

Lesson #8

NT LESSON #8 “A MORE EXCELLENT WAY”

Reading: MATTHEW 5

by Ted L. Gibbons

Introduction: The Savior never intended that the Sermon on the Mount be given to the multitudes. It was a special sermon for his most faithful disciples, given to those who had already demonstrated that they were willing to accept him as Savior and Redeemer and enter into a covenant relationship with him. It was from this group that the Savior chose the Twelve Apostles. Note Matthew 5:1: “And seeing the multitude, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set [JST: “set down”], his disciples came unto him”

This is perhaps the same mountain where he “continued all night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12) before choosing the Twelve. Following the Sermon on the Mount, “he came down with them [the Twelve and other disciples from whom the Twelve were chosen], and stood in the plain, and the company of his disciples, and a great multitude of people out of all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon, which came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases. . . . And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples and said, Blessed be ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” Matthew 8:1 records that “*When he had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed him.*” (*emphasis added*) It was in this location that he gave what we have called the Sermon on the Plain, to the multitudes described above. Thus it should not surprise us to learn that some parts of the Sermon on the Mount were not intended as directives for the behavior of all people. Some were intended solely for those called full-time into his service. For example, see 3 Nephi 13:25, in which we are told that “when Jesus had spoken these words, he looked upon the twelve whom he had chosen, and said unto them . . .” The instructions that follow in 3rd Nephi, and we may assume, in Matthew 6, are intended just for the Twelve.

None of this should be construed to mean that we can pick and choose from the Sermon those parts that we want to apply to our own lives and then ignore the rest. If we mean to be true disciples, to be truly Christlike, then we must make every effort to make our actions and thoughts and words match the pattern of this most remarkable of all sermons . President Harold B. Lee wrote:

In his Sermon on the Mount, the Master has given us somewhat of a revelation of His own character, which was perfect, or what might be said to be “an autobiography, every syllable of which He had written down in deeds,” and in so doing, has given us a blueprint for our own lives. (*Stand Ye in Holy Places*, pp. 341-342)

Thus the only correct way to study this sermon is to determine if the design of our lives matches the blueprint provided for us in these chapters.

It would certainly be worth your while to note in your scriptures those invitations extended by the Savior in Matthew 5-7 that need special attention in your own life.

I. THE SAVIOR TEACHES THE BEATITUDES (Matthew 5:3-12)

At the beginning of his remarkable sermon, the Savior describes certain attitudes that will draw upon us the blessings of heaven. They are the attitudes that make believers useful in the pursuit of perfection and in the promulgation of the Kingdom of God. These are called the Beatitudes.

Beatitudes: Name given to certain declarations of blessedness in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3-11, cf. Luke 6:20-22). They describe certain elements that go to form the refined and spiritual character, and all of which will be present whenever that character exists in its perfection. Rather than being isolated statements, the Beatitudes are interrelated and progressive in their arrangement. A more comprehensive and accurate listing is found in 3 Ne. 12 and JST Matt. 5:, where a greater spiritual emphasis is given. (LDS Bible Dictionary)

Blessed [are] the poor in spirit, who come unto me; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3, JST) Look at the footnotes for this verse. The idea of being poor in spirit is presented here as the opposite of being proud. Humility is the issue in this verse, and if that humility brings one to the gospel of the Lamb, then the one who is poor (humble) will certainly be blessed as the JST and 3 Nephi 12:3 promise. In Alma 32:8, as Alma begins to speak to the poor of the Zoramites, he says, “I behold that ye are lowly in heart; and if so, blessed are ye.” Note the number of times some form of the word “humble” appears in Alma 32 (see verses 6,7,12,13,14,15, &16). These poor Zoramites are the perfect example of the first beatitude. They were poor in spirit, and they came to the Lord through the words of Alma and Amulek.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4) Note in Isaiah 61:3 how many different ways the Lord repeats this promise.

To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

Ultimately the mission of the Savior will end all mourning. Revelation 21:4 promises us that at the end of time, “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:5) Look at the footnote for this verse. The meaning of the word “meek” is contained in such synonyms as *gentle, forgiving, benevolent*. We have at times mistaken the meaning of this word and assumed that it describes a man or woman with no backbone or courage. Numbers 12:3 tells us that the man who confronted Pharaoh and parted the Red Sea was meek: “Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.” In fact, the Savior tells us in Matthew 11:29 that he is “meek and lowly of heart.”

