

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

by

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While the Sermon on the Mount is one of the most familiar passages in the Word of God, there is great diversity of opinion among scholars as to its interpretation and application. The author has attempted to provide an analysis of this passage which is not only grammatically and theologically acceptable, but which is also contextually consistent. This has been accomplished through an examination of the purpose, the recipients and the applicational period of the Sermon on the Mount.

The purpose of the passage has been viewed in two basic ways by evangelical conservatives. The first, held by many dispensationalists, views Matthew 5-7 as a description of the conduct which will be required during the Millennium. The second views it as the description of godly characteristics which are to be manifested by God's children. When coupled with the recipients and the interpretational period of the passage, the Sermon on the Mount is concluded to be the description of the character of Kingdom citizens in any age, since its delivery.

There are also two major opinions as to the identity of the recipients of the Sermon on the Mount. The first considers the multitudes as the recipients since they are mentioned in the introduction and the conclusion of the passage. However, if this approach is adopted several major difficulties arise. First, Matthew 5-7 would be teaching the universal fatherhood of God since Jesus referred to God as the "Father" of the recipients no less than 16 times in the passage. In addition, if the passage was delivered to the multitudes, then an unbeliever is able to fulfill the teachings contained in it in his present condition. Both of these difficulties are theologically unacceptable. The second major opinion views the recipients as the disciples, with the multitudes listening to the discourse. This view is grammatically and theologically preferable.

The applicational period of the passage is the most disputed issue among evangelicals today. Dispensationalists usually apply it directly to the Millennium, or to the Tribulation or to some combination of the two. Nondispensationalists usually insist that Matthew 5-7 deals primarily with the Church. It is the conclusion of this thesis that both approaches are too restricted. Actually, the passage describes the character of Kingdom citizens in any age. With regard to the evil conditions and actions described in Matthew 5-7, however, the discourse finds primary fulfillment during the Interregnum Period.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . . 1

Chapter

I. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION . . . . . 6

    Ante-Nicene Fathers

    Post-Nicene Fathers

    Roman Catholicism

    Reformation

    Liberalism

    Judaism

    Modern Ecclesiological

    Dispensationalism

II. PREMILLENNIAL INTERPRETATIONS . . . . . 16

    Kingdom Fulfillment View

    Kingdom Anticipation View

    Kingdom Anticipation-Fulfillment View

III. IDENTIFICATION OF THE RECIPIENTS . . . . . 22

    The Multitudes

    The Disciples

    Grammatical Considerations

    Contextual Considerations

    Identification of the Disciples

    Significance of the Recipients

IV. AN ALTERNATE PREMILLENNIAL VIEW . . . . . 38

    The Nature of the Discourse

    Jewish Language in the Discourse

    Matthew 5-7 and the Millennium

    Matthew 5-7 and the Interregnum

CONCLUSION . . . . . 52

. . . . .

BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . . 54

## INTRODUCTION

There are few passages in the Word of God which are as familiar as the Sermon on the Mount. Numerous scholars have attempted to interpret and apply this portion of the Bible. Consequently, commentaries on Matthew, works on Christian ethics, New Testament theologies, sources on the Kingdom of God and individual treatments on the Sermon itself present the serious student with an overwhelming amount of resources. This thesis is not simply an effort to add to the existing materials, but rather to provide an acceptable analysis of Matthew 5-7, especially with reference to the purpose and the recipients of the discourse.

### The Need of the Study

Indeed, if there are many available sources which deal with the Sermon on the Mount, then what is the need for an additional study? The author of this work is dispensational in his theology and premillennial in his eschatology, and yet he is not completely satisfied with the dispensational and premillennial approaches which are offered. In addition, however, it should be noted that the dispensational views of this passage are generally misrepresented by nondispensationalists.

For example, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones describes the dispensational approach in the following manner:

That is the teaching; it says, in effect, that the Sermon on the Mount has nothing to do with us. It is meant 'for the kingdom age.' It was meant for the people to whom He was preaching; it will be meant again in the millennial age. It is the law of that age and of the kingdom of heaven, and has nothing whatsoever to do with Christians in the meantime.<sup>1</sup>

This depiction of the dispensational view is definitely inaccurate. While the majority of dispensationalists agree that the primary fulfillment of the Sermon will be realized in the Messianic kingdom,<sup>2</sup> it is relevant in this age as well.

Charles C. Ryrie insists that "since it is one of the most detailed ethical codes in the Bible it has a special application to men's lives in any age . . . one must never miss its importance in application to the Church today."<sup>3</sup> As this thesis endeavors to supply an acceptable view that harmonizes with dispensational premillennialism, it will also accurately represent the dispensational views which are frequently misquoted.

#### The Problems of the Study

Basically, there are three problems which this study seeks to solve. These will be delineated in interrogative form. First, what is the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount?

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<sup>1</sup>D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 14-15.

<sup>2</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), pp. 107-108.

<sup>3</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), p. 82.

Second, who are the recipients of this well-known discourse? And finally, when is the Sermon on the Mount to be directly applied?

The purpose of the Sermon on the Mount will be discussed for that will affect one's view of the Sermon's recipients and its direct application. The two major possibilities for the purpose include either the description of the character of kingdom citizens in the Millennium, or the disclosure of the character of kingdom citizens in any age, including the present age.

To determine the recipients of this passage, Matthew 5:1,2; 7:28,29 will be examined in light of the internal contents of the entire discourse. Both the multitudes and the disciples are mentioned in the introduction of the passage. Obviously, one's understanding as to the identity of the recipients will greatly affect the overall interpretation and analysis of Matthew 5-7.

Of course, the age (or ages) in which the Sermon on the Mount directly applies is the most disputed issue among evangelicals today. Does it find direct fulfillment in the Church age, in the Messianic Kingdom, or in some combination of the two? In other words, one needs to ascertain whether it deals primarily with the Church, with the regenerated nation of Israel, or with both.

### The Procedure of the Study

In order to satisfy the need of the study and solve the problems of the study, the following procedure will be pursued. First, there will be a brief survey of the history of interpretation of Matthew 5-7. In this section various representatives from Church history will be examined. Particular care will be taken to distinguish modern dispensationalism from its rigid predecessor.

Next, a discussion of the three major premillennial interpretations will follow. The strengths and weaknesses of each will be analyzed as much as is possible. Each view is premillennial in its eschatology, but they differ as to the time when the Sermon on the Mount is to be directly applied.

Then the recipients of the discourse will actually be identified. The identity of these recipients represents one of the principal keys needed to unlock the meaning and significance of the passage. Matthew 5:1 offers two possibilities, τοὺς ὄχλους or οἱ μαθηταί. While either is grammatically possible, theological considerations based upon the internal evidence of the Sermon help to solidify the choice.

After this, an alternative to the premillennial interpretations discussed in the second chapter will be offered. Prior to the conclusion, this view will be discussed in light of modern dispensationalism. Areas of agreement and disagreement will be highlighted to demonstrate several

reasons for the present convictions of the author regarding the Sermon on the Mount.

## CHAPTER I

### HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

The purpose of this section is not to give an exhaustive survey of the history of interpretation with reference to the Sermon on the Mount. Such an undertaking would not be possible considering the scope of this paper. Rather, a brief survey will be presented in order to demonstrate the extensive variety of views which this passage of Scripture has generated. However, accompanying this variety of approaches there is one interpretive characteristic which has been generally held throughout the history of the Church.

