spouting out abstractions that had little relevancy to life. To the contrary, he addressed real needs to real people in his own world. The more we can learn about that the better we can understand the meaning of his words.

With this probing of both the historical and literary aspects of the gospel texts we will be able to grasp much better and more accurately what Jesus was teaching as interpreted to us by Matthew and Luke.

#### 4. Historical background of Matthew and Luke:

The circumstances prompting the writing of Matthew and Luke are only partially understood. But sufficient information is available in order to draw some conclusions about the historical setting of these two gospel accounts.

One starting point adopted in these studies is that the writing sequence of the four gospels is Mark (middle 60s), Matthew (early 70s), Luke (early middle 70s to early 80s), John (early 90s). We set this forth in our study of the Origin and History of the Bible. Additionally assumed is that both Matthew and Luke had a copy of both Mark and a common source called Q to draw up as written sources for the writing of their accounts. In the Sermon the issue of the material common to both Matthew and Luke becomes the major point of consideration, since Mark omits any reference to the Sermon.



##### 1) Gospel of Matthew

For a more detailed presentation of these issues, see my Lecture Notes on the History of the Bible, topic 2.1.1.4 Matthew. This was a part of the study in our previous work on the Origin and History of the Bible. Here we merely summarize that more detailed study. Considerable difficulty confronts the Bible student when comparing the writer profile from the external church father sources with the internal profile from the gospel itself. Church tradition identified Matthew, or Levi the tax collector, as responsible for this document. In content of the gospel reveals a writer highly skilled in the styles of first century Jewish scribal patterns of presenting and defending one's ideas. Also this author was very knowledgeable of both the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek translation of it called the Septuagint (LXX). For the Jewish tax collector to have written such a gospel considerable help from a writing secretary must be assumed.

The gospel was most likely written in the early 70s after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans. With Palestine in chaos and Jewish people in bewilderment over the destruction of the City of Zion and the temple, ultra nationalistic movements emerged in desperate attempts to prevent the extinction of the Jewish religious tradition. Part of this movement involved pressuring Jews on the fringe of Judaism to return to zealous observance of the Law of God, since the understanding was that this destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was religiously the punishment of God for Jewish failure to faithfully obey the Torah. In the Christian communities of Damascus and Antioch intense pressure was put on the Jewish members to abandon their Christian 'heresy' and return to the synagogue in order to prevent the complete destruction of the traditions of the Jewish Fathers.

The first gospel was occasioned as a vigorous defense of Jesus as the genuine continuation of the revelation of God as promised by both Moses and the prophets. Jesus was indeed the prophesied Messiah and His teachings represented authentic continuation of the revelation of God given by Moses and the prophets. For Matthew Jews as Christians represented the true Israel for they were genuinely following the divine revelation of God's will to His covenant people Israel. It was the synagogue who was disobedient to God, not the Jewish Christians meeting in Christian communities. This is the central point

of the Matthean gospel.

## 2) Gospel of Luke<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the third gospel came a decade or so after Matthew, and was occasioned by entirely different circumstances. From the external sources of the Church Fathers came the tradition of Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul from the middle of the second missionary journey in the middle 50s to the end of Paul's life in the middle 60s. As a slave doctor he was 'loaned' out to the apostle to help him cope with ongoing health issues. In the process of his travels with Paul Luke determined to present a two volume story of the beginnings of the Christian religion.

