

The Torah of Messiah and True Righteousness

- *Musings from the bottom of the Mountain*¹

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matt 5:17)

As we know from studying Matthew, the idea of fulfilment is vitally important, and pervasive, in Matthew’s Theology.

Jesus came to fulfil Torah and the prophets, as opposed to abolishing them (Matt 5:17-20). Yet at the same time, with the coming of Messiah, the kingdom of Heaven is near, and a new stage in the outworking of God’s Kingdom promises has arrived. So part of the balance we will try to achieve in looking at the Sermon on the Mount holistically is, as described in Matthew 13, to retain the treasures of old, but also to gaze on, and benefit from, the new treasures that come with the life and teaching of the apostles, as conveyed to us by Matthew, the “discipled scribe” who learned of his master and sought to teach us about his ways.

“Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” (Matt 13:52)

On the one hand, in coming to the Sermon, we must insist that there is continuity in terms of the promises and the wisdom and ways of God in Torah – the God who made himself known to Israel is fulfilling his promises, through Messiah. But there is also something progressive and indeed climactic about the coming of Messiah, and given that the Sermon represents the first major block of teaching in Matthew, and thus in the New Testament as a whole, we must expect that Messiah in his teaching, will go beyond what was revealed in former times. A new day has dawned – Immanuel is here – and we should expect new revelation that builds on the former foundation.

We began this article with a quote of Messiah about fulfilment. As we study through Matthew together, we will hear Messiah say that the law and the prophets were proclaimed until John:

“For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.” (Matt 11:13)

And as readers of the gospel of Matthew, by the time we arrive at chapter 5, we have already heard that John the Baptist, and Jesus himself, have called for repentance because “the kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (see 3:2 and 4:17). Something new is taking place, because someone greater has come.

Before we spend time discussing the Sermon itself, we need to go back and think more deeply about Torah, so in a sense we are going back before trying to move forward. We need to remind ourselves that it was God himself who gave Torah to his people, and thus we need to think to recapture a vision of Torah as being a blessing.

¹ This (draft) article serves as preamble to the Sermon on the Mount and aims to stir discussion and thought. Subsequent pieces will go into more detailed discussion of the sermon itself.

Unfortunately, many Christians view Torah as something largely negative, especially insofar as people think about Torah as the 613 commandments of “the law of Moses”². Since no-one can keep the Law, Law brings only wrath and curse and conviction; if we have come to Christ and seen our need for grace, why spend much time on the Law? Why spend much time at all on “The Old Testament” – just give us Romans!

Let’s begin with a thought experiment.

Say you were a Jew living in Israel in 200 B.C., or 20 B.C., or even in 15 A.D. (assuming Jesus was born around 5-6 B.C., strange as they might sound).

How would you answer the question “What does God want from you, and from your people?” And how would you ground your answer?

One very spiritual answer that a person may suggest is something along the lines of “I must believe in the coming Messiah who is going to die and take away my sins”.

And it is my firm conviction that the Hebrew Bible is indeed Messianic³, and Jesus says to his disciples in Luke 24:

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

But we must also recognise that in 200 or 20 BC, Messiah hadn’t even been born yet, and in 20 A.D. very few people would have known of his birth or his very ordinary life in Nazareth of Galilee. We must also recognise that in Luke 24, all of the events of the life of Jesus, including his miracles, teaching, death and resurrection had taken place, and the disciples of Jesus *still* didn’t “get it”, despite the fact that he had specifically told them what would take place at the hands of the Jewish and Roman leadership. Hence the rebuke of Jesus, combined with further careful teaching about the Messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Bible.

Although by the time of Jesus, and leading up to that time, there was increasing Messianic fervour and excitement amongst many in Israel, it would be very naïve for us to think that we would know in advance all that God was about to do with the coming Incarnation, even though there were certainly passages in the Hebrew Bible that were considered to be pointing towards the Messiah (note, for example what the chief priests and scribes said in Matt 2:4-7 – they correctly identified from the Prophets the birthplace of Messiah).

Let’s go back to the original question – you’re a Jew before the time of the public ministry of Jesus; what does God want from you (or for you)?

² One challenge here in even discussing the broader issue is that many non-Jews don’t fully grasp how when Jews speak about Torah, they may mean the commandments of God, or they may mean the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) or even both. In fact, sometimes Torah can be used almost as shorthand for the Hebrew Bible, or what is (somewhat sadly) called “the Old Testament” in Christian circles. The problem is that even for those who see a dramatic discontinuity between the New Covenant and the Mosaic Law in Jeremiah 31, Jeremiah would specifically be contrasting the Mosaic Covenant with the New, not calling ¾ of the Bible old or passé.

³ See especially Michael Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology

Even if part of your answer might be that God wants me to look forward to the coming of Messiah, which might be taking place soon (based on careful study of the Bible), I want to suggest that there would be prior Biblical and foundational contours to the answer you would give as a thoughtful and devoted Jew.

I am thus going to proffer a stylised answer to this question, which attempts to anchor what is said in the Bible itself (similar to how many Christians would answer a similar question posed today). I am aware that there is a vast body of Jewish writings from time periods before and close to the coming of Messiah, and perhaps a future version of this article, or other articles, might incorporate this in an answer. For now though, I want to attempt an answer that is grounded in the Bible itself, and particularly in texts that have in some way featured in Matthew, or would be close at hand to a Jew like Matthew in New Testament times.⁴

My name is Chaim, which means life, and I am so excited to be able to discuss with you the life to which God has called me, and my people. It gives me delight and joy to talk about such things.

