



Carl Bloch, Sermon on the Mount, 1877. oil on copper plate, 104 x 92 cm, Museum of National History, Frederiksborg. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

MATTHEW 6–7 (3 NEPHI 13–14)

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Overview

Mt 5 focuses on the Mosaic law, while Mt 6–7 distills the Prophets from the Old Testament. Jesus teaches the higher law to emphasize inner purity along with outer obedience. He calls on disciples to control their appetites, needs of the flesh, and worldly wants. Stylistically, there is such a sharp contrast between these two chapters that biblical commentators suspect Mt 6:1–18 was introduced later. That is not the way John W. Welch sees it, however. As the text moves to a higher order and presents a second set of requirements for total dedication to God, Welch sees this as transition in a temple text taking the disciples to a higher order, as in 3 Ne 13–14 and outlined below.¹

Matthew 6—Giving to the Poor

Mt 6:1–4 (NASB). “*Take care not to practice your righteousness in the sight of people, to be noticed by them. . . . [If] your charitable giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.*” Jesus encouraged His disciples to act from a higher motivation than for others to see. The word alms in the KJV is in many Greek texts “righteousness.” The example of giving to the needy anonymously is just one example of doing something for the right reason. Jesus promised that if we give sincerely and secretly, Heavenly Father will reward us openly.

This became important in the Restoration as well when the Prophet Joseph Smith received the law of consecration and understood our need to sacrifice our all to God (D&C 42). This includes generously giving Him our time, capacity, and will. The *Lectures on Faith* warns, “A religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation.”² No gift is accepted on the Lord’s altar unless the giver is motivated by love (Mt 6:18, 22–24).

Mt 6:2. “as the hypocrites do.” The footnote on “hypocrites” in the Church’s official KJV defines *hypocrite* as an actor who plays different characters behind a mask. Jesus denounces such pretending by teaching that God knows our hearts.

The order of prayer—Mt 6:5–13

Mt 6:5–6 (also 3 Ne 13:5–6). “*when thou prayest, enter into thy closet.*” Jesus begins His instruction on *private* prayer—note the use of the singular “thou.” (He shifts in verse 9 to instructing on public prayer.) We pray in secret so that it’s clear we are only praying to be heard by God—linking back to the need to avoid hypocrisy.

Mt 6:7. “when ye pray, use not vain repetitions.” In addition to referring to thoughtless words, vain repetitions also refer to prayers said without commitment to follow through on our verbal promises to God. Empty phrases can also be requests that are not heartfelt. Prioritizing our desires before prayer to seek for what is most meaningful will help us curb our vain wishes. The verse continues to condemn idolatry—which comes from putting anything, including our will, before God’s will.

Mt 6:8 (NIV). “*Father knows what you need.*” This verse does not mean that even though God knows our needs, we shouldn’t sincerely ask. Instead, Christ asked us to use prayer to seek the Father’s will and draw closer to Him. Asking acknowledges that we know our Heavenly Father is the power supporting all that is good, that He is the giver of our gifts.

Mt 6:9. “After this manner therefore pray ye.” Jesus changes to the plural to now refer to *public* prayer. From the earliest Christian times, the Lord’s Prayer was “basically a prayer used by a group.” Jesus “may have taught something like the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew several times,” as other prayers outlined in different situations have minor changes. Both Jewish rabbis and early Christians had “strong prohibitions against reciting a fixed prayer.”³ In early Christian documents, Hugh Nibley found sacred group prayers, where those praying stood in a circle around the Lord.⁴

The Lord's Prayer in Mt 6:9–13 can be seen as an outline for group prayers rather than a set recited prayer. One-third of the Lord's Prayer includes praises to God: hallowed be His name, His kingdom will come in power and glory (Mt 6:9, 10, 13).

Mt 6:11. “our daily bread.” Another literal translation reads, “Give us this day bread sufficient for our needs [*epiousion*].” John W. Welch sees this as foreshadowing the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.⁵

Mt 6:12 (JST). “And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” The KJV “debt” is changed for “trespass.” This translation is equally acceptable since the Greek word used here, *opheilēmata*, can be translated as “debt, sin, or offense.”

