

MATTHEW 7

SERMON ON THE MOUNT CONCLUDED

For further reading on the Sermon on the Mount, see John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/sermon-mount-light-temple>.

Matthew 7:1–5. Stage 18: Instructions to Prepare Each Person to Pass God’s Judgment

Judge righteously, for all will be judged as they have judged others. Jesus next turns His attention to giving information about the final judgment and how all may pass through it. He first states the main principle behind the final judgment: “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matthew 7:1–2). Essentially, mortals cannot stand as judges of their brothers and sisters when they themselves are flawed, and all people will find themselves judged at the bar of God by the same standard that they have used in judging others. This divine judgment operates universally and impartially, for God is no respecter of persons. This particular concept of justice—namely, rewarding or punishing a person in a manner that matches their own being or conduct—is mentioned several times in the scriptures as the form of God’s justice at the judgment day. For example, Alma 41:13–15 says that God will restore good to the good, evil to the evil, and mercy to those who have been merciful. Similarly, forgiveness only comes through the Atonement of Christ to those who have forgiven others (see Matthew 6:15; 3 Nephi 13:15).

Therefore, a primary concern of the true Christian should be to develop one’s own character: to be pure (“cast the beam out of thine own eye”), to serve (“see clearly to cast the mote out of thy brother’s eye”), to avoid hypocrisy, and to think and act toward others in the way that you would have God render judgment unto

you (Matthew 7:5). The judgment process is more reflective than it is projective. We are often much more willing to recognize faults in others than in ourselves. The Greek word translated as “mote” (*karphos*) denotes a splinter or a chip—a comically small piece of wood when compared with a “beam” (*dokos*), a log or timber large enough to support the weight of a roof or structure.

Matthew 7:6. Stage 19: Recipients Are Warned Not to Give “the Holy Thing” to the Unworthy

One is not to cast pearls before swine or to give sacred things to dogs. Next, the Lord requires that His hearers be willing to keep holy things secret: “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you” (7:6). For most readers, the meaning of this saying is puzzling, even something of a riddle. These words seem out of place or hard to explain for most interpreters of the Sermon on the Mount, for after demanding that disciples should love their neighbor, even their enemy, it seems inconsistent for Jesus to call these people dogs and swine and to require His followers to withhold their pearls from them. The emphasis, however, is clearly on withholding certain things that are holy and protecting them as sacred.

Drawing on Logion 93 in the Gospel of Thomas, one possible meaning of “the holy thing” is some kind of revealed knowledge, which is consistent with seeing the Sermon on the Mount as being given in a sacred covenant-making context. Jesus has given His hearers something that cannot be reported publicly. In early Christianity, several practices and experiences were kept sacred and not shared with secular audiences. Thus, the language here in Matthew 7:6 reminds some scholars of esoteric teachings used in the Greek mystery religions. The earliest Christian handbook associates this saying in 7:6 with a requirement of exclusivity, not allowing anyone to “eat or drink of the Eucharist with you except for those baptized in the name of the Lord” (see Didache 9:5; 14:1–2). When this wealth of sacred knowledge is given to recipients, its array of sacred elements becomes a string of precious pearls of great price, even “your pearls” (Matthew 7:6), which one sells everything in order to obtain (see 13:45–46). Once this knowledge is obtained, one holds it private to protect it (see 13:44).

The violation of this obligation of secrecy carries or implies harsh penalties and consequences. If it is violated, the pearls will be trampled, and the one who has disclosed the holy thing will be torn to pieces. This warning reflects the method of punishment prescribed for covenant breakers in Psalm 50: “Those that have made a covenant with me . . . consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces” (Psalm 50:5, 22). The Sermon on the Mount may thus also warn against apostasy, apostates, or heretics. Recall also that the covenanters were expressly forewarned at the outset of the Sermon on the Mount when they were called to become the salt of the earth that they ran the risk of being “trodden under foot” for losing their strength (3 Nephi 12:13; Matthew 5:13).

