

# The Teachings Of Jesus

## (The Sermon on the Mount)

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### **FIFTH BLOCK (7:1-27)**

#### **Moral Character and Moral Conduct** *(Living in Consistency with Who We Are)*

As we move from block to block of this sermon we see similar themes and motifs developing throughout. In the First Block (5:3-16, The Beatitudes), Jesus addresses those who are open to the reign of God in their lives. In the Second Block (5:17-48, The Ethics of Jesus: Codes Vs Character), we are introduced to the concept of moral behavior, which results, not from the controls of moral codes, but from our moral character. We behave as we do because of who/what we are, not because there are rules/codes in place to control us. In the Third Block (6:1-18, The Righteousness of God) Jesus discusses the concept of righteousness as it relates to our moral character. The one who is truly righteous is the one who does what he does because of his moral character rather than because of his self-concerns. He gives alms, prays, and fasts because of who he is as a righteous person (i.e., because of his moral character), rather than doing acts of righteousness in order to be thought well of in the eyes of men (self-centered motivations). In the Fourth Block (6:19-34 - Living Out of a Misplaced Sense of Values), Jesus ties all of what he has said to our values. Why do people behave as they do? Because they think and/or believe as they do. What do they think most about? They think most about those things that are of greatest value to them. Here the issue is our sense of values. Jesus concludes his discourse

(7:1-27) with a discussion of how all of this (openness to the reign of God, our moral character, our righteousness, our sense of values) relates to our behavior or moral conduct. The bottom line here is, "living in consistency with who we are." In the opening lines of this block, Jesus goes straight to the issue of the way we behave toward one another. If we are beings created in the image of God, why do we treat one another like we are we are all created out of dirt?

### Criteria for Judging Others (7:1-5)

*Do not pass judgment, that you be not judged. 2 For judgment with which you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure with which you measure, you use, it will be measured to you. 3 And why do you see the speck (karphos – a small dry object) in your brother's eye, but do not consider the beam (dokos – a beam used in the construction of a house) in your own eye? 4 Or how will you say to your brother, "Let me remove the speck from your eye"; and behold, a beam is in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you will see more clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matt 7:1-5, author's translation).*

There are two major views as to what Jesus is prohibiting here: (1) condemning or setting in judgment on others or (2) judging others without having the kind of moral character that allows us that right. In reality, both views forbid us sitting ourselves in a position of judgment or condemnation of others. How so? In the first instance, Jesus himself forbids us this role, in that this role is his exclusively; and in the second instance, none of us have achieved the level of moral character that allows us the "right" to pass the judgment of eternal condemnation on anyone. The role of judging the human race is Christ's and Christ's alone; and this is by virtue of his lordship over heaven and earth (Matt 28:18). In John 5:22ff, Jesus says:

*The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to, the Son, (23) that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. (24) Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him*

*who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*

Then further, in verse 27, Jesus says that the Father had given him authority to execute judgment, because he was the Son of man. In verse 30 he says, "I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me." What Jesus is saying here is that he, by virtue of who he is, is the only one who may sit in judgment on any man or woman. This is his role as Lord of heaven and earth (Matt 28:18) and Lord of the living and the dead (Rom 14:9). This fact is further established in the teachings of Paul, where he says in 2 Cor 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body." The fact that we have no authority to call anyone to stand before our judgment seat is a fact that some people have not fully grasped.

What then is Jesus saying here in this text? It appears that what he is talking about has to do with our treatment of one another - our behavior as we judge the behavior of others. One must distinguish between people and their behavior. We may clearly be able to see behavior that is immoral and unacceptable to God. We all choose our behaviors. These behaviors may estrange us to one another and to God, but it is the behavior that may legitimately be the object of our judgment. This kind of judging is a must for us. That is what this whole discourse is about. It is not easy to distinguish between a person's behavior and that person him or herself. But we must remember that a person will more quickly hear a discussion of the morality or immorality of a given type of behavior only if the person leading the discussion is free of questionable behavior him or herself. If your own judgment with reference to moral behavior is in question, then what voice do you have with anyone else?

### Distinguishing the Sacred from the Profane (7:6)

*Do not give holy things to the dogs; nor throw your pearls before*

*swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and having turned they will tear you into pieces* (Matt 7:6, author's translation).