#### Ante-Nicene Fathers

While the Ante-Nicene Fathers were less than infallible in their interpretation of the Bible, their works are valuable in that they describe how the early Church applied various passages of the Word of God. This is especially significant with respect to the Sermon on the Mount. "Anyone who has the curiosity and patience to study the indices of Biblical quotations in the Church Fathers of the first 3 centuries will discover that Matthew 5 was quoted far more frequently than any other chapter in the Bible, while chapters 5-7 were quoted

more frequently than any other 3 consecutive chapters."<sup>1</sup> The use of Matthew 5-7 in catechetical collections in the early Church stresses the importance of this passage in the instruction of young converts.<sup>2</sup>

Frequent references to the Gospels in general, and specifically to Matthew 5-7, suggest that the Ante-Nicene Fathers directly applied much contained in the Gospels to the Church Age. Certainly, the majority of them took this approach to the Sermon on the Mount.

#### Post-Nicene Fathers

In general, the Post-Nicene Fathers agreed with their predecessors in evaluating Jesus Christ's greatest discourse. For example, Chrysostom, who is recognized as the greatest preacher in the Post-Nicene age, believed that the Sermon on the Mount was certainly intended for all Christians.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Augustine, the greatest theologian of this period, was convinced that Matthew 5-7 depicted God's perfect standard for believers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Harvey K. McArthur, Understanding the Sermon on the Mount (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup>Ralph P. Martin, New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), p. 224.

<sup>3</sup>The Preaching of Chrysostom: Homilies on the Sermon on the Mount, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup>Warren S. Kissinger, The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975), p. 13.

### Roman Catholicism

Basically, the Roman Catholic Church, especially during the Medieval Period, viewed the Sermon as a Christian ethic of perfection which could be achieved by the clergy alone. This served to widen the gap between the clergy and the laity.

### Reformation

Towering above their contemporaries in the Reformation were Martin Luther and John Calvin. Their impact is measured by their works which, in turn, became the viewpoint of the masses. Both wrote in opposition to the Roman Catholic position, yet they also denounced the literal approach taken by the Anabaptists. These Reformers recognized the validity of the discourse, but maintained that the church must be viewed as continuous with society. As a result, they did not literally interpret the Sermon; rather they viewed it in light of the maintenance of the state and the social order.<sup>1</sup>

Since the Anabaptists held to the separation of church and state, they were able to overcome the Reformers' inability to literally apply the imperatives contained in Matthew 5-7. They strictly adhered to Jesus Christ's commands concerning nonresistance, love of enemies and oaths. They viewed the Sermon on the Mount as a charter for the Christian life, and they patterned their lives after the teaching of Christ even

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

though it often resulted in martyrdom.<sup>1</sup>

### Liberalism

The rise of liberalism in the nineteenth century brought yet another approach to the Sermon on the Mount. Instead of ascertaining moral obligations from the passage, liberals view it as containing a salvation ethic. In other words, Matthew 5-7 is not descriptive of the expected behavior of believers, rather it delivers the lifestyle which, if obeyed, will result in salvation. This position, held by men like Brewster and Harnack,<sup>2</sup> is to be categorically rejected!

The liberal interpretation views the Sermon as the key to personal salvation, as well as the key to cultural salvation. "The liberal view holds that literal fulfillment of the Sermon was intended by Jesus, that such fulfillment is possible to human beings in their present condition, and that the Sermon remains a practical ethical program for the ideal development of mankind."<sup>3</sup> This is presented under the banner of the "social gospel," which postulates that adherence to the Sermon on the Mount will usher in the Kingdom of God. It should be noted that this is not the purpose of the Sermon,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 33-34.

<sup>2</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, Christian Personal Ethics (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 282.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

and that God alone is capable of setting up His Kingdom. Obviously, the "social gospel" approach to the Sermon on the Mount is also unacceptable.

### Judaism

Although Orthodox Judaism generally rejects the value of anything found in the New Testament, there are some Jewish scholars that do not take this position. For instance, Gerald Friedlander accepts those portions of Matthew 5-7 which are rooted in the Old Testament and Rabbinic literature.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, he rejects anything which has no parallel in Jewish sources.

Claude G. Montefiore represents "liberal" Judaism and has a high regard for this great discourse. This is due to the lack of any material which is essentially antagonistic to Judaism and the omission of Christological references with regard to salvation. Consequently, it serves as a forum in which both Christian and Jew can interact.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this position necessarily rejects the majority of New Testament doctrine in order to arrive at this conclusion.

### Modern Ecclesiological

Throughout the Church age many have directly applied the principles contained in the Sermon on the Mount. This

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<sup>1</sup>Kissinger, The Sermon on the Mount, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

persuasion is also popular at the present time. Representatives such as John R. W. Stott<sup>1</sup> and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones<sup>2</sup> emphasize that Matthew 5-7 applies directly to Christians since it describes the character of God which is to be manifested in every true believer. The moral principles are especially stressed in the context of personal relationships, in contrast with national or political concerns. In general, this approach is completely opposed to the dispensational view which will now be examined.

### Dispensationalism

Although this view of the Sermon on the Mount is the final one to be considered, it is by no means the most recent. Critics of this view, however, often assert that it is recent in development, and therefore undesirable. "Originating with the Plymouth Brethren and associated especially with the names of J. N. Darby (1800-1882) and William Kelly (1821-1906), this particular premillennial interpretation has been known as dispensationalism . . ." <sup>3</sup> In his book Dispensationalism Today, Charles Ryrie demonstrates that although dispensationalism is recent in origin as a system of theology,

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<sup>1</sup>John R. W. Stott, Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1978), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>Lloyd-Jones, Studies, 1, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>George Eldon Ladd, Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), pp. 48-49.

dispensational concepts were held by men long before the time of Darby and Kelly. The key to determine the validity of this theological system is not its historicity, but rather its support from the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup>

There are three indispensable components of dispensationalism and they include: (1) the distinction between Israel and the Church, (2) consistent use of the literal principle of interpretation, and (3) recognition of the underlying purpose of God as the glory of God.<sup>2</sup> The first component is the overall distinctive of this theological system. Dispensationalism views the Sermon on the Mount as being directed to the nation of Israel in conjunction with an offer of the Kingdom. Primary fulfillment will be realized during the Millennium.

At this juncture, the development of the dispensational interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount should be discussed. In order to facilitate this discussion the definition of a dispensation will now be provided. "A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose."<sup>3</sup> A dispensation, then, deals with the arrangement used by God to complete His purpose. While time periods are involved, they do not constitute the foundation of a

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<sup>1</sup>Ryrie, Dispensationalism, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

dispensation contrary to popular opinion.

In general, the early dispensationalists were more rigid in their approach to Matthew 5-7 than modern dispensationalists. "This discourse is no more related to the Church than the Messianic, Davidic, earthly kingdom is related to the Church, and those who apply it to the Church seem little aware of the problems which are involved."<sup>1</sup> Statements such as this one are usually quoted, or misquoted, by nondispensationalists who wish to document the dispensational interpretation. Usually, men like L. S. Chafer and C. I. Scofield would supplement such statements by quoting 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." However, these limited references failed to provide the balance which characterizes modern dispensationalism.<sup>2</sup>

John Walvoord, President of Dallas Theological Seminary, exhibits this balance in his dispensational approach. The Sermon has primary fulfillment in the Millennium, but it is also relevant in the present age. "While it is clear that

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<sup>1</sup>Lewis S. Chafer, Systematic Theology, Volume V (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1976), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that this transition in the dispensational approach to the Sermon on the Mount has been reflected in The New Scofield Reference Bible. Certain statements found in the footnotes of the original edition such as "the Sermon on the Mount in its primary application gives neither the privilege nor the duty of the Church" (p. 1000), have been changed considerably. This particular statement is often quoted by critics of the dispensational approach, yet it does not accurately represent the modern view.

the epistles are more precise in delineating the particular responsibility and privilege of Christians in the present age, it would hardly be fitting for Matthew, writing this gospel many years after the death of Christ, to introduce material which would be irrelevant to his contemporaries."<sup>1</sup> Walvoord then draws this conclusion,

This address can hardly be viewed as only prophetic, and it is clear that Jesus expected immediate response from His hearers, not simply acquiescence that He was telling the truth. Accordingly, the study of the Sermon on the Mount yields its treasures to those who analyze each text, determining its general meaning, its present application, and its relation to the future kingdom program.<sup>2</sup>

Walvoord clearly demonstrates that this passage is not to be ignored by Christians, but rather its moral and ethical principles are to be followed, since they are relevant today.