The Joseph Smith Translation confirms that Matthew 7:6 is concerned with the requirement of keeping certain sacred things secret. It reads, “The mysteries of the kingdom ye shall keep within yourselves . . . for the world cannot receive that which ye, yourselves, are not able to bear” (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 7:10–11). As Alma had said in the first century before Christ, “it is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless, they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart [it except] according to the portion of [God’s] word which he doth grant” (Alma 12:9).

Matthew 7:7–8. Stage 20: A Threefold Petition Is Made: “Ask, Seek, and Knock”

By inquiring of the Lord, seeking His righteousness, and knocking, it shall be opened. At this point, the listeners are ready to approach the Father. They are told that if they will ask, seek, and knock (in other words, when a threefold petition is made), “it shall be opened unto [them]” (Matthew 7:7). This offer is open to all people (compare Alma 12:9–11). Each one (*pas*) that asks, having been brought to this point of entry, will receive and be received (Matthew 7:8). It makes good sense of Matthew 7:7 to understand it in a ceremonial context.

Actual experience among Christians shows that the promise articulated here should not be understood as an absolute one: many people ask and seek and knock, yet in fact, many of them do not find. Moreover, there is reason to believe that Jesus expected His true followers to seek something out of the ordinary. An early saying from Oxyrhynchus, which is attributed to Jesus, reads, “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.” It is crucial that a person come to the Father correctly (see 7:21), and all who seek and ask—after believing and accepting the requirements in the sermon that precede this invitation—for them it will be opened.

Matthew 7:9–12. Stage 21: The Father Answers and Gives Good Gifts as Requested

Having received bread and fish, one should likewise give and do unto others who seek and ask. Who, then, will be there to open “it” unto the petitioner? The Father. Jesus asked, “Or what man is there of you, who, if his son ask [for] bread, will give him a stone? Or if he ask [for] a fish, will he give him a serpent? . . . How much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (Matthew 7:9–10, 11). Asking for bread is the symbolic equivalent of asking for Jesus, who is the “bread of life” (John 6:48). Asking for a fish is figuratively asking for life through the Atonement and salvation of Jesus. The fish was a common pre-Christian symbol of fortune and health that became a familiar symbol of Jesus and baptism very early in Christianity. The promise veiled within such symbolism gives assurance that those who properly ask for Jesus will not be stoned (suffer death), nor will they encounter a serpent

(that is, Lucifer). Instead, the petitioner will receive good gifts directly from the Father (Matthew 7:11). The gift is eternal life, “the greatest of all the gifts of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 14:7), descending below all things, rising above all heavens, and filling all things (see Ephesians 4:8–10, where *domata*, the Greek word for “gifts” in Matthew 7:11, also appears). The abundant generosity of God providing His people with bread and fish calls to mind the miraculous multiplication of the fish and the loaves (see Matthew 14:15–21).

Moreover, one cannot enter into eternal life completely alone. In the final analysis, being charitable is required to claim the blessings of the Lord, for without charity, the pure love of Christ, we are nothing: “Whoso is found possessed of [charity] at the last day, it shall be well with him” (Moroni 7:47; see 1 Corinthians 13:2). With this virtue in mind, Jesus taught, “Therefore, all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Matthew 7:12). Thus, all followers of the Lord Jesus Christ are responsible to see that other people are assisted in every way possible, especially being shown the way to salvation and eternal life.

In other words, Jesus may be commanding Christians not only to do things “to others” but to do things “for others.” The sense of the grammar can be read either way. The disciples are told that whatever they would like others to do for them, they should do the same for others, again with a reference being made to the law (of Moses) and to the spirit of Elijah (the prophets). Jesus intended His disciples to do more than engage only in the deeds of human kindness normally associated with the Golden Rule. He would want them, above all, to be taught the gospel and be brought to salvation. So, He admonishes his disciples to do such things for others, to teach them the gospel and to perform with them or for them the ordinances of salvation and exaltation. Elder Boyd K. Packer asked rhetorically, “Is it not Christlike for us to perform in the temples ordinances for and in behalf of those who cannot do them for themselves?”¹