Mt 6:13 (JST). “Suffer us not to be led into temptation.” The JST changes the doctrine to clarify that God does not tempt us but that He can help us avoid temptation if we follow His Spirit's promptings. His gift of agency allows choice and opposition. Jesus encouraged disciples to especially pray to avoid temptation. Even though the KJV Old Testament uses variations of *tempt* seventeen times, none of those instances refer to the adversary trying to destroy God's plan for humanity.⁶ Only in the New Testament does the Lord connect temptation with Satan. Paul includes “discerning of spirits,” or identifying temptation, as a needed gift of the Spirit (see 1 Cor 12:10).

Mt 6:13. “Amen [ἀμήν]” means “verily, surely, truly, of a truth, so it is, so be it, may it be fulfilled.”

Forgiveness—Mt 6:14–15 (3 Ne 13:11, 14–15)

Mt 6:14. “if ye forgive men their trespasses.” Jesus's law of forgiveness is repeated twice in the higher law for emphasis (Mt 6:12, 14–15). The double reference underscores that no one with hard feelings or an unforgiving attitude toward others can expect God's forgiveness.

Fasting, washing, and anointing—Mt 6:16–18 (3 Ne 13:17)

Mt 6:16. “when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance.” Jesus asks His disciples to focus their fast on communing with and serving God. Jesus discourages outward behaviors without the more important inner commitment. We don't put sackcloth and ashes on to make a big deal of our fasting or to make ourselves look more righteous than the people around us; we fast to align ourselves with God's will and to exercise our faith. Isa 58:5–7 reiterates the law of the fast in a similar way:

Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? . . . Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

Mt 6:17. “anoint thine head, and wash thy face.” Jesus's new order of fasting is accompanied with anointing the head and washing the face. In the past, Levitical and Aaronic temple workers washed

their faces, hands, head, and feet, symbolic of becoming spiritually cleansed (Ex 30:18–19; 40:30). God also commanded Aaron to anoint ancient temple workers (Ex 29:7; 30:30). Jesus’s higher law invites all disciples to be like the priests and to come before the Lord when they fast, approaching Him when they are washed and anointed, seeking His approval without any need of worldly acknowledgement. This sacred and private worship will be rewarded by Heavenly Father.

Mt 6:18. “*appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father.*” When humans worship for praise of others or to be noticed, it is not pleasing to God. This is the third time the text repeats that God will see and reward our secret needs (Mt 6:4, 6, 18). The pattern of repeating things three times is characteristic of the Sermon on the Mount—and even more so of the Sermon at the Temple, beginning when the voice of the resurrected Lord was heard by the crowd three times before they understood it (3 Ne 11:5).

Consecration—Mt 6:19–24 (3 Ne 13:18–24)

Jesus requires a singleness of heart (or wholehearted dedication). When disciples put aside their own will and riches to serve God, they in turn give generously of their time and talents to God’s work. Disciples must commit their lives if necessary. When complete sacrifices are offered on God’s altars with love, He accepts them.

Mt 6:19, 21. “*Lay not up for yourselves treasures . . . where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*” Jesus warns against a love of materialism or of things you can buy with money. He asks for a pure heart for the third time in the sermon (Mt 5:8, 28). Only through seeking His treasures can we be purified. He gave His Spirit as the cleansing agent to accomplish that atoning gift for us.

Mt 6:22. “*thy whole body shall be full of light.*” Jesus promises more light to His followers. The footnotes in the Church’s official KJV explain that a singled eye is sincerely focusing on God. This is consistent with the JST of Mt 6:22, which adds, “Be single *to the glory of God.*” This is how our bodies can be full of light—as Jesus later taught, “I am the light” (Jn 8:12).

Mt 6:24. “*two masters*” is a phrase from ancient slave laws. It is likewise applicable in our devotion and service to God; we cannot simultaneously seek another treasure.