This is, perhaps, one of the most difficult sayings of this whole discourse. It would appear that what is at issue here is what is at issue throughout this whole block of material. Specifically, moral teaching, especially moral teaching as rooted in religious belief. If what is holy or sacred is the revelation of God which contains his moral image, then to try to encourage those whose behavior has reached the stage of complete moral malignancy to be receptive to this revelation is equal to giving to dogs and swine that which they do not value and will not receive.

In the ancient Middle East dogs and swine were considered unclean animals. People raised dogs for pets and swine for food; these were not a threat to man. There were, however, wild or savage dogs and wild boars that roamed about. These are used in proverbs throughout Jewish literature and appear to be the kind of animals Jesus has in mind here.

This raises this question: is Jesus saying that there folk who are more like savage dogs and wild boars than like people? That does appear to be what he is saying and we all know from our own experiences that what he is saying is true. Now, the point here seems to be as follows. There must be something redemptive about those God chooses to deliver from their enslavement to the powers of evil. That something appears to be "the will to be delivered." John speaks of those who love the darkness and hate the light" (John 3:19-21). Paul, in Rom 1:18-32, speaks of those who have gone from disbelief in God, to moral perversion, to complete moral malignancy.

This is an interesting and significant concept. Are there those who are beyond the point of redemption? Are there those in whom God sees nothing redemptive? If this is the case, it explains why, in several cases in the OT, God allowed the total destruction of complete societies, while with other pagan cultures God sent prophets to convert them. God must have seen something redemptive in some that wasn't there in the others.

It doesn't take long to see that you are wasting your time trying to lead some people to see what you have seen in God's revelation of his moral character in pages of Scripture and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. These people, in terms of their moral behavior, are usually more like dogs and swine than like people created in the image of God. As long as they value the profane more than the holy, your attempts to communicate morality to them is attempting to give that which is holy-to dogs and casting your pearls before swine. The warning Jesus gives here is that the swine may despise your morality so much that they turn and in demonic frenzy and try to destroy you for your efforts.

### The "Golden Rule" of Moral Behavior (7:7-12)

*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone asking receives, and the one seeking finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? 11 If you therefore, being evil (poneros – having the capacity for evil), know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give good to the ones asking Him! 12 Therefore, everything you desire men to do to you, you do also for them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matt 7:7-12), author's translation).*

The point here is that God is accessible to those who seek him. As his sons and daughters, we may come into his presence and make requests of him as a child does of a loving father. Now, if our God is our model of fatherhood, how should we as fathers be behaving toward our children? And further, with a father such as this to model moral behavior for us, what kind of children should we be? Or more specifically, with a God like this whose moral character and behavior are ever before us, what kind of people should we be?

What a tremendous lesson is here with reference to moral behavior as it relates to moral character. The reason that God's moral

behavior is what it is, is because his moral character is what it is; so also with us. The "golden rule," with which Jesus concludes his teaching, simply summarizes what has been emphasized throughout this discourse. It is a far better world in which to live when men live out of their moral character than by moral codes. The whole of the written revelation of God found in "the law and the prophets" (Hebrew Scriptures) was given with the intent of developing in man such moral character that it would be unnecessary to bind on him laws and rules of moral behavior. If my behavior is truly a reflection of who I am, then what does my behavior say about who I am? This is the question to ask here.

### The Difficulty of Moral Existence (7:13-14)

*Enter through the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way leading to destruction (apoleia - translated "lost" in the KJV, but its meaning is to be destroyed), and many are the ones entering through it. 14 How narrow is the gate and difficult (tethlimmene - encumbered, compressed, difficult) is the way leading to life, and few are the ones who find it (7:13-14, author's translation)*

It is easy to talk moral character and moral behavior; it is not always easy, however, to be moral in character and behavior. Trying to live as a moral being in the midst of an immoral world is to live in the midst of paradox. Jesus exemplified in the whole of his life everything he taught here in this sermon, and the immoral forces of this world nailed him to a cross. He knew this while he was delivering this discourse, yet he taught us these things anyway. Why? Because the alternative to living the way he taught us to live is a world not fit to live in!

This world is a vale of soul making. We are free moral agents in a pilgrimage. Good and evil are before us always. The presence of evil is as necessary as good in the development of moral character. The course of evil is easy to find and a pleasure to follow - the gate is wide and the way easy! The course of good is often hard to find

and very difficult to follow. But the conclusion of the journey will "tell the tale" in the making of the kind moral character that will fit us for the spending of eternity with God. That's the lesson Jesus is trying to teach us here.