Mosiah 3:19 offers a pattern for learning meekness: “For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.”

Elder Maxwell defined meekness in the following way:

In daily discipleship, the many ways to express selfishness are matched by many ways to avoid it. Meekness is the real cure, for it does not merely mask selfishness but dissolves it! Smaller steps could include asking ourselves inwardly before undertaking an important action, Whose needs am I really trying to meet? Or in significant moments of self-expression, we can first count to 10. Such thoughtful filtering can multiply our offering by 10 as a mesh of reflective meekness filters out

destructive and effusive ego (Neal A. Maxwell, “Repent of [Our] Selfishness” [D&C 56:8],” Ensign, May 1999, 230.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. (Matthew 5:6) Men have basic needs which motivate them in most of their actions. The pursuit of sufficient and tasteful food is one of those needs. In an emergency, *sufficient* food may mean simply enough to sustain life and the *tasteful* part may be negotiable. But all of us are familiar enough with hunger and thirst to understand the Savior’s message. Here he suggests that we should have a longing, a craving for spiritual food—that we should hunger and thirst after righteousness. Recall the discussion of the Samaritan woman with the Savior at Jacob’s well about this very subject. (See John 4) Look at Enos 1:3,4. What experiences caused Enos’ soul to hunger? Abraham 1:2 gives a sweet description of one who hungered and thirsted after righteousness. What did Jesus promise to those with such an appetite? What can we do to lift our appetites from our cars and bank accounts and refrigerators and *stuff*, to the things of the Spirit?

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. (Matthew 5:7) In the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:12) we are admonished to pray to be forgiven in the same way we forgive others. Someone has said “He who refuses to forgive burns the bridge over which he himself must one day pass.” Matthew 18 contains the parable of the unmerciful servant, the man who received mercy and yet refused to extend mercy to another. D&C 64:9-11 gives the modern directive of the Lord in this matter. Are there those to whom you need to extend your forgiveness and mercy? Whether or not they merit forgiveness is of no consequence at all. If we want the Lord to edit the sinful episodes of our own lives from the record of our deeds, then we must allow others that same blessing from us.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. (Matthew 5:8) The phrase “pure in heart” is one of the descriptions of the inhabitants of Zion (D&C 97:21) And the inhabitants of Zion will one day dwell with God.

“And the Lord said unto Enoch: Then shalt thou and all thy city meet them there, and **we** will receive them into **our** bosom, and they shall see **us**; and **we** will fall upon their necks, and they shall fall upon **our** necks, and **we** will kiss each other. . .” (Moses 7:62,63)

D&C 97:16 speaks of the temple and promises,

“Yea, and my presence shall be there, for I will come into it, and all the pure in heart that shall come into it shall see God.”

Hugh Nibley offered this interesting observation about Zion.

Zion is the pure in heart--the pure in heart, not merely the pure in appearance. It is not a society or religion of forms and observances, of pious gestures and precious mannerisms: it is strictly a condition of the heart. Above all, Zion is pure, which means "not mixed with any impurities, unalloyed"; it is all Zion and nothing else. It is not achieved wherever a heart is pure or where two or three are pure, because it is all pure--it is a society, a community, and an environment into which no unclean thing can enter. "Henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean" (3 Nephi 20:36). It is not even pure people in a dirty environment, or pure people with a few impure ones among them; it is the perfectly pure in a perfectly pure environment. "I . . . will contend with Zion . . . and chasten her until she overcomes and is clean before me" (D&C 90:36). (Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol.9, Ch.2, p.27).

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

(Matthew 5:9) “And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.” (Mark 4:39) What would it be like to have this same power in our families, and among our friends?--the power to command or at least encourage peace when the storms of life rage around us. The Lord promises to bless us for trying. The word peace also appears in the scriptures in this way: “The gospel of peace.” Perhaps peacemakers are also those who preach the gospel of peace, and thereby help the gospel of peace to flourish in the world.