Mt 6:24. “*Ye cannot serve God and mammon.*” *Mammon* is a Semitic word used for riches. In Jesus’s law, we should not serve money by seeking worldliness. Instead, Jesus’s disciples realize that everything they have is God’s. If we want to follow Him, we must align our heart with His will and serve Him as our master. A true disciple asks God every morning, “How can I serve You today?”

Disciples will be cared for—Mt 6:25–28 (3 Ne 13:25)

Mt 6:25 (JST). “*Go ye into the world, and care not for the world; for the world will hate you, and will persecute you, and will turn you out. . . . Nevertheless, ye shall go forth from house to house teaching the people; and I will go before you.*” The JST adds wise counsel for disciples who are called to preach as missionaries. Jesus promises to take special care of the physical

needs of these disciples so that they may focus on their service of building God’s kingdom. (In 3 Nephi this promise is for the ordained Apostles.) For the rest of us, we must go back to the instructions given in Eden to labor for food while calling upon God for help (Mose 5:1).

Mt 6:25 (ESV). “**do not be anxious about your life.**” Other modern English translations prohibit excessive worry. Jesus asks disciples to *sacrifice fears*. As part of the higher law of faith and trust, Jesus asks disciples to not be overly anxious about the cares of daily life. Disciples sacrifice fear by giving place to faith in Christ. We remove excessive worries when we rid our minds of anger, vengeance, worldliness, pride, and self-seeking behaviors. If our aim is single to doing God’s will, we can serve Him without fear or anxiety. (Yet, there are mental illnesses and other trials that cause anxiety to play a debilitating role in our lives. These are separate matters.)

Mt 6:25 (NIV). “**Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?**” God wants us to keep an eternal perspective. He is a generous provider to those who follow and serve Him. In fact, He promises to provide for the eternal needs of all who endure to the end, even giving eternal life (see 3 Ne 15:9).

Mt 6:26 (JST). “**take no thought for these things, but keep my commandments.**” After the reference to God feeding the birds, the JST adds a human application. Jesus continues, asking disciples not to fret or worry about things they cannot control but to instead trust Him.

Mt 6:28. “**Consider the lilies of the field.**” The example of the lilies refers to a broad classification. The Bible dictionary explains, “The term lily here is general, not referring to any particular species, but to a large class of flowers growing in Palestine, and resembling the lily, as the tulip, iris, gladiolus, etc.” In Israel, flowers grow in various colors. It is interesting to note that the *Lilium chalcedonicum*, or scarlet martagon, looks like a red poppy and grows profusely among the wild grasses of Galilee. Jesus’s millennial apparel will also be red (Isa 63:2).

Endowing the disciples with clothing—Mt 6:29–32

Mt 6:30. “**If God so clothe the grass . . . shall he not much more clothe you?**” Building on the phrase “what ye shall put on [*endysēsthe*]” in Mt 6:25 (and Lk 24:49), Jesus refers to a different type of clothing for His ordained disciples. As one Greek scholar explained,

[God will] newly clothe them in glorious clothing. As the lilies of the field, so the chosen disciples will be clothed by God, even more gloriously than Solomon himself, whose temple was the most splendid of all (see 3 Nephi 13:25, 29–31). The Greek word for being clothed is *enduo* (*endumatos*, “raiment,” in Matthew 6:25, 28; *endusesthe*, “put on,” in Matthew 6:25). Jesus uses this word in Luke 24:49, shortly after his resurrection, when he tells his apostles, to remain in the city “until ye be endued with power from on high.” It means “to endow.” The Greek word *enduo* has two meanings, and both are pertinent to the endowment. First is “to dress, to clothe someone,” or “to clothe oneself in, put on.” The second

is, figuratively, to take on “characteristics, virtues, intentions.” The meaning of the English word *endue* (or *indue* from the Latin) likewise “coincides nearly in signification with endow, that is, to put on, to furnish. . . . To put on something; to invest; to clothe,” and Joseph Smith’s diary uses these spellings interchangeably, as for example when Joseph prayed that all the elders might “receive an endowment in thy house.” Thus, in this section of the Sermon at the Temple, Jesus can be understood as promising more than garments that offer physical protection for the body (although garments do this, too); he speaks of garments that “endow” the disciples with powers and virtues more glorious than Solomon’s. More is involved here than the promise of material well-being: “Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?” (3 Nephi 13:25).⁷

