

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: A DISCOURSE PERTAINING TO THE PROFFERED KINGDOM

Most Christians have heard the Sermon on the Mount taught as a code of ethics for Christian living, or as a description of what it looks like to have Christ “ruling in your heart” in the present. But is that actually what Christ was doing on that mountainside? Let's look at *when* He delivered this discourse, *to whom*, and in the middle of *what message He had already been proclaiming for some time* — because all three point somewhere very specific: not salvation by grace, but entrance into, or exclusion from, a literal kingdom.

The Message Already Being Proclaimed

The Sermon on the Mount doesn't open the story; it drops into the middle of one already underway. John the Baptist had opened his ministry with a single announcement —

Matthew 3:2

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

and Christ began His own public ministry with that identical announcement —

Matthew 4:17

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

“Repent” here (Greek 'metanoeite') is a plural imperative — addressed not to isolated individuals but to the nation as a whole, the same way English once used “ye” to mark a plural “you.” Modern translations lose that distinction on the surface, but the grammar underneath doesn't change: this was a call for national repentance. And it wasn't a message John or Jesus alone carried. The Twelve preached it, then the Seventy, over a span of more than three years, permeating everything happening in Israel during that time. “The kingdom of the heavens” is not incidental language Matthew reaches for occasionally — the phrase appears thirty-two times in his gospel. It's the subject.

That call for national repentance wasn't landing on a blank slate. It was the latest turn in a cycle that had defined Israel's entire history up to that point. From the nation's earliest days, the pattern repeated itself with almost mechanical regularity: Israel would follow God and obey Him, then start to stray into disobedience and idolatry, God would send a prophet to plead with them to repent, Israel would repent and be forgiven, follow God again for a time — and then start the whole cycle over. The book of Judges records this same pattern generation after generation, everyone “doing what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 21:25) until God raised up a deliverer to restore them. It continued through the monarchy — Saul's disobedience, the kingdom split in two after Solomon's, king after king leading the nation further from God — until it finally cost them everything: the northern kingdom taken captive by Assyria, the southern kingdom by Babylon, and centuries spent under the rule of foreign nations that need never have governed them at all.

The office of prophet existed largely to interrupt this cycle — to call the nation back to obedience before the consequences Moses had already spelled out (Lev. 26; Deut. 28) came due. So when John the Baptist, then Jesus, then the Twelve and the Seventy took up the same message — repent, the kingdom is at hand — they weren't introducing something new. They were the latest voices in a very long line calling Israel out of the same cycle she'd been stuck in since her earliest days. This time, though, the call came with something no prophet before had been able to offer: the King Himself, in person, asking for the repentance that would finally let the *heavenly* portion of the kingdom promised to Abraham actually arrive.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) falls right inside this same proclamation, delivered specifically to Christ's disciples —

Matthew 5:1-2

“And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:”

It's delivered inside the same proclamation John had already been making for months by this point: the kingdom of the heavens, at hand, offered to Israel. The only real question left is which kingdom that is.

What Kingdom? Genesis Already Told Us

Genesis answers this in its own opening chapters. Genesis 1:1–2:3 lays out four movements — creation (1:1), ruin (1:2a), restoration (1:2b-25), and rest (2:1-3) — and the sixth day of that restoration ends with a specific purpose stated for man's existence —

Genesis 1:26

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”

God doesn't state this purpose once and move on. He repeats it two verses later, this time speaking directly to the man and woman He has just made —

Genesis 1:28

“Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

Man wasn't created merely to inhabit the restored earth — he was created to rule it. But an incumbent already occupied that position: Satan, placed over the earth as its first provincial ruler before man's creation, still governing it (although in a fallen state himself, due to his desire to usurp God) when man arrived to take dominion. And so when man fell (Gen. 3:1ff), the effect wasn't just moral corruption; it was disqualification. The ruler he was meant to replace remained in place.

This isn't a purpose stated once in Genesis and then dropped. It runs through the rest of Scripture as a settled theme—

Psalms 8:3-8

“When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen — even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas.”