This project took shape sometime after the apostle's martyrdom in the middle 60s in Rome. By the middle 70s Luke had migrated eastward out of Rome to either Macedonia or Asia Minor where his patron Theophilus, perhaps also his owner, provided the necessary funding for the writing of these two volumes as well as the copying of them for distribution. Both volumes are formally dedicated to Theophilus who although a wealthy Roman official had also become a Christian convert anxious to understand everything possible about his new Christian faith. Thus the gospel and the Acts of the Apostles present a universal oriented story of Jesus and early Christianity. Jesus is the Savior of the world, in contrast to the Roman emperor who carried this title. Furthermore, Jesus focused his ministry on the poor and outcast of society reflecting true devotion to the God of the universe who passionately cared for all people, not just the rich and powerful. The internal writer profile confirms most of the external Church Father tradition with additional insights of the extensive knowledge of and writing skills with Koine Greek. along with profound insights into the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. The Gospel of Luke becomes the message of hope for all humanity, rich and poor, male and female, slave and freedman. This will play an important role in the way Luke opts to present a highly abbreviated account of Jesus' sermon. Only those themes relevant to his writing objective are included in his narrative in chapter six.

## 5. Literary arrangement of the Sermon in:

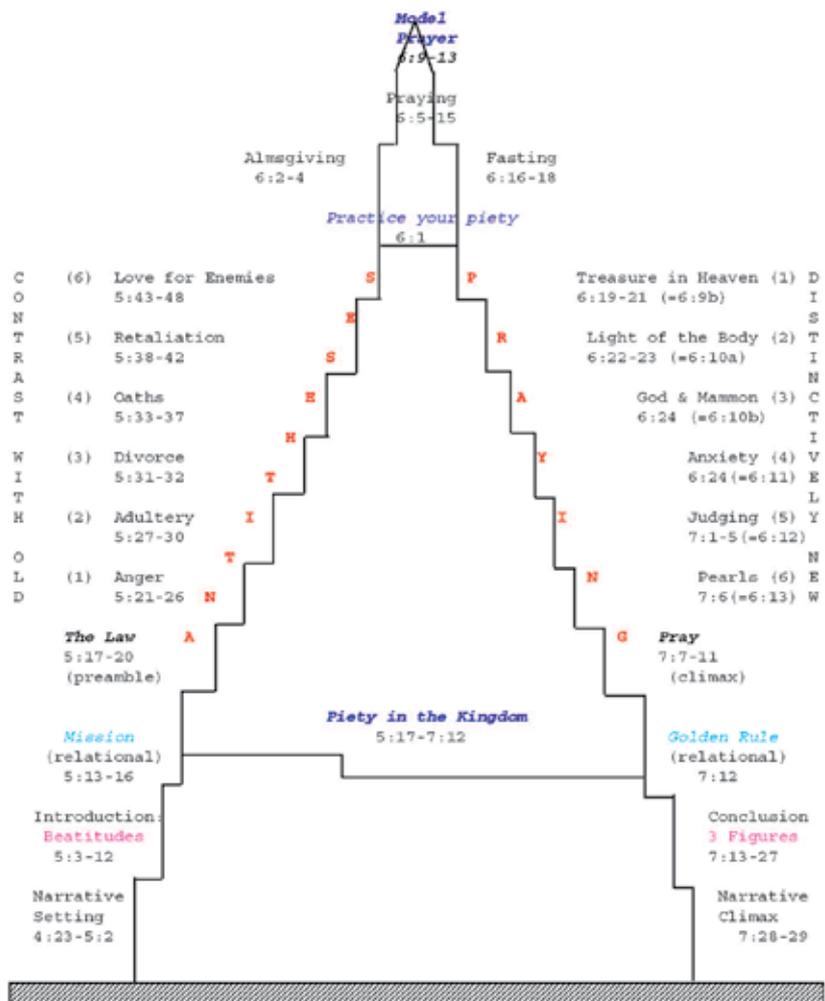
As discussed above in point 3.1), the literary structure of a text is significant to the presentation of the groups of ideas by the writer. Understanding this structure is essential to accurate exegesis of the scripture. The level of detail along with the structural complexity of each is dramatically different in the two versions of the Sermon between Matthew and Luke.

