

Matthew 5:1-2

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After observing the large crowds, Jesus withdraws to a mountainside and His disciples follow Him. Jesus then begins to teach His disciples. What follows in chapters 5-7 is traditionally called the “Sermon on the Mount.”

A parallel account of this passage is found in Luke 6:17-19.

Having introduced *Jesus* as the Messiah, Matthew now gives his audience the opportunity to encounter Him up close through the first of five extended discourses dispersed throughout his Gospel narrative (Matthew chapters 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25). This first discourse is the most well-known and it is among the most beloved passages in all of scripture. It is commonly known as Jesus’s “Sermon on the Mount.”

The word quickly spread about *Jesus*’s miracles that healed every kind of disease and sickness. In a short span of time following His arrival in Capernaum, a village on the northern shore of Lake Galilee, He was drawing considerable *crowds*. *Jesus* noticed the *crowds* of people coming to get healed. *When He saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain and sat down.* Jewish teachers (called rabbis) often *sat down* when they taught, with their pupils gathered around them. Matthew writes that *Jesus’s disciples came to Him, after He sat down.*

The context indicates that *Jesus* withdrew from performing miracles for the crowd of Jews and Gentiles who came to Him from a 200-mile radius seeking a physical benefit, to be healed. *Jesus* apparently withdrew in order to provide His disciples a spiritual benefit. In the previous chapter *Jesus* was teaching in the synagogues and healing among the people. Now *Jesus* begins to teach His disciples on a *mountain*. The Greek word translated *mountain* also occurs in 5:14 and is translated *hill*. This term does not provide a precise location for the Sermon on the Mount. Tradition places *Jesus*’ sermon on a slope near the shore of the lake that is the Sea of Galilee. Wherever it was, the disciples followed, but the crowds did not, as shown in 8:1, “When *Jesus* came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him” (Matthew 8:1).

The picture Matthew presents indicates that *Jesus* first demonstrated His divine power through healing, then sat down to explain a greater power to His disciples. Physical healing has a temporary benefit. But the inner power to heal souls has a lasting benefit.

Jesus’s sermon appears to only be addressed to *His disciples*. The phrase, *His disciples*, is not necessarily limited to the “twelve disciples” whom *Jesus* selects in Matthew 10:2-4. Context determines which disciples are being referred to. *Jesus* had a substantial number of disciples. This can be seen in John 6:66, when a large number of *disciples* ceased walking with *Jesus* while the twelve remained. In the context of Matthew 5:1, *His disciples* is likely a broader reference to those who have been following *Jesus* with some regularity and/or demonstrated a greater level of commitment to Him than the wider crowds. Simon Peter and Andrew, as well as James and

John—the two pairs of brothers whom *Jesus* called to follow Him in earlier verses—would almost certainly have been a part of His audience.

“The Sermon on the Mount” is therefore an internal message whose recipients already belong to the movement *Jesus* is founding and leading. In Luke’s Gospel, *Jesus* will restate many of the same ideas to the twelve disciples after He chooses them (Luke 6:12-49). Since this is *Jesus*’ kingdom platform, it is likely the twelve heard these teachings on many occasions.

Although this group of *disciples* in Matthew 5 includes more than the twelve, it probably was not a substantial group size, both because *Jesus* was teaching while sitting down, and because *Jesus*’s ministry had just begun. After the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew says that “When *Jesus* had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching” (Matthew 7:28). The word translated as crowds (“ochlos” G3793) also means “people.” In this context the “crowds” or “people” refers to the gathering of *His disciples* and not the “large crowds” (ochloi polloi) who flocked to *Jesus* from far and wide that Matthew mentions in 8:1.

“The Sermon on the Mount” serves as a deeper initiation for *His disciples* where *Jesus* reveals to them the core platforms of His Kingdom. Among these platforms are counter-intuitive ideas such as “Treat others the way you want others to treat you;” “Forgive others and You will be forgiven;” and “Humble yourself and follow after Me and I will make you great.” *Jesus* will make the point in this chapter that He did not come to overturn the teachings of the Old Testament, but to fulfill them. *Jesus*’s platform is a kingdom platform, but might be summarized this way: “Serve Now and Rule Later.” Matthew shares the record of this internal meeting as a way to introduce his audience to *Jesus*’s Kingdom platform.