< ***Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.*** (Matthew 5:10-12) Persecution can take many forms. The outrages of Missouri, the siege of Masada, the fall of Jerusalem, the fiery furnace, and the lions' den. But there are other, more subtle kinds of mistreatment--the kinds that come from peers in school or in the office or in the club. What kinds of persecution have you

experienced? Has your pattern of belief—your commitment to make your life conform to the blueprint given in the Sermon on the Mount—brought you into conflict with those who do not accept your beliefs?

The Bible Dictionary definition of the Beatitudes told us this: “Rather than being isolated statements, the Beatitudes are interrelated and progressive in their arrangement.” Can you see that progressive relationship?

II. THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS ARE TO BE ‘THE SALT OF THE EARTH’ AND ‘THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD’ (Matthew 5:13-16)

To understand why the Savior informed his most faithful disciples that they were the salt, it may be helpful to consider some other things he might have called them. “Ye are the pepper of the earth.” “Ye are the quartz of the earth.” “Ye are the grass of the earth.” Ye are the fingernails of the earth.”

All of this is a bit awkward. Why then the comparison to salt? What is there about salt that would enable the Savior to teach the desired lesson and leave an image that would continue to instruct his disciples throughout the ages to come. Consider some of the attributes of salt.

1. Salt only loses its savor through contamination, never through age. Salt will maintain its flavor over hundreds of years.
2. Salt that is contaminated is useless (“good for nothing”).
3. Restoring salt to a useful condition after contamination is a difficult proposition.
4. Salt is a powerful preservative and curative
5. A little salt goes a long way.

Now look at some of the scriptural references to this mineral and ponder their messages to us.

- < Job 6:6: “Can that which is unsavoury be eaten without salt? or is there any taste in the white of an egg?” We who are salt are to make a difference. In a bland and unsavory world, we must be pure salt.
- < Leviticus 2:13 is a most interesting insight into the place of salt in the gospel covenant: “And every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt; neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking

from thy meat offering: *with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt.*”
(*Emphasis added*) Salt is a symbol of the covenant. With ancient sacrificial offerings, salt was a required component. How do we offer *salt* today with all of our offerings? What particular quality should our sacrifices and offerings for the kingdom have that might be describes as salt?

- < Mark 9:50 teaches us something else about this symbol and its place in the gospel. “Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltness, wherewith will ye season it? *Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another.*”
(*Emphasis added*) Salt is both something we are and something we have.
- < Colossians 4:6: “Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.” Let the goodness of the covenant we have entered into influence all our talk and walk before the Lord.
- < D&C 101:39,40: “When men are called into mine everlasting gospel, and covenant with an everlasting covenant, they are accounted as the salt of the earth and the savor of men; They are called to be the savor of men; therefore, if that salt of the earth lose its savor, behold, it is thenceforth good for nothing only to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men.

We are also told in these passages that we are light—the light of the world. Light does two things for us. It enables us to see, and it enables us to understand:

And the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings (D&C 88:11).

What then does the Lord expect of us if we are the “light of the world”? What do we do to enable people to see better? What do we do to help them understand the purposes and goals of life? Are you involved in this process of being light? Does your light shine in such a way that it blesses those around you and causes them to glorify your Heavenly Father?

A friend played high school basketball, the only LDS student on the team. Many years after this experience he met a former teammate and learned that he had joined the Church. Wondering if his example might have been an influence in the conversion of his former friend, he asked what difference it had made those long

years ago to play sports with a Mormon. His friend's response was, "You're LDS?" How might we put our light "under a bushel"? What can we do to let people see us and see better because of us?

It is interesting to note that the Lord here does not use the language of simile. Rather he uses the language of identification. He does not say, "You are like salt and light." He says, "You are the salt You are the light . . ."

III. JESUS TEACHES A NEW AND HIGHER LAW (Matthew 5:17-48)

The traditions and requirements of the Law of Moses were the heart and soul of the Jewish faith, and of the relationship of the Jewish people with their Maker. Thus the teachings of the Savior would clearly have caused deep concerns for those good and honest (as well as the bad and dishonest) people who had tried their entire lives to live by this law. As the Savior prepared to elevate the sights of his disciples to a new level of obedience, and new kind of gospel law, he explained that he had not come to destroy even the smallest part of what they held dear. Every "jot and tittle" of the law was safe. Jesus had come not to destroy, but to fulfill.