In answer to your question about what God wants for me, and for the people of Israel, I happily answer: There is one God who created the heavens, the earth and all that is in them, who alone is due my worship and reverence and love. God wants me to love Him and obey him in accordance with all that he has graciously revealed, for God graciously chose our fathers and showed us how he wants to be followed. Every day we pray and recite the Shema, and we talk about God's word which we have heard proclaimed to us –

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4-9⁵)

God chose our people and taught us what he wants for us as we live in the land he promised us. Just before the Shema in Torah, God commanded us, speaking through Moses:

*"Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it,² that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long.³ **Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you,** and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deut 6:1-4)*

God wants us to flourish, so he told us how to live in order that things might go well for us! That's one of the ways in which he shows His love and protection for us! He warned us that we must never forget the LORD our God; we must

..take care lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.¹³ It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you

⁴ I am including Bible references as they would appear in your English Bible

⁵ Though Jews in the Land wouldn't have referred to verses with the numbers we use, and those in the Land who knew Hebrew would use the Hebrew name for the book!

shall swear. ¹⁴ You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you— ¹⁵ for the Lord your God in your midst is a jealous God—lest the anger of the Lord your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth. (Deut 6:12-15)

God wants us to remember and obey him in accordance with all that he has graciously revealed, with all of our hearts, soul and strength, for God graciously chose our fathers and showed us what he wants. He warned us to never serve or follow other Gods, or he would be angry with us, but if we follow him faithfully, he will be pleased with us. We must never toy with God, the Creator, and we must fear Him and remember that he is Holy.

We must never put God to the test by not listening to him, or straying from his commandments, for Moshe (Moses) told us:

¹⁶ “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. ¹⁷ You shall diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his testimonies and his statutes, which he has commanded you. ¹⁸ And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, that it may go well with you, and that you may go in and take possession of the good land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers ¹⁹ by thrusting out all your enemies from before you, as the Lord has promised. (Deut 6:16-19)

Thus we talk about Torah all the time, as we say in the Shema, and we celebrate God’s deliverance as a community. Furthermore when he gives us these instructions and commandments for living, he doesn’t only want us to talk about them – though talking about them is commanded and important – what he wants is that we strive to diligently keep them, and to do what is right and good and pleasing in the eyes of the Lord. We must be doers of His Word!

We also explain what we are doing, and why, to the next generation, for God said:

²⁰ “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ ²¹ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. ²³ And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. ²⁴ And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. ²⁵ And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.’ (Deut 6:20-24)

We were slaves in Egypt but God delivered us, and did amazing miracles around us, because he remembered his promises to us. He brought us into the Land that God gave that he promised to us and to our fathers. We love the land of Israel, for it is the land that God promised to our fathers, and has given us forever. But to flourish in the Land we must obey God, lest he be angry with us. God told us to keep his word and to fear him; this is for our good as well. God wants us to have life, and to preserve us.

In the past, some generations rebelled against God and his word, so God punished our people; in fact, a few hundred years ago after repeated warnings through the prophets, God punished us at the hands of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, who even took us into exile and destroyed the Temple. I don’t want that to happen to us again; I want to stay alive and to live well and to bring glory to God, so at least for me and my household, we want to be righteous and do all that the Lord commanded.

I'm worried when I see how lightly many people around me take God's word, but I want to please him and do what he says. There seems to be a growing expectation that Messiah is going to come before too long; he will deliver us and teach us about God. As a people, we've had a lot of troubles recently, even since returning to the Land from exile, but I'm calling out to God and hoping for the coming of Messiah speedily. And as for me, and my family, we want to serve the LORD, regardless of how many around us are living.

[Note: You can use your imagination a bit and modify how you answer depending on whether you were speaking before or after the coming of Antiochus and the Maccabean period].

"But let's talk a bit more based on what we know from God's Word. With my congregation, we've recently been memorising this section of Torah that comes before the Shema as well; I think I've finished memorising the first part which says:

*"And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.² **You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.**³ Your eyes have seen what the Lord did at Baal-peor, for the Lord your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor.⁴ But you who held fast to the Lord your God are all alive today.⁵ See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.⁶ **Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'**⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?⁸ And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?⁹ **"Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.** Make them known to your children and your children's children—¹⁰ how on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.'¹¹ And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom.¹² Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.¹³ And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments,^[b] and he wrote them on two tablets of stone.¹⁴ And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess.*

Don't you think it's amazing that God said about his commandments:

Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?⁸ And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

Praise be to our God; he hears our prayers and is so near to us and has told us what he wants!

The part I'm still memorising is about how we must carefully guard against idolatry and never make images to represent God or that replace him. But I do remember how the section ends:

*²⁵ "When you father children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, so as to provoke him to anger, ²⁶ **I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed.** ²⁷ **And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you.** ²⁸ And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. ²⁹ **But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.** ³⁰ **When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice.** ³¹ **For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.** (Deut 4:25-31)*

We have to take very seriously all that the LORD has said, and be aware that he will judge us if we are disobedient. But we must always remember and be amazed at the grace and mercy of our God; Moses said that even in punishment and exile, and especially in the latter days:

...from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. ³⁰ When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice. ³¹ For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them. (Deut 4:29-31)

God will never finally forget Israel or covenant or his promises. We must always return to him and obey him, no matter how far we stray as a people. God is a merciful God; he said to Moses on the mountain:

"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7).

Even though the anger of the Lord is frightening, God abounds in love and faithfulness; he is a forgiving God and wants us to come back to him. And God reminds us of what he has done for us in the past, and who we are as a people. We commemorate his great deliverances of the past; how he saved us, and we look forward to what he will yet do. Every week, we celebrate Shabbat to remind ourselves of God and to show that God is more important than our work, and that he himself is the Creator God. On Sinai God said to Moses:

¹³ "You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. ¹⁴ You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. ¹⁵ Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶ Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. ¹⁷ It is a sign forever between me and the

people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.” (Exodus 31:12-17)

The Sabbath is a sign forever between God and Israel, and a reminder that He made everything – the heavens and the earth and all that is within them, but he also made a covenant with us. The prophets also remind us that this sign is very important to God – oh, there’s so much more I could say! But God has given us so many reminders of who he is, and how near he is, even though we have been through some very difficult times. We must always put our hope in God; we must always meditate on his word. We must always strive to do what he said and walk in the wisdom he gave us.

King David said this:

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
² but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
⁴ The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
⁶ for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalm 1)*

We must delight in Torah, and we must meditate in it day and night, just like we say in the Shema. If we do that and are faithful to the LORD then we will flourish like the tree planted by streams of water; God sees us and we want him to be pleased with us; we don’t want to perish like the wicked.

Oh, we haven’t even begun to talk about the Temple in Jerusalem, and the nearness of our God, and how we offer sacrifices when we sin, and give offerings when we want to thank God. Torah commands us to give sacrifices and freewill offerings to the Lord; he has made provision for us to be forgiven, through his grace! What a blessing it is for me that I can travel to the temple in Jerusalem and celebrate God’s deliverance and mercy in that Holy place!