#### General Observations

While this survey of the history of interpretation of Matthew 5-7 is admittedly brief, it does provide interesting information. Throughout the history of the Church, the Sermon on the Mount has been generally applied directly to Christians. Although historical interpretation is by no means authoritative, it is to be examined and considered.

The major problem with those views which apply the passage directly in the Church age is that they usually assert

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<sup>1</sup>John F. Walvoord, Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

that the Sermon on the Mount was given not only for the Church, but to the Church, as represented by the disciples. This author has seen few approaches of this kind which have adequately dealt with the recipients and significance of the Sermon. In addition, the distinctively Jewish language is rarely handled by those who assert that the passage is Church truth. Consequently, these problems will be discussed and analyzed when the author's approach is presented.

## CHAPTER II

### PREMILLENNIAL INTERPRETATIONS

The author has previously identified himself as a dispensational premillennialist. However, none of the three main approaches of dispensational premillennialists to the Sermon on the Mount have been totally acceptable. This chapter is designed to accurately relate and evaluate these three<sup>1</sup> views. While there are points of disagreement between the author and these positions, this is not to be construed as any kind of negative reflection upon the individuals who hold them.

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<sup>1</sup>A fourth view, known as the "historical kingdom offer," will be explained here. Basically, this approach maintains that the Sermon on the Mount was delivered to the nation of Israel as a description of the characteristics which would have been in force had Israel accepted Jesus Christ's offer of the Kingdom. This position does not recognize any future fulfillment of Matthew 5-7 and is quite limited in scope. The author is unaware of any dispensationalist who might presently support this approach. It is mentioned because this aspect of the interpretation of the passage is held in common by the three major premillennial approaches to the Sermon on the Mount. It should be noted that, in general, nondispensationalists do not distinguish the three views described in this chapter. Rather, the dispensational approach is usually described with reference to the "Kingdom Fulfillment View." While these three views have elements in common, the differences involved require that they be differentiated and discussed separately. This variety, even among dispensationalists, tends to emphasize the diversity of opinion which has been occasioned by the passage.

### Kingdom Fulfillment View

Leading exponents of this approach, previously alluded to in the discussion of dispensationalism, include John F. Walvoord and Charles C. Ryrie. They maintain that the Sermon on the Mount is inseparably connected with Jesus Christ's offer of the Kingdom to the nation of Israel. "The Sermon accordingly must be understood in this eschatological context."<sup>1</sup> The Sermon is a description of the characteristics which will be expected during the Millennium. The offer was made to the nation and rejected. At the Second Advent of Christ the Kingdom will be offered again, and the regenerated nation of Israel will accept it. Thus, primary fulfillment of the teachings contained in Matthew 5-7 will be realized during the 1000 year reign of Christ upon the earth.

While this position identifies the interpretational period of the passage as the Millennium, "it does not in the least disregard the ethical principles of the Sermon as being not only applicable but also binding on believers today."<sup>2</sup> Again, this reflects the balance which characterizes the modern dispensationalists.

In order to accurately represent this interpretation, it is necessary to provide a quotation of some length. The following is an excerpt which supplies a four-fold

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, Matthew, p. 45. (Emphasis mine).

<sup>2</sup>Ryrie, Dispensationalism, p. 109.

consideration of the Sermon on the Mount:

(1) Basically and primarily it is a detailed explanation of what the Lord meant by repentance. It was a call to those who heard it to that inner change which they had dissociated from the requirements for the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. Therefore, (2) it has relevance to any time that the kingdom is offered, and that includes the days of the tribulation as well as the days when Christ spoke. But (3) it does picture certain aspects of life in the millennial kingdom and thus in a certain restricted sense is a sort of constitution of the kingdom. However (4) as all Scripture, it is profitable for any people, and since it is one of the most detailed ethical codes in the Bible it has a special application to men's lives in any age.<sup>1</sup>

#### Kingdom Anticipation View

This approach affirms that the Sermon on the Mount is directed to those who are in anticipation of the Kingdom.

"The Sermon on the Mount was directly given in connection with the inauguration of the Messianic Kingdom and with the expectation of a literal obedience by believing Jews who were anticipating the imminent establishment of the Kingdom during Christ's earthly ministry from the time the Sermon was delivered until His rejection was settled as well as future believing Jews who will be anticipating the coming again of the King and the establishment of His Kingdom during the last three and one half years of the tribulation period, though its principles of conduct are to be directly applied at all

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<sup>1</sup>Ryrie, Biblical Theology, pp. 81-82. Dr. Ryrie's consideration is quite similar to the "Kingdom Anticipation-Fulfillment View" but the emphasis of this third observation makes him representative of the "Kingdom Fulfillment View."

times by the true followers of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> Again, notice that this view recognizes the application of the Sermon's principles in any age.

Representatives of this position connect Matthew 5-7 with the offer of the Kingdom, rather than with the description of the Millennium itself.<sup>2</sup> This conclusion is drawn because the actions, circumstances and adverse conditions which are described in the Sermon do not correlate with the Biblical portrayal of the Messianic Kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, the author felt this view was unworthy of consideration. However, upon close scrutiny it has much in its favor. It recognizes the incompatibility of the Millennium with the conditions described in Matthew 5-7. Also, it considers the significance of the Jewish language which is employed in the Sermon.

On the other hand, this approach fails to address itself to several questions. Each view in this chapter insists that Matthew 5:23-24 is to be taken in a purely Jewish context. At the same time, Zimmerman states that the

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Zimmerman, "A Study on the Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount" (Unpublished Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana, 1965), p. 73.

<sup>2</sup>Dwight J. Pentecost, "The Purpose of the Sermon on the Mount," Bibliotheca Sacra, CXV (July, 1958), p. 134.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 135. The relation of the contents of the Sermon on the Mount to the Millennium will be discussed at length in Chapter IV. The author basically agrees with Pentecost that the Sermon does not describe conditions which will exist, and dominate, in the Kingdom.

Sermon will be in effect during the last half of the Tribulation. If this is true, then the reference cited above will have no direct fulfillment since the Antichrist causes temple worship and the sacrificial system to cease at the midpoint of the Tribulation. Yet, during the first half of the Tribulation, the Jews will be at peace and not persecuted.

In addition, this approach stresses that the passage is specifically addressed to believing Jews. What about Gentiles who are saved during the Tribulation? Will they not be part of the Messianic Kingdom? Unfortunately, this approach raises a few questions as it attempts to answer others.

#### Kingdom Anticipation-Fulfillment View

As the designation suggests, this approach combines the two previous views contained in the chapter. "It seems rather clear then that although the sermon will be primarily in force during the kingdom age and the tribulation which shall immediately precede, it also governed and motivated the lives of the disciples of Christ during His earthly ministry."<sup>1</sup> The combination approach is adopted because none of the three periods listed in the above quotation can be considered to hold the key to the interpretational period of Matthew 5-7.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J. F. Rand, "Problems in the Literal Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount," Bibliotheca Sacra CXII (January, April, 1955), p. 135.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

This observation is quite enlightening. One of the major problems facing the interpreter is the determination of the period (or periods) in which Matthew 5-7 directly applies. This author is not aware of any dispensational interpretation in which the Sermon on the Mount fits exactly.