Matthew 7:13–14. Stage 22: The Righteous Enter through a Strict or Constricted Opening

This is the way that leads into life eternal, while the broad popular way leads to destruction. Regarding the “way,” the Greek word *hodos* usually means “a road, path, or street, but it can also mean a way of life or a course of conduct.” The “way” is said to be narrow (King James Version), but the Greek word used here actually means “demanding” (*tithlimmenē*) or filled with “tribulation” (*thlipseōn*, as used in Acts 14:22). The doctrine of the two ways is as old as the Creation account, with its flaming sword that guards “the way” to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24). It is frequently referenced throughout the Old Testament. Psalm 1:6 reads, “For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish.” Deuteronomy 30:19 states, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life.” Isaiah 59:8 warns, “The way of peace they know not, . . . they have made their roads crooked.” This

dichotomy is prominent throughout the Book of Mormon (see 2 Nephi 2:11, 26–27; Helaman 14:30) and throughout the Dead Sea Scrolls and in early Christianity.²

The Greek word here for “gate” is not the word for a door to a house (*thura*) but is for the entrance to a city or temple (*pulē*). This gate is said to be “strait” (*stenēs*), meaning “narrow” or “tight.” Temple gates are mentioned in Psalms 24:7–10; 118:19–20, and the word *pulē* is used five other times in reference to the gate of the tabernacle³ as well as many times in Ezekiel. Thus, Jesus’s audience would have readily understood the subtext of the word *pulē* to refer to a temple entrance. In contrast, the wide or broad gate is described as being *plateia*, meaning “flat and broad” (hence the English words *plate* and *plateau*).

Understanding the narrow gate as a portal into the temple, one can better understand why only “few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:14, emphasis added). Entrance into the temple was carefully regulated. Only a few, even of the priests, could enter into the innermost courts of the temple. Realizing this point helps in answering the probing question, “Then, can only a few people be saved?” Jesus’s point here may be that only a few can enter *at a time*. People enter the covenant and the temple one by one, but eventually all may find the way and enter.

As 2 Nephi 31:17 indicates, the process of entering this gate begins with repentance, baptism, remission of sins, and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost. Signposts and markers help guide people to the narrow gate, and instruction about the doctrine of the two ways—the path to life or the road to destruction—serves to remind the disciples that it is an undeviating path of truth that leads to life eternal (compare Deuteronomy 30:19 and Jeremiah 21:8). The image involved here is not that of a door to a house (*thura*) but of the gate of a city or a temple (*pule*).

Matthew 7:15–20. Stage 23: Beware False Prophets, Who Are Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing

A tree is known by the fruit it brings forth, either good or evil. Some people will attempt to persuade people not to enter by the narrow gate or the strenuous way, but they are to be seen as wolves wearing sheepskins, apparently imitating a sacrificial sheep or even the Lamb of God. But they can be identified and judged by their selfish and corrupt fruits. Typically, false prophets do not care much for others. Among other errors, they fail to live by the Golden Rule to do unto others as they would have them do unto you (Matthew 7:12).

In contrast, “every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit” (7:17). Having partaken of the tree of knowledge, man’s life becomes a quest to find and righteously partake of the fruit of the tree of life and live forever.

Echoes of temple and final judgment imagery are again discernible in the words of Jesus here. Obviously, Jesus is not speaking of ordinary trees: these are ultimately moral symbols. They either bear “evil” fruit (the Greek word *poneros* can mean “sick, wicked, worthless, degenerate, or malicious”) and they

are “corrupt” (*sapron*, meaning “decayed, rotten, evil, unwholesome”), or in contrast they are “good” (*agathon*, “of inner worth, moral, right”). These trees are symbolic of the final state of one’s eternal character, determining whether one will either live or be “hewn down and cast into the fire” (7:19).