Oh, but now we’ve been talking for a long time, and yet there’s so much more that I can say. Let’s talk about these things again soon! But let’s bring some of the topics together by how David – our greatest earthly King - prayed to God after collecting all the things that were offered towards the building of the temple:

“Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. ¹¹ Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. ¹² Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. ¹³ And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name. ¹⁴ “But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. ¹⁵ For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were.

Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding. ¹⁶ O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own. ¹⁷ I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. ¹⁸ O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you. ¹⁹ Grant to Solomon my son a whole heart that he may keep your commandments, your testimonies, and your statutes, performing all, and that he may build the palace for which I have made provision.” (1 Chron 29:10b-19)

Oh, we must bless the Lord and do all that he says! We must love him and fear him and worship him with all our hearts and soul and strength! May we, like Solomon, have whole hearts and keep God’s word!

There’s so much more that could, and really must, be said. In my stylised answer, I particularly focussed on Deut 6, given the section from which Jesus cites Scripture in his wilderness temptations (Deut 6-8), but I have also included a few other quotes from other well-known portions of Scripture. And I’ve specifically mentioned the Sabbath commandment, given that this will later become a contentious issue in Matthew.

But please don’t miss the overall thrust that Torah is good, and a gracious gift from God. God expected Israel to keep Torah, and that we cannot simply resort to a meme line or caricature whenever we hear “law” that instantly becomes dismissive under an umbrella of “works-righteousness”. Whilst “works-righteousness” is an issue that must be discussed Theologically, too many Christians simply dismiss anything the Bible says about obedience or ethics as being contrary to “grace” (poorly understood), or take the Greek work[s]/ ἔργα as a bad four letter word.

Jesus is going to specifically say in the Sermon, to which we now return,

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see **your good works** (ὁμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα) and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt 5:16)

Furthermore, he is going to end the sermon with these words:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.” (Matt 7:21-27).

We began this piece by noting how Matthew emphasises that Jesus came in fulfilment of the Hebrew Bible. Explicitly, he says in Matt 5:17-18:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished”

Jesus didn’t come to abolish the law but to fulfil it; when we get to our study of those verse and walk through the text we will discuss what they mean, and how the words have been understood by others. But for now, we need to raise another issue that represents a default mindset with which many Christians will approach any mention of “the law” in the Bible, particularly grounded in a selective reading of Paul and pop-style preaching from Gentile preachers who might not have maybe gone into the issue in a lot of detail. Basically, when people talk about Paul’s view of the law, they immediately contrast “law” with “grace” (which does have some basis in sections of Paul), but they tend to be talking about Paul’s view of the law in Romans and Galatians.⁶ Furthermore, there is a “totalising tendency” whereby the next step implies that mentioning grace precludes mentioning commandments by God that must be kept by us (“We’re not in to works-righteousness of course; it’s all about grace!”).

Suffice to say that this sharp dichotomy between law and grace does not comprehensively address all that Paul has to say on this subject. Whilst we will not go into this in much detail here, and may attempt at the end of the study on the Sermon on the Mount to deal with the subject of “Paul and the Law” in a more detailed fashion, we do want to note that a major issue in Galatians pertains to God’s grace and salvation in Messiah coming through faith for Gentiles, without submitting to the Mosaic law and becoming Jews before they become Christians. Elsewhere in Galatians (5:6), Paul states:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Yet in 1 Corinthians 7:19 Paul is comfortable to write:

For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, **but keeping the commandments of God,**

and in 1 Corinthians 9:21:

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (**not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ**) that I might win those outside the law.

However we understand the various nuances of what Paul is saying in the Corinthian passages above we cannot miss that Paul requires obedience to God’s revealed will for people, especially in light of the requirements of Christ. Grace is not an excuse for lawlessness or sin; just as with Torah, when God reveals his will for us, he expects us to walk/ live in accordance with his revealed will.

⁶ In both cases, there is quite a heavy backdrop of issues pertaining to Romans, Jewish and Gentile reconciliation in Messiah ushered – I have previously written in some detail about issues flowing from Romans 13, and will here simply note that one idea emerging from this chapter is that whilst certain practices are commanded, there should nonetheless an awareness and respect towards those who do take part in certain (allowable practices).

Paul frequently gives or implies commands that require certain conduct of Christians.⁷ For example, if we read Titus 2:11-15, we recognise that the grace of God has come to us, yet that same grace teaches us to deny worldly lusts and to live godly in the present age, looking forward to the blessed hope of Messiah's (2nd) appearing. In other words, there is this idea of grace being transformative and grace making demands of people, which is pretty similar to what Jesus will say in Matt 11 of the need "take my yoke upon you".

Jesus, doesn't simply say "come to me", even though some might imagine this by listening to numerous pop Christian songs. Rather he says come to me, and take my yoke upon you. He says that his followers must "take up your cross and follow me." (Matt 16:24). One might also get the idea that because people sing about how everything is just by God's grace, which redeems us and casts away all fear,⁸ there is often little attention given to how God also requires obedience, and ethical and pure living. Whilst God's grace is entirely undeserved by us, and all is of grace, there is also great costliness attached to the outworking of that grace towards us - redemption doesn't just take place by the grace of God, rather redemption is accomplished through the blood of Messiah, whose self-sacrifice flows from the graciousness of God, and calls forth a new way of living.

All of which is to say, we must be very careful about (mis-) interpreting the Sermon on the Mount because of a selective interpretation of the apostle Paul. And we mustn't seek to retrofit Pauline Theology into Matthew in such a way that Matthew loses his apostolic voice. We want to really hear what Jesus says in Matthew 5-7.

Those who are familiar with pieces I've written about discipleship and worship in Matthew will know that I have raised concerns about how many Christians speak about the love of God, and loving God, apart from giving much attention to the contours of this subject in the Bible itself. Yes, true Christians must love God, and do love God. But on the other hand, even in John's gospel, where John stresses the necessity of believing in Messiah, and receiving life through believing, he also reminds us that Jesus says not "if you love me tell me", but rather "if you love me keep my commandments" (John 14:15). If we think further about it, the plethora of commands in the NT, including the concentration of such in the pastorals, show that grace calls for many (obligatory) responses from God's people – there are things that God's people must do and it is sinful to not do them.