At this point it should be stressed that this approach also affirms the relevance of the Sermon on the Mount to the present age.<sup>1</sup> This is obviously a consistent characteristic of modern dispensationalists despite the misrepresentation that their view often receives.

Great care has been exercised in an attempt to accurately represent the different dispensational views of the Sermon on the Mount. A complete refutation of these views has not been offered since there are certain aspects of the dispensational approaches with which the author concurs. Nevertheless, there are some factors which need to be examined in detail because of their significance.

The most crucial factor is the identification of the recipients of the discourse. This component is vital to one's understanding of the passage and the proper interpretation of it. Consequently, this issue will be thoroughly discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

## CHAPTER III

### IDENTIFICATION OF THE RECIPIENTS

Unquestionably, determination of the identity of the recipients is one of the most decisive factors in the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. It should be observed, however, that this conclusion is not the unanimous consensus among commentators.

The uncertainties as to whom the sayings were addressed has engendered ardent controversies, as for example: whether Jesus taught the universal Fatherhood of God or limited it to those who had accepted Him as Messiah; whether the injunctions of (say) the Sermon on the Mount were for all who would accept and follow them, or only for Jesus' disciples . . . these are marginal questions. The burning question is: Can his teachings be followed and obeyed in a social and world order like ours?<sup>1</sup>

Is it possible that the answer to the "burning question" is dependent upon the "marginal question" as to the identification of the recipients? This author is convinced that such is the case. Actually, the identification of the recipients is the contextual key which will help to unlock the mystery of the Sermon on the Mount.

Two passages must be examined in order to determine

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<sup>1</sup>G. G. Atkins, From the Hillside (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1948), p. 4. Of course, that question could be erroneously applied to any New Testament passage. Obedience is not based upon the compatibility of the command to the believer's society, but whether or not God has commanded the believer to obey.

the addressees of Matthew 5-7. These are the first two verses, Matthew 5:1-2, and the final two verses, Matthew 7:28-29, of the discourse. These four verses will be considered in the context of the entire Sermon to decide whether it was directed toward the multitudes or the disciples.

### The Multitudes

The major support for this view is that the multitudes, *τοὺς ὄχλους*, are mentioned in Matthew 5:1, and in Matthew 7:28, *οἱ ὄχλοι*, while the disciples, *οἱ μαθηταὶ*, are mentioned only in Matthew 5:1. There is no question that the multitudes listened to the discourse. However, simply their presence alone does not guarantee that the message was directed to them. Other factors must be considered as well, such as contextual and theological elements. To identify the recipients as the multitudes leads to several basic errors.

First, if the Sermon on the Mount were intended for the multitudes, then it was given as a general address without regard to the spiritual condition of the recipients. There are serious implications which naturally follow this line of reasoning. The Sermon is delivered without demanding any prerequisites. If this is true, then an unbeliever is able to fulfill the teachings of the passage in his present condition. Thus, the Sermon does not necessitate regeneration to be observed. This approach has already been identified as

the liberal interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

Second, this understanding of the recipients results in an inaccurate doctrine concerning the relationship of God to mankind. During an address delivered at the Grace Bible Conference at Grace Theological Seminary (February, 1978), J. Sidlow Baxter cited this double reference to the multitudes to support the view that Jesus was teaching the universal fatherhood of God. This is possible since Jesus referred to God as the "Father" of the recipients no less than 16 times in the passage.

There are certain commentators who believe that while the disciples were the primary recipients, portions of the Sermon were intended, directly or indirectly, for the multitudes as well. Pink writes,

Though we are told at the beginning of chapter V that it was His 'disciples' whom Christ here taught, yet it is equally clear from the closing verses of chapter VII that this Sermon was spoken in the hearing of the multitudes. This must be steadily borne in mind throughout, for while it contains much instruction for believers in connection with their living a good, honest, and blessed life, yet not a little in it is designed evidently for unbelievers, particularly those sections which contain a most searching setting forth of the spiritual nature of His kingdom and the character of those who enter and enjoy its privileges.<sup>2</sup>

In a similar vein, Morgan asserts:

The occasion of the Manifesto, then, was Christ's vision of the Multitudes, and their need, and His determination to reach them. Retiring from them, He took time to

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<sup>1</sup>Henry, Ethics, p. 282.

<sup>2</sup>A. W. Pink, An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), p. 13.

instruct a few loyal souls concerning His Kingdom in order that through them the multitudes might see the breadth and beauty and beneficence of the Kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup>

One simply needs to examine other passages in Matthew, which refer to the multitudes, to understand that the multitudes were not part of God's Kingdom. In Matthew 13 Jesus began to speak to the multitudes in parables so they would not understand. "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matthew 13:13). They were unable to comprehend spiritual material because they had not been spiritually regenerated.

In addition, the multitudes chose Barabbas, instead of Jesus Christ, due to the influence of the chief priests and the elders. "But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitudes to ask for Barabbas, and to put Jesus to death" (Matthew 27:20). While the multitudes followed Jesus to listen to His teachings and benefit from His miracles, many of them never committed themselves spiritually to the Son of God.

The conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount has led some to believe that it was directed to the multitudes. "The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew

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<sup>1</sup>G. Campbell Morgan, The Gospel According to Matthew (N. Y.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1929), p. 40.

7:28-29). By itself, this passage would confirm the multitudes as the recipients. However, it must be considered in light of Matthew 5:1-2, the content of the entire Sermon and the information concerning the multitude found elsewhere in Matthew. As this is done in the following sections of the chapter, it will become clear that Jesus Christ did not deliver His discourse to an unregenerate multitude.

### The Disciples

Without question, the disciples are identified as the recipients by the majority of commentators. This approach is not only grammatically possible, but it is also theologically and contextually preferable. Such men as Barclay,<sup>1</sup> Robinson,<sup>2</sup> Thomas<sup>3</sup> and Lawlor<sup>4</sup> effectively demonstrate that Christ directed His comments to the disciples, but in the listening presence of the multitudes (cf. Matthew 7:28-29).

The next two sections will examine the grammatical and contextual considerations which favor the disciples as the recipients of the Sermon. Once the disciples have been

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<sup>1</sup>William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew: Volume I (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), p. 82.

<sup>2</sup>T. H. Robinson, The Gospel of Matthew (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup>W. H. Griffith Thomas, Outline Studies in the Gospel of Matthew (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961), p. 67.

<sup>4</sup>G. L. Lawlor, The Beatitudes are for Today (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 20.

established, there will follow an analysis as to what group the disciples include and/or represent. Finally, this chapter will contemplate the significance of the recipients to the interpretation of the passage.

### Grammatical Considerations

"And opening His mouth He began to teach them" (Matthew 5:2). Since the multitudes and the disciples are mentioned in the previous verse, one must determine which one is the antecedent of "them," or *αὐτοῦς*. It has been previously stated that in terms of grammatical form, either one is possible. On the other hand, "the nearest and most natural antecedent of 'them' (the object of Jesus' teaching in verse 2) is the 'disciples' of verse 1 . . ." <sup>1</sup> Although proximity is not necessarily the determinative factor with respect to antecedents, it does merit consideration. Certainly, this grammatical feature favors the disciples. Alford also cites *οἱ μαθηταὶ* as the antecedent of *αὐτοῦς*. <sup>2</sup>

The disciples also qualify as the most natural antecedent, as has been noted. Matthew indicates that Jesus began<sup>3</sup> to teach when His disciples came to Him. By way of

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay M. Newman, Jr., "Some Translational Notes on the Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1-12," The Bible Translator, 26:1 (January, 1975), 109-110.

