**Sermon on the Mount & Spiritual Character**

*by Harry Osborne*

The Sermon on the Mount serves as the Gospel of Matthew's focal statement by Christ regarding the nature of the coming kingdom and the foundational principles of the gospel. In turn, the gospel is presented as the law for that new, spiritual kingdom. The importance of the Sermon on the Mount is impossible to over-estimate. It turned the values of a materialistic world and self-righteous nation upside down and set in place a totally new order. In the wake of Jesus' teaching, a new age dawned looking to the paradoxical truth He stated as both a profound, yet simple standard for defining the truly "blessed" – those finding joyful contentedness through giving spiritual values the priority in life.

Though one might expect that a world-altering message would be spoken from the halls or courts of power and wealth, the text tells us where Jesus' sermon was preached. The fourth chapter ends with Jesus preaching in Galilee, the lowly esteemed province far north from the center of Jewish culture, power and wealth in Jerusalem. In that inglorious area, chapter five tells us that Jesus did not go into the largest city, but “up into the mountain” to preach this lesson. Thus, the fundamental principles of the new law of the gospel were first proclaimed from a rustic ridge in rural Galilee. The eighth chapter completes the scene with Jesus coming “down from the mountain” and entering “into Capernaum” (8:1, 5).

The sight traditionally thought to be the place where Jesus spoke this sermon is the Horns of Hattin, a twin-peaked rise on the western side of the Sea of Galilee. The Catholic Church of the Beatitudes now sits on that spot with its ornate altar, mosaic floor and stained glass. In 1967, Pope Paul VI, dressed in his opulent regalia, blessed the chapel and read the beginning words of Jesus' sermon -- the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12). Yet, when Jesus spoke those words, it was a far different scene. Jesus was dressed in the humble clothing of an itinerate preacher, not the luxurious extravagance of the materialistic and self-serving papacy. Jesus spoke words of profoundly simple truth that replaced mindless ritual with the reverently spiritual. The history of the popes has been in the opposite direction. Jesus portrayed humble service to those around Him even though He was divine. The pope is the picture of ostentatious splendor who expects those around him to bow down as if he was God. Jesus instructed us to *"call no man your Father upon the earth"* (Matt. 23:9), but what do the popes and Catholic priests want to be called? In the closing words of the beatitudes, Jesus affirmed the blessedness of those persecuted for righteousness' sake. The papacy and the Roman Catholic hierarchy are history's greatest persecutors and mass-murderers of people seeking righteousness. From the Inquisition to the extermination of men of faith seeking to make the Bible text available to the common man, saying nothing of the cover up of rampant abuse of children by modern priests, the Roman Catholic Church has been far from an example of purity, peace-making and protection for the persecuted. Think of our Lord's reaction to the pope mouthing these words:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*

*For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.   
Blessed are those who mourn,*

*For they shall be comforted.   
Blessed are the meek,*

*For they shall inherit the earth.   
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,*

*For they shall be filled.   
Blessed are the merciful,*

*For they shall obtain mercy.   
Blessed are the pure in heart,*

*For they shall see God.   
Blessed are the peacemakers,*

*For they shall be called sons of God.   
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,*

*For theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Matt. 5:3-10).

The popes of Rome and the apostate church they direct have a record of the exact opposite character as Jesus commended. Surely our Lord's disgust for such an appalling display of hypocrisy would have been much the same as Jehovah's contempt for the hypocritical ritual of Judah (Mal. 1:10).

The Protestant world would no doubt see the hypocrisy of the pope reciting the above words, but is the pope the only one guilty of such duplicity? Do the "televangelists" not exemplify the exact opposite character commended by Christ? Does mainstream denominationalism not exhibit an opposite path in their ever-increasing quest to advance the social and recreational programs to attract the masses rather than focusing on the spiritual? Is it not apparent that the "show-time" style of supposed worship seen in the churches of men is at odds with the quiet reverence and spiritual focus taught by our Lord (Matt. 6:1-18; Jn. 4:23-24)? Can we not see the same disconnect between the Evangelical world's claim to desire a "personal relationship with Jesus" while pursuing "health and wealth gospel" that defines success by acquisition of material possessions rather than the prioritization of spiritual values (Matt. 6:19-24, 33)?

However, lest we be guilty of judging others with one standard while failing to apply it to ourselves (Matt. 7:1-5), let us consider our own character and priorities in the light of Jesus' words. Do we value the effect of being humbled in spirit to bring us closer to the character of Christ? Or are we given to pride that lifts our view of self and our desires above others? An humble servant's heart is foundational to the character Christ demands (Gal. 5:13; Matt. 23:11-12). Do we understand the necessary role that mourning due to spiritual things has in building godly character? Or are we in a constant quest for fun and entertainment that leaves little time for such reflection? Time spent in proper mourning is needed to bring us closer to God (Eccl. 7:2-4; Jas. 4:9-10). Do we value a meek and quiet spirit? Or do we admire the brash and forward personality so loved by worldly culture? Remember, it is meekness in character that God values and demands (1 Pet. 3:1-4; Jas. 1:19-21; 3:13; Gal. 5:22-23). Do we truly hunger and thirst after righteousness? Or do we spend less time in learning of it than we do in feeding the physical appetite and pursuing recreation? Learning and living the righteousness instructed by God takes much time and fervent desire (Psa. 1:1-2; 119:97-104, 127-128, 162-167; Jn. 6:48-69). Do we show mercy to others? Or do we seek to destroy those who cross us? Showing mercy brings our character closer to God's (Lk. 6:35-36). Do we purify even our hearts? Or is an evil heart being cloaked by feigned religion? God knows our hearts and will judge accordingly (Jas. 4:8; 2 Cor. 5:10; Eccl. 12:14). Do we seek to maintain the peace God ordained? Or are we fostering faction and discontent? Seeking peace demands, not compromise with error and evil, but pursuing the joint submission to God's truth by all in every matter (Eph. 4:1-3; Col. 3:15-17; 1 Pet. 3:8-12). Are we suffering for righteousness' sake? Or are we causing the righteous to suffer? There is a major difference between the two (1 Pet. 4:12-19; Matt. 5:11-12; 2 Tim. 3:12).

Brethren, the sad truth is that the kingdom of our Lord has been devastated by many who call themselves Christians, but have exemplified the opposite character to that commended by Jesus. We all know of cases where the wealthy, powerful and self-obsessed have torn congregations apart and run off spiritually-minded saints to start all over by planting the true seed of the kingdom in another place. More than once, the tears of godly and faithful Christians have watered humble spirits, sundered from those they love by division in the church, to grow closer to the Father. May God help us all to truly examine ourselves to see if the character traits of the beatitudes are really in us or if our claim to value such is mere hypocrisy.