



The Sermon on the Mount Study
Bible Study Session 29
Matthew 7:28-29

Study By
Lorin L. Cranford
 cranfordville.com

Greek NT

28 Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τοὺς λόγους τούτους, ἐξεπλήσσοντο οἱ ὄχλοι ἐπὶ τῇ διδασκίᾳ αὐτοῦ· 29 ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων καὶ οὐκ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς αὐτῶν.

La Biblia de las Américas

28 Cuando Jesús terminó estas palabras, las multitudes se admiraban de su enseñanza; 29 porque les enseñaba como uno que tiene autoridad, y no como sus escribas.

NRSV

28 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, 29 for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

NLT

28 After Jesus finished speaking, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, 29 for he taught as one who had real authority -- quite unlike the teachers of religious law.

The Outline of the Text:¹

With this text we come to the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Such markers are common in Matthew as can be seen in 11:1, 13:53; 19:1 and 26:1.² The previous study on the two foundations brought the discourse section to an end, and this passage brings the narrative to a conclusion. As such, it parallels the narrative introduction in 5:1-2.

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Thus for more correct understanding both passages need to be examined together. The primary target audience for the sermon according to 5:2 was the disciples (i.e., ‘them’ equals ‘disciples’). The crowds gathered that day were ‘listening in’ on what Jesus was saying to the disciples as a secondary audience (as implied in 7:29). But when Matthew describes the reaction to these words of Jesus, he focuses attention on ‘the crowds’ (cf. 7:28), rather than the disciples. The disciples, already committed to Jesus and familiar with His teachings to some extent, had been impressed by Jesus’ teaching prior to listening to this message. Matthew’s objective also was to emphasize the impression that Jesus made on the wider Jewish audience, so that his readers some decades later could understand the popularity of Jesus with the masses of Jewish peasants in the early days of His public ministry. But, as the study below will demonstrate, this crowd response did not equate to a commitment to follow Jesus as a disciple. This reality raises several interesting questions about effective communication of one’s message to an audience.

This narrative formation by Matthew is somewhat like that in Luke³ but with important differences. Luke ties the initial setting details in v. 20a closer to the Summary Narrative in 6:17-19. Matthew presents a Summary Narrative prior to the Narrative Introduction in 4:23-25⁴ but with limited connection between the two units of text.

¹Serious 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.

²Mt. 11:1 (NRSV): “1 *Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples*, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.”

Mt. 13:53 (NRSV): “53 *When Jesus had finished these parables*, he left that place.”

Mt. 19:1 (NRSV): “1 *When Jesus had finished saying these things*, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.”

Mt. 26:1 (NRSV): “1 *When Jesus had finished saying all these things*, he said to his disciples,”

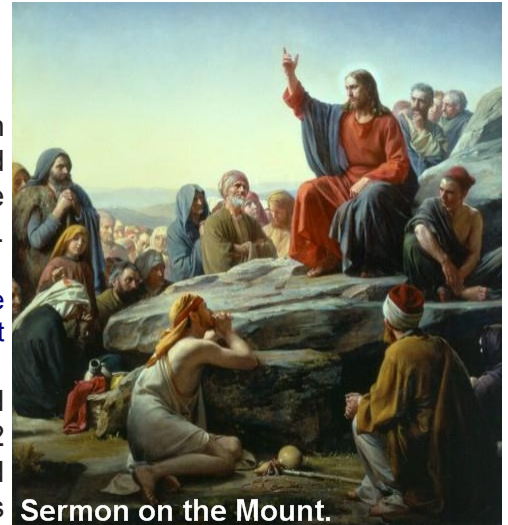
³Cf. Luke 6:17-7:1.

Narrative Introduction, 6:17-20a: 17 He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. 18 They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. 19 And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. 20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:...

Text of the Sermon: 6:20b-49

Narrative Conclusion, 7:1: After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.

⁴NRSV: 23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing



Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew in targeting a Jewish Christian readership of his gospel stresses the traditional Jewish aspects much more prominently such as the mountain, sitting posture of Jesus etc. Both gospel writers signal that the Sermon was directed to the disciples, while a larger crowd was present and also listening to what Jesus said.