Building the kingdom of God on earth—Mt 6:32–34

Mt 6:32–33 (JST). “**Why is it that ye murmur among yourselves, saying, We cannot obey thy word because ye have not all these things.**” Jesus asked disciples to not seek for worldliness or adopt the values of nonbelievers, or Gentiles. Those of the world receive their glory in monetary adornments, while disciples who keep their covenants will receive their glory from God.

Mt 6:33 (JST). “**Wherefore, seek not the things of this world but seek first to build up the kingdom of God.**” Disciples still have an obligation to make the best of themselves, as do those not serving the Lord full time. No matter what employment they have or who provides their paycheck, disciples always work for God. Money is only a means to provide for earthly needs. The end is in the kingdom of God.

Mt 6:33 (JST). “**Seek . . . to establish his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.**” When disciples do their part through obedience and hard work, the Lord will provide for their needs (and sometimes wants). When pure motives combine with earnest seeking of God’s will, His promises of celestial exaltation will be honored.

Mt 6:34. “**Take . . . no thought.**” This verse includes Matthew’s fifth and sixth use of the word “thought,” *merimnao* (albeit in different tenses; see Mt 6:25, 27, 28, 31, 34). This word means “to be anxious; to be troubled with cares, to care for, look out for (a thing); to seek to promote one’s interests.” The Lord wants us to apply faith to overcome fears. If we are doing everything the Lord asks of us, we can trust Him and not be overly worried about the rest. Just as the children of Israel received their daily ration of manna, the Lord will bless His servants, one day at a time (Ex 16:4).

Mt 6:34. “**evil [kakia].**” This word has a broader meaning in Greek and includes our problems or troubles of the day. In the Restoration we the positive corollary to this: “Let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed” (D&C 123:17).

Matthew 7

Preparing for the Judgment—Mt 7:1–5 (Lk 6:37–38)

Lk 6:37–38. “**Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned.**” After not including anything from Mt 6, Jesus’s Sermon on the Plain here returns to share themes of judgment from Mt 7.

Mt 7:1–2 (JST). “**Jesus taught his disciples that they should say unto the people. Judge not unrighteously . . . but judge righteous judgment.**” Consistent with the audience change in 3 Nephi, the JST adds that the following advice is for more than just the Lord’s chosen full-time servants. All people need to make decisions or judge between good and evil regularly. Yet, Jesus commands us to judge righteously. It is the Spirit that leads us to make wise choices and judge between truth and error. Jesus warned that we will be judged as we judge others. He alone is the judge who knows each heart and circumstance.

Righteous judgment is filled with love and should be more “reflective than projective.”⁸ The key to not being judgmental is seeking the Spirit’s gift of charity. The command to judge righteously is augmented in Moro 7:16: “The Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge.” Also, in the Doctrine and Covenants, God encourages us to pray for the gift of discernment (see, for example, D&C 46:8, 23).

Lk 6:39. “**Can the blind lead the blind?**” At this point in Luke’s record of the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus turns to include a parable.

Mt 7:3–5. “**beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?**” “Mote” refers to a speck of straw or saw dust and is compared to the “beam,” which is a log or the main L beam in a home. To cast out our beams—sins or weaknesses that blur our perspective—we must repent and introspectively seek increased purity. Then we can serve others without hypocrisy. This way we respect and empathize with others as we hope God does with us. Our primary job is to become more Christlike by seeing as He sees. (The JST adds extra ideas on the unrighteous Pharisees’ hypocrisy; see the Bible appendix).

Discretion requirement

Mt 7:6 (JST). “**Go ye into the world, saying unto all, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come nigh unto you. And the mysteries of the kingdom ye shall keep within yourselves.**” (See more changes in the Bible appendix). The JST clarifies that all the world needs the call to repent, but the “mysteries,” or the most sacred teachings of Jesus, must be kept sacred.