Recalling Chaim's answers and citations of Deuteronomy, and the passages quoted above, we actually see something very similar in what God says to the children of Israel. When God is telling Israel how to worship and love God effectively, he calls them to do what He has commanded them – they need to trust in God, and come to Him in faith, but also do what he has told them to do. But these commandments do not come prior to God's grace exercised in salvation; God's grace in deliverance (salvation) is followed by graciously revealing his will in terms of how his delivered/ redeemed people are to live, both in order to please Him and also for their God.

⁷ As discussed in aspects of the Truthwalk study on Theology of Discipleship

⁸ Consider these words in Phil Wickham, *House of the Lord*:

We are forgiven, accepted

Redeemed by His grace

Yet Paul goes to great lengths in his theological letters to explain how redemption is through the blood of Messiah, and that we are now bought by God at great price e.g.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace (Eph 1:7), and

You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Cor 6:19b-20)

God has always expected his people to be obedient to his requirements and will for them. Thus what is noteworthy about the last section of the Sermon on the Mount, or John 14:15, is not that obedience is suddenly required – and obedience certainly does not become an optional extra in the New Testament – what is noteworthy is that Jesus calls for obedience to his teachings and his commands i.e. he doesn't simply say obey God (though he does say this) but that he also says "Obey me". And the Father, who sent the Son, specifically says in the Transfiguration account "Listen to **him**!" (Matt 17:5). Whatever else is going on the Transfiguration account (which we will study in due course), we must see that Jesus is not simply on a par with Moses and Elijah; Jesus is the supreme fulfilment of the hopes of the Hebrew Bible and its teachers and prophets.

Yet we must also remember that God **does** reveal himself through his ancient word. Sometimes, when listening to various pop or preppy preachers, one might think that the real problem with the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees is that they are trying to keep "the Mosaic Law" (i.e. Torah). Once again, we note that God expected his people to be obedient to Torah; in fact Jesus was obedient to Torah, and Matthew says of the leadership:

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, **so do and observe whatever they tell you**, (Matt 23:2-3a)

The problem with them is not that they tell people to keep Torah; one major problem is that they misappropriate Torah and strive only to impress others; hence their works and their way of following God is not to be emulated. Jesus says that

... **they preach, but do not practice.** ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵ **They do all their deeds to be seen by others.** (Matt 23:3b-5)

Jesus also talks about how there are weightier issues of the Law that shouldn't be neglected. Amongst other things, he criticises them for being utterly pedantic in interpretation of certain laws (e.g. that they tithe mint and rue and cumin) but that they neglect the weightier issues of Torah. But Israel was indeed commanded by God to tithe, and Jesus doesn't say otherwise. For it was not only Moses who gave Torah to Israel; indeed it was God who gave Moses the words to speak, hence in the introductory section to Deuteronomy, we read:

In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the people of Israel **according to all that the LORD had given him in commandment to them.** (Deuteronomy 1:3)

From both the verse above and the dialogue earlier, we must not miss that God is the one who gave Torah. So in a sense, we have now circled all the way back to both the idea of Messianic continuity with respect to Torah, but also the concept of how Messiah fulfills Torah, and the word of God as a whole.

For Christian readers, there is usually an awareness of some discontinuity in terms of how God expects us to relate to him, in the sense that we aren't under the Mosaic covenant in the same way that Israel is under the Mosaic covenant - one very obvious example is that Christians no longer approach God with animal sacrifices at a central sanctuary in Jerusalem.⁹ But the stipulations within Torah went a lot further than just animal sacrifices; there were all kinds of prescriptions for how to eat and how to live, such as not having two kinds of thread in your garment, and not planting two kinds of seed in your field. As Christians, we affirm that all Scripture is given by God, and we affirm that God is holy, and at the very least all of these commands show that God is very particular in His standards, including in how he wants to be worshipped and how he wants his people to live.

In 1 Timothy 1:8 Paul talks about the Law being good, if one uses it lawfully. And there are certainly contours about Paul's view of the Law that need to be discussed. At the same time though, when listening to many (gentile) Christians it almost sounds as if as if they don't see any grace in Torah ("that was Law and now God deals with us based on grace"). Coupled with a default posture in reading the New Testament that says (only) "it's all of grace", "Jesus paid it all" and so forth - which are not untrue, when understood correctly - one might assume that the whole Hebrew Bible has little to teach us in terms of how to relate to God, and what he requires of his people. To this is added a false assumption is that there are no covenant obligations or requirements for obedience on us anymore "because we are under grace and not under law" - which we discussed briefly above. Once again, we do not have to know much of the New Testament to recognise that there are many commandments given to God's people; indeed, we very much do have obligations towards both God and others.

At the same time, we must recognise that Jesus is *telos* or goal of the Torah. In Matt 9, it seems that part of the point about new wine and new wineskins has to do with Jesus not simply coming to 'patch up' the problematic parts of contemporary Judaism of that day, he has come as the Son of God and the King of Israel; what he says, goes. He is to be listened to, and God the Father endorses what he says, and who he is. So what Jesus has to say has primacy over everything else. Thus disobedience is viewed as disobedience to his words; the great commission has Jesus telling the apostles to teach people to observe "all that I have commanded you", and on the Mount of Transfiguration the Father says "Listen to Him!"

In the Matthean "run-up" to the Sermon on the Mount, we recognise that both John the Baptist and Jesus begin their ministries with the call:

"Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"

⁹ This is why many scholars and teachers understand "The Law of Christ" in Galatians along the lines that Paul is referring to the Commandments of God that are applicable to Christians, flowing from the coming of Christ, Christ, and his commandments that come to us through the apostles and other writers of the New Testament.

The true King of Israel is about to make himself known to Israel, and ultimately to the nations, and so there is a prophetic call to respond in light of this radical new stage in the outworking of God's plans.