Luke closes his narration of the Sermon by mentioning simply that Jesus finished speaking ‘in the hearing of the people’ (εἰς τὰς ἀκοὰς τοῦ λαοῦ) and then left for Capernaum. Both Luke and Matthew focus on the crowd rather than either Jesus or the disciples in their Narrative Conclusion. But Matthew highlights the response of the crowds to Jesus while Luke simply mentions that they heard what Jesus said, which is the first signal by Luke that the crowds were listeners to the words of Jesus along with the disciples.

Why Matthew chooses to stress the response of the crowds is not certain. It very well could have something to do with his Markan source for much of his gospel narrative. In Mark 1:22, virtually the exact phraseology is found: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”⁵ Although the setting for the two narratives is different, the reaction of listeners to Jesus’ words are depicted exactly the same way.⁶

As the block diagram below visually illustrates, the single sentence of the Greek text naturally falls into two sections: 1) a statement and 2) the reason for the statement. This will form the organizing structure of our study.

I. Reaction to Jesus’ teaching, v. 28.

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching,

Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τοὺς λόγους τούτους, ἐξεπλήσσαντο οἱ ὄχλοι ἐπὶ τῇ διδασκίᾳ αὐτοῦ.

The way Matthew introduces the crowd response is significant: Καὶ ἐγένετο. This more formal, Jewish pattern is used by the gospel writer to end all five of the major discourses in his gospel.⁷ Thus it has stylistic importance for Matthew in order to signal the end of a major set of teaching, i.e., discourse, material in the gospel. From a literary aspect, Matthew has organized his story of Jesus about five major speeches of Jesus in the then popular Jewish pattern of the ‘five books of Moses.’⁸ This first introductory discourse has now ended.

every disease and every sickness among the people. 24 So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. 25 And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

⁵Mk. 1:22: καὶ ἐξεπλήσσαντο ἐπὶ τῇ διδασκίᾳ αὐτοῦ· ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς.

Mt. 7:28-29: 28 Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τοὺς λόγους τούτους, ἐξεπλήσσαντο οἱ ὄχλοι ἐπὶ τῇ διδασκίᾳ αὐτοῦ· 29 ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς αὐτῶν.

⁶The Lukan parallel to Mk. 1:22 in Lk. 4:31-32 makes a similar point: 31 He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the sabbath. 32 *They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority.* [καὶ ἐξεπλήσσαντο ἐπὶ τῇ διδασκίᾳ αὐτοῦ, ὅτι ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ ἦν ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ.]

⁷Compare Num 16:31; Deut 31:1 LXX; 31:24; 32:45; Jer 26:8. Particularly close is 2 Bar 87:1: ‘And it came to pass when I had ended all the words of this epistle ...’. Matthew repeats his closing formula five times, at the end of each major discourse (5–7, 10, 13, 18, 24–5). On the Semitism, καὶ ἐγένετο, see p. 82.” [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 725]

⁸Cf. Lorin Cranford, “Literary Outline: The Gospel according to Matthew,” cranfordville.com.

The Prologue Matt. 1-2

Book One: The Son begins to proclaim the Kingdom Matt. 3:1-7:29

Narrative: Beginnings of the ministry Matt. 3:1-4:25

Discourse: The Sermon on the Mount Matt. 5:1-7:29

Book Two: The mission of Jesus and his disciples in Galilee Matt. 8:1-11:1

Narrative: The cycle of nine miracle stories Matt. 8:1-9:38

Discourse: The mission, past and future Matt. 10:1-11:1

Book Three: Jesus meets opposition from Israel Matt. 11:2-13:53

Narrative: Jesus disputes with Israel and condemns it Matt. 11:2-12:50

Discourse: Jesus withdraws from Israel into parabolic speech Matt. 13:1-53

Book Four: The Messiah forms his church and prophesies his passion Matt. 13:54-18:35

Narrative: The itinerant Jesus prepares for the church by his deeds Matt. 13:54-17:27

Discourse: Church life and order Matt. 18:1-35

Book Five: The Messiah and his church on the way to the passion Matt. 19:1-25:46

Narrative: Jesus leads his disciples to the cross as he confounds his enemies. Matt. 19:1-23:29