Mt 7:6 (NIV). “**Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs.**” Jesus warned against sharing sacred information with apostates and heretics, using the image of two unclean animals. Dogs and pigs were unclean and despised (Deu 14:3–21). Jews from the second temple era connected two verses from the Torah to describe Gentiles as dogs. The logic went that if unclean meat could be given to dogs and Gentiles, then Gentiles were dogs (Ex 22:31; Deu 14:21).

Mt 7:6. Trodden under foot. This was an old Semitic phrase and is found most often among Old Testament authors from 700–600 BC (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Psalms). Significantly, we find the same phrase used by authors of the Book of Mormon,⁹ adding evidence to the antiquity of that text that claims to initiate from that same time period. Matthew records the Lord using *katapatesousin* (“trodden, trample”) to teach that discretion is so important that it includes harsh penalties.

Seeking a gift from the Father: A threefold petition—Mt 7:7–11

Mt 7:7–8 (NIV). “**Everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.**” The most important things we need to seek are not physical but spiritual and eternal. Perhaps instead of asking that food will nourish and strengthen us, we could ask God for “strength in temptation, forgiveness, love, insight, knowledge of his will, a blessing on another, a change of heart. It is in the asking, seeking, and knocking process that we come to understand intimately the Lord’s accessibility and his ongoing function as Savior.”¹⁰ The dialogue teaches us more of our need for a Redeemer, our dependence on the Spirit, and how to turn our will over to God. This allows us to become all we can be—as Elder Maxwell taught, our complete submission to God is really emancipation.¹¹

Mt 7:7–8. “ask . . . seek . . . knock.” Jesus gives this threefold petition to prepare His disciples to approach Heavenly Father. Not all who ask get an answer; only those who seek, listen, and submit their will to God’s will have the door “opened unto [them].” An early Christian record known as the *Gospel of Philip* includes Jesus saying something similar: “Let him who seeks not cease seeking until he finds, and when he finds, he will be astounded, and having been astounded, he will reign, and having reigned, he will rest.”¹² In the ceremonial context of the similar sermon in 3 Nephi, it appears that Jesus’s special disciples have received His higher law—meaning they accepted the requirements to repent and purify their thoughts—so that now as they ask, seek, and knock, they may receive the mysteries of God that are opened to them.

Mt 7:9 (JST). “**they will say, we have the law for our salvation, and that is sufficient for us.**” The full JST addition spells out a misunderstanding of the day. It is not the law of Moses that saves. The law leads to our Redeemer, who saves: “Come in, my son; for mine is thine, and thine is mine” (JST, Mt 7:9).

Mt 7:9. “if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?” Jesus taught on many levels when He encouraged disciples to ask for “bread.” In Jn 6:35, 48, it was symbolic of asking for the Bread of Life.

Mt 7:10 (NIV). “**if he asks for a fish.**” By the time the Gospels were written, *fish* (Greek *ichthus*) had a dual meaning for Christians. The word became a symbol in early Christianity as an acrostic. Significantly, it represents God’s children asking for Christ’s at-one-ment.

Mt 7:10. “will he give him a serpent?” The serpent is an unclean animal under the law of Moses. Jesus’s reference to a fish in opposition to the serpent also has an allegorical interpretation. The serpent can be interpreted from the

*I*esous (Jesus)
*CH*ristos (Christ)
*TH*eou (God)
*U*iou (Son)
*S*oter (Savior)

biblical context of the Garden of Eden as Lucifer or temptation. Jesus promised that those who properly ask for God's Spirit will not receive the devil.

Mt 7:11. "how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" When petitioners follow Jesus's previous directions, they will receive good gifts from the Father. We can ask for simple blessings of food, or we can ask for a higher level of spiritual blessings. It appears that "we restrain the Lord's gifts to us until we have identified the things we need most and then ask him for those gifts."¹³ Jesus identified His Father as the only one who is good.¹⁴ (God's gifts are a portion of His goodness. God's greatest gift is eternal life (or exaltation; see D&C 14:7). In a covenant context, God's greatest gift is allowing His children to enter His presence and all that entails.