<sup>2</sup>Henry Alford, The Greek Testament: Volume I (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), pp. 36-37.

<sup>3</sup>Take \_\_\_\_\_ as an inceptive imperfect, which lays stress on the beginning of the action.

contrast, it appears that Jesus went up on the mountain to teach His disciples when He saw the multitudes that had followed Him. "The other fact that should not escape our attention is that noted in Ch. 5:1, that the reason for Jesus' going up the mountain was to escape the crowds and that the Sermon was directed not to the crowds, although they may have been sitting on the fringe, but rather to His disciples."<sup>1</sup>

Robinson has observed:

. . . the Sermon is addressed, not to the world at large, but to the disciples . . . that is the key to the whole. The crowds are about him, and, presumably, are free to listen, but his words are not addressed primarily to them. That is characteristic of Jesus; his moral teaching is intended for those who have already consecrated themselves to him.<sup>2</sup>

This is the majority opinion among commentators. Yet one must explain the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, which describes the reaction of the multitudes to the teaching of Jesus Christ. The main approach suggests that Jesus taught His disciples in the listening presence of the multitudes.<sup>3</sup> While such a statement, by itself, leaves much to be desired, an examination of the actual content of the Sermon will preclude any other understanding of the multitudes with

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<sup>1</sup>J. W. Bowman and R. W. Tapp, The Gospel from the Mount (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Robinson, Matthew, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup>Morris A. Inch, "Matthew and the House-Churches," The Evangelical Quarterly, 43:4 (October-December, 1971), 198.

reference to Matthew 5-7.

### Contextual Considerations

The Apostle Paul wrote most explicitly as to the ability of unbelievers to understand spiritual things. "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Corinthians 2:14, NASV). The expected behavior which is described in the discourse is not to be viewed as requirements for salvation, but rather external evidence that verifies regeneration.

All the commands . . . to holiness, without exception are addressed to saved people--not one is addressed to the unconverted. The unconverted are exhorted to be born again. Disciples only are urged to be holy.<sup>1</sup>

The following verses indicate that the recipients of the Sermon on the Mount were indeed citizens of the Kingdom of God:<sup>2</sup>

Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account

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<sup>1</sup>G. A. McLaughlin, Commentary of the Gospel According to St. Matthew (Chicago: Christian Witness Company, 1909), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>The passages cited in this section clearly indicate that the recipients are spiritually regenerated. The underlined portions represent the added emphasis of the author and those phrases which identify the recipients as Kingdom citizens. No less than sixteen times Jesus emphasizes that God is their Father. Also, chapters 6 and 7 contain a series of contrasts between what unbelievers do and what is expected of God's children. The Sermon does not describe actions which empower individuals to become members of God's family, rather it delineates the manifested life style which is expected of anyone who claims to be a citizen of the Kingdom.

of Me (5:11)

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (5:12)

You are the salt of the earth (5:13)

You are the light of the world (5:14)

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (5:16)

But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven (5:44-45)

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (5:48)

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven (6:1)

But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you (6:3-4)

And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites . . . But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you (6:5-6)

Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him (6:8)

Pray then in this way: 'Our Father who art in heaven' (6:9)

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you (6:14)

But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions (6:15)

But you, when you fast, annoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in

secret will repay you (6:17-18)

Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them (6:26)

For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (6:32)

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him (7:11)

It is clear from these references that the Sermon on the Mount was addressed directly to the disciples. The internal evidence will not allow any other conclusion.

Having established that the context supports the disciples as the recipients, it is appropriate that the significance of Matthew 7:28-29 be discussed. William Hendriksen believes that although the Sermon was intended primarily for the disciples, there is a secondary sense in which it was intended for the multitudes, as indicated by the final two verses of the passage.<sup>1</sup> Peter Ellis has been more specific in his explanation of the multitudes as an audience which is subordinate to the disciples:

The identification of the disciples as Matthew's immediate audience in the Sermon on the Mount and the Jews as his "off-stage" audience contributes greatly to the understanding of Matthew's purpose. By having the Jews hear the sermon and marvel at the authority with which Jesus spoke (cf. 7:28-29), Matthew has prepared the way for Jesus' later condemnation of the Jews in ch /sic/ 11-12--a condemnation which, in reality, is directed toward the Jews of Matthew's time who have

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<sup>1</sup>William Hendriksen, The Sermon on the Mount (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1934), p. 20.

continued to reject Jesus and persecute his followers.<sup>1</sup>

Actually, the emphasis in the final two verses is on the authority of Jesus Christ as He "taught" the multitudes. In other words, His deity was underscored as He declared to them the commands of God upon His own authority (cf. 5:20,22, 26,28,32,34,44; 6:2,5,16,25,29). In addition, in 7:21-22, He identifies Himself as the Lord. As those who were permitted to listen to the discourse, the multitudes were amazed at the personal claims of the speaker. Furthermore, while the disciples, as the direct recipients were already Kingdom citizens, numbered among the multitudes may have been some who were to become citizens of the Kingdom. This does not diminish, however, the disciples as the primary recipients of the discourse.

#### Identification of the Disciples

As the disciples have been confirmed as the recipients of the Sermon on the Mount, it is necessary to identify who is included in this designation, as it is used in Matthew 5:1. There are some men such as Alford,<sup>2</sup> Hendriksen<sup>3</sup> and Newman<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Peter F. Ellis, "Matthew: His Mind and His Message," The Bible Today, 69 (February, 1974), 1488. It should be noted that the author does not agree with Ellis' overall approach to the passage, in which Matthew is seen as one who manipulates the account, in order to accentuate his point. However, Ellis' observation is interesting when viewed from the perspective which holds the Bible as the inspired Word of God.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, The Greek Testament, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup>Hendriksen, The Sermon on the Mount, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>Newman, Jr., "Some Translational Notes," p. 110.

who believe that the use of "disciples" is a general reference to Christ's followers, not a specific reference to the Twelve. Others, such as Sanders, view this usage in its limited sense.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, there are numerous commentators who do not specify the exact identity of the disciples in this passage.

In order to arrive at an acceptable conclusion, it will be necessary to analyze the phrase *οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ*. Matthew's first employment of *μαθητῆς* is found in Matthew 5:1.<sup>2</sup> This is most significant since it is accompanied by the definite article. This construction is known as the anaphoric use of the article.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Matthew mentioned a group which had been previously introduced. A word study of *μαθητῆς* as it is used in Matthew will provide the essential information needed to determine the identity of the disciples, whether they represent the Twelve or some larger

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<sup>1</sup>J. Oswald Sanders, Real Discipleship (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup>W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, A Concordance to the Greek Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, reprinted, 1974), p. 608.

<sup>3</sup>The anaphoric use of the article occurs when something, or someone, is introduced for the first time with the article. The article serves to refer back to that which has already been mentioned. Matthew assumed his readers would understand who was meant by this designation since the "disciples" constituted a known entity. To determine the group that Matthew represented by this term, it will be necessary to study his use of *μαθητῆς* throughout the book of Matthew. Only those instances where the disciples of Jesus Christ are in view will be considered.

group in this context.