"Behold, I say unto you that the law is fulfilled that was given unto Moses. Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfil the law; therefore it hath an end. Behold, I do not destroy the prophets, for as many as have not been fulfilled in me, verily I say unto you, shall all be fulfilled." (3 Nephi 15:4-6)

The law was fulfilled in Christ because it pointed to Christ. Amulek explained this to the Zoramites. He said: "And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal" (Alma 34:14).

In addition, all the prophecies had been or would be fulfilled. The Jews surrendered nothing by their allegiance to the Messiah. They were merely fulfilling the purposes for which the law had been given, which was to point them to Christ. We must be careful in our own devotion to the gospel that we do not begin to believe that devotion is the purpose of the gospel. We have commandments and we must obey, but the purpose of the commandments is not to obey, but to bring us worthily back into the presence of God through the atonement of the Savior.

As the Savior began to teach the higher law, he followed a pattern that was repeated six times in Matthew 5. In effect he said, “You have heard it said in old times . . .” and then he repeated the old doctrine. Then he continued by saying, “But I say to you . . .” and then Christ taught the new law. This pattern is repeated in Matthew 5: 21-26; 27-30; 31-32; 33-37; 38-42; 43-47. In each case, the Lord seems to be substituting a Celestial law for a Terrestrial law.

They used to say “don’t kill,” but I’m saying “don’t even be angry.” Note that the phrase “without a cause” is absent from the JST and from 3 Nephi 12:22. The Savior forbids anger, unresolved arguments (“agree with thine adversary quickly”) derisive name calling (“Raca”), and carrying grudges. He even makes the righteous party in a disagreement—the one bringing the gift—responsible to initiate the process of reconciliation. This is heavenly behavior indeed (Matthew 5:21-26).

They used to say “Don’t be immoral” but I’m saying, “Don’t even think about it.” Again in Matthew 5:28, the language is not comparative but descriptive. If you lust, you have “committed adultery already in [your] heart.” The damage to the lusting individual is precisely the same as if the actual act had been committed. D&C 63:16,17 describes the effect of lust on the spiritual life of an individual. Such a person “shall not have the Spirit, but shall deny the faith, and shall fear.” Could an actual, physical act have worse consequences than these? We must watch our thoughts *and* our deeds, but thoughts first, because they always precede the deed.

Experimental and clinical psychologists have proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the human nervous system cannot tell the difference between an ‘actual’ experience and an experience imagined intensely and in detail. (*Psycho-Cybernetics: A New Way to Get More Living Out of Life*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960, p. ix).

If you have been frightened by something in a movie, for example, you know this is true. You paid for your ticket. You are in a theater seat next to your friends, eating popcorn you purchased at the concession stand a few yards away, and yet when the monster leaps from the darkened doorway, you react as though it were all real. The influence on you is exactly the same.

The Lord placed an unusual and dramatic emphasis on this element of his sermon. After warning about lust and adultery of the heart (5:27,28), he said this:

Behold, I give unto you a commandment, that ye suffer none of these

things to enter into your heart, for it is better that ye should deny yourselves of these things, wherein ye will take up your cross, than that ye should be cast into hell. Wherefore, if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. Or if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And now this I speak, a parable concerning your sins; wherefore, cast them from you, that ye may not be hewn down and cast into the fire (JST, Matt. 5:31-34).

Are there things that you need to “cast . . . from thee”? A young man with whom I am acquainted told me that his father had disposed of the family computer even though it was needed for a family business. The young man had struggled with the temptation of lurid images on the Internet, and had asked his father for help. His father recognized the problem and *cast it out*.