Considering that the traditional location of the Sermon on the Mount was a slope near the northern shore, *His disciples* likely would have gathered around their Lord facing the Sea of Galilee. As *Jesus* sat with the Sea as His backdrop and its breeze blowing into the *disciples*’ faces, the slope of the hill would have formed a natural amphitheater. From *His disciples*’ vantage point they could see the different towns and villages circling the lake. These towns represented a wide range of political diversity within Jewish and Gentile society. If *Jesus* ascended Mt. Arbel or a similar nearby peak, they would have been roughly a thousand feet above the shore, and also had a full view of the towns and cultures surrounding the lake. For purposes of painting a picture of the event, we will assume the sermon took place in the traditional location.

As *His disciples* faced the sea, just down the slope and slightly to their left was the trade city of Capernaum located on the northern shore. Further up the road and fully to their left was the farming village of Chorazin. To the east of Capernaum, on the northern edge of the sea was the fishing village of Bethsaida. The Pharisees’ influence ruled these towns. They emphasized strict obedience to God’s law. From their synagogues, the Pharisees sat in the seat of Moses and taught everyone to obey the law. Of all the leading political-religious groups among the Jews at this time, it was the Pharisees who ought to have most accepted *Jesus* as their Messiah. They were knowledgeable, committed, and held a strong faith that what the scriptures said was true. But their political system was corrupt.

The Pharisees were hypocrites (pretenders.) They wanted to be seen as standing for the law, but they did not want to live it. Faithfulness to God would have brought a confrontation with Rome, and such a confrontation would have put at risk their position of power and influence. Outwardly the Pharisees identified with the Law of God, but inwardly they bowed the knee to Rome. Jesus will call them out on this point. However, it seems the Pharisees were held in high regard by ordinary Jews. This can be seen in Matthew 15:12, when the disciples come to Jesus to make sure He was aware that His words had offended the Pharisees. This signals respect for the Pharisees, even among the twelve.

To *His disciples'* right was the western shore of Galilee and the city of Tiberias. Tiberias was made the capital of the Galilee region a little over a decade earlier by Herod Antipas. Herod spent a great deal of his time enjoying his palace there. Herod's followers, the Herodians, were the party most strongly affiliated with Rome. Not only did their power directly come from Rome, the Herodians were basically Jewish by ethnicity but Roman by culture. They indulged in the sinful acts of Roman paganism. And wherever there were Herodians, there were Sadducees nearby. Even though the Jerusalem temple was a hundred miles south of Galilee, Sadducees would regularly court their Herodian allies. The city of Tiberias then represented a place of compromise, if not outright surrender to Roman authority.

To the left of *His disciples* was Galilee's eastern shore. There was the Gentile region known as the Decapolis, which was often referred to in the gospels as "The other side." The Decapolis received its name from the ten principal cities that were founded by Alexander the Great's surviving generals in the fourth and third centuries B.C. Now under the rule of Rome, the Decapolis was a separate province that bordered Israel. These cities were guarded and protected by Rome's famous Tenth Legion. The Greco-Roman city of Hippos sat atop a hill and loomed over Galilee, as an ominous reminder of Rome's dominance and rule.

On the eastern horizon, five or so miles up a valley, *His disciples* might have been able to make out the city and fortress of Gamala. Gamala was situated on a steep hill, just over the northern border of the Roman Decapolis. It was where the Jewish Zealots were headquartered. The Zealots lead the movement that sought to overthrow Roman rule. They would lead an uprising in 66-73 A.D. and be defeated after a bloody war. Gamala itself would be the site of perhaps its fiercest battle. In order to rally his battle-tired troops, the Roman general and future emperor, Vespasian, personally led the final charge to victory. Over 4,000 Jewish zealots chose to jump off the cliffs upon which Gamala sat rather than submit to Roman capture. Gamala represented the brewing tension between those who sought to violently gain Jewish independence and the Romans who sought to maintain their occupation of Judea. At least one of Jesus' twelve disciples was an official member of the Zealots, "Simon the Zealot." The rest (save Judas) had the zealot spirit.

Jesus's "Sermon on the Mount" is delivered *up on the mountain*. Matthew, once again, alludes to *Jesus* being a kind of Moses. Matthew has previously compared Jesus to Moses: Israel's Lawgiver through multiple allusions in his Gospel narrative. (*Jesus's* escape from Herod's slaughter of baby boys in Bethlehem similar to Moses' escape from Pharaoh's edict to kill all Hebrew male children (Matthew 2:16-19); *Jesus's* baptism at the Jordan similar to Moses leading Israel through the sea (Matthew 3:13); *Jesus* fasting 40 days following the Spirit in the

wilderness similar to Moses leading Israel in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-2); *Jesus* directly quoting Moses's final message to Israel (Deuteronomy) in His refutations of the devil (Matthew 4:4, 4:7, and 4:10). *Jesus* will be a 'second Moses' in fulfillment of a prophecy from Deuteronomy. He will not only lead His people out of slavery and fulfill the Law of Moses, but He will deliver a New Covenant.

