

Introduction

Much should be made of the radical need for prioritizing our lives in total, according to the teachings of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount and in Scripture as a whole. This need becomes obvious when we see the “worry passage” as a section within the larger context of the primacy of God’s kingdom and righteousness. An implication of this larger context is the fact that we worry when we do not prioritize as we ought. Seeking God first in and above all earthly things is essential to solving the worry habit. This way of reading the worry passage comes from a structural reading of the Sermon. Today, I want to discuss another way of reading the Sermon, a way that will help us make practical and appropriate application of it. Accordingly, my title is “A Historical-Redemptive Reading of the Sermon on the Mount.” Reference to the history of redemption and thus to biblical theology is not something new for you, but it will cause you to do some careful thinking to avoid rash or inane conclusions (here and regarding the whole Gospel). We will cover three main points: 1) Necessity of a historical-redemptive reading, 2) Principles of a historical-redemptive reading, and 3) Application of a historical redemptive reading.

1A. Necessity of a historical redemptive reading of the Sermon

Why are we involved in matters of the history of redemption? In many respects, this involvement is intuitively obvious, and in other respects, we have to work hard to put our finger on the right button for understanding.

The Sermon on the Mount inescapably involves us in redemptive history because the Sermon exemplifies the preaching of Jesus *before* His death, resurrection, and ascension. It has its place early in the history of redemption that unfolds in the coming of Christ. There are therefore no direct indications of His approaching death or the events to follow it. Thus, the Sermon noticeably lacks any reference to how the blessings of the kingdom are secured for sinners. There is no indication of how God grants forgiveness. There is no explanation of how the Lord executes and upholds justice in the saving of sinners from their utter spiritual poverty (5.3; 6.12). Mourning our sins, confessing faith, turning in repentance, and doing good works do not ground salvation or make it just, no matter how important and necessary these things may be. Therefore, the Sermon is riveted to the past, and it thus has a shape that reflects its place in history.

However, we cannot read the Sermon as something static from the past, as something static and frozen in a historical time zone. We must look ahead from the time of the Sermon to the time of the NT church and we must read the Sermon in a dynamic and living way as the words of our Lord to us today. We must do so for the following interrelated reasons.

1) This is instruction *of disciples* by Jesus

Per the narrator’s opening statement, we know that He not only spoke to the crowds, but also to His disciples (Mat 5.1-2). He formed a band of disciples in anticipation of the church that He came to build on the rock of apostolic testimony (Mat 16.18; Jn 14.25-26; in these verses He says in effect, “I will build my church and your testimony to me will be the rock foundation of my church”). Disciples make up His church by baptism because baptism is the way that discipleship is initiated (Mat 28.19, **Make disciples...baptizing them...teaching them**). Baptism involves coming under the discipleship authority of a spiritual leader as the language of “**baptism into**” indicates (**baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**). Israel was baptized *into* the discipleship authority of Moses (1 Cor 10.2). The people of the nations that become disciples become such by receiving baptism *into* the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, in the baptismal discipleship commitment to nourishment on the

commands of Christ, disciples come by baptism to the Table, to its nourishment and to nourishment under pastoral teaching (cf. family nurture is epitomized in the Supper).

Therefore, the discipleship instruction that we have before us in the Sermon on the Mount shows the ear markings of the time in which Jesus gave it, but He gave it for all disciples coming into the church by baptism. The Sermon is for pastoral-prophetic exposition in guiding disciples to what is true instead of what is false (cf. Mat 7.15, "**Beware of false prophets**"). Disciples come under the authority of the triune God in the church, and thereby they come under pastoral instruction. Per the principles of church membership, we are to test and guard this instruction in an orderly way to uphold the truth (1 Tim 3.15).

2) This is instruction for disciples *to the end of the age*

Jesus told the apostles to teach all He commanded to the end of the age when He said, "**Go...teaching them all I commanded...and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age**" (Mat 28.19-20). In the Sermon on the Mount, we have His commandments; He articulates the challenge of doing good works that the Law defines and that glorify God. He gives general instruction as to how the Law functions in the time of the new covenant in its fulfillment form (5.17-20, **Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them**). He also gives specific exposition of example Laws that guide us in handling all of His Laws (in 5.21-48, He explains the true spirit and intent of both specific commandments and the law of love).