The writer of Hebrews quotes this very psalm centuries later, and adds a detail that matters enormously for everything this study has been building toward —

Hebrews 2:5-8

“For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. But one testified in a certain place, saying: ‘What is man that You are mindful of him, or the son of man that You take care of him? You have made him a little lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, and set him over the works of Your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet.’ For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him.”

Two things stand out. First, the author explicitly ties man's dominion to “the world to come” — not the present arrangement, but a future one, the same coming kingdom this whole discourse has been tracing. Second, and just as plainly: “we do not yet see all things put under him.” Man's rule over creation was declared at the very beginning, repeated to the first man and woman directly, echoed centuries later in the Psalms — and it still hasn't happened. That's not a contradiction in Scripture; it's the same pattern this study keeps pointing out. The purpose was announced at creation. The fulfillment is still ahead.

That's the kingdom in view every time “kingdom of the heavens” appears in the gospels — not a new, unrelated offer, but the very kingdom (heavenly kingdom ruling over the earthly kingdoms) introduced on page one of Genesis, still unclaimed, still under Satan's rule, still waiting for a qualified Man to take it.

The Temptation as Antitype

That background is what makes sense of an episode that otherwise reads strangely out of place: Christ's forty days in the wilderness, tested by the same ruler who had brought about the first Adam's fall —

Matthew 4:1-3

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, ‘If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.’”

Notice the tempter's repeated condition — “If You are the Son of God” (vv. 3, 6). “Sonship” isn't an incidental title here; it implies rulership. Only sons rule in God's kingdom, whether angels in the present arrangement or man in the one still to come. This temptation is the antitype of Genesis 3, four thousand years later: the same incumbent ruler, confronting this time the second Man, the last Adam, the very One qualified to take the scepter Satan has held since God anointed him “ruler of this world.”

And this isn't left to inference. Later in the same encounter, Satan states his claim to the kingdom outright —

Luke 4:5-8

“Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, ‘All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours.’ And Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.”’”

Notice what Christ does not say. He never disputes that the kingdoms of the world have been “delivered” to Satan, or that Satan can give them “to whomever he wishes.” He refuses the terms — worship in exchange for a shortcut to the throne — without ever denying the claim itself. That's a strange offer for Satan to make, and a stranger one for Christ to leave uncontested, unless it's true: this kingdom really is Satan's to hold, for now, and the only way to take it is the way Christ actually took it — not by worshiping the usurper, but by qualifying to replace him.

The Kingdom Still Ruled by Another

This isn't a kingdom Christians are asked to imagine is somehow already theirs by default. Scripture is direct about who currently governs it —

Ephesians 6:12

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

That's not a vague spiritual location. Scripture describes three distinct "heavens": the cosmos itself, the same "heavens" created alongside the earth in Genesis 1:1; the sky or atmosphere directly above the earth (Gen. 1:6-8); and the "heaven of heavens" where God's own throne is (Deut. 10:14; 2 Cor. 12:2-4). The "heavenly places" where Paul locates "the rulers of the darkness of this age" aren't God's throne room — they're that first "heavens," the created cosmos itself, still under other management.

Colossians confirms this rule extends to things unseen as well as seen —

Colossians 1:16

"For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him."

Visible thrones — earthly kings and governments — and invisible ones in the heavens: both created by Christ, both still needing to be reconciled to Him (Col. 1:20). And Scripture is careful to describe that reconciliation, for the invisible rulers at least, as still ahead — in language easy to misread, since English translations often render it as already accomplished —

Isaiah 14:12-15

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.' Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit."

"You shall be brought down" — future tense, not yet accomplished. Whatever throne Lucifer built for himself above the stars of God, Scripture still describes its fall as ahead, not behind. That's exactly why Paul can still describe "the rulers of the darkness of this age" as a present, active reality (Eph. 6:12) even though Christ's death and resurrection have already secured the victory over them — won, but not yet enforced. The kingdom hasn't changed hands yet.

