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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 8: THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

"... as was his custom, he taught them." (Mark 10:1)

If the gospels are the heart of the New Testament, there is no doubt that the teachings of Jesus are the heart of the gospels themselves. Jesus was clearly a master teacher, and in studying the way he taught we can learn much about his message. Jesus taught anywhere and everywhere. He taught large groups and individuals, publicly and privately, in the temple and far from society. He taught when people wanted to hear what he had to say and when they did not, but his teaching was never without application to the needs of those he taught. What he taught was often unexpected and unconventional, but it was always illuminating. As a result, people listened to the Master Teacher with rapt attention – as Luke's Gospel puts it, "all the people hung on his words" (Luke 19:48). In this unit we will see how Jesus taught, why his teaching was so effective, and why understanding Jesus' teaching methods helps us better understand what he taught.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

To fully understand the effectiveness of Jesus' teaching – and many of the points he made in what he taught – we must understand that Jesus taught in the accepted manner of the Jewish scholars and teachers of his day. But his approach was also very different in that he taught with a complete certainty (Mark 1:22) that was far above most human teaching (see Note 1). Jesus explained that confident assurance when he said "For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak" (John 12:49 ESV).

Although all of the four gospels record the teachings of Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew is unique in often giving us insight into the way Jesus taught. Because Matthew appears to have been written (probably first in Hebrew) for a primarily Jewish audience, it includes many details that would have been readily understandable to his first-century Jewish readers, though we may not notice or easily grasp them today. An important example is found in Matthew's story of Jesus' argument with the Pharisees over the matter of his disciples "harvesting" grain on the Sabbath day. The account is found in Matthew 12:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:1-2)

The Mosaic law specifically provided for individuals to pluck grain as they walked through a field (Deuteronomy 23:25), so for the Pharisees the problem with the disciples' actions was not taking the

grain, but taking it on the Sabbath. Jesus responded to this accusation by giving a number of examples showing why the disciples were not breaking the Sabbath.

He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:3-8)

The examples Jesus gave may seem to be random, but for Matthew’s Jewish audience they were far more meaningful. In the decades before Christ and during the first years of his life, the great Jewish teacher Hillel (c. 110 BC, died AD 10) and his followers among the Pharisees developed a number of rules for interpreting the Scriptures. The Pharisees used these principles continually in their study and disputing of the law, and Jesus effectively used the Pharisees’ own principles in refuting their criticism – as we see if we look closely at the types of arguments he used in Matthew 12:3–8.

“Haven’t you read?” – The Argument from Comparison (12:3–4): “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.” The Pharisees were fond of arguments by analogy in informal discourse: If “X” is the case, then a similar situation should probably be the same. Jesus used this type of argument in his initial statement by showing a clear biblical example of a ritual law being broken when there was a pressing physical need that could be alleviated. The fact that the physical need – hunger – was the same in this example as in the situation the Pharisees were criticizing made this argument all the more potent. This was akin to the Jewish interpretative principle of *gezera shawa* (equal category), based on the argument that if two separate passages contain the same word, this is sufficient reason to explain the one text in light of the other.

“How much more” – The Argument from Extension (12:5–6): “Or haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.” Most Pharisees belonged to either the very strict division of the Shammaites or the more lenient school of the Hillelites. While the former rejected many arguments from extension, the followers of Hillel believed the biblically sanctioned work of the priests in their temple service could sometimes be extended to appropriate situations. This was often done by means of a *Qal va-hodem* – literally “light to heavy” – or “how much more” argument which was frequently used by Jesus (as in his Sabbath day healing – Matthew 12:10) and also utilized by him here: If it is right for work to be done if it were associated with the temple, *how much more* if work were done that was associated with one greater than the temple? This could mean Jesus himself, but the Pharisees could not attack him on this point as the “something greater” could be the principle of mercy to which Jesus immediately turned.

“Mercy, not sacrifice” – The Argument from Higher Principle (12:7): “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.” Jesus then assailed the Pharisees with another, and even stronger, argument to which they themselves often appealed. The argument from higher principle carried great weight, and Jesus skillfully accomplished it by quoting the book of Hosea (Hosea 6:6) to make his point. The Hebrew word for “mercy” which he quoted here was *hesed*, connoting steadfast love rather than simply judicial mercy. The term convicted the Pharisees for

placing their scrupulousness ahead of love and concern. Jesus also knew, of course, that the Pharisees were aware of this scripture – his statement “if you had known these words” is a second conviction, as they certainly knew them.

“Lord of the Sabbath” – The Argument from Personal Authority (12:8): “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Jesus followed his initial logical arguments with one which doubtless shocked the Pharisees – one that clearly implied his own authority to render judgment in the matter. Yet it was an argument the Pharisees could not challenge, as Jesus had just demonstrated his superior knowledge and interpretation of the Scriptures and the principles involved – using their own techniques of argumentation. We should also understand that the arguments Jesus utilized were not randomly stated. Rather, he carefully worked from the least powerful argument up through the examples he gave so that his final one – that of his own authority – stood at the head of the chain of argumentation.