Sixty-five times Matthew uses *μαθητής* to refer to the disciples of Jesus (cf. Matthew 5:1; 8:21,23; 9:10,11,14, 19,37; 10:1,42; 11:1; 12:1,2,49; 13:10,36; 14:15,19,22,26; 15:2,12,23,32,33,36; 16:5,13,20,21,24; 17:6,10,13,16,19; 18:1; 19:10,13,23,25; 20:17; 21:1,6,20; 23:1; 24:1,3; 26:1,8,17,18, 19,20,26,35,36,40,45,56; 27:64; 28:7,8,13,16). Sixty-three times it is accompanied by the article. The two anarthrous constructions are found in Matthew 10:42; 21:1. Matthew generally tends to particularize and identify the disciples with the use of the article. Twenty-five times *αὐτοῦ* is used to identify the disciples with respect to Jesus Christ, while in four instances *μου* or *σου* is utilized. In four cases the phrase "the twelve disciples" is employed (10:1; 11:1; 20:17; 26:20), and once "the eleven disciples" is used (28:16).

While the first specific reference to the twelve disciples is located in Matthew 10:1, the overall use of *μαθητής* by Matthew supports the approach which views the reference in Matthew 5:1 as being applicable to the Twelve. In view of the construction *οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ*, it is most natural to take it as such, especially since it is a group familiar to the readers. This approach would recognize that the placement of the discourse by Matthew is not necessarily chronological.

Of course, even if the reference were to a larger group of disciples, e.g. the seventy (cf. Luke 10:1,17), it

would not affect the interpretation. John 6:66 records, "And as a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him any more." This took place after Jesus revealed that there were some of His disciples who did not believe (cf. John 6:64). The approach that takes the more general understanding of "disciples" in Matthew 5:1 would not change the interpretation. For just as many withdrew in John 6, Judas, one of the Twelve, demonstrated his state of unbelief when he betrayed Jesus Christ. Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount to His disciples with the full knowledge that at least one was not even a citizen of God's Kingdom. This in no way lessens the impact of the discourse. This author views either understanding of the disciples as possible, but prefers to take it as a reference to the Twelve.

It should be noted that there are few instances when Matthew uses *μαθητῶν* in the more general sense. He does not mention the seventy, or the larger group that eventually deserted Jesus Christ. His emphasis is upon the Twelve, and since he expected his readers to be familiar with the identity of the group, it is most natural to perceive Matthew 5:1 as a specific reference to the Twelve.

### Significance of the Recipients<sup>1</sup>

If the disciples are the recipients of Christ's "mountain manifesto" (the author is convinced that is the case), then certain problems arise when one views the Sermon on the Mount in the context of a Kingdom offer to the nation of Israel.

This author believes that Jesus Christ presented Himself as Messiah and offered the Kingdom to the nation of Israel. The nation rejected Christ and His offer, thereby postponing<sup>2</sup> the Kingdom until the Second Advent. Pentecost writes:

Without doubt the commonly accepted view of those who espouse the literal and dispensational method of interpretation is that this discourse is to be related to the future Messianic or earthly kingdom of our Lord. This is the outgrowth of the proposition that Christ offered Israel a kingdom at His first advent, which was rejected by that nation, and therefore postponed. Our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, it is contended, made this pronouncement in connection with the offer of the kingdom, and is to be interpreted as a description of that kingdom, its character, constitution, and constituents.<sup>3</sup>

If the Sermon on the Mount was delivered in conjunction with the offer of the Kingdom, then the discourse was also rejected

<sup>1</sup>This section will discuss the impact of the "disciple" approach to the various dispensational views. The author recognizes that the great majority of dispensationalists would agree with this identification of the recipients. However, certain inconsistencies result from this position when taken to its logical conclusion.

<sup>2</sup>This postponement is certainly part of the will of God and in no way disparages the sovereignty of God.

<sup>3</sup>Pentecost, "The Purpose of the Sermon on the Mount," pp. 132-133.

by the nation of Israel. Presumably, then, it will be accepted at the Second Advent when the entire nation turns to the Messiah.

However, such reasoning is non sequitur and does not follow the premises in light of the identification of the recipients. For if the discourse is to be coupled with the offer, then how is it that Christ directed the Sermon to the disciples, and not to the multitudes in general? The disciples did not reject Christ, but rather demonstrated themselves to be citizens of the Kingdom. Thus, the Sermon should not be construed as an indispensable segment of the Kingdom offer. A viable alternative will be discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### AN ALTERNATE PREMILLENNIAL VIEW

Having discussed the identity of the recipients, and its impact upon the dispensational approaches, an alternate premillennial view of the Sermon on the Mount will now be discussed.<sup>1</sup> This will be accomplished according to the following procedure. The nature of the discourse, the Jewish language in the discourse, the relation of the Sermon to the Millennium and to the Interregnum,<sup>2</sup> Kingdom citizenship and finally, the relation of the Interregnum view to dispensationalism will all be studied in separate sections.

#### The Nature of the Discourse

In his approach to Matthew 5-7, A. D. Lindsay has asked the astute question, "But how can we profitably discuss the content of the teaching contained in the Sermon on the Mount till we have got our minds clear as to the nature of

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<sup>1</sup>While the author is indebted to the many authors who have contributed to the study of this passage, he is not convinced that Matthew 5-7 should be viewed as "Church truth," or "Tribulation truth," or "Kingdom truth" only. This chapter will seek to analyze the Sermon in light of several crucial considerations, and then it will offer an alternative approach.

<sup>2</sup>The Interregnum is descriptive of the period between the Ascension and the Second Advent of Jesus Christ.

of that teaching."<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested previously that the Sermon on the Mount is not a description of characteristics which must be achieved in order to obtain salvation, but rather a depiction of that character which is expected of God's children (e.g., Matthew 5:43-48). In reference to the Beatitudes in particular, Thomas writes:

This passage tells Christ's followers (vs. 1,2) not how to become citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, but how they as citizens are to live. They are described in relation to what they are, which is keynote in the Sermon.<sup>2</sup>

Along the same line, Lloyd-Jones asserts, "What is of supreme importance is that we must always remember that the Sermon on the Mount is a description of character and not a code of ethics or of morals."<sup>3</sup>

If this analysis is correct, and the disciples are the recipients of the discourse, then what is the relationship between Matthew 5-7 and Matthew 28:19-20? The Great Commission, which was delivered to the eleven disciples (cf. Matthew 28:16), reads, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the

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<sup>1</sup>A. D. Lindsay, The Moral Teaching of Jesus (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1937), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, Outline Studies, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>Lloyd-Jones, Studies, p. 28.

end of the age." Fenton<sup>1</sup> and Sanders<sup>2</sup> insist that there are no scriptural or logical grounds for believing that Matthew 5-7 was excluded from the Great Commission, which is contained in the same Gospel.

In his discussion of the Great Commission, Dr. James L. Boyer states:

In other words, Peter and John and the rest of the apostles went out preaching and teaching. What did they teach? They taught their converts to keep the commandments that Jesus had given to them . . . the commandments that were given by Jesus to His disciples were intended for the converts of the apostolic preaching.<sup>3</sup>

This author has not found any evidence which clearly indicates that the teachings delivered to Christ's disciples in Matthew 5-7 were not included in the Great Commission. Is it to be assumed that the disciples understood this discourse to relate only to the Messianic Kingdom? Matthew certainly does not explicitly disclose this as being the case. Actually, the dispensational response to this is based upon the fact that the Sermon on the Mount is to be taken in conjunction with Christ's offer of the Kingdom to the nation of Israel.

In describing his approach to any particular passage,

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<sup>1</sup>J. C. Fenton, St. Matthew (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>Sanders, Real Discipleship, pp. 15-16.

<sup>3</sup>James L. Boyer, "Is the Bible for Us?", Seminary Chapel Message (Winona Lake, Indiana: Grace Theological Seminary, September, 1977), p. 3.