Those "heavenly places" aren't poetic flourish — they're the same governing sphere Paul has in view when he describes the Church's present role —

Ephesians 3:9-10

"...and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places,"

The same "principalities and powers" currently ruling are the ones the Church is displaying God's wisdom to right now, in the present dispensation — the current arrangement under which God is administering His purposes through the Church rather than through Israel, the way a household is run one way under one steward and another way under the next. Those powers are not yet dispossessed, not yet replaced. That still lies ahead, and Scripture names the moment it finally happens —

Revelation 11:15

"Then the seventh angel sounded: and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!'"

Genesis to Revelation, it's the same kingdom throughout — introduced at the beginning as a ruined heavens and earth in need of a ruler, contested in the wilderness by the same tempter who arranged the first disqualification, and finally handed over, publicly and permanently, at the sounding of the seventh trumpet.

The Pattern of Saul and David

Scripture doesn't leave “a rejected ruler who keeps ruling” as some strange loose end. It's a pattern God has already shown once, in the story of Saul and David, and the parallel is close enough to be worth reading straight through.

Saul was anointed king over Israel, but he rebelled against the Lord and was rejected as king (1 Sam. 10:1ff; 15:1-23). David was then anointed in his place —

1 Samuel 16:13

“Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward. So Samuel arose and went to Ramah.”

But Saul did not relinquish the throne, and David did not attempt to seize it. Saul, rejected but still reigning, was simply allowed to continue — and David, in the meantime, found himself removed from the kingdom entirely, gathering others to himself in the hills —

1 Samuel 22:1-2

“David therefore departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam. So when his brothers and all his father's house heard it, they went down there to him. And everyone who was in distress, everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him. So he became captain over them. And there were about four hundred men with him.”

Only later — after Saul's death — was his crown finally taken and given to David, and David and his men moved in to take over the government (1 Sam. 31:1-13; 2 Sam. 1:1-10; 2:1ff). The pattern this typifies is exact. Satan, like Saul, was placed as ruler and then rejected for rebellion. Christ, like David, was anointed King while the rejected ruler went right on reigning. Christ did not immediately ascend the throne; He is presently gathering to Himself those who anticipate His coming reign — the same thing David did in the hills around Adullam. And just as the day came when Saul was put down and his crown given to David, the day is coming when Satan will be put down and his crown given to Christ.

This isn't just a colorful parallel; it reflects an actual principle of how God governs. An incumbent ruler, even a rejected one, continues to reign until replaced by his successor — God does not allow a vacuum of government to exist on the earth (compare Dan. 4:17). Satan's rebellion produced disarray and a ruined kingdom (Gen. 1:2a), but it did not produce the absence of a divinely permitted government. Satan's continued rule isn't some embarrassing loose end in the story; it's exactly what the pattern of Saul and David would lead us to expect.

Scripture even marks this waiting period with a specific word. The New Testament uses two different Greek words for “crown” — 'stephanos,' a victor's crown, and 'diadema,' a monarch's crown denoting actual regal power. Christians are repeatedly promised a 'stephanos' (1 Cor. 9:25; James 1:12; Rev. 2:10) — never a 'diadema' — because 'diadema' is reserved for one who has actually entered into regal power. That distinction shows up at a key moment in Revelation —

Revelation 4:10-11

“The twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: ‘You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.’”

These elders cast down a 'stephanos,' not a 'diadema' — a sign that, whatever position they once held, they are not currently reigning. Only later, when Christ actually takes the kingdom, does John describe Him wearing “many diadems” (Rev. 19:12) — and only after Satan and his angels have finally been put down (Rev. 19:17–20:3) does the announcement sound: “King of kings, and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16). Until that happens, Satan still wears the crown that will one day be taken from him by force.

Not the Gospel of Grace

With that in view, the setting of the Sermon on the Mount stops being incidental. Christ went “up on a mountain” to deliver it (Matt. 5:1) — and a mountain, throughout Scripture, signifies a kingdom (compare Matt. 17:1-5, where Christ's transfiguration — a preview of kingdom glory — likewise happens on a mountain; Isa. 2:1-5; Dan. 2:31-45). The setting matches the subject: this is a kingdom discourse, delivered on a kingdom's mountain, to men who had already left everything to follow the King.