Discourse: The Last Judgment Matt. 24-25

The Climax: Death-Resurrection Matt. 26-28

From Wednesday to Thursday night Matt. 26:1-75

From Friday morning to Saturday Matt. 27:1-66

From Sunday to the End of the Age Matt. 28:1-20

Matthew injects himself back into the narrative as the narrator offering his comments on the scene that he is painting. Jesus finished what he wanted to say to the disciples. Interestingly, Matthew characterizes the Sermon as τοὺς λόγους τούτους ('these words'), while Luke labels them πάντα τὰ ῥήματα αὐτοῦ ('all his words'). Luke's phraseology stresses the oral delivery of words more than does Matthew's. Additionally, Matthew also labels the words of the Sermon as τῆ διδασχῆ αὐτοῦ ('his teaching'). Note that the typical words for preaching⁹ over against teaching are not used by Matthew to define the Sermon. The major significance of that is to point to the disciples as the target of the Sermon, rather than to the crowds. Jesus was speaking to 'insiders' while allowing 'outsiders' to listen in to His words.

The reaction of the crowds is the primary point of Matthew's initial declaration. The heart of their response was ongoing shock as denoted by the Greek verb ἐξεπλήσσαντο. This verb is closely related to fear and may very well suggest also that the concluding words about final judgment created intense uncomfortableness at the prospect of facing God in judgment.¹⁰ The imperfect tense of the Greek verb stresses ongoing reaction, not just an initial reaction that soon faded away. The crowds listened and became uncomfortable with what they heard, and this uncomfortableness lingered for some time after they returned back to their homes.

The way the ancient world depicted emotional reactions is significantly different than in the modern western world. Just in the Greek New Testament alone, some seventeen different Greek word groups are used to express various understandings of surprise and astonishment.¹¹ The verb used here ἐκπλήσσομαι connotes the idea of shock coupled with fear that leads a person to move away from the source of this emotion.¹² The sense of 'overwhelmedness' can be driven by recognition of being in the presence of the Divine, or negatively it can be driven solely by a sense of fearing danger to one's life. Matthew's use of the term not only here, but to mark the end of all five discourse sections in his gospel is focused primarily on the first meaning of sensing the presence of God in the teaching of Jesus. And this intuition led to lingering uncomfortableness, thus the use of the imperfect tense of the verb. Matthew seems to be saying to this readers many years afterward that folks who heard Jesus speak clearly recognized the presence of God in His words. But the strict demands contained in those words often proved more than they were willing to commit to and thus there was considerable uncomfortableness felt from Jesus' words. For the disciples, prior commitment to Jesus and acceptance of His demands were already present and so their reaction would have been different from that of the crowds of people present.

This focus on the disciples has interpretive implications as were raised in Study One on the Sermon. The Sermon is not an evangelistic tool; instead, it is a discipleship channel. The assumption of the Sermon is that listeners are already 'disciples' and are seeking to understand how to live in the Kingdom a life that is pleasing to God and that will prepare them to successfully face Almighty God in final judgment. That it can speak to 'outsiders' is unquestioned, but that is not its basic objective. Thus Gerhard Kittel's interpretive perspective completely misses the mark. Equally off the mark is the Dispensational relegation of the Sermon to a supposed thousand year reign of Christ, along with Albert Schweitzer's mistaken notion of a Plan B option of Jesus. As the study of the text of the Sermon has consistently shown, the interpretive views that see the Sermon as 'good works' miss the mark as well.

The Sermon begins with commitment to Jesus as the Teacher of the Sermon. In the posture of commitment

⁹These include the κηρύσσω and εὐαγγελίζω word groups. .

¹⁰ἐξεπλήσσαντο οἱ ὄχλοι ἐπὶ τῇ διδασχῆ αὐτοῦ. This phrase, borrowed from Mk 1:22, appears again (slightly modified) in the redactional 22:33. Compare also Mk 11:18; Lk 4:32; Acts 13:12. In Mark and Luke, the verb, ἐκπλήσσω, sometimes refers to the reaction that naturally follows an extraordinary event or miracle (Mk 7:37; Lk 2:48; 9:43). This is never so in Matthew's gospel, where the word is reserved exclusively for the response provoked by Jesus' words (7:28; 13:54; 19:25; 22:33). The addition by Matthew of ὄχλος (cf. 4:25; 5:1) displaces the impersonal plural of Mk 1:22. The disciples, oddly enough, are not mentioned. We do not hear that they too were amazed.