In addition to these specific techniques of instruction, Jesus also utilized numerous other teaching methods of the rabbis, perhaps none more frequently or more skillfully than his use of the parable. Although they are simply worded, the parables of Jesus have been described as some of the most profound religious teachings ever made. In fact, all the parables recorded in the gospels represent gems of instruction which richly repay the time we spend in reading them and meditating on their principles. Space does not allow us to examine this aspect of Jesus’ teaching here, but to learn more about this key area and to better understand the individual parables, we recommend the free e-book *The City on a Hill: Lessons from the Parables of Jesus* which can be downloaded from the FreeChristianEBooks.org website.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Naturally, the teachings of Jesus recorded in the four gospels are far more extensive than can be covered in a single unit of this course, but we can look at some of the key characteristics of that teaching that apply to virtually all his instruction. This is made possible in large part because Jesus himself summarized much of his own teaching in his great Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). The sermon is widely regarded as the greatest distillation of his teaching – almost every principle he taught was boiled down into this short section of Scripture.

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Although many of the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount may seem new, they are actually firmly grounded in the Old Testament. A case in point is the so-called Beatitudes found in Matthew 5:3–12. This section of the sermon is given in a form often used in the Old Testament: “Blessed [or happy] are those who . . . for they shall . . .”. For example, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked . . . That person is like a tree planted by streams of water” (Psalms 1:1–3). In fact, the individual beatitudes mostly paraphrase verses from the Psalms (compare “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” with Psalm 37:9, 11, 29) or Proverbs. Each beatitude is a proverb-like statement and, in fact, Jesus quotes from or alludes to the book of Proverbs numerous times in the sermon. But the connections are more than incidental. When we look closely at the Beatitudes, not only do we find that they are given in a format found in Proverbs, but we also find a remarkable *inverse* similarity between what Proverbs 6 tells us about the seven things God hates and the first seven beatitudes:

God Hates – Proverbs 6:16-19	The Beatitudes – Matthew 5:3-12
A proud look	The meek
A lying tongue	Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
Hands that shed innocent blood	Those who mourn
A heart that devises wicked schemes	The pure in heart
Feet that are quick to rush into evil	The poor in spirit
A false witness	The merciful
A person who stirs up conflict	The peacemakers

This comparison does not include the final, eighth and what is sometimes called the ninth, beatitudes: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness” (vs. 10) and “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you” (vs. 11), because only the first seven beatitudes, like the seven evils mentioned in Proverbs 6, are actual characteristics of a person. Thus, the Beatitudes cover many of the same ideas found in Proverbs 6:16–19 in a positive manner, as it was often typical of Jesus’ teaching to recast negatively worded concepts in a positive manner (Matthew 22:35–40; etc.).

Jesus’ hearers would have also understood the promises of the Beatitudes in terms of the Old Testament – as promises for the future time of God’s reign as foretold by the prophets. As Christians we tend to read them in the light of the present reality of the kingdom (Matthew 12:28; Luke 17:20–21; etc. – see Note 2), but we should not forget how they were primarily understood by Jesus’ audience.

We continue to see how rooted the Beatitudes are in the Old Testament when we look at them individually. For example, when Matthew records Jesus saying “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” these words would have been understood – and rightly should be – in terms of the Old Testament prophetic tradition. The prophet Isaiah tells us “But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2 NKJV), and this helps us understand that spiritual “poverty” has nothing to do with having an overly humble attitude, but one of true and deep repentance – the very quality Jesus showed was a prerequisite for entrance into his kingdom (Matthew 4:17; etc.).

This basic principle must be applied to all of the Sermon on the Mount – and all of Jesus’ teaching – if we are to understand it. There are unfortunately many who attempt to separate the teachings of Jesus from their biblical setting – to see them as something new and better replacing old and somehow outdated principles. But Jesus did not replace the principles of the Old Testament in his teaching; rather, he elevated them – taking them to new heights of understanding and application, as we will see next.

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

The Sermon on the Mount is certainly one of Jesus’ most well-known teachings, yet as the noted theologian John R.W. Stott has remarked, “The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed” (*The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 1973, p. 15). A better grasp of this section of Scripture certainly enables us to better understand and apply all of Jesus’ recorded teachings.

A major misunderstanding of the Sermon on the Mount among many Christians relates to Jesus' statements about the law of God. Many believe Jesus was somehow ending the principles of the Mosaic law or replacing it with a new and better law of "love." To properly understand the sermon, we should begin by noticing its setting. Jesus usually climbed mountains to get away from people (John 6:15; etc.), not to teach them, so when we read that he led his disciples and many others (Matthew 5:1; 7:28) up a mountain to teach them he clearly had a purpose in mind – to make a parallel with the giving of the Law to Moses and the people of Israel on Mount Sinai. It would have been obvious to Jesus' original hearers that the Sermon on the Mount was given law-related significance by its very setting. As Jesus began to instruct his followers on that Judean mountainside, he made it clear that the law of God was at the center of what he was teaching – that God's laws provided the "rules" for the way of life of the kingdom of God.