The Sermon on the Mount is the first concentrated block of teaching that emanates from the King. And from a study of the Hebrew Bible as a whole, we should recognise that Scriptures foretell a climactic and consummative period in human history when God will set up his kingdom on earth. So coming into the Sermon, we recognise that the coming of the King connects with eschatological, or end-time, expectations – the call to respond with a changed heart-attitude (i.e. "Repent"), and to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt 3:8) is connected with the "kingdom of heaven being at hand". At a minimum, the kingdom of heaven being at hand has to do with the public manifestation of the King in his earthly ministry.

Thus in the sermon as a whole, we should expect that the King will teach, explain, command, exhort, and also bring to light new (prophetic) revelation that is in accord with this new stage of God's Kingdom Programme for his people.

At this point, it may be helpful to discuss some different approaches towards the sermon on the Mount (SM), attempting to interact with both some of the virtues and shortcomings of these approaches. This will be a selective sampling of suggestions that have been made to me by pastors or others in South Africa, sometimes in sound-bite format. You may have heard other takes, but these are the primary ones that I've been exposed to in conversation.¹⁰

Some interpreters have suggested that the Sermon represents an ethic that is expected by God at some stage in the future kingdom on earth (sometimes equated with the Millennial Kingdom). On the one hand, this suggestion has the virtue of linking the sermon to Hebrew-Bible expectations of an earthly kingdom, where the King will rule. I believe the Bible does teach that Messiah will one day set up his kingdom on earth at his future return, and part of the Sermon itself teaches us to pray for this to happen ("May your Kingdom Come!"), meaning that the sermon teaches the followers of Messiah to pray in the Present for the Kingdom to come in the future. Furthermore, at various junctures in Matthew we do find clear references to a future kingdom that is yet to arrive e.g.:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Matt 25:31-34)

But it is going to be very clear as we go through the sermon that that there are many present obligations on those who profess to know this king, and also talk about being persecuted for the sake of righteousness, suffering ostracism on account of association with the King (e.g. 5:11), and expectations of what Jesus wants from his followers in the present in terms of behaviour. Clearly we do learn in Matthew of things that will take place in the future, including the following:

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and

¹⁰ Author's note – I wrote quite a bit of this piece whilst travelling in the Netherlands, so will expand and refine some aspects when I am back in South Africa and have certain notes/ resources on hand.

gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matt 13:40-43)

When the King returns, and the Kingdom has come, the King sitting on his throne, and the unrighteous will be removed from his Kingdom. Although the word of the King will forever have validity, it seems clear in Matthew (and the SM) that disciples will suffer now, in this age, as a result of their association with, and obedience to the King. Note in particular Matt 5:11

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account

But also the future judgment by the King in Matt 7:21-22a, based on present doing of the will of the Father:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. **On that day** many will say to me...

Thus it seems impossible to wholly relegate the Sermon to some period in the future; Jesus is teaching and making demands of those who hear his word. At the same time, Jesus is fully aware of the consummation of the Kingdom which is yet to come, and teaches his followers to live now in light of the Kingdom, and the King’s final assessment, and to pray now for the Kingdom to come (which is related to the prayer for the King to come back – Maranatha!).

If the Sermon cannot be relegated wholly to the future, another suggestion I’ve heard essentially relegates the requirements of the sermon to the past, at least from the Reader’s perspective. Some have taken the Sermon as being Messiah’s interpretation of the Mosaic Torah i.e. in the midst of all sorts of man-made interpretations of Moses (e.g. by the Scribes and Pharisees), Messiah gives the definitive interpretation of what God actually wants of his people under “The Torah of Moses.” However, this is then often joined with a belief that the Law of Moses was in force until the death of Messiah, and now we are in the New Covenant Age, or under grace as opposed to Law, so then the SM becomes the beautiful interpretation of what Mosaic Torah actually required, but now we are no longer under the Old Covenant and Mosaic Torah any longer, so we don’t have to worry much about the specific requirements in the SM.

Whilst many of us might recoil at some of the implications of the 2nd suggestion, there are aspects of it that are worth considering. Clearly when Jesus gave his verbal presentation(s) of the contents of the SM, he was speaking to Jewish people who were under obligation to obey the Torah that God gave through Moses. Furthermore, we see throughout Matthew that Jesus takes issue with the interpretations, stances, behaviour and heart-attitude of the majority of the Jewish leadership, so one would expect that Messiah would offer a corrective and divine perspective of what God wants of these Jewish people, who continue to approach God on the terms that he prescribed for Israel, including through the giving of animal sacrifices etc. So for example, Jesus says to an audience standing in front of him that

...if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matt 5:23-24).

Now whilst I would insist that this does have implications for Christians living today, the initial audience is clearly a Jewish one who literally offer gifts at a physical altar. So at least when Jesus first spoke to his audiences, he was speaking to people who lived under the Mosaic Law and were expected to apply his words to their present practice, which included provisions relating to the temple.

Additionally, in interactions Jesus will have throughout Matthew, he will often refer to Torah and rebuke, correct or challenge people based on what Moses wrote. Matthew also uses the Jewish leadership as a foil to the internal and holistic righteousness that Jesus requires. In fact, in the overall structure of Matthew it is likely that the counterpart in Matthew to the macarisms/ beatitudes in ch 5 are the woes pronounced by Messiah in ch 23.¹¹

Moses himself foretells in Deuteronomy 18 that one day God will raise up a prophet like him, to whom the Children of Israel must give heed. In the centuries that followed this pronouncement, the passage in Deut 18 was increasingly associated with Messiah, and Peter himself makes the application to Jesus in his sermon in Acts 3. Part of the Jewish expectation of Messiah was that he would help to interpret contentious issues and provide divine wisdom; maybe there's even a hint of that in John 4:25 with the woman at the well saying that the Messiah is going to effectively solve all of these contested issues:

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Thus there is something to the idea that what Jesus says is certainly not unconnected from the Torah teaching that was given by God to Israel.

But we must also insist that Jesus in the SM is laying down ongoing teaching for his followers which we could refer to in shorthand as *Being Disciples*. This is the first significant block of Messiah's teaching in Matthew, and indeed in the NT as a whole. Matthew ends with the Great Commission, and the command that the apostles must teach all nations to observe all that Messiah has commanded them. The SM is the first concentrated teaching that introduces the will and wisdom of Messiah for those who want to follow him, and God.