Dr. Boyer, who is a dispensational premillennialist, relates:

Some have proposed that we chop up the Bible into dispensational segments, take only what is clearly ours in our dispensational setting and relegate everything else to the place of secondary application. So most of the Old Testament, the Gospels and Acts are excluded. To put it differently some propose that if a teaching is repeated in the grace sections of the New Testament then that much becomes applicable to us. It seems to me that this view ignores the fact that much of God's instructions are common to all periods.

I would like to propose the precise opposite to this approach. We should presume that all the Bible is for us unless there are clear indications that it is not. The clear indications would be what I have been talking about previously, occasional matters and deliberately changed items such as dispensational differences. In this proposal the burden of proof would always be on the one who would deny the application to us. We would assume it was ours unless it was proved to the contrary.<sup>1</sup>

If this approach is accepted, then Matthew 5-7 has direct relevance in the present age,<sup>2</sup> since the dispensational approaches do not provide any evidence that the discourse is to be placed outside the boundaries of the Great Commission.

#### Jewish Language in the Discourse

One of the major problems facing the interpreter who does not view the discourse as directed to Israel alone, is the handling of the Jewish terminology contained in the Sermon on the Mount. The following verses are representative:

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter

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<sup>1</sup>Boyer, "Is the Bible for Us?", pp. 17-18.

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that the author does not believe that Matthew 5-7 is Church truth. This will become evident when the alternative approach is presented in another section of this chapter.

the kingdom of heaven (5:20)

But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' shall be guilty before the supreme court (5:22)

If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering (5:23-24)

But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King (5:33-34)

But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your alms may be in secret (6:2-3)

But you, when you fast, annoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men (6:17-18).

Ryrie claims that "in interpreting the Sermon's righteousness, even the conservative is required to abandon literal interpretation if he attempts to make it directly applicable to the believer today."<sup>1</sup> This observation is correct when the Sermon is presented as "Church truth," that is, specifically intended for, and applicable, in the present dispensation. Of course, the overwhelming majority of evangelical nondispensationalists take this approach to the Sermon on the Mount in order to make it applicable today.

However, Ryrie's statement does not apply to this author's approach, which views the Sermon on the Mount as a character description of Kingdom citizens of all ages, but

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<sup>1</sup>Ryrie, Dispensationalism, p. 106.

especially during the Interregnum period. The Jewish terminology is to be expected in view of the setting and the recipients of the discourse.

It is almost certain that Matthew wrote for Jewish Christians in order to establish them in their faith in Jesus of Nazareth as to the Christ promised in the OT . . . Jewish names and concepts are not explained in the gospel since they would be readily understood. On the one hand, it reflects the unbelief of Israel in Jesus' time, and on the other, it emphasizes the Gentiles superseding the Jews because they had rejected the Messiah.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the addressees of the Gospel according to Matthew were Jewish believers. Also, the recipients of Jesus' discourse were His disciples, who also were Jewish believers. It is quite natural, then, to expect Jewish terminology. In addition, the disciples of Jesus Christ lived during a transitional period which extended into the early years of the Church age. Even in the book of Acts this transition is depicted, and there are several distinctively Jewish terms and concepts recorded in it. Therefore, in light of the addressees of Matthew, the audience of the discourse and the transitional period involved, it is normal to expect Jewish terminology to be employed.

By way of contrast, it would be most unnatural to expect a well-developed soteriology and ecclesiology in the Sermon on the Mount. Hendriksen explains:

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<sup>1</sup>L. M. Petersen, "Gospel of Matthew," The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. IV, ed. by Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), p. 136.

The reason why the doctrine of the Atonement by blood is not emphasized in this sermon is that in God's wisdom the facts of redemption precede the doctrines of redemption. The full import of the significance of Christ's death is not yet pointed out in this sermon for the simple reason that Christ had not yet died. Cf. also John 16:12 ff.<sup>1</sup>

There is no mention of the Church until Matthew 16:18, indicating a progression of revelation. And in this reference Christ promises to build His Church in the future. Yet many dispensationalists cite the lack of ecclesiological material as evidence against the direct application of Matthew 5-7 in the present age.<sup>2</sup> Again, consideration of the material previously discussed, in relation to the Jewish language, does not necessitate ecclesiological terminology.

### Matthew 5-7 and the Millennium<sup>3</sup>

Those spiritual characteristics which mark the Millennium include righteousness, obedience, holiness, truth and the fulness of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> The conditions and actions described in the Sermon on the Mount indicate that evil is prevalent and believers are persecuted for the sake

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<sup>1</sup>Hendriksen, The Sermon on the Mount, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup>Ryrie, Biblical Theology, pp. 79-80.

<sup>3</sup>It will become apparent that this section is crucial to the approach of the thesis. The factors which are considered in this section provide strong support for the approach which is suggested by the author.

<sup>4</sup>J. Dwight Pentecost, Things To Come (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), pp. 482-487.

of Jesus. Yet, in his description of the millennial Kingdom, Pentecost observes:

The reign will be one of inflexible righteousness and justice (Isa. 11:3-5; 25:2-5; 29:17-21; 30:29-32; 42:13; 49:25-26; 66:14; Dan. 2:44; Mic. 5:5-6, 10-15; Zech. 9:3-8) . . . The government will deal summarily with any outbreak of sin (Ps. 2:9; 72:1-4; Isa. 29:20-21; 65:20; 66:24; Zech. 14:16-21; Jer. 31:29-30). "He shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked" (Isa. 11:4). Any overt act against the authority of the King will be punished with physical death.<sup>1</sup>

Immediate judgement of sin will characterize the reign of Christ in the Millennium. Apparently, the Sermon on the Mount does not describe millennial conditions upon the earth.

The following is a representative sample of the many inconsistencies which arise when one finds primary fulfillment of Matthew 5-7 during the Millennium:

- 1) Matthew 5:10-12, 44-46 describe the enemies of God's people and the great persecution inflicted by them upon the saints, yet during the Millennium no overt evil acts will be tolerated
- 2) Corruption is widespread, for the recipients are to act as salt (Matthew 5:13), which basically prevents contamination
- 3) Moral darkness is prevalent, for they are to act as the light of the world (5:14)
- 4) Matthew 6:10a reads "Thy kingdom come," which will no longer be a necessary petition during the Millennium

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 503.

- 5) Most recognize that Matthew 6:10b will be realized during the Messianic Kingdom and will no longer be requisite at that time
- 6) Ἐφ' τοῦ πονηροῦ in Matthew 6:13 is a reference to "the evil one," and this is grammatically (and contextually) possible, it does not fit the great bulk of the millennial period during which Satan will be bound
- 7) Matthew 6:16-18 cannot possibly refer to the Millennium in light of the passage contained in Matthew 9:14-15, since the Bridegroom will be continuously present during the entire 1,000 years
- 8) Matthew 6:25-33 does not fit the Millennium which is characterized by economic prosperity
- 9) Matthew 7:6b is not indicative of the peace which will dominate during the Millennial reign
- 10) Finally, the only eschatological reference in the entire Sermon (Matthew 7:21-23), finds its fulfillment at the end of the Tribulation, not during the Millennium.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, contrary to two of the three major dispensational approaches, the Sermon on the Mount does not find primary fulfillment during the Millennium. Then during what time will the passage find direct fulfillment? The next section will seek to provide an acceptable answer to that question.

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<sup>1</sup>C. F. Hogg and J. B. Watson, On the Sermon on the Mount (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1934), pp. 17-18. Some of these observations were supplied by the author.

