

Introduction

Due to its uniqueness, we have given considerable time to the Sermon on the Mount. Now it is appropriate that we do some review of the Sermon, which is comparable to putting icing on a cake or having desert after dinner. We have had a great feast; now is time for some afterthoughts and highlights. In this light, today I want to “stir you up by way of reminder” (2 Pet 1.13). I want to take you through the entire Sermon structurally so that we can take it all in piece by piece in brief review.

There are a couple of interrelated ways to get at the structure of the Sermon. First, we can think of the three chapters in Matthew (5-7), and ask ourselves, “where are the major breaks in the flow of thought.” To answer this question, we need to have the text in front of us and to be able to flip back and forth through the pages. Second, we can think about the big topics that make up the major units, and then try to place them into categories. We do both of these steps at the same time, noting verse divisions and topical flow of thought.

1A. What are the big topics as you think through the Sermon?

Let me give you some time to think about them and to cite some if you wish. Some large topics are the Beatitudes, the Law, the Lord’s Family Prayer, the Worry Passage, Phariseeism, and Hypocrisy. These topics are comparable to the slices of a pie that represents the Sermon.

What would you add or take away from this list and why? Perhaps you might have your mind set on some specific things in the Sermon that are a special blessing or a significant challenge such as the golden rule, forgiving and judging others, going the extra mile, and loving our enemies. Alternatively, you might add the difficulty of interpreting graphic metaphorical language (turn the other cheek; gouge out your eye, people as dogs, and a fiery hell).

2A. How can we precisely determine the chapter and verse divisions that go with these topics?

The following questions will help us identify the sections more precisely.

1) Why should we not end the Law section at verse 32?

We can get our cue from the “you have heard that it was said” language that occurs (with minor variations) in verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, & 43.

It is important to note that law and love are not antithetical (cf. 43-48) for the exposition of the Law includes the call to love (as is the case in Deut 6.5; Lev. 19.18).

2) What do we do with 5.13-16?

Is it an entirely distinct section (a main section)? It seems too short to serve as a major section. Does it go with what comes before it or with what comes after it? To determine its connection we need to focus its key element.

What is its most important element, something well known and outstanding? The most important element is surely good works that glorify God. The salt and light images merge into the idea of good works (salt and light are hooked together by the “you are” phrases in 13-14, and both are thus hooked with good works by the tie of light that shines in good works, v. 16).

We might connect the idea of good works with the marks of a Christian in the Beatitudes (with hungering for righteousness, 5.6, 10), but there is something very natural about connecting good works with “good works of the law” (cf. love, law, and works in James 2). This leads to our next question.

3) How can we judge the topical closeness or separateness from the Beatitudes?

This is rough and ready, but we can look at the Beatitudes and pick up its language and “directional” tone, then we can do that with the other topics of the Sermon for comparison.

So what is the nature of the language and “directional” tone of Matthew 5.1-12? What is noticeably absent here, especially when you think of the Sermon on the Mount as a great ethical code that advances law and commandment? Noticeably, there is no command or exhortation, except the opening of verse 12, which is a very soft command (it is more like saying, “all the blessings, including the reward you have in heaven,” give you cause to rejoice and be glad). Fundamentally, the Beatitudes give us a promise of blessings that cover the gambit of human experience and extend upward from the struggles of earth to the glories of heaven.

Now what change of language and directional tone surfaces in 5.13-16 that points ahead to the notions of commandments and laws? When we get to verse 17, we should see a clear change in tone, one that subtly emerges in verse 16. To what language do I refer? Therefore, we have reason to put the salt, light, and good works text in a different section on our graph from the Beatitudes. Good works go with the Law section (5.17-48) because in contrast to pronouncement of blessing or promise of blessing in the Beatitudes, we have duty, exhortation, commandment, and responsibility in the Law section.

4) Why is the Lord’s Family Prayer not an isolated or discrete section within the Sermon?

Some of the topics we listed earlier subsume under other ones. Can you anticipate what I mean regarding the Lord’s Prayer by looking at its location in the chapter? The Prayer is part of the warning regarding hypocrisy and Phariseism (as something different from hypocrisy) serves as a contrast in the section on the Law. Thus, the sectional unit is 6.1-18 and the theme is a warning about hypocrisy.

5) The worry passage is 6.25-34 (cf. anxious, vs. 25, 34), but what does the opening word of v. 25 indicate? “Do not worry” has its ground in the preceding verses. Why should we take the ground to come from 19-24 and not simply 24? Verse 24 calls for a choice that presupposes the alternatives of laying up treasures on earth and in heaven. Therefore, the worry passage is an implication or conclusion that flows from the more central theme in 19-24. How might we identify that central theme? It is heavenly mindedness versus earthly mindedness (per 19-21) and it is serving God in a heavenly way in all earthly things (per 24).

Now we have to say that we mistakenly title this text when we call it the worry passage. What is a better way to title verses 19-34? We can give a better title for the worry material by comparing verse 33 with the alternatives of 19-20 and the choice of 24. We might call it heavenly mindedness, serving God in all earthly things, or seeking kingdom righteousness.

6) How do we know that the analogy of house building is a concluding unit?

We know the conclusion orientation of the last section (7.24-27) particularly from the reference Jesus makes to “these words of mine,” referring to the entire Sermon.