1. Jesus "Fenced" the Law. The rabbis of Jesus' day attempted to protect the laws of God by building a legal fence around them in such a way as to make transgression less likely – just as we might do in driving if we tell ourselves the speed limit is 40 miles per hour when it is in fact 50 miles per hour. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for doing this, but not because they were trying to avoid breaking God's laws, rather because they were concentrating on the wrong things – on small physical details rather than the important aspects of God's law. That is why Jesus told them "You give a tenth of your spices ... But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matthew 23:23). In the Sermon on the Mount, we see Jesus "fencing" the law in a far more spiritual manner – as when he taught that we should not allow anger to rise that might lead to murder, lust that might lead to adultery, and so on (Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).

2. Jesus "Focused" the Law. Although Jesus clearly taught the importance of the law of God in the Sermon on the Mount, we should notice that he said nothing about the sacrificial and ritual aspects of the law that would soon be rendered obsolete through his own sacrifice (Hebrews 10:8–18). Nevertheless, Jesus continually stressed the importance of the ongoing underlying ethical and spiritual principles of the law that predated the rituals given to Moses, and that would continue after those rituals were no longer necessary. Jesus focused his teaching – and our lives – on the eternal ethical and moral aspects of the law of God. We see this focus in the way Jesus said "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

3. Jesus "Fleshed Out" the Law. Rather than denigrating or attempting to do away with the principles of the law as some claim he did, Jesus stressed its application. When Jesus said "You have heard it said ... but I say to you ..." the first four of those six statements (the "antitheses" as they are called by theologians) are based on the Ten Commandments. But Jesus was not contradicting the law of God in saying these things, rather he was magnifying the law and "fleshing out" its principles in order to show how to more fully apply them. That is why Jesus could say: "Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

4. Jesus "Fulfilled" the Law. Jesus made his intent clear early in his sermon when he said: "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" (Matthew 5:17). While many think that by "fulfill" Jesus meant to "complete," or "finish," in the sense of "fulfilling" a requirement that then does not need to be met again, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus pointed both to the ongoing relevance of the law of God and to his own role in fulfilling that law. We know that Jesus kept the law of God perfectly (2 Corinthians 5:21), and through his teaching he enabled us to better keep it also. In other words, his "fulfilling" the law relates both to the law of God accomplished (what Jesus did) and the law of God applied (what we must do). While Jesus freed us from the impossible burden of perfect obedience, he also strengthened our obligation to strive to fully obey God's law.

It is no coincidence, then, that the Sermon on the Mount effectively ends with Jesus' warning of divine retribution on those who would try to deny or ignore God's laws: "Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!'" (Matthew 7:23 CSB). The stress on the importance of the law of God that we see throughout the Sermon on the Mount is reflected in all the gospels (see Note 3) – as when Jesus, in effect, preemptively answered those who might say he replaced law with love: "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15 ESV). So in the area of God's law as in all other aspects, the Sermon on the Mount contained not so much "new" principles, as the reaffirmation and strengthening of what the word of God had stressed from the beginning.

But the teaching of these strengthened principles was accomplished with the greatest skill and effectiveness. Matthew tells us: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching" (Matthew 7:28). This was not because Jesus had done away with God's revelation, but because he had illuminated it with unique clarity and power.

* Note 1: The Greek word *exousia*, translated as "authority" in Mark 1:22, is typically used in the New Testament for God's authority or his authoritative statements.

* Note 2: The Greek word *makarios* which is translated "blessed" or "happy" (the word can mean both things) in the Beatitudes can mean "blessed" in both a future sense as when we say "May God bless you," and in a present sense as when we say "I am so blessed." The Beatitudes thus point to a spiritual blessing that finds total fulfillment in the future kingdom of God, but which also makes us happy/blessed now.

* Note 3: This stress on the moral law of God is not only found in the gospels, of course. The New Testament Epistles also follow the teaching of Christ regarding God's laws defining love of God and love of neighbor (see Romans 13:8–10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8; etc.).

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

Select and memorize three scriptures showing that in his teaching Jesus did not do away with the moral and ethical laws of God, but strengthened and extended their application.

Beneath the Surface:

It is clear that Jesus used many of the specific instructional techniques of his time in his teaching. What principles might we learn from these techniques that we can use in our own teaching or explanation of the Bible?

Everyday Applications:

Read through the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and consider how you can better apply its principles with the understanding that Jesus "fenced, focused, fleshed out, and fulfilled" the law of God.

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