Individual people are equated with the tree of life, for by planting the seed of life in oneself, each disciple grows up into a tree of life, as the prophet Alma describes (see Alma 32:41–42). Each good tree of life has a place in God’s paradise (see Psalm 1:1–3). One of the earliest Christian hymns sings, “Blessed, O Lord, are they who are planted in Thy land, and who have a place in Thy Paradise; and who grow in the growth of Thy trees” (Odes of Solomon 11:18–24).

A final symbolic meaning comes from seeing the cross also, ironically, as a symbol of a tree of life (see 1 Peter 2:24). Each person who is raised up in the form of the tree will have eternal life. Ritually, the early Christians prayed in the “cruciform” position with their hands raised, stretched out toward the Lord. Originally this position signified the passion of Christ and was a gesture used in confessing Christ at baptism; it imitated the cross, death, and a spiritual unification with Christ.

Those who do not become such a tree and bring forth good fruit, however, will be chopped down and thrown into the fire, for they shall be known by their fruits (Matthew 7:19–20). Evil trees that bring forth bad fruit are the false prophets who are sure to come. The Lord assures the disciples that they “shall know them” (7:20) and know whether these purported prophets have come with truth and goodness or not.

Having established these points here, Jesus will draw again on this important imagery a short time later in Matthew 12:31–37. There, after being accused by the Pharisees of casting out devils by the power of Satan, Jesus assures people that “a house divided against itself is brought to desolation” and that “he that is not with me is against me” (12:25, 30), applying the same principle stated here that a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit.

Matthew 7:21–23. Stage 24: Those Who Do God’s Will Enter His Presence; God Will Not Recognize Those Who Do Not Follow Him

Here, as the final step of progression in the Lord’s sermon, people are prepared for an encounter with the Lord Himself. Some will say to Him, “Lord, Lord,” and they will be allowed to “enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 7:21). But others, even good people of the world who have cast out devils and done wonderful works in the name of the Lord, will be turned away. Why? Because the Lord will have to acknowledge, “I never knew you; depart from me, ye workers of iniquity” (7:22–23; 3 Nephi 14:22–23).

This declaration is strong and precise: “I never knew you” (*oudepote egnon hymas*), not even once. How is it that the Lord has not known them when God knows everything? It cannot be that He is unaware of these people, and the problem is not that He knows the petitioners too little to be their advocate in court. On the contrary, He knows them all too well. He must not know them in some other sense. The Hebrew word “know” (*yada*) has a broad range of meanings. One of them is covenantal. In Amos 3:2

the Lord says, “You only have I *known* of all the families on earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (emphasis added). Amos’s words clearly indicate that Jehovah knows or recognizes only Israel as His legitimate servants because He and they have entered into a covenant relationship with each other.

Clearly, more than worldly works alone will be required. Knowing the Lord through making and keeping this covenant is crucial. Even those who claim to have cast out devils and done good things in the name of the Lord will not necessarily qualify. Only those who have actual authority and who know and fill the requirements of staying on His straight and narrow covenant path will be recognized by the Lord at that judgment day. They will be raised up to see God and to enter into celestial glory: “Whoso remembereth these sayings of mine and doeth them, him will I raise up at the last day” (3 Nephi 15:1).

Significantly, words from Matthew 7:23 will appear again toward the end of Matthew’s Gospel. In Matthew 25:41, Jesus says that those who have not cared for the hungry, the naked, those in prison, and people in great need will, unfortunately, have to be told to leave: “Depart from me [*poreuesthe ap’ emou*], you cursed ones [*katēramenoī*].” Those words intentionally recall these words from the end of the Sermon on the Mount: “Go away from me [*apochōreite ap’ emou*], you workers of lawlessness [*anomian*]” (7:23).