Related to this, I want to mention one other interpretive idea I've encountered which in some ways has a trajectory similar to the idea that the SM is "Old-Testament Law". For lack of a better label, I'm going to call this a "Lutheran-style" interpretation¹², where the Sermon is collapsed into a hopelessly unattainable definition of what perfect holiness requires: "Be perfect therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect".

As it is completely impossible to achieve the perfection of God, the main role of the Sermon is effectively to convict us of sin and drive us to Christ for salvation/ justification by faith. So whether in the Beatitudes or elsewhere, the Sermon is just telling us to trust in Christ from the heart, or be saved through faith in the gospel. This type of reading, whilst acknowledging that the SM teaches us about God's holiness, effectively makes Matthew's point in including the Sermon almost a more comprehensive version of a Lutheran-style reading of Paul in Romans and Galatians; the Law serves to convict us and serve as a tutor which drives us to justification by faith in Christ. Now we are no longer under Law but under Grace.

¹¹ Compare how Luke records blessings (*macarisms*) and woes in Luke 6:20-26, in the so-called "Sermon on the Plain".

¹² Note: by "Lutheran-style" I do not mean that Luther held this position, but rather the idea whereby the main function of the sermon is to simply drive us to belief in Christ, and be justified by faith. In this sense, the SM would be functioning very similarly to the majority Lutheran interpretation of how the Mosaic Law in Galatians and Romans functions.

Ironically, where this lands up is almost making the Sermon function as prelude to an evangelistic message – say what Jesus requires and then say that the solution is to believe the gospel. Or, by way of application, whichever part of the sermon is preached, what Christians need to do is just to trust in Christ more wholeheartedly. But why strive or seek to understand (or keep!) commands; the sum-total of becoming a Christian, or being sanctified is just to trust in God, or “to let go and let God”.¹³ Yet this type of approach simply cannot be squared the wording of the Sermon, or with Matthew as a whole. Jesus simply gives too many commands and calls for good works (and effort!). In the Great Commission, Jesus mandates the apostles to teach “all that I have commanded you.”

Let’s move now to think about how the Sermon fits into the flow of Matthew.

John the Baptist called for people to repent and to produce fruits in keeping with repentance, but more than that, he pointed to “the coming one” and referred to the nearness of the Kingdom.¹⁴ Jesus called for people to repent in light of the Kingdom of Heaven being near (Matt 4:17), and started calling disciples to follow him (4:18-22). Now in light of who Jesus is, and the call to follow him, we should be wondering what it looks like to live as followers of this King – so the Sermon on the Mount lays out what it means to be disciples. We have already heard that Jesus taught, up to this point, we have not heard in any detail *what* he actually taught, only that he proclaimed a similar message to what John was proclaiming.

What does it look like to follow Messiah? Amongst other teachings we are going to learn from Messiah that disciples are those who pursue righteousness and are part of the heavenly kingdom, furthermore they are those who desire and pray for the consummated kingdom to come to earth. This Messiah is interested both in heart attitude/ internal righteousness, but also in obedience and action. But he does not simply offer moral teaching or look back to the Hebrew Bible; he also teaches that his words must be obeyed, and he holds himself forth as the eschatological judge. Disciples must live in such a way that they are prepared for the final judgment and by building their house on Messiah’s word – just as John taught, Jesus makes clear that he is the final judge.¹⁵ True disciples must pursue a greater righteousness (e.g. 5:6, 10, 6:33 and especially 5:20), that goes far deeper than external works; their good works must flow from pure hearts and bring glory to the Heavenly Father. But clearly what he teaches must be practised, and not simply “believed” in the heart, for he says:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (Matt 7:24)

This raises the interesting question, that has been asked by many, about whether the SM serves as entry requirement to the Kingdom (which is sometimes then categorised as “works-righteousness”) or an ethic for those “who are already saved”. Whilst I would fall into the category of those who are Reformed in their soteriology and bristle at the mention of works-righteousness (i.e. works-righteousness will never save me), we must ask whether we are incorrectly imposing certain Theological contours on Matthew that end up with our forcing a certain pre-understanding on the Sermon. Ironically, some who disavow that the sermon is about entry to the Kingdom often end up preaching on component parts as if they are talking to unbelievers about the need simply to trust in Jesus.

¹³ I’ve encountered this type of Theology of sanctification both from those who have adopted a “quietist approach” within pop-Reformed circles, and from those who knowingly or unknowingly promote some version of Keswick Theology. An excellent short book on the latter, which contrasts a balanced biblical approach to sanctification, and thus indirectly applies to many ideas that characterise quietism is Andy Naselli, *No Quick Fix: Where Higher Life Theology Came From, What It Is, and Why It’s Harmful* (Lexham 2017)

¹⁴ See the detailed notes I wrote on Matt 3

¹⁵ See Matt 3:12, and notes mentioned above.

And in the midst of the sermon, Jesus does indeed talk about entering the Kingdom e.g.:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:20¹⁶)

And Jesus warns about people who “on that day”, will falsely appeal to Jesus as Lord and claim to have done many (miraculous) works in his name.

Overall, I do think that Jesus is talking primarily to those who have in some sense “followed him” including by repenting/ changing their heart-attitude and recognising something remarkable in Jesus and his message about the Kingdom. Matthew does point out that Jesus is speaking to his disciples in Matt 5:1, but he also makes mention of the crowds, and in 7:28 and the fact that the crowds are astonished by his teaching and recognise how his authoritative teaching differs with the that of the scribes (7:29).

But what to make of all the warnings? Or the fact that although we the readers have been told that Jesus “will save his people from their sins” (1:21), Jesus will only specifically start talking about his coming death to his close disciples much later in the book, and even then, the apostles themselves don’t fully “get it”. In allowing Matthew to tell the good news about Jesus the Messiah in his own words, should we immediately “read back” various details to the early chapters from what he hasn’t yet said? And after reading and knowing the story, how do we re-read the Sermon once we have come to believe in the Suffering and Rising Messiah, after we have beheld both the Cross and Resurrection, and learned from the apostle Paul?