Thus, the nature of the case is that Jesus spoke these words *for the church* but He did so *before the church*, before the accomplishment of His work that laid the ultimate foundation of the church. Consequently, we have to read the Sermon as post-resurrection believers in the time between His comings (that is, we are to read in a historical-redemptive way).

2A. Principles of a historical-redemptive reading of the Sermon

Reading with historical-redemptive eyes means that our interpretation of the Sermon (as all of the Gospel accounts) has to involve two counterintuitive principles: we must leave some explicit things behind, and we must find and take with us some implicit things.

1) On one hand, there are things that are like husks that we must leave behind when we take hold of the kernel of wheat within. For example, when Jesus speaks of presenting your offering at the altar (Mat 5.23), He is not telling us to make blood offerings now in church worship, yet He does speak to us now. This is language conditioned by the time of anticipation. Jesus is speaking about literal blood offerings on the altar for the disciples to whom He spoke, but His words anticipate the time when His final offering is the ultimate foundation of the church. Now there are still literal offerings in the time of the NT church, but they are not blood offerings. Instead, now we come with the sacrifices of praise and giving (Heb 13.15-16): **Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.** ¹⁶ **Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.** We present these sacrifices as priests building on the foundation of Christ, the living stone and the cornerstone (1 Pet 2.1-8):

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. ² **Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation-** ³ **if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.** ⁴ **As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious,** ⁵ **you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.** ⁶ **For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."** ⁷ **So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,"** ⁸ **and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. [cf. Rom 12.1-2]**

Christ is the foundation stone because He is the stone that the builders rejected and crucified. He is the foundation stone by means of His work of redemption. His death is the priestly sacrifice

par excellence. Therefore, our priestly sacrifices of praise and giving must have a radical importance because they make up new wineskin forms of OT sacrifices *that we still make*.

In relation to our reading and use of the Sermon on the Mount, it is clear that there are things that Jesus said that we must identify as old wineskin in nature and we must leave behind when we apply the Sermon today in the time of new wine and new wineskins.

2) On the other hand, there are things that we must discover by good and necessary consequence with a history of redemption mindset. For example, we can continually refer to the death and resurrection of Christ as the ground of the blessings He promises. We must refer to His work of redemption even though it is not something that He elaborates on in the Sermon. Our thinking goes like this: He is righteous and in the Sermon, He calls us to kingdom righteousness, so those who receive mercy as poor sinners do so based on God's justice that is satisfied and not bypassed. It is satisfied in the death of Christ and the Father confirmed His acceptance of Christ's death by raising Him from the dead (reading 5-7 in light of the entire Gospel, which is another way of saying that we read with historical-redemptive awareness).

Therefore, the comfort to those who mourn their sin comes from the accomplished work of Christ. Similarly, the gift of the kingdom of heaven both now and not yet to poor sinners comes from the accomplished work of Christ. This work was in the future when Jesus preached, but the Sermon on the Mount is *for all disciples* who receive His teaching through His ministers *to the end of the age*. Finally, we can add the broad point that we are not to think about the Law (sacrifices and laws) in terms of abolition (do not think I came to abolish them, Mat 5.17). We are to think about the Law; we are to think about it in terms of continuity that abides the shift from old wine to new wine (thus, look for *its* new wine application with continuity).

3A. Application of the historical-redemptive reading of the Sermon on the Mount

Our focus here is on the authority of Christ. We should note how the Gospel writer presents His authority, how we get perspective on it, and how the relevance of His authority comes to expression in some specific ways.

1B. Presentation

1) First, Matthew presents the Lord's authority in his concluding comment.

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching,²⁹ for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

In this comment, there is no citation of what others thought about the authority of Jesus as done elsewhere. Matthew records the wonder and amazement of the people at the teaching of Jesus, but *he* straightforwardly asserts the remarkable authority with which Jesus taught. His authority resided in His own person. He did not rest on tradition like the scribes (the interpreters of the Law).

2) Another way that Matthew presents the authority of Christ is in the representation of the teaching of Christ he gives us. Especially interesting in this regard is the "but I say" sections. Jesus equates His interpretation with that of God. He corrects the tradition in a way that sounds unilateral. Of course, we know that all that He taught He first received from the Father (Jn. 5.19):

Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

However, here the language is unqualified and emphatic: "I say to you" (cf. Mat 5.18, 20, 21, etc). He definitely has a unique authority.