### 1) Matthew 4:32-7:28

Matthew's summary presentation of the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon is a masterpiece of literary design. He carefully balances the narrative introduction (4:23-5:2) with the narrative conclusion (7:28-29). The introduction of the Sermon begins with

### The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lein L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.

<sup>11</sup>For a more detailed study see topic 2.1.1.5 The Gospel of Luke in the *Origin and History of the Bible* study series.

the summary portrait of a disciple in the Beatitudes (5:3-12). This is matched with an equally skillful invitation to become a disciple in the Conclusion in 7:13-27. The theme of mission to the world brackets the body of the sermon in 5:13-16 (salt and light) and 7:12 (golden rule).

The heart of the sermon is **piety in the Kingdom** (5:17-7:11). This is developed around a threefold set of 'three's' and 'six's.' Jesus idea of piety in the Kingdom stands *first* in a sixfold contrast with the Old Testament Torah (5:17-48). *Next*, even more dramatically piety in the Kingdom must be practiced in a significantly different way from that of the religious leaders of first century Judaism. A threefold contrast underscore how this works in almsgiving, prayer and fasting (6:1-18). Then, building off the sixfold set of petitions in the Lord's prayer in 6:9b-13), the *third* section of the Sermon applies our specific prayer petitions to discipleship obligations in a sixfold pattern in 6:19-7:11 with a dramatic call to pray like this as a disciple of Jesus (7:7-11). The heart of piety in the Kingdom of God as envisioned by Jesus is prayer. Everything leads up to it; and everything flows out of it. But this was not traditional Jewish praying. Rather, it was a radical new way of approaching God in prayer. It carried with it profound obligations of discipleship commitment and practice, if the praying were to be genuine before God.

Quite ingeniously, the twofold Torah structure in the Decalogue (obligations to God inseparably linked with obligations to others) are reproduced here in new creative fashion. Obligations to others (5:13-16; 7:12) bracket obligations to God (5:17-7:11). Additionally, the eight beatitudes of 5:3-12 are organized around the same twofold structure. Thus Jesus affirmed the basic validity of the Law of God especially in its core structure. The linking of religious devotion with ethical obligation to others was a distinctive of ancient Judaism not found elsewhere among the various religions of both the Old and New Testament eras. But Jesus continues this tradition as fundamental to Christian religious understanding. The Sermon is one place where this principle is strongly affirmed.

Matthew has crafted a beautiful portrait of discipleship as the foundation to what Jesus taught and advocated during his earthly ministry. With the Sermon we catch a glimpse into the very heart of Christ, who not only taught these concepts but lived them out more perfectly than anyone else ever has.

## 2) Luke 6:17-7:1

The literary craftsmanship of Luke in his version of the Sermon is not so dramatic as that found in Matthew. Literary balance is certainly present, but with the greatly abbreviated account it is not so profound as in Matthew.

The literary structural diagram below presents the thought flow arrangement of the eight pericopes in Luke's version of the Sermon. Careful balancing of related concepts is build into the structure, but at the narrative

setting level and the inside the content of the Sermon itself. The beatitudes as Introduction (6:20-23) are matched by the Conclusion in 6:46-49. The Woes in 6:24-26 are matched by Warnings in 6:43-45. Then the centerpoint of the Sermon is the twofold Loving Enemies (6:27-36) / Judging Others (6:37-42).

Again we get some feel for literary craftsmanship by both gospel writers. Each has their own target audience with specific needs. Both Matthew and Luke understood the teachings of Jesus to address those needs. And so the arrangement of their presentation of the Jesus materials is tailored to apply Jesus' teachings to their individual audience.

Once we gain some awareness of how both Matthew and Luke put together their summations of the preaching of Jesus, we have much greater appreciation not only for the marvelous spiritual insights of Jesus, but also a much greater appreciation for the literary and interpretative skills of both gospel writers in knowing how to interpret Jesus to their readers. This method is both accurate to the ideas of Jesus and helps their first century readers see just how relevant Jesus remains to their situation and spiritual needs. And He remains just as relevant today as He was in His own time.

### Literary Design of Luke 6:17-7:1a

