



Sermon Context - Matthew 5:1-2

Before jumping into the content of this most famous of Jesus' sermons, it would be beneficial to consider the

1 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

specific context in which He preached it. If taken in isolation, what follows will be so heavily filled with the law as to cause even the most ardent moralist to despair. If we do not consider who "the crowds" were that Jesus saw and responded to with this sermon, we will fail to grasp what His task was and run the real risk of misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

In his commentary on Matthew, Stanley Hauerwas notes that "The sermon, therefore, is not a list of requirements, but rather a description of the life of a people gathered by and around Jesus. To be saved is to be so gathered. That is why the Beatitudes are the interpretive key to the whole sermon—precisely because they are not recommendations. No one is asked to go out and try to be poor in spirit or to mourn or to be meek. Rather, Jesus is indicating that given the reality of the kingdom we should not be surprised to find among those who follow him those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek. Moreover, Jesus does not suggest that everyone who follows him will possess all the Beatitudes, but we can be sure that some will be poor, some will mourn, and some will be meek."¹

Keep in mind that it seems likely that Jesus was preaching to a growing group of followers and working with them to grow in their understanding of the difference between the Judaism that they had been raised in and His own distinct teachings. We need to avoid any interpretation that might suggest that Jesus was outlining a road map to work out one's salvation, as much as describing the natural outgrowth of faith in Him. If we forget this we are likely to heap unreasonable requirements upon ourselves that we have no chance to meet. Instead, we ought to keep in mind that in Christ, having already been washed clean in the blood of the lamb, we are now free and in our freedom, the law no longer instructs us with regard to our behavior but rather can be seen as a point of verification for the fruit that faith naturally produces within us.

Thoughts for Reflection

How does this approach to understanding the Sermon on the Mount differ from prior readings of these verses that you have engaged in? What hope does this approach give to you?

1. Hauerwas, Stanley. Essay. In *Matthew*, 60. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015.