Is the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount exclusively (or mostly) to those “who are already in”, or is the teaching an invitation and warning to those “who want to get in”? Could it be both? Might it be an eschatological wisdom ethic Messiah gives that explains how God wants people to live¹⁷ and flourish, in line with the coming of Messiah and his coming Kingdom? When we hear the term righteousness, should we immediately think that the only meaning is (forensic) justification, when it seems that Jesus is very much concerned with both inner attitude and ethics (i.e. lived out righteousness)?

There is a rich Heritage in the Jewish Bible that does talk about people being righteous, and explaining the characteristics of such a person, without implying that such a person doesn’t require atonement for forgiveness of sin. Psalm one, which I included in the fictional discussion above, is an example that shows how a righteous person lives – there are two ways of living or being in the world, just as Jesus talks about the broad and narrow road, the two different ways of building a house, and so forth.

In the overarching structure of Matthew, we have already been introduced to the teaching that Jesus will save his people from their sins, and as with the other gospel writers, the largest segment of his gospel is devoted to the last week of the life of Jesus. And the blood of the covenant in 26:28 is identified as Messiah as being for the forgiveness of sins:

...this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins

¹⁶ A number of scholars understand that being called least in the Kingdom of Heaven in v19 might be a euphemism for not entering the Kingdom at all, which would make the line somewhat parallel to v20

¹⁷ Along the lines of what Jonathan Pennington suggests in *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*

And yes, we do all need saving and forgiveness of our sins. Nonetheless it seems clear that Jesus wants us to live righteousness and pursue the path of righteousness; to pursue a certain way of being in the world.¹⁸ In other words, this is the Torah of Messiah, in the sense that Torah is teaching, and not simply command (as is the case with Mosaic Torah as well!); Jesus does call for people to believe a certain way, but also calls for us to live a certain way. Jesus calls for a holistic righteousness that flows from the heart, a righteousness that accords with God's nature, will and coming kingdom, as Pennington helpfully characterises it.¹⁹ The teaching of Messiah includes commandments, but it is also an invitation and explanation of how to flourish in this present age – how to be righteous and live well in accordance with who God is and his coming kingdom, which we pray (even now) to come on earth.

Throughout Matthew, we will learn that what God wants is hearts that are inclined to him and to others, we are not simply to confess true things about God with our lips, or to say that we love him, without giving attention to the heart and the works that God requires.²⁰ We must love God with heart and mind and soul and strength, and we must indeed confess the right things about God and Messiah both to him and before others, yet this is inadequate without hearts that strive to see lives that are consistent with the professions about Christ and doing what he says.

None of the preceding is simple “works-righteousness”; though God really does want hearts that are oriented to him and lives that are fruitful and characterised by works that bring glory to him. In this age, none of us will follow the Sermon on the Mount perfectly, and we all need to be saved from our sins. God wants us to be undivided and complete in our devotion to him, hence Jesus says:

“You therefore must be τέλειοι, [pl of *teleios*], as your heavenly Father is τέλειος [*teleios*]” (5:48), and

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (6:24)

This does not run contrary to God's grace or his provision of a Saviour and forgiveness. Indeed, Jesus teaches his followers to pray that God would forgive their debts. But the call for whole-hearted devotion to God gets to the heart of how God wants people to live. When we despair, we recognise, and remember that we all need a saviour, and that God forgives us our sins. But we also recognise that simply doing various works is not satisfactory to God if they do not flow from hearts that are pleasing to him. In one sense, we should recognise truthfulness in various of the suggested interpretative options we mentioned. Jesus didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfil it, and says that nothing will be done away with from the law until everything is accomplished. Jesus talks repeatedly in Matthew about what God said through Moses, and does not simply do away with Moses. Yet he also takes a role and place that far outstrips Moses, and he must be listened to. What he requires of his followers will never perfectly be fulfilled in this age, and his followers must recognise the need, and pray for the Kingdom to Come.

²⁰ As I have pointed out elsewhere, this is a major problem in terms of how “worship” is understood in many contemporary churches. One problem is that some songs are sung which do not even say true things about God, or teach truth to those around us. But fundamentally, often the implication is created that because some singing, emotional expression and activity took place, worship has taken place. But does going through various motions and ritual (necessarily) mean that people's hearts are near to God, and that they are obedient to God's word? There is some much emphasis on externalities, the need for a band and various other mechanistic elements that often there is little discussion about worship actually *is*, and what God desires from worship. Jesus goes to the heart of what it means to follow him, and what it looks like to give glory to God.

But in light of the coming of the King, and his teaching about what it means to be citizens of the Heaven, there is a need for transformed living that accompanies external confession and an internal change of heart-attitude (i.e. repentance). This tides to the eschatological reading and situation of the SM in the midst of the call for repentance in light of the Kingdom of Heaven being at hand. In the overall thrust of Matthew, we must recognise the need for a Saviour, yet this is not simply about the SM having served its duty once we are justified by faith, but rather a recognition that ultimately God is at work in our hearts and changing us, and that he both redeems us and teaches us how to live, including by following the teachings of the SM²¹. As we read the rest of the NT, we come to recognise how it is only God who ultimately changes hearts to make them willing, and that the Spirit empowers willing obedience, yet Matthew has only told us so far that the Messiah will baptise with the Spirit. We want to let Matthew tell us the good news about Jesus and journey with him towards a fuller understanding; part of how the synoptic gospels “work” is that progressively fill in ever greater detail of Jesus – who he is, what he calls for, what he has done – but they do not tell us everything at once.

There is a certain way of living which accords with the nature and will of God, and lives in light of his coming kingdom. That way is the path of wisdom and of righteousness. That is the way of living to which Jesus calls us. He wants completeness/ wholeness in devotion to God and himself – heart, soul, mind and strength. He wants people to recognise that a divided heart will never produce a flourishing life, as the King David prayed:

Teach me your way, Lord,
that I may rely on your faithfulness;
give me an undivided heart,
that I may fear your name. (Psalm 86:11)

There is new revelation that comes with Messiah, as we should expect, so he doesn’t simply repeat what Moses said; as David Turner put it in an audio lecture, Jesus didn’t just say: “Read what Moses says” followed by “Ditto”. Neither does he discard Moses; in fact, in Matt 19 when a ruler approaches him, their interaction starts:

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”
“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.” (Matt 19:16-17)

As the conversation progresses, Jesus says

“If you want to be perfect, (τέλειος; *teleios*) go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

This is the only other use in Matthew of the word τέλειος, which was used in 5:48. Jesus isn’t saying that salvation/ perfection comes through possession-selling. Rather, he is pointed to the man’s divided heart and loyalties, and identifying that his great wealth, and the goings-on in his heart are stopping him from following Messiah, no matter how much he thinks he is keeping the commandments.