3) Finally, Jesus remarkable authority stems from the fact that our relationship to His words (how we hear and obey them) determines whether we are categorically foolish or categorically wise, and it determines whether we are bound for great ruin (Lk 6.49) and final destruction (Mat 7.13), or for greatness (Mat 5.19) and eternal life (Mat 7.14).

2B. Perspective

Per the authority that resides in His own person, Jesus is the great king (Mat 5.35), but how can we say that heaven is His throne and the earth is the footstool beneath His feet (Mat. 5.34-35)? We have to conclude that His authority has a now and not yet quality to it as does His

kingdom. There is a strong prospective element in His authority for it is something that God will give to Him by means of, and only after, the resurrection. We know from Matthew 28.19 that all authority in heaven and on earth is a gift that the Father gave to Christ. The Father gave this authority to Christ upon the completion of His work on earth. Thus, we have to say that His authority *in the Sermon* is something that Jesus possessed in some incomplete way. We have to say that He has this authority, a divine authority, while at the same time we have to say that it is somehow incomplete. He has this authority as Son of God and Son of Man, but *Christ incarnate* can only attain universal sovereign authority through His work on earth. In other words, Jesus has unparalleled authority, but in humiliation. He awaits exaltation. Hence, we speak of the authority given to Him on earth as prospective (cf. Jn 17.2, because you have given the Son all authority, therefore, glorify Him, and thus give Him that authority in exaltation; cf. Stonehouse, *Witness*, 169).

We have to think in terms of Peter's remark in Acts 2.32-36 where he states that by the resurrection, Jesus became both Lord and Christ. (**This Jesus God raised up...being therefore exalted at the right hand of God...For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand... Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified**). In other words, we have to think in terms of the Sabbath kingship and universal sovereignty that the incarnate Christ attained by means of His death and resurrection. It is through His exaltation, by resurrection-ascension, that He becomes the great king with heaven as His throne and the earth as the footstool of His feet (cf. Isa 66.1-2; Gen 1.1-2.3 with Acts 2.29-36 and resurrection enthronement in the book of Hebrews, 1.5, 8, 13; 4.14; 5.5-9; 8.1, 6; 12.2). In this light, we have to draw out implications for the church (for us) on this side of His death and resurrection.

3B. Relevance

Consider some "relevance" implications:

1) The Sermon is relevant to the new covenant church that Jesus will build. 2) The Law, expounded in the Sermon, is relevant to the new covenant church. 3) The authority of Christ in Law and Sermon is relevant to the new covenant church. 4) Putting these three things together, we get a fourth. The Sermon anticipates the ascension glory and Sabbath Lordship of Christ when He will come to possess "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Mat 28.18). He exercises Sabbath Lordship by means of His commandments (28.20), which include the entire Law of the OT in its new covenant, fulfillment form. He shows us how to approach the Ten Commandments by expounding on some of them. His commandments in their new wineskin forms, therefore, make up the governing laws of the church that He purchased with the blood of the new covenant. To seek to live by the Law of God (with a repentant heart) is to seek to live as disciples under the authority of Christ in His church.

Thus, a distinct relevance obtains for Sunday as the Christian-Sunday-Sabbath. We should call this day "Delight Day" and "honorable" (Isa 58.13-14). We should set it apart with special distinctiveness for attentive and wholehearted concentration on the things of God that center on the risen, ascended, and exalted Lord Jesus. We should give this day of the week "holiness" a "set-apartness" in earnest devotion to our Savior. Thereby, church attendance, the elements of worship, corporate family prayer, and discipleship learning are all matters of devotion to Christ as our Sabbath Lord. After church, we should seek to make miles out of our worship and honor Christ by honoring His day. We may profitably make miles out of the sermon by discussing it with family members and fellow saints. Pure and simple, the Lord's Day is more than the time we spend together in church. At the least, it has to include the day in its primacy as each day of work refers to the prime time devoted to work. We should order our lives around the Sabbath kingship of Christ instead of compromising and fitting His day to our wants and wishes. These are implications that derive from the way Christ expounds the commandments for His church in anticipation of His accomplished work of redemption (hence the prioritizing).

Conclusion: We must hail the power of Jesus' name, worship the king, and honor Him as universal sovereign and our Sabbath Lord.