Interacting with other people—Mt 7:12

Mt 7:12 (NIV). "do to others what you would have them do to you." Jesus summarizes the Old Testament Law and Prophets into a phrase. The golden rule is more than kindness toward others. This also extends to all children of God on either side of the veil. Jesus asked His disciples not only to do things *to* others but also *for* others. Vicarious temple work fits into this category (see 1 Cor 15:29). This is the only way one can understand how a just and merciful God can insist on baptism (in Jn 3:5 and elsewhere) when only a small percentage of humanity has ever had the opportunity to be baptized. Jesus admonished us to perform ordinances for those who did not have the chance in mortality. The Restoration alone opens the door for everyone ever born to receive God's greatest blessings through vicarious work. We believe God has a completely inclusive view. All may choose to be part of God's chosen people (D&C 121:34–36).

Entering through a narrow opening—Mt 7:13–14

Mt 7:13 (JST). "Repent therefore, and enter ye in at the strait gate." There is only one gate to God's presence. The English word *strait* means "narrow, difficult, restricted, channel, very strict, or severe." This teaching of only one way to heaven is consistent with the early Christian message that described the Two Ways, leading either light or darkness, to life or death.¹⁵ The Book of Mormon mentions a similar idea about six hundred years before the early Christian period. In 2 Ne 31:17, the way to God is described as being through repentance, baptism, remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Going through the Lord's narrow gate is total submission to God's will.¹⁶

The three scriptural blocks in table 1 (below) use similar vocabulary; however, Nephi's sermon identifies the key position of the Spirit. It is the Spirit that can navigate us through the narrow and difficult opening into God's presence. The Spirit becomes a personal guide to "show unto you all things what ye should do" (2 Ne 32:5). Nephi's passage highlights another restored insight by associating a remission of sins with the fire of the Holy Ghost. Only then is one on the "path which leads to eternal life." Nephi explains the cause-and-effect relationship between the needs for baptism and keeping the commandments to receive the Spirit, "which witnesses of the Father and the Son" (2 Ne 31:18).

Table 1. Teachings of the Two Ways in scripture

Mt 7:13–14	Lk 13:24	2 Ne 31:17–18; 32:5
<p><i>Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.</i></p>	<p>Strive to <i>enter</i> in at the <i>strait gate</i>: for many, I say unto you, will seek to <i>enter</i> in, and shall not be able.</p>	<p>The <i>gate</i> by which ye should <i>enter</i> is repentance and <i>baptism</i> by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins <i>by fire and by the Holy Ghost</i>. And then are ye in this <i>strait</i> and narrow path which leads to <i>eternal life</i>; yea, ye have entered in by the <i>gate</i>; ye have done according to the commandments of the Father and the Son; and ye have received the <i>Holy Ghost</i>, which witnesses of the Father and the Son, unto the fulfilling of the promise which he hath made, that if ye <i>entered in</i> by the way ye should receive. . . . [The Holy Ghost] <i>will show unto you all things what ye should do</i>.</p>

Bearing the fruit of the tree of life—Mt 7:15–20 (Lk 6:43–46)

Mt 7:15–16. “Beware of false prophets . . . know them by their fruits.” Immediately after discussing the path “which leadeth unto life,” Jesus described trees and their fruits. These are not ordinary trees. They are symbols of evil and good. In the Greek, “evil” also means “sick, wicked, worthless, degenerate, and malicious,” and the “corrupt” fruit can be read as “decayed, rotten, evil, unwholesome.” The “good” fruit is “fit, capable, of inner worth, moral, right.”

Mt 7:17–18. “A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit.” Jesus spoke of false prophets as bad fruit from evil trees. The Lord assured the disciples that He had given them adequate knowledge to test these “prophets” by their fruits.