Matthew 7:24–27. Stage 25: The Wise Build upon “the Rock” by Hearing and Doing All These Things

Those who build on the rock will withstand torrents, while those who build elsewhere, without “having authority,” will collapse (Matthew 7:28). The wise man (*phronimos*) is the one who grasps his ultimate heavenly character. The foolish man (*mōros*) is like the blind guide who cannot distinguish the temple from the gold in the temple (Matthew 23:16–17) or like the foolish bridesmaids who were unprepared for the marriage supper of the Lord (25:2). The coupling of the words *wise* and *fool* is familiar from the psalm that asks, “Fools [*mōroi*], when will you be wise [*phronēsate*]?” (Psalm 94:8).

While the parable says that there are foolish individuals who build on the sand by following false prophets or blind guides, it also says that the community must be built on the sound foundation of God’s law and covenant, like the wise man.

The wise man here does not build his house upon any nondescript rock but upon *the* rock. This expression occurs at one key juncture in the Old Testament—in the wilderness, Moses struck “the rock” (*tēn petran*), out of which water poured forth (Numbers 20:8–11). This rock prefigured the rock in Matthew 7:24–25 in several ways: it enshrined the deity (and was thus equated by Paul with Christ Himself in 1 Corinthians 10:4), it was a source of rescue from impending death, and it gave forth great amounts of water: “He made streams come out of the *rock*, and caused waters to flow down like rivers” that “gushed forth” (Psalm 78:16; 105:41; emphasis added). By inviting His disciples to liken His life-giving words to this life-giving rock, Jesus affords a concluding parallel not only between Himself and Moses but also

between His words and the source of salvation in the temple. The Lord's temple stands inseparably atop its mountain (Psalm 27:5).

In contrast, the Sermon on the Mount juxtaposes the coursing torrents and raging floods that are images of the forces of evil. The contrast between those waters of destruction and the immovable solidity of the Lord is never expressed more clearly than in Psalm 93, which celebrates at the beginning and the end the Lord, who is securely present in His holy temple, clothed in His garments of power, seated on His throne, and issuing His everlasting judgments. At the center of this Psalm, nothing can match the mighty strength of the Lord.

Because the temple symbolizes the Garden of Eden, where God reigned in peace over the waters of chaos, building upon the mountain of the Lord evokes the eternal stability of the temple. Thus, building one's house upon the rock invites all people to base their lives on the Lord, His plan, His laws, and His covenants in the temple.

Matthew 7:28–29

Those who heard Jesus's words in Matthew 5–7 were "astonished at his doctrine" or teaching (*didachēi*) because He taught "as one having authority" and not as the scribes, who just transcribed or repeated the words of others. This validation speaks volumes about Jesus's spiritual charisma, authenticity, power, and priesthood authority. As the great Jehovah of the Old Testament, Jesus had authored and given the previous law and covenant. As the Messiah of the New Testament, the Christ now explains and implements the new covenant and its holy ordinances.

The issue of authority will be raised again later in the Gospel of Matthew when the chief priests demand of Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you that authority?" Jesus answers by giving the parable of the father's two sons, one willing to do the father's will and the other unwilling (see 21:23–32).

7:29. In sum, the Sermon on the Mount deserves all the many superlative accolades it has ever been given. It is the sermon of sermons. It is a masterpiece of the Creator. It is good and true. It deserves our fullest attention and devotion. I loved memorizing the entire Sermon on the Mount in German as a missionary, and I love reading it again and again. I loved teaching it to my children when they were growing up, and I relish talking about it with my wife. I love embracing and teaching its expansive vision of the eternal promises of the full human potential, as peacemakers, as children of God, and as those who have been invited and assured that they may become perfect like their Father who is in heaven is perfect. I love seeing all this come to life in the light of temple texts and temple experiences. I love how its mountain setting opens to our panoramic view Jesus's foundational covenant plan. I love how its concluding setting at the temple in 3 Nephi 11 unveils the everlasting promises of its exalting plain and precious truths.

Notes

- 1 Boyd K. Packer, “Covenants,” April 1987 general conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.
- 2 For a thorough analysis of this concept, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 49–78.
- 3 Exodus 27:16; 38:15–17, 30; Numbers 3:26; 4:32.

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