²¹ Cf some of the ideas in Chaim’s explanation of Torah in the fictional account earlier.

In the SM, I believe that Jesus is giving Messianic Torah, and expounding on the righteousness that God desires and expects. But Torah, including Torah in the OT, is not simply laws, rather it is teaching, and wisdom, and commandments. Torah was not given to Israel in order to free them from Egypt; it was a gracious revelation of his will showing them how he wants them to live. At the same time, righteousness and true knowledge of God is required to enter the kingdom of Heaven; in fact, as the SM draws to a close, Jesus does not simply say that people must believe in him.

We will end the beginning of our musings from the bottom of the mountain with the actual words and warning Jesus uses, and discuss their implications in a future paper:

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Matt 7:18-27)

Appendix – A very brief discussion of another basic question

I wrote much of the above paper in an effort to stir thoughtful reflection about the Sermon on the Mount, but after finishing the body of the writing, it occurred to me to invite readers to wrestle with another question, similar in some ways to the question that Chaim answered.

I'll only suggest briefly some possible this question briefly (for now), but hopefully you'll be provoked to think a bit more about both how the Bible comes to us, as the Word of God in the words of men, but also about the need for good systematic theology.

The question is: what does it mean to be a Christian? How would you answer?

Answer 1: Being a Christian means to believe in the gospel that Jesus the Messiah died for our sins and rose again.

Answer 2: Being a Christian means that we have been saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone.

Answer 3: Being a Christian means being in a living relationship with Jesus, the Son of God – knowing and being known by him.

Answer 4: Being a Christian means following the teachings of Jesus.

Answer 5: Being a Christian means loving God and loving others, because Christ first loved us.

Answer 6: Being a Christian means experiencing union with Christ and partaking of divine life.

Answer 7: Being a Christian means being delivered from the righteous wrath of God, on the basis of the Propitiatory Sacrifice of Christ at the Cross, through faith in Him and what he has accomplished for us.

Answer 8: Being a Christian means striving to lead a holy life, on the terms prescribed by God, energised by the Holy Spirit.

I'm sure that many more answers could be suggested, various facets of the above answers could be combined, and various things I've written could be nuanced or elaborated on. And I'm sure that you would want to order your answer in certain ways, perhaps by clearly emphasising the Cross and Resurrection. Many of the early Christians believed earnestly that it was very important to voice clearly what the Bible taught about the Triune God - I think that we could do a lot worse than reciting the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Depending on who you are speaking to, and the backdrop and context to the conversation, you may emphasise particular facets about what it looks like to be a Christian.

But here's the thing. Saying (for example) that being a Christian means following the teachings of Christ is a true statement. It's just not a comprehensive statement, but it is true. Likewise, it is true to insist that Christians are those who love God and others. But that statement doesn't talk about the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus; maybe the person who says "Christians love God and others" is responding to a person who says that they know an abusive person who is very religious, says that Jesus is Lord and saves sinners etc. but is brutally unkind and duplicitous and more.

In one way or another, the Bible talks about all kinds of things that characterise being a Christian. The structure of the gospels gives great emphasis to the final week of Jesus, and consistently, the apostolic writers keep going back to the gospel. Without Christ being who he is, without his dying for sinners and rising again there is no salvation; without God's grace and his regeneration of sinners, no one would be saved; without sinners responding through repentance and faith, and being united to Christ, they do not partake of all the benefits of Christ and his salvation.

But the Bible talks about being a Christian in many different ways, and it doesn't say all it has to say in one place (hence the need/ utility of creeds and confessions and doctrinal statements, particularly when grievous errors arise). There is a relational element to being a Christian; Christians must know Christ, and even more fundamentally, they must be known by Him. Christians must love God. They must love others. They must do what he says. They must bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Actions are important. But the heart is important too; it's no use to simply behave in a certain way if we have hearts that are twisted and warped and hostile to God. The life that we have ultimately flows from the Triune God, through the God-Man, Jesus Christ, on the basis of what he has accomplished for us. God graciously elects and calls us, we must respond through repentance and faith, God unites us to Christ, and so forth. This is why early creeds usually say something about who the Triune God is, who Jesus Christ is, what he accomplished for the salvation of sinners, and that these things must be believed. In one way or another, most major creeds and confessions are attempting to lay out the various contours of the essentials of being a Christian and root their answers in the Bible. Various of the Confessions go into greater detail about the Christian life.

When the Bible describes Christians, sometimes it describes them from the perspective of what they believe, sometimes from the perspective of how they (must) live, sometimes from the perspective of their relationship with God – and this may be in terms of who they trust or how they are united to God, or how God has adopted them or given them his Spirit. These different perspectives ultimately cohere with one another – they are not contradictory. But not every passage in the NT is teaching about every aspect of the Christian life, and particularly in the synoptic gospels, the good news about Jesus takes us on a journey through the life of Jesus and the (partial) understanding of the apostles and others. We want to take seriously what each Biblical writer is teaching in a particular place, rather than simply making every individual Bible passage sound like it is only teaching a formalised summary that comes in a later creed.

Jesus is more than a teacher. But he is not less than a teacher. Listening to his teaching is vital if we are to be disciples, for the word disciple means something like “learner” in the sense of an apprentice (i.e. someone who learns and puts into practice, not someone who crams for an exam).

When Matthew comes to the concluding part of his gospel in the great Commission, he explains what the apostles, and the Church as a whole, must do:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.** And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20, emphasis added)

As we begin to delve into the Sermon on the Mount, let us take his teaching seriously, and provoke one another not only to hear, and correctly interpret the sermon but also to do what Messiah has said.

And may we also help one another to remember that Jesus came to save sinners like us from our sins, that he has shed his blood and risen again, and that we are all in need of his grace and strength. He is patient with us and kind, and it is for our good that he wants us to follow him faithfully, even as he confronts us with hard things.