Matthew 5-7 and the Interregnum

It has been observed that all of the various evangelical approaches to the Sermon on the Mount are less than totally acceptable. While the various views represent valuable contributions to the study of the passage, attempts to relegate the entire Sermon to either believing Jews or the Church leave several questions unanswered and various problems unresolved. The author proposes that the Sermon on the Mount is the description of godly characteristics which are expected of Kingdom citizens in any age.<sup>1</sup> However, primary fulfillment of the evil conditions and actions described in Matthew 5-7 occurs during the Interregnum period.

The Interregnum period may be described as that age which begins at the ascension and ends at the Second Advent. While it generally describes "an interval between two successive reigns, when the country has no sovereign,"<sup>2</sup> its theological usage is in reference to that interval, between the two advents, during which Christ is not bodily present upon

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, this analysis should be considered in the light of the progression of revelation. That is, only those Kingdom citizens which have lived since the delivery of the Sermon on the Mount are expected to manifest the specific characteristics described in it.

<sup>2</sup>Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, ed. by David B. Guralnik (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1972), p. 737. It should be observed that none of the documentation in this section is from authors who espouse the Interregnum view. This is necessary since the author has not found this approach expressed in any written medium. However, the citations employed adequately express what the author desires to communicate.

the earth.

This particular approach has several advantages. First, it recognizes that the disciples (Jewish believers) were the direct recipients of the discourse. It has been demonstrated that the grammatical, contextual and theological considerations, when taken together, demand the disciples as the primary addressees. The discourse, then, does not describe requirements for salvation, but rather the character manifested by Kingdom citizens of any age. The disciples were the immediate recipients of these blessed truths, but these truths are also for those who become disciples of the Lord in any and every age.<sup>1</sup> R. F. Collins has observed that the "entire Sermon on the Mount, a first preaching of the kingdom of heaven, is, in fact, a description of the basic qualities which should mark the life, thought, and activity of the citizen of the kingdom of heaven."<sup>2</sup>

Second, this view adequately explains the use of Jewish terminology without relegating the discourse exclusively to the nation of Israel. The recipients of the discourse (Jewish believers), the addressees of Matthew (Jewish believers) and the transitional nature of the period all combine to make the use of such terminology quite natural. In addition, the Interregnum period includes the Church age, but it is not

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<sup>1</sup>Lawlor, The Beatitudes, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>R. F. Collins, "Thy Will Be Done On Earth As It Is In Heaven," The Bible Today, 14 (November, 1964), p. 917.

limited to that period. The interim of time between the Ascension and Pentecost initiates the Interregnum, while the seven year tribulational period concludes it. These two segments, when combined with the Church age, establish the setting in which the evil conditions and actions described in the discourse are realized. Thus, the complexity of the Sermon is recognized and not applied to Israel or the Church alone, but to all Kingdom citizens, but especially those during the Interregnum, which includes periods when God works through the Church and Israel. Thus, one can look at Matthew 5:23-24, unquestionably the strongest "Jewish" reference in the entire passage, and conclude, "Many of God's children ought to disqualify themselves from fellowship with the saints until first they have removed from an offended brother the anger that is in his heart; only then may they come and offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving."<sup>1</sup>

Third, this approach acknowledges several verses contained within Matthew 5-7 which provide temporal hints as to the interpretational period of the Sermon on the Mount. "But you, when you fast, annoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Matthew 6:17-18). In this passage, Jesus Christ assumes that the recipients of His discourse will have

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<sup>1</sup>J. Dwight Pentecost, Design for Living: The Sermon on the Mount (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), p. 97.

opportunity and occasion to fast. To discover when the disciples had an occasion to fast, one must examine Matthew 9: 14-15, "Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?' And Jesus said to them, 'The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.'" Here, the presence of Jesus Christ made it unnecessary for His disciples to fast. It is interesting to note that the period during which Jesus Christ is not physically present with His followers upon the earth, corresponds exactly with the Interregnum, from the Ascension to the Second Advent. On the other hand, this author does not wish to suggest that Christians are commanded to fast.

In addition, the only eschatological reference in the Sermon appears in Matthew 7:21-23, which this author believes occurs at the end of the Tribulation period. This reference also is the final segment of the teaching content of the discourse. This author believes that fact is significant. It is no accident that the sole eschatological citation in Matthew 5-7 occurs at the end of the discourse and describes an event which takes place immediately before the beginning of the Millennium. While this observation is not conclusive by itself, it certainly harmonizes well with the Interregnum

view.<sup>1</sup>

Fourth, and finally, the Interregnum approach successfully avoids the major pitfalls of the ecclesiological and dispensational approaches. Unlike the ecclesiological view, this position does not assert that the Sermon on the Mount was delivered directly to, and for, the Church. Furthermore, the Interregnum view does not claim that the discourse must be taken in conjunction with the offer of the Kingdom to the nation of Israel.

Thus, the Sermon on the Mount depicts the character of Kingdom citizens of all ages, but describes conditions and actions which will find their primary fulfillment during the Interregnum period. The Interregnum can be broken down into three segments: 1) the interim between the Ascension and Pentecost, 2) the Church age, and 3) the Tribulation.

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<sup>1</sup>If the order of the discourse is significant (dispensationalists argue this for the entire book of Matthew), then Matthew 7:21-23 certainly would not support the "Kingdom fulfillment" approach.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has endeavored to demonstrate that the Sermon on the Mount describes the character of Kingdom citizens in any age. With regard to the evil conditions and actions described in Matthew 5-7, the discourse finds primary fulfillment during the Interregnum period. Of course, this passage has generated an incredible amount of different interpretations and the author does not expect any kind of wholesale acceptance of the approach which has been suggested. However, this paper should be considered as an honest attempt to solve the various problems one encounters when interpreting any passage in the Gospels, in this case the Sermon on the Mount.

The author has already identified himself as a dispensational premillennialist. However, the dispensational approaches to the Sermon on the Mount were found to be less than totally acceptable. It is to be understood that disagreement among Christians need not be accompanied by resentment. This author has great respect for men like Charles Ryrie and John Walvoord, yet he is unable to adopt their position on Matthew 5-7. It is an encouragement to read an author who is gracious and kind even when he disagrees with another individual or position. An excellent example would be James Boice, who is nondispensational, as he describes the early dispensationalists with whom he disagrees:

Moreover, I have the deepest respect for these gifted teachers. They were deeply spiritual men. They were steeped in the Bible--far more, for instance, than most Bible teachers today, myself included. And yet, I am convinced that in their approach to the Sermon on the Mount the leaders of dispensationalism were wrong.

It is no great discredit to them to say that. There has never been a system of Bible interpretation that has been right in every point, and the early leaders of dispensationalism would have been the first to admit their own fallibility.<sup>1</sup>

Hopefully, evangelical Christians will be characterized by this attitude to an even greater degree as points of disagreement arise.

The application of the passage in the present age is paramount, since this age is one segment of the Interregnum period. Again, it should be observed that modern dispensationalists stress the relevance of the passage in the Church age. Zimmerman asserts quite emphatically:

The age-abiding principles enjoined by the Sermon are directly relevant to the Church and should be vigorously applied. Though the Sermon was not given directly to the Church, it was given for it. Its teachings are of inestimable value to the Christian who rightly handles the whole body of truth and obeys the principles set forth therein.<sup>2</sup>

The passage in Matthew 5-7 describes the standards of God as they are to be manifested by His children in any age. This "mountain manifesto" has withstood attacks throughout the centuries, and has emerged unscathed as the ultimate description of godly character as delivered by Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup>James Montgomery Boice, The Sermon on the Mount (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Zimmerman, "A Study on the Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount" (Unpublished Th.M. dissertation, Winona Lake, Indiana: Grace Theological Seminary, 1965), pp. 124-125.

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