

'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.' People sometimes think the Sermon on the Mount is just ethical teaching about living in a decent society but this verse makes it clear that, like the Mosaic Covenant Law, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are based on the character and nature of God.

THINKING POINT

Was Jesus making things easier – or harder? There are some important points to remember about the teaching of Jesus about the Jewish Law:

- The Jewish leaders stressed the importance of right actions; Jesus extended this to include the intentions and motives.
- The Jewish leaders kept the letter of the law; but Jesus looked also at the spirit of the law and its purpose.
- The commandments tended to be negative in that they emphasised what people should not do. Jesus emphasised positive principles like 'love your neighbour' which could be applied to any situation.

MATTHEW CHAPTER 6

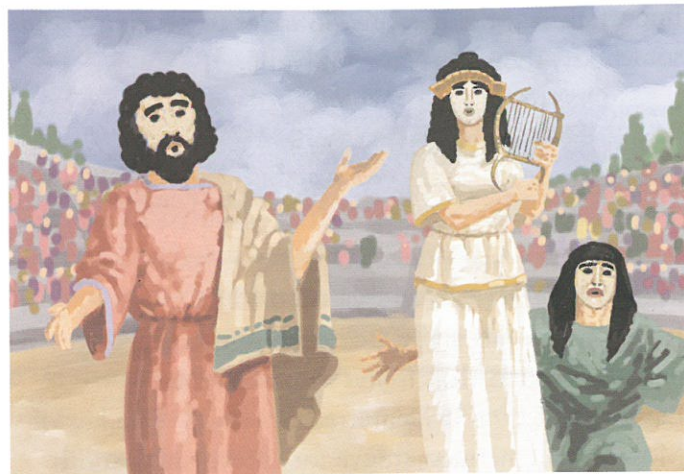
The Sermon on the Mount was probably used to instruct new converts how to live the Christian life. It is still used for this purpose today.

Chapter 5 showed the sort of people Christians should be and the principles by which Jesus said they should live their daily lives.

Chapter 6 moves on to the subject of the teaching of Jesus about religious practices. The chapter starts with three key examples of religious duties:

- giving to the needy
- prayer
- fasting.

The Sermon on the Mount condemns religious hypocrites (the Greek word for play-actors is used here). These are people who pretend to be religious.



Greek actors used to wear masks.

Matthew 6:1–4 Giving to the Needy

The description of the hypocrites broadcasting their good deeds must have made his listeners smile. We get the phrase 'blowing your own trumpet' from these verses. The aim when doing any good deed should be to please God not to impress other people.

The left hand must not know what the right hand is doing. There must be no showing off. True religion is communication between the individual person and God.

Matthew 6:5–8 Prayer

The same points are made concerning prayer. Everything must be done with sincerity. The teaching is not criticising public prayer. It is against making a show of religion and repeating prayers out of habit without thinking about the meaning.

Matthew 6:9–13

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.*

Jesus, like many rabbis, gave his disciples a pattern for praying.

The pattern for prayer starts with praise and adoration to God using the title 'Father' which Jesus himself used when praying.

The believers in expressing their hope that God's kingdom will come are volunteering to help bring about God's plans for the world.

Requests for daily necessities follow. Both physical needs such as bread, the basic food, and spiritual necessities such as forgiveness.

Finally there is a petition for protection.

Sometimes a doxology (words of praise) is added: 'For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen.' This doxology probably reflects a prayer of King David in 1 Chronicles 29:11.

*Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power
and the glory and the majesty and the splendour,
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.
Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom;
you are exalted as head over all.*

FOR DISCUSSION

Christians believe that this prayer is as appropriate for believers now as it was for those in the early church.

Look at each phrase in the Lord's Prayer and discuss the extent to which this is true.

Matthew 6:14–15 Forgiveness

Sayings about forgiveness continue the theme of sincerity in prayer. The idea is that someone who is genuinely grateful to God for being forgiven will forgive other people.

Matthew 6:16–18 Fasting

Fasting is a sign of repentance. The Pharisees encouraged fasting on Mondays and Thursdays in the daytime. John the Baptist's disciples fasted. Jesus said his disciples would fast when they had good reason to do so.

The early Christians did not seem to take these

THINKING POINTS

If your brother sins rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.' (Luke 17:3–4)

Peter, one of the Apostles, asked Jesus:

'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.' (Matthew 18:21–22)

Do you think Jesus means that there should be no forgiveness on the seventy-eighth time?

What if the person does not repent?

If God knows what you need before you ask him, why do people pray?

verses in the Sermon on the Mount to condemn all fasting. There is evidence that they fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, as well as during times such as Lent.

The point being made is the same as in the examples of giving charity and praying. It is not fasting but hypocrisy which is being condemned.

Matthew 6:19–24 Treasures in Heaven

This collection of sayings is about having priorities in life. The contrast is made between treasures on earth and treasures in heaven. Worldly treasures do not last. Spiritual wealth lasts forever.

Believers are told to set their heart on things that last; to focus on concerns which bring light into their lives.

Money, property and material possessions should not be allowed to rule a Christian's life. Money should not become a god.

THINKING POINT

How far do you think the themes in these verses echo the same ideas as those in the Beatitudes?