"The passive of ἐκπλήσσω can mean to be 'amazed' or 'overwhelmed' either with wonder, as in 13:54, or with fright, as in 19:25 (cf. BAGD, s.v.). Because both meanings are appropriate to 7:28-9, maybe the distinction just made should here be abandoned. If Jesus' teaching would cause wonder because of its novelty (cf. Mk 1:27; Jn 7:46; and see below),⁵¹ it would also, given that the note of judgment has been rung so loudly at the end of chapter 7, be natural for people to react with fear. (The imperfect tense has the force of indicating continued amazement or wonder, as though the people returned to their homes still pondering what it all meant.)" [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 728]

¹¹See topics 25.206 - 25.222 in Johannes P. Louw, and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition, (New York: United Bible societies, 1996), for a listing and discussion of these words.

¹²"The primary meaning of ὀεκπλήσσει is to strike out or expel." [Colin Brown, vol. 1, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 529.]

to Him, one then hears His words giving direction and definition to foundational principle of discipleship under the rule of God over one's life. This perspective corrects a distortion often made of Paul that salvation is defined solely as an faith commitment initial rite publicly affirmed in baptism. Salvation begins with this commitment, but this is only the starting point. The Pauline concept of the lordship of Jesus corresponds clearly to the principles of the Sermon that faith MUST be lived out in consistent obedience to Christ if it is genuine. James in his infamous 'faith and works' emphasis in Jas. 2:14-26 has elaborated on the Sermon at just this point.

Properly interpreted Jesus' words do come at the listener with 'gang buster' force and demand. When the listener is unprepared to acknowledge the presence of God in these words, and to commit to obeying them, the consequence will be the same sense of uncomfortableness experienced by the crowds of people who first heard these words of the Sermon.

II. Basis of the reaction, v. 29

for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς αὐτῶν.

The foundation of the people's astonishment at Jesus' teaching was the authority with which He spoke. Matthew's point is clearly that divine authorization penetrated these words of Jesus so that they came though with the Heavenly Father's stamp of approval clearly evident to the listeners. To the disciples already committed to Jesus as God's Son and Messiah, this authority was not a surprise. But to the 'outsiders' curious about Jesus, this tone of divine authorization was quite surprising.

The meaning of ἐξουσία, 'authority,' is authorization by God to speak His words to people.¹³ Thus Jesus' words push the listener to make a decision not about agreeing or disagreeing with the words that are heard. Instead, the listeners are pushed to accept or reject the divine authorization of the Teacher to speak such words. Is Jesus the Son of God or not? This was at the heart of their decision. And probably a part of what made them uncomfortable from hearing these words.

It stood in stark contrast to what they often heard from the Jewish scribes in the temple and in the synagogues. In part, the words taught by the scribes focused attention on the scribal interpretative perspective on the Old Testament Law. One could easily agree or disagree that the scribe correctly interpreted the scripture text. And the ancient scribal teaching style invited debate and discussion. But with Jesus' words in the Sermon, the focus is on Him and His claim to speak directly from God, even at a level higher than did Moses. Thus the listener is forced to accept or reject the Teacher, not just His words.

How many accepted Jesus from this Sermon? From the astonishment of the crowds, one cannot conclude any converts, for the verb ἐξεπλήσθησαν carries no suggestion of discipleship commitment as an outcome of listening to Him. They were impressed but whether that turned into discipleship commitment the text doesn't say. In fact the subsequent pericopes following the Sermon in chapters eight and nine stress growing opposition to Jesus. Particularly important is the so-called 'Would-be Followers of Jesus' pericope in 8:18-22 clearly implying that many were not prepared to make the required commitment to Jesus.