### Judging the Moral Teacher by His Moral Character and Conduct (7:15-23)

*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in the clothing of sheep, but within they are ravenous wolves. 16 By their fruit you will know them. Are not grapes gathered from thornbushes and figs from thistles? 17 Thus, every good tree produces good fruit, but a rotten (sapron - decayed or rotten) tree produces evil fruit. 18 A good tree cannot produce bear bad fruit, nor can an evil tree produce good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Therefore by their fruit you will know them. 21 Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the reign/ kingdom (basileia - rule or reign) of the heavens, but the one doing the will of My Father, the one in the heavens. 22 Many will say to me in that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons and done many wonders were performed?" 23 And then I will declare to them, "I never" knew you! Depart from me, [you] the ones working lawlessness,' (7:15-23, author's translation).*

This is a continuation of the proceeding teaching. The evil of this world often takes the form of goodness. Those who appear to be representatives of the forces of good are often the very presence of evil in our midst. The "holy men" in our midst can be the very servants of Satan. How can we tell the difference? Jesus tells us here by means of a moral axiom: moral character reflects itself in moral conduct! If we are truly the sons and daughters of God, then our moral character will reflect the moral character of our Father, as was the case with Jesus of Nazareth. Where do we look to see his moral character? We look to his moral behavior!

By their fruits you shall know them! Calling Jesus "Lord" is easy to do. Allowing Jesus to be "Lord" is another matter. If Jesus is truly our Lord, then it is he who stands before us as the paradigm of moral behavior. This is what conversion to Christ means -- transformation of who we are by means of whom we believe him to be and the reflection of that belief in our lives.

### Concluding Admonitions (7:24-27)

*Therefore everyone hearing these my words and doing them, will be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock, 25 and down came the rain the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house; and it did not fall for it had been founded on the rock. 26 But everyone hearing my words and not doing them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: 27 and the rain came down, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house; and it fell, and the fall was great," (7:24-27).*

This sermon concludes with a parable. A parable is, essentially, a story used to illustrate a point or teach a lesson. This story makes a potent point and teaches a lesson of eternal significance. The point of this story is that we must make every effort to hear what Jesus is saying to us because his words have eternal significance.

What he was saying to his original hearers and to us as we read these words in Scripture is that the development of moral character is critical to our relationship with God and to one another. We behave as we do because we think or believe as we do. For those of us who are Christians, we behave as we do because of what we believe as Christians. That which gives content to our moral character is what we believe and our beliefs center in this person Jesus of Nazareth. That is why we hear these words of his and do them!

## Reaction of the People: He Taught Them Not as the Scribes (7:28-29)

*And so it was, when Jesus had ended these words, the people were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes, (Matt 7:28-29).*

To fully appreciate what is being said here, one needs to know something of the nature of Judaism in the first century Mediterranean world. A key term here is "tradition," especially, rabbinic tradition; or as called in the Gospels, "the traditions of the elders" (Matt 15:2-6).

There were numerous forms of tradition in first century land of Israel; but, most of it can fall under two forms: (1) rabbinic tradition (*haggadah* and *halachah*, and (2) rabbinic interpretation of Scripture (*midrashim*, *drashim*, and similar collections of literary tradition). In later centuries the whole body of rabbinic tradition was compiled into a collection of documents called "The Talmud." The Talmud earlier existed as the *Mishnah*, produced in the second century CE and the Talmud later developed called the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. The Talmud tradition consists of two types of writing: (1) the *Mishnah* consisted of an authoritative body of theological thought, and (2) the *Gemarah*, which was a body of authoritative exegesis of Scripture.

These authoritative interpretations of Scripture are what we are concerned with here in the Sermon on the Mount. The rabbis associated with the Pharisees followed a fixed (i.e., orthodox) body of Torah interpretation. There were other traditions associated with the Sadducees, the Essenes or Dead Sea Sect, and numerous apocalyptic writings of second temple Judaism. Jesus appears to be taking issue with the traditional interpretations associated with the scribes and Torah scholars of the Pharisees. "You have heard it said by those of old" (Matt

5:21), would be the oral (rabbinic) traditions associated with the rabbinic community of Jerusalem.