As Messiah, *Jesus* is a second (and better) Moses. In Deuteronomy 18 it was prophesied that the Messiah would be like Moses:

"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.' The Lord said to me, 'They have spoken well. I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him.'" (Deuteronomy 18:15-19)

In this passage from Deuteronomy, Moses recounts the time when the children of Israel were extremely mortified by God's nearness. The thunder, lightning, and smoke coming from the mountain terrified them so much that they requested Moses go alone up the mountain to receive and deliver God's law. The children of Israel said that they would die if God came any nearer. And the Lord said that their terrors were well founded. Then God made a promise to them, that He relayed through Moses. The promise was essentially this: "I have heard your prayers asking Me not to speak in this manner to you again because My speaking to you will cause you to die. So, I will raise up for you a prophet like Moses who will be among your countrymen, and He will speak My words to you. His voice will not be as scary, but this does not mean you should not listen to Him or listen any less intently than you are listening now. I will personally require obedience from you to what He says."

The Sermon on the Mount is a second giving of the law from a mount by the second Moses, and Mt. Sinai was a foreshadowing of the Sermon on the Mount. The Israelites' request was answered fifteen hundred years later when God raised up *Jesus*: who was a prophet like Moses; who was among His countrymen (Matthew 1:1-17); and who spoke the words of God (John 12:49). *Jesus* and His Sermon on the Mount are a fulfillment of Moses's prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:15-19.

The Old Covenant was delivered at Mt. Sinai by Moses, God's prophet. The New Covenant was delivered *up on the mountain* overlooking Galilee by *Jesus*, God's Messiah. Both covenants were delivered to a covenant people (the nation of Israel and *Jesus's disciples*.) In each case, the covenant was given for the benefit of the covenant people. *Jesus's* objective in encouraging His disciples to live according to His words is so they will be "blessed" or fulfilled. Similarly, Moses exhorted the covenant people of Deuteronomy to "choose life" by walking in obedience. A society where everyone treats others as they want to be treated is a great place to live. The alternative is that everyone fights until one tyrant wins, and oppresses the rest.

As God's Messiah, *Jesus* was more than a prophet like Moses. He was also God. God was no longer delivering His message directly from a Mountain, through words written on stone tablets, or through a human prophet. God was now in human form, personally delivering His message to His people. Jesus, the Word of God, *opened His mouth and began to teach* (speak) the words of God. Moses could only deliver the Law as God instructed and inscribed it upon tablets of stone. Jesus reveals the truth and spirit behind the Law and writes them upon the hearts of His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:26-28).

Though one message was delivered amidst smoke and fire and the other on an unremarkable day by a calm lake, the sermons given on both mountainsides 1500 years apart were the same in essence: love God and worship Him, love others and serve them—and you and those around you will be blessed.

With his disciples gathered around him, Jesus *opened His mouth and began to teach them* about His Kingdom. Jesus's Kingdom platform echoed, fulfilled, and surpassed that of His prophetic predecessor, Moses. His platform was a reframing of the Mosaic Law. But instead of being a law on tablets of stone, Jesus revealed the truth and spirit behind the law. Jesus put the His law within the hearts of His people (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:26-28).

Moses told the children of Israel of a new way of living that was different from the surrounding nations. The Mosaic Law was an invitation for voluntary compliance without human rulers. It was an invitation to self-governance. Moses instructed his people how to find and enjoy God's blessing within the land they were about to enter by voluntarily living in harmonious community. *Jesus* told *His disciples* of a new way of living that was different from typical earthly powers, who seek coercive control. He instructed *His disciples* how to live the principles of Kingdom of Heaven while living on earth, and enjoy its blessings to the fullest.

But even though these covenants were delivered by different men, at different times, and in different environments, the offer and the requirements were the same.

The offer was to choose life or choose death (Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 7:24-27).

The requirement to choose life was to love God and worship Him only (Deuteronomy 5:1-15; 6:5; Matthew 6:33) and to serve one's neighbor in love (Deuteronomy 5:16-21; Matthew 5:39-44; 6:12; 7:12).

What follows is the fullest discourse we have on record of the gospel of the kingdom *Jesus* was preaching. For the next three chapters, Matthew ceases to narrate. He simply lets his audience listen and hear the words that came when Jesus *opened His mouth and began to teach, saying...*

Biblical Text

5:1-2 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,