The good tree and fruit symbolize the tree of life (Gen 3:22). After Eve and Adam ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge and entered mortality, they began their quest to find and worthily partake of the fruit of the tree of life. After the probation period when they learned of the Savior’s atoning sacrifice and repented, they could live forever without their sins (see 1 Ne 8:20).

Jesus also equated individual people with trees. We can plant the seed for the good tree to grow within us (Alm 32:41–42). Each good tree of life has a place in God’s paradise, and God loves the trees of His vineyard very much. He goes to great lengths to save His trees, digging and dunging, grafting branches and hiring gardeners. His desire is that each one of us will grow up unto eternal life, yielding much fruit (Jac 5; Ps 1:3).

Similarly, in Jn 15:1–5 Jesus describes Himself as a vine and His servants as branches. In other scripture, God or His servants the prophets allegorically are righteous roots to trees, with people becoming the fruits.¹⁷ The Lord’s cross is also referred to as “the tree” in 1 Pe 2:24. Ritually, early Christians prayed with their hands raised, “stretched out towards the Lord.” The extension, they said, “is an upright cross.” John W. Welch explained, “Originally this signified the passion of Christ and was a gesture used in confessing Christ at baptism. It imitated the cross, death, and a mystic unification and life with Christ.”¹⁸

Entering the presence of the Lord—Mt 7:21–24

Mt 7:21–22. “**Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.**” Some say “Lord, Lord,” but they do not “enter the kingdom of heaven.” Only those who “doeth the will of my Father” are allowed to enter. The Lord repeated a similar message to the Prophet Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail, adding a significant question and answer: “Why are they not chosen? Because their hearts are set so much upon the things of this world . . . that they do not learn this one lesson—that the rights of the priesthood . . . cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness” (D&C 121:34–36; see Mt 22:14). Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “We need to break free of our old selves—the provincial, constraining, and complaining selves—and become susceptible to the shaping of the Lord. But the old self goes neither gladly nor quickly. Even so, this subjection to God is really emancipation.”¹⁹

Mt 7:21–22 (JST). “**for the day soon cometh, that men shall come before me to judgment, to be judged according to their works.**” The conclusion of this encounter with God will be at the Judgment. In addition to the Lord acting as our judge, other prophets will be “at the judgement bar” (2 Ne 33:11; Moro 10:27, 34).

Mt 7:23 (JST). “**Ye never knew me.**” God has always known us, but we must come to know Him through the scriptures, through His words, through His Spirit, through His covenants, and through following His example. In Hebrew, *yada* (“knew”) has a broad range of meanings. It can mean “covenantal,” as in Amos 3:2: “You only have I known of all the families on the earth.” Only to Israel had God granted the covenant. It suggests that God requires more of us than good works to enter His kingdom—we must become like Him.

We can learn to know God through repentance. As we are forgiven, we feel His love and develop assurance in His power. We come to know God when we sacrifice our desires and actions to His will. Our fears can dissolve as we trust in Him. As we work through this process of submission, He builds our faith.

When we develop confidence in God, we can see through the mortal veil and follow His plan in confidence. Then we can see His Hand sprinkling miracles and tender mercies graciously into our lives.

The wise build on God's foundation—Mt 7:24–27 (Lk 6:47–49)

Mt 7:24. *“whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock.”* As a builder Himself, Jesus used the image of building a home or church. (In the KJV of Mk 6:3, *tektōn*, the word here for “builder,” is translated “carpenter,” but given the lack of trees and wood in the area, it is more likely that Joseph and Jesus were stonemasons or general builders.) The wise are those who know, remember, and do God’s bidding. They will be recognized by the Lord, and in His due time, He will raise them up to inherit celestial glory.

Mt 7:26–27. *“built his house upon the sand . . . and the winds blew . . . and it fell.”* Jesus is our only sure foundation and the rock of our redemption. Building our lives on anything else is as useless as building a house on sand. If we do not take the forethought to build a firm foundation, when the storms of life assail, everything will fall. Without faith built on Christ, those who are tossed by the winds of life will not know to call on God.