It is often thought that Jesus was taking issue with Moses and the *Torah* here. This is not the case given his statements to the contrary; "I came not to destroy the Law/*Torah*," (Matt 5:17-20). Throughout the Gospels, when Jesus refers to the Scriptures, he does so with such introductory formula as, "It is written," "What says the Scripture?" "Have you not read?" The use of the term "heard" would more easily be understood as a reference to the oral tradition extant within first century Judaism. It is this oral tradition that Jesus has in mind, not the OT Scriptures or Moses himself.

Rather than teach out of the authoritative rabbinic traditions, Jesus taught the people out of his own authority; and his teaching was not only but in opposition to the traditional exegesis of the scribes of old, so much so that the people were amazed at what they heard.

The expression "not as their scribes" would also indicate that these were the ones who were setting themselves in opposition to Jesus. This suggests that they were engaged in a practice in first century Judaism called "*the honor challenge*." The fact is, those were constantly issuing these challenges were constantly coming out on the short end and Jesus was constantly growing in popularity with the people witnessing these confrontations. In his book, *Prophet and Teacher, An Introduction to the Historical Jesus*, by William Herzog II, this author raises the question of Jesus' growth in popularity and suggests this scenario as the reason why,

Most societies have characteristic ways of disputing and arguing in public forums (for example, televised debates between candidates or radio talk shows), and first-century Palestine was no exception. One major cultural form used for conducting public disputes was "the honor challenge and riposte." Palestine in the first century was an "agonistic"

society (from the Greek *agon*, which means contest) in which social contests for acquiring honor were daily occurrences.

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These challenges were highly visible contests held in public, often crowded spaces, and the crowd usually decided who won and who lost. What was a stake? Honor primarily, but to gain honor is also to gain political leverage because the actions and words of an honorable man are treated with respect and carry weight (Hertzog II, *Prophet and Teacher*, pp 80-81).

Why Jesus was given such a hearing of these controversial interpretations of the moral instruction of Scripture? He was quickly becoming a the voice to hear as a result of his ability to handle the “honor challenges” being issued by the established voices of authority from Jerusalem. There is no question that the Jerusalem hierarchy had sent their best minds to Galilee to do something about this person people were calling “the prophet from Galilee.” The early chapters of the Fourth Gospel give a clear picture of the concern being created by Jesus on behalf of the Jerusalem hierarchy. This reality is best explained by the Apostle John’s revelation that Jesus had began his messianic ministry by cleansing the Temple, and had ended his earthly sojourn by a second cleansing.

This presentation of Jesus called “the sermon on the mount” was revolutionary when spoken and is yet revolutionary today. Steve Chalke, in his controversial book, *The Lost Message of Jesus*,

If Jesus were to achieve the status of an honorable man worthy of public recognition, that is, become a force to be reckoned with, it is most likely that he earned such recognition, at least initially, through his skill in public debate and through his reputation as a healer and exorcist, activities that he could have pursued in market towns when crowds were present. The peasants returning home would have something to talk about, and Jesus would gain ascribed honor and public notice . . . He

acquired honor because the crowds in Galilee recognized him as a truthful interpreter of the Torah, (*The Lost Message*, p 81).

In Mark 1:21-22, we read,

*They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. 22The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.*

Jesus began as a controversial figure and the controversy centered in his interpretation of the Scriptures as opposed to the traditional interpretations of the establishment figures of the Jerusalem hierarchy; the priests associated with the Temple and their claims to being the legitimate agents of the forgiveness of sins or granting a state of purification to sinners, and the scribal community made up of the establishment scholars of Judaism. As stated in the first lesson of this study, "*Never a Man Spoke as This Man*," Jesus set himself in opposition to "establishment Judaism" from the very beginning of his ministry with the cleansing of the Temple in John 2:12-25, which is followed by the Pharisee Nicodemus coming to him acknowledging that Jesus was a teacher come from God (John 3:1-15).

The Sermon on the Mount was given as when Jesus returned to Galilee and "went through Galilee teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the reign/rule of God and healing every disease and sickness among the people," (Matt 4:23). Of significance here is the message Jesus was proclaiming, "the rule of God is coming," and that he was creating a following from "among the people." Matthew sets this sermon in a context of a large gathering of people, "Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him," (Matt 4:25). With this audience before him he went up on the mountainside (a piece of mosaic imagery Exodus 19:3), sat down as did the "teachers of Israel" and began to teach the people. The "teaching" given the people here is yet today one of the most profound presentations of moral instruction given to man. He didn't teach as the scribes, he taught as one whose voice was the voice of God.