So far, we have the following sections:

Beatitudes, 5.1-12

Law, 5.13-48

Hypocrisy, 6.1-18

Heavenly mindedness, 6.19-34

Wise house building, 7.24-28

7) What do we do with the contents of 7.1-23 (reflection on these sections directs our attention to the first 23 verses of chapter 7 as loose ends)?

a) What are the distinct contents in this section?

Judging others (7.1-6)

Prayer (7.7-11)

The golden rule (7.12)

Entry by the narrow gate (7.13-14)

False prophets (7.15-23)

b) How do we integrate or segregate the contents of 7.1-23 with 6.19-34?

Here are some questions and answers that help us connect 6.19-34 with 7.1-23.

What connects 6.33 with prayer (7.7-11) and entering by the narrow gate (7.13-14)? Prayer is a matter of seeking and the narrow gate and way have to be *found* by seeking.

What thematically bonds the worry theme with judging and the golden rule? One thing we worry about is what others may do to us (unjustly) or not do for us (unlovingly) to promote our good and well-being.

What thematically connects seeking kingdom righteousness (6.33) with being on guard against false prophets (7.15-23)? A central way to seek kingdom righteousness is by the words of Christ that His ministers preach in the time after His resurrection.

What can we title this collage of items from 6.19-7.23 if we take them as a unity with diversity? We can call it all heavenly mindedness and find some way to sub-divide the elements from 6.19-7.23.

Now we have the following five major sections of the Sermon:

Beatitudes, 5.1-12

Law, 5.13-48

Hypocrisy, 6.1-18

Heavenly mindedness, 6.19-7.23

Wise house building, 7.24-28

3A. How can we arrange the five topics of the Sermon as slices of a pie?

We can use the directional line of thinking again. In this directional line of thinking, what do we notice in 5.16, 5.17, 5.44, 6.1, 6.19, 7.1, 7.6, and 7.13 (to capture most of the remaining units of the Sermon)? The following questions then surface: Do we have something akin to pronouncement or something more akin to duty? Do we have something more like promise or something more like exhortation? Do we have a “command” or exhortation in the concluding paragraph? These questions lead us to divide the pie into two halves with the Beatitudes in one part and all the rest in the other part.

Now we should re-title each part with a single term that encompasses each half as a whole and that makes clear the relationship between each half.

How can we re-title the Beatitude section? [Pronouncement, promise]

What single word can identify everything in the other section? [Duty, exhortation]

What notion can we add to both of these single words show how they are aspects of the same single theme? [promise of blessing, duty of the blessed; promise of salvation, duty of salvation]

4A. How can we indicate the narrator’s contribution to the Sermon?

We can speak of the narrator’s introduction (5.1-2) and of the narrator’s conclusion (7.28-29).

5A. What is the simplest outline of 5-7 in two parts with a framing by the narrator?

Narrator’s Introduction 5.1-2

Promise (of salvation) 5.3-12

Duty (of salvation) 5.13-7.27

Narrator’s Conclusion 7.28-29

6A. What is a fuller outline of 5-7 adding detail to the two main sections

Narrator’s Introduction 5.1-2

1A. Promise (of salvation) 5.3-12 (seven blessings with eight marks of a Christian)

2A. Duty (of salvation) 5.13-7.27 (four exhortations)

1B. Exhortation to good works defined by the Law 5.13-48

1C. Initial challenge 5.13-16

- 2C. General explanation 5.17-20
- 3C. Specific exposition 5.21-48
- 2B. Exhortation to avoid hypocrisy 6.1-18
- 3B. Exhortation to seek kingdom righteousness 6.19-7.23
 - 1C. Above and in all earthly things (6.19-24)
 - 2C. In judging others (7.1-6)
 - 3C. In prayer (7.7-11)
 - 4C. Per the golden rule (7.12)
 - 5C. For entry by the narrow gate (7.13-14)
 - 6C. In relation to false prophets (7.15-23)
- 4B. Exhortation to do what you hear 7.24-27
- Narrator's Conclusion 7.28-29

Concluding Implications

What we need to do now in light of this structural look at the Sermon on the Mount is to reflect on this structure to find some implications that arise from this way of viewing it.

Do you see some "big picture" implications that arise from the structure of the Sermon?

Here are some:

1) The promise section gives us a definition of a Christian in 8 marks

We can put all the marks together in a sentence. The Christian is one who faces all the law squarely (pure in heart) and pursues it earnestly (hungering) with deep repentance (poor, mourning) as a gentle and merciful peacemaker, even if persecuted.

Similarly, we could put the seven blessing into a now and not yet framework that defines the salvation of the kingdom.

2) The exhortation to law keeping defines God glorifying good works (the best kind!) showing the relevance of the Law in new wineskins (cf. our place in the history of redemption in relation to the Sermon; we have to make historical-redemptive application).

In narrow scope (exposition of the Law) and in the big picture (two divisions of the Sermon: promise and duty), there is no antithetical relation between promise and duty or law and love. Promise, law, duty, and love all intertwine in the believer who clings to Christ for dear life and seeks to serve Him in all things.

3) The Lord's Family Prayer comes within the caution about hypocrisy. This is not to discourage family prayer but it is to put a special hedge around honest heartfelt prayer.

4) The worry passage is within the section on the primacy of seeking kingdom righteousness. Surely then, the key to solve the worry problem is to seek God first in a heavenly way in all earthly things (with no secular-sacred whatever).

5) Big picture and in the conclusion, we have an emphasis on both the heart and the outward act. The Sermon is a call to faith and repentance expressed in practical obedience.