Was Jesus an effective communicator of His message? By some modern criteria, he was not. If positive results are the measuring standard of success, then Jesus failed in the Sermon. But if success is measured by putting clearly and unquestionably the words of God before an audience is the standard of evaluation, then Jesus was a resounding success. Furthermore, from the text itself no indication is present that a single person became a follower of Jesus that day. Perhaps later on some concluded that He did speak the truth of God and then they became disciples, but we have no direct indication in scripture of this.

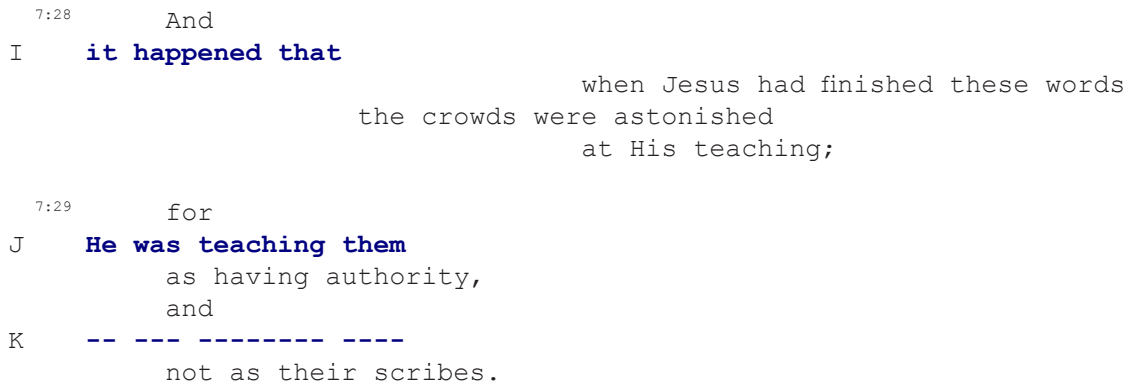
Why didn't Jesus modify his message in order to get a substantial batch of new disciples that day? After all, he was in the early stages of public ministry, and needed a growing group of followers. Most modern preachers

¹³“The consistent element in this teaching that caused the astonishment was the ἐξουσία, ‘authority,’ it presupposed. Unlike οἱ γραμματεῖς αὐτῶν, ‘their scribes,’ who taught not with a sense of their own authority but in heavy dependence upon the traditions of earlier teachers and somewhat diffidently, Jesus set forth his teaching with unique conviction and authority (cf. ‘But I say to you’: 5:22, 28, 32, 39, 44; ‘these my words’: 7:24, 26). Nor does his teaching consist mainly of the exegesis of the text of Torah; it is preeminently his own words that are authoritative. This unique ἐξουσία is, as the reader of Matthew knows, the result of the true identity of Jesus. It emerges repeatedly in Matthew (as in the other Synoptics) in relation to Jesus’ deeds (9:6, 8; 21:33), is given in turn to the disciples (10:1), and given by implication to the Church of every age (28:18), where the risen Lord commissions his disciples to make disciples of all nations. Matthew’s addition of ‘their’ (αὐτῶν) to ‘scribes’ indicates a distance between the Jewish Christians of Matthew’s community and the rabbinic authorities of the synagogue. It thus has an unmistakable polemical tone reflecting the growing hostility between the synagogue and the church.” [Donald A. Hagner, vol. 33A, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 193-94.]

do this. In reality, the Lord considered faithfulness to God's leadership more important! This suggests a strong lesson for our day, when success can be measured by artificial standards and thus hide the spiritual reality of what is taking place. To be sure, sometimes a large immediate response to the preaching of the Gospel did happen in the early church as Acts chapters one through six make abundantly clear. But this was the exception, rather than the norm for early Christianity, as the missionary activity of Paul in Acts eleven through twenty-eight makes very clear. Both Peter and Paul followed the example of Jesus by concentrating on preaching the words of God and then trusting God to use those words in what ever way He deemed appropriate for the situation. Faithfulness to the words of the Gospel was their standard of success or failure. And it should be ours as well!