No part of the Sermon on the Mount deals with how a person is saved. The complete discourse deals with the message already being proclaimed — entrance into, or exclusion from, the kingdom of the heavens. That was true when Christ first delivered it to Israel, and, as the next section will show, it's just as true for the message Christians are meant to hear from it today.

The Sermon Itself Says So

This isn't a claim that has to be argued from the outside. Open the sermon itself, and the very first words out of Christ's mouth set the terms —

Matthew 5:3-12

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Notice the frame. The Beatitudes open with “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3) and close the list with the identical phrase (v. 10), and everything between those two bookends is future tense — shall be comforted, shall inherit, shall be filled, shall obtain mercy, shall see God, shall be called sons of God — ending on “great is your reward in heaven.” That's not the language of a transaction already completed at the moment of belief. It's the language of an inheritance still ahead, conditioned on the very qualities Christ is describing.

A few verses later, Christ makes the conditional nature of that inheritance explicit —

Matthew 5:19-20

“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Rank in the kingdom — “least” or “great” — is tied directly to obedience. And entrance itself is made conditional on a righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees. This isn't the free gift of initial salvation, which by definition excludes any contribution of personal righteousness (compare Eph. 2:8-9). It's the same present, ongoing, examined kind of righteousness this whole discourse has already tied to reward rather than to rebirth.

The same conditional note runs straight through the rest of the sermon — giving, praying, and fasting all done in secret so that “your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you” (6:4, 6, 18); treasure deliberately laid up “in heaven” rather than on earth (6:19-21); the command to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” with everything else added as a consequence (6:33). And it reaches its sharpest point in the sermon's final warning —

Matthew 7:21-23

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

Read that carefully. These aren't unbelievers being turned away at a moment of conversion — they're people who prophesied, cast out demons, and worked wonders in Christ's name, and He still says *in that day* “I never knew you.” “Enter the kingdom of heaven” in verse 21 is not a synonym for becoming saved or experiencing a present reality of having the King rule in your heart; it's the same entrance this entire sermon has been describing from its opening line, granted or withheld on the basis of doing “the will of My Father,” not on the basis of a past profession or a present feeling. The sermon closes the same way it opened: not with an invitation to believe for the first time, but with a warning about what will be found, and rewarded or withheld, on the day the kingdom finally arrives.

From Israel to the Church

The offer of the kingdom applied to Israel throughout the gospels, and it applied again, re-offered, throughout the book of Acts. But Israel, as a nation, rejected both the message and the Messenger —

Matthew 21:43

“Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.”

This is a dispensational shift — a change not in the kingdom itself, but in the steward through whom God is working toward it. “Dispensation” (Greek 'oikonomia,' household management) is Scripture's own word for this kind of arrangement: a period in which God administers His purposes through a particular steward, with a particular set of obligations attached. Under the past dispensation, Israel was that steward. Under the present dispensation, it's a new entity, one “not a people” that has now become God's own —

1 Peter 2:9-10

“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.”

Once that shift is in view, the rest follows directly. The things dealt with in the Sermon on the Mount can no longer apply to Israel under her set-aside dispensation — they apply now, throughout the remainder of the present dispensation, to the one brought into existence to receive what Israel refused: the heavenly portion of the kingdom, the “kingdom of the heavens.” The Sermon on the Mount, having to do with the kingdom of the heavens from beginning to end, can only be applicable to Christians today.

What This Means for Us

This is the same kingdom traced throughout this discourse — the one lost in Eden, contested in the wilderness, still under other management, and still worth everything it costs to gain. The Sermon on the Mount was never a code for getting saved; it's Christ's own description, delivered to His own disciples, of what it looks like to live as a steward of a kingdom still to come. Whatever it asks of the reader, it asks it for the same reason every dispensation does — not to earn a place in God's family, but to be found faithfully obedient in the household you already belong to, when the Owner returns and the kingdom changes hands for good.