Conclusion

Mt 7:28–29. *“when Jesus had ended these sayings.”* Matthew’s Gospel repeats this phrase five times.²⁰ In his record of the Lord’s ministry, Matthew repeats this saying as a section marker to organize his Gospel into five sections. These five divisions are known as Matthew’s Christian Pentateuch. Matthew may be trying to show Jesus as a new Lawgiver, a new Moses. This hypothesis is as old as Papias, from AD 140.²¹ As some Latter-day Saint scholars have noted,

The sermon on the Mount gives a new view of calling on God and coming unto Christ: The old concept of God as primarily an emergency source evaporates, as does the idea that we might still live our own lives, God helping a little now and then. . . . Perhaps we think that God speaks in hyperbole—that we cannot take him literally when he invites total dependence. Perhaps we are afraid to interpret him literally because the full truth seems to require so much of us. Or perhaps it seems too wonderful to be true.²²

This sermon was arguably the most important of Jesus’s sermons. Jesus repeated portions of it throughout His ministry and even to the lost sheep of Israel and to His modern followers at the start of the Restoration.

Book of Mormon Perspective

By contrasting the similar passages of the Sermons on the Mount and on the Plain with the Sermon at the Temple in 3 Nephi, you can find great insight into the different times, audiences, needs, and even levels

of understanding of the sermons' listeners. The Sermon at the Temple records more of the Lord's instruction than we find in the Matthean record.²³

Notes

1 John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 62–69. I quote Welch's ideas and words as an outline as well as the synthesis.

2 *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 6:7.

3 Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon*, 63.

4 Hugh Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (1978): 41–78.

5 Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon*, 68.

6 The word *temptation* is not mentioned in Genesis, and when *tempt* or *temptation* is found elsewhere in the KJV of the Old Testament, it often refers to God testing someone, not Satan interceding to thwart God's work. For example: "test" / *nis-sāh* (Gen 22:1; Ex 17:2, 7; Num 14:22; 1 Sam 17:39); "despair, trials" / *maccah* (Deu 4:34; 6:16; 7:19; 29:3; Job 9:23; Ps 95:8; "examine, try" / *bā-ḥă-nū* (Mal 3:15). Of the three Hebrew words that are translated into some form of *tempt*, none speak of Satanic influences acting against God.

7 Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon*, 68.

8 Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon*, 87.

9 See Mosi 12:1; Alm 4:2; 34:29; 46:22; 3 Ne 12:13; 15:16.

10 Catherine Thomas, "Sermon on the Mount," in *Studies in Scriptures*, vol. 5, *The Gospels*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1986), 247.

11 Neal A. Maxwell, "Willing to Submit," April 1985 general conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

12 Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2007), 154–156. Bentley Layton, "The Greek Gospel of Thomas," in *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1987). (Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1, 654, 655.)

13 Thomas, "Sermon on the Mount," 247.

14 Mt 19:7; Mk 10:18; Lk 18:19.

15 R. H. Connolly, "The Epistle of Barnabas and the Didache," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 35, no. 138 (1934), 113–118. In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the Two Ways refer to light and darkness. In the *Didache*, they are described as life and death.

16 Noel Reynolds, "The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 49–78.

17 Jac 5; Deu 20:20; Isa 41:19; Neh 8:15.

18 Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon*, 76. The symbol is also found in the serpent on the rod or tree during the children of Israel's forty years in the wilderness (see 1 Tim 2:8).

19 Maxwell, "Willing to Submit."

20 Mt 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1.

21 George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1961), 7:11.

22 Jackson and Millet, *Studies in Scripture*, 5:248.

23 The Sermon at the Temple in 3 Nephi includes most of Matthew's text and then adds eight points: (1) lecture on the portion of God's covenant with Israel yet to be fulfilled; (2) admonition to ponder; (3) healing the sick; (4) the parents and the children; (5) the covenant memorialized and a new name given; (6) continued worthiness required; (7) conferring the power to give the gift of the Holy Ghost; (8) from sermon to ceremony. For more details see Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon*, 47–144.