Diagram of the Sermon on the Mount Mt. 7:28-29

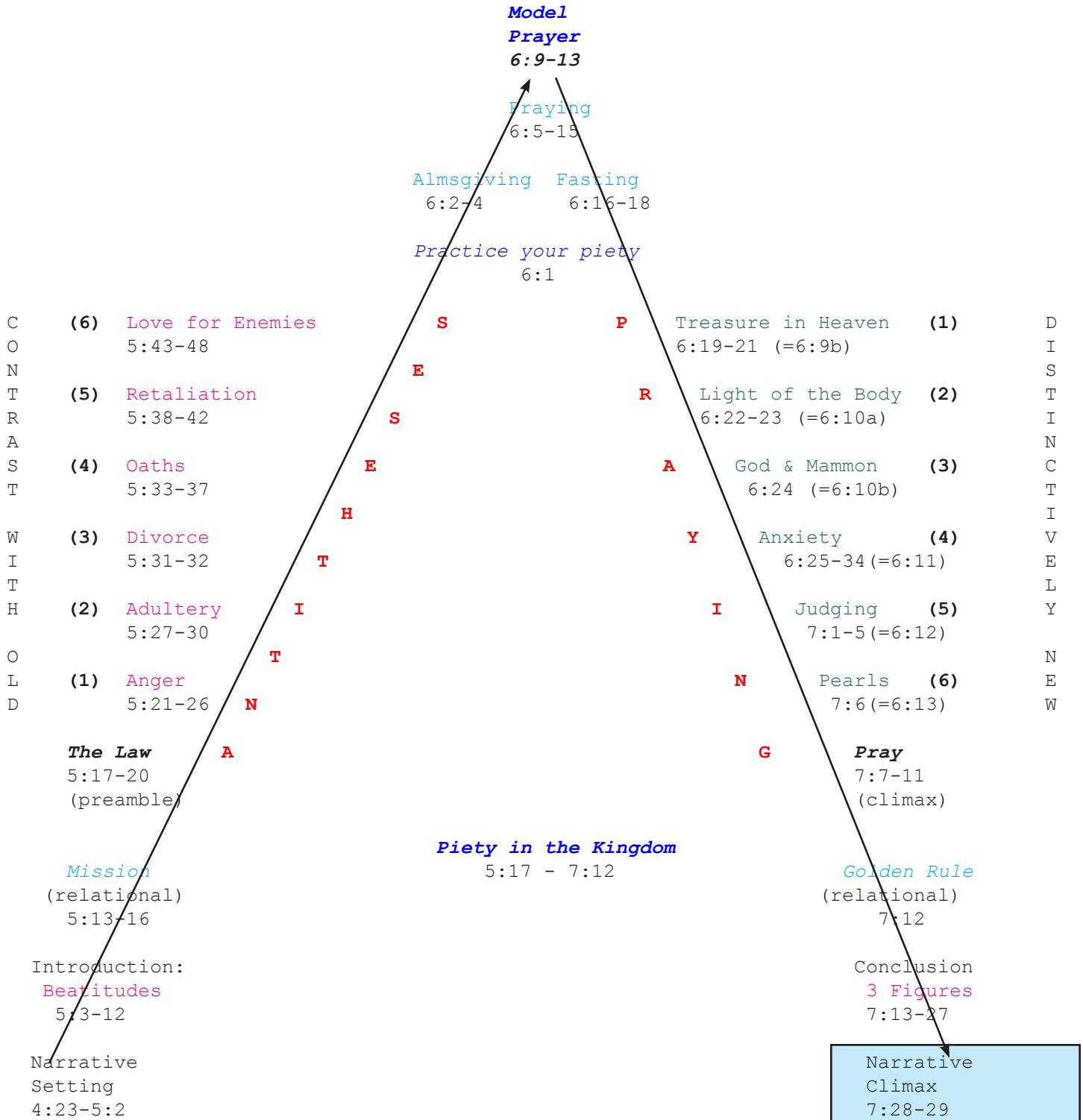
The internal organization of ideas is rather clear and easy to grasp. The following block diagram of the underlying Greek text illustrates visually this arrangement of ideas.



The over arching structure is clear. Matthew begins with a declaration of the response of the crowds when Jesus finished teaching (statement # I). This is followed by stating a reason for this response (statements J and K).

The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lorin 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.