They used to say, “Keep your oaths,” but I’m saying, “Keep your word.” The fact that you said “yes” or “no” should be as binding to you as the most solemn oath you can swear. Be honorable and full of integrity. You don’t need a contract or the threat of legal action to get you to do what is right. Keep your promises and your covenants and your agreements. Remember the Lord’s description of himself: “What I have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself . . .” (D&C 1:38) We who are striving to become like him cannot afford the indulgence of excuses for failure to do what we have promised to do. Abraham Lincoln said, “Well, I have said it, and be the consequences what they may, it shall not be my fault if I fail to do it.” (*The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Roy B. Basler, Ed., Rutgers University Press [1953], p.3)

They used to say, “Make sure that you are just in your retribution and your retaliation,” but I’m saying, “Forget retribution and retaliation.” Do good. Give more than you have to give. Do more than you have to do.” In D&C 98:23,24, the Lord teaches this principle in this way:

Now, I speak unto you concerning your families--if men will smite you, or your families, once, and ye bear it patiently and revile not against them, neither seek revenge, ye shall be rewarded. But if ye bear it not patiently, it shall be accounted unto you as being meted out as a just

measure unto you.

If we seek revenge or retaliation, then whatever happened to us, we deserved. It was “a just measure unto” us. We can never use the excuse, “he hit me first, he hurt me first.” Sequence is meaningless to a being for whom “all things are present” (D&C 38:2), and are “continually before the Lord.” (D&C 130:7)

“They used to say, love those that love you and hate those that hate you,” but I’m saying, “Love everybody and as for your enemies, bless them, do good to them, and pray for them.” We must act like the children of our Father in Heaven. When B.W. used to beat me up every day in high school, I was in mortal fear of him. He was about the size of a Buick, and made my life miserable for months during my sophomore year. I did not love him, I hated him. I wanted to hurt him. But I was terrified so I came late to school and used the back stairs and snuck furtively around the halls. But I was a captive in gym class, and he attacked me daily in the locker room. The teacher thought me a wimp and said so. He would not intervene and he would not let me transfer. “You don’t need a transfer, Gibbons,” he told me. “You need a baseball bat. Be a man!” Finally in a moment of humiliation and frustration, I hit B.W. We were on the front steps of the school. He lost his balance and fell over backwards, striking his head on the edge of a lower step, knocking himself unconscious and requiring the services of the school nurse. He never bothered me again. I gloried in my triumph. But I know now I was wrong. Cookies and prayers would have served me and my Savior better.

CONCLUSION: Finally we are commanded to be perfect like our Father in Heaven. (See Matthew 5:48) Perhaps no commandment has troubled Latter-day Saints like this one. The apparent impossibility of such a *conquest of self* may cause us to falter in our resolve to improve. But perhaps we have misunderstood just what is required of us in this matter. Elder Bruce R. McConkie, speaking at the funeral of Elder S. Dilworth Young, said this:

If we die in the faith, that’s the same things as saying that our calling and election has been made sure and that we will go on to our eternal reward hereafter. As far as faithful members of the church are concerned, they have charted a course leading to eternal life . . . [and] if they are in line of their duty, if they are doing what they ought to do, although they may not have been perfect in this sphere, their probation is ended . . . with their death, and they will not thereafter depart from the path. It is true as the Prophet Joseph Smith said, that there are

many things that have to be done “even beyond the grave” to work out our salvation, but we’ll stay in the course and we will not alter from it, if we have been faithful in this life. (13 July 1981)

Notice also the footnote for the word “perfect” in Matthew 5:48. The Greek word from which this English term is taken means “complete, finished, fully developed.” Notice also the content of these three verses:

1. (D&C 60:7) And in this place let them lift up their voice and declare my word with loud voices, without wrath or doubting, lifting up holy hands upon them. ***For I am able to make you holy***, and your sins are forgiven you. (***Emphasis added***)
2. (DC 67:13) Ye are not able to abide the presence of God now; neither the ministering of angels; wherefore, ***continue in patience until ye are perfected***. (***Emphasis added***)
3. (DC 88:74) And I give unto you, who are the first laborers in this last kingdom, a commandment that you assemble yourselves together, and organize yourselves, and prepare yourselves, and sanctify yourselves; yea, purify your hearts, and cleanse your hands and your feet before me, ***that I may make you clean . . .*** (***Emphasis added***).

C.S. Lewis wrote of this about seeking perfection:

“The command Be ye perfect is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He [Christ] is going to make us creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were ‘Gods’ and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said” (Mere Christianity, London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977, p. 172).

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