

I've been a Christian for over 50 years now. During those years my understanding of the Bible has deepened and matured. As a result of this journey, I've changed my opinion on what I understood the Bible to teach on various subjects. In the process of reevaluating my theology, I've written 6 books. Those books are discussed on these pages. I call these books "My Library." I would like to introduce you to a new book in this library called The Stipulations of the Covenant, a book on the Sermon on the Mount.

What is the Sermon on the Mount?

Or, what is the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount? Why did Jesus preach it?

Salvation

A big question is this: "does following it result in salvation?" Some believe it does. "Do not the beatitudes teach a doctrine of salvation by human merit and good works, which is incompatible with the gospel?" This is a very telling statement suggesting that "a doctrine of salvation by human merit and good works" although not found in the gospel was taught in the Old Testament; it was not.

In his book *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount*, Hans Windisch said, "Nothing is said in the Sermon about the inability of humans to do good; nor is there anything to be read here of the office of Jesus as mediator or of the redemption through his blood. What stands in the Sermon on the Mount is, from the point of view of Paul, Martin Luther, or John Calvin, complete heresy, for this is perfectionism, this is righteousness by works, this is law and not gospel." "In other words, it [the Sermon on the Mount] preaches the law not the gospel, and offers righteousness by works not by faith." Sadly, Christianity has been cursed by this type of teaching. Rather, "The Sermon on the Mount, like all the rest of the New Testament, really leads a man straight to the foot of the Cross."

"It is this same fear that the promises of the Sermon on the Mount depend for their fulfillment on human merit that led J. N. Darby to relegate them to the future 'kingdom age.' His dispensationalism was popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible (1909) which, commenting on 5:2, calls the Sermon 'pure law,' although conceding that its principles have 'a beautiful moral application to the Christian.'" As is so often the case with John Nelson Darby and the Scofield Reference Bible, their understanding of Scripture is amazingly deficient.

As a result, this defective view of the Sermon is taught in "classical dispensationalism, a primarily American, fundamentalist form of Christianity that had a widespread influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For classical dispensationalists, the Sermon is not applicable to Christians today because it comes from a pre-Christian "dispensation," during the period of the law (from Sinai to Calvary), not from the period of grace (Calvary to the parousia). Therefore, the kingdom of heaven that Jesus is

speaking about in the Sermon was the offer of a millennial kingdom to Jews. As a result, its teachings do not apply to Christians at all, even as an impossibly high ideal.”

Before Darby and Dispensationalism, Luther had already answered these issues. Speaking of the Sermon Luther said, “From these statements, those silly false preachers have drawn the conclusion that we enter the kingdom of heaven and are saved by our own works and actions. On this they build their endowments, monasteries, pilgrimages, Masses, and the like.” And as is to be expected, Luther nailed the difference saying, “it must be maintained that faith or being a Christian is quite distinct from its fruit...” So, no, the Sermon on the Mount does not teach a works salvation. It teaches us the fruit of salvation, not its cause, which cause is entirely by grace and through faith—and not of works.

The Impossible Ideal

Another response to the Sermon goes like this, “The law, says Paul, has not been given that it may lead to life. It is not law that saves, but faith. Law awakens the consciousness of sin; law provokes transgression. The law is preparation for the gospel ... in that it reveals to humans their impotence; by driving them to despair, it opens their eyes to the wonder of the mercy of God. It is precisely the same with the Sermon on the Mount, and this was the intention of Jesus. He wanted to bring his hearers to the consciousness that they cannot, in their own strength, fulfill the demands of God. He intends to lead people, through the experience of their failure, to despair of themselves. His demands are designed to shatter our self-reliance; nothing else is intended.” Now, most of that is true. Certainly, it is God’s intent that the Law would reveal our inability to live the perfect life driving us to the Cross. However, the last phrase “nothing else is intended” is misleading. Yes, something else is intended, sanctification. The Law is the standard to which we strive and by God’s grace can substantially emulate on this earth and fully so in heaven. The Law of God always sets forth God’s standard for holy living. We must ask, if not the Law of God as that standard, then what?

A Standard for Sanctification

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ supreme standard for holy living—sanctification. Martin Luther states, “Christ is saying nothing in this sermon about how we become Christians, but only about the works and fruit that no one can do unless he already is a Christian and in a state of grace.” Joachim Jeremias makes this observation, “...the Sermon on the Mount is a catechism for baptismal candidates or newly baptized Christians.... It was preceded by the proclamation of the gospel; and it was preceded by conversion, by a being overpowered by the Good News.” “Thus the Sermon ‘is spoken to men who have already received forgiveness, who have found the pearl of great price, who have been invited to the wedding, who through their faith in Jesus belong to the new creation, to the new world of God’.”

Calvin contributed to a clearer view of the Sermon for in “the Reformed tradition ... there is a productive use of law/covenantal instructions understood in the context of grace.

This allows for a slightly different reading of the Sermon than Luther's. In Calvin's reading of the Sermon, we see Jesus rescuing the law of God from the Pharisees, who emphasized its external acts instead of its heart. The Sermon is the compendium of the doctrine of Christ, the new-covenant law. Unlike Luther's negative reading, for Calvin, the Sermon can be fulfilled by Christians not in the flesh but by the grace given through the Holy Spirit, through dependence on God alone. We are weak, but God grants us what we need to obey him.

These statements explain the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount. "the Sermon on the Mount as a kind of 'new law,' like the old law, has two divine purposes, both of which Luther himself clearly understood. First, it shows the non-Christian that he cannot please God by himself (because he cannot obey the law) and so directs him to Christ to be justified. Secondly, it shows the Christian who has been to Christ for justification how to live to please God. More simply, as both the Reformers and the Puritans used to summarize it, the law sends us to Christ to be justified, and Christ sends us back to the law to be sanctified." Very well said.

So, our study is about the Sermon on the Mount, a message by Jesus teaching us how to live the Christian life.

But in addition to the material on the Stipulations of the Covenant, there are others topics here that might interest and challenge you. Indeed, I trust they will enlighten your mind and soul.