



Prayer and Ethics in the Sermon on the Mount

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Good teachers know the value of deliberate structure for teaching. They use it to achieve learning goals, foster formation, and encourage retention. Effective teaching involves many things, but thoughtful structure is very often a key characteristic.¹

Matthew's Gospel reflects this kind of teaching. Readers have long noticed didactic qualities in the Gospel's organization and flow. In fact, interpreters have compared it to manuals from antiquity, like the Didache or Qumran's Manual of Discipline. Their similarities suggest that Matthew's Gospel may have served a similar purpose: as a manual for teaching and leadership in church communities.²

¹ Mark Throntveit was a dear seminary professor of mine. He loves scripture (and Hebrew). He enjoys students. And he has a refreshing sense of humor. My own passion for teaching Bible is indebted to him. A most memorable trait of his teaching was his uncanny ability to see structural patterns (especially chiasms) in almost any story. Sometimes these patterns showed a significance otherwise too easily bypassed.

² Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew: And Its Use of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 35; Ernst von Dobschütz, "Matthew as Rabbi and Catechist," in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, ed. Graham Stanton; trans. Robert Morgan (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 19–29; Rudolph Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 356–58; Paul S. Minear, *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 12–23.

Two parts of the Christian life as seen in the Sermon on the Mount are spiritual practices and service to one's neighbor. Though these two are often separated, this discourse shows that they are in fact interrelated, and that each depends on the other for strength and focus.

The main reason many regard Matthew as a teaching gospel is the many ways it gives structure and order to the teachings and stories of Jesus. For example, Matthew features five large blocks of teaching (5:1–7:27; 10:1–42; 13:1–52; 18:1–35; 24:1–25:46), assembles thematically related material (e.g., 8:1–9:34; 21:28–22:14; 23:1–36), pairs together stories of equal length (e.g., 2:1–12, 13–23; 5:21–32, 33–48; 8:1–17, 18–9:1a; 18:1–14, 21–35), repeats key words and phrases (e.g., 9:13 and 12:7), highlights numerical patterns (e.g., 1:1–17; 23:13–36), features literary inclusions (e.g., 1:24; 28:20), and makes use of doublets (e.g., 4:23 and 9:35; 7:16–19 and 12:33–35).³ Among the New Testament Gospels, these traits distinguish Matthew, suggesting they likely are neither coincidental nor organizing for organizing's sake. On the contrary, they resonate with and stem from a larger narrative emphasis on learning, discipleship, and ministry formation under Jesus, the master teacher.

Even more, the structure itself of the Sermon has significant implications for how the activities of prayer and ethics relate, according to the vision of Matthew's Jesus. Trusting that the medium of Jesus's message matters no less than the message itself, we will have a closer look at the Sermon's design as an indication of what is most central.

A passage where Matthew's teaching qualities shine is the Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:27). It is not only the first and most extensive collection of Jesus's teaching in Matthew; it also reflects some major narrative themes (blessedness, righteousness, Jesus and the Torah, hearing and doing). Even more, the structure itself of the Sermon has significant implications for how the activities of prayer and ethics relate, according to the vision of Matthew's Jesus. Trusting that the medium of Jesus's message matters no less than the message itself, we will have a closer look at the Sermon's design as an indication of what is most central.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: ITS SHAPE AND DESIGN

Among interpreters, there is no consensus on the structure of the Sermon on the Mount. Many see it as composed of three or more movements (e.g., 5:3–16; 5:17–7:12; 7:13–27), with 5:17–7:12 more or less its central section.⁴ Some find it helpful

³ For more on these features, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Lins (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 37–41.

⁴ See Donald A. Hagner and Hans Dieter Betz (who further subdivides 7:13–27). Similar outlines are offered by Dale C. Allison Jr. (5:3–12; 5:13–7:12; 7:13–27), Donald Senior (5:1–16, 17–48; 6:1–7:12; 7:13–29), and Daniel J. Harrington (5:1–20, 21–48; 6:1–18; 6:19–7:12; 7:13–29). Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 50–66; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew: 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993), 84; Dale C. Allison Jr., "The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 423–45; Donald Senior, *Matthew*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 68–69; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2nd ed. Sacra Pagina 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2007), 76.

to organize the Sermon's content around triads of material.⁵ Others approach the Sermon thematically, believing its contents revolve around a singular theme like righteousness,⁶ the will of God,⁷ or the command to love God and neighbor.⁸ Still others believe a specific passage of the Sermon constitutes a summary or outline of the whole, like the Beatitudes⁹ or the Lord's Prayer.¹⁰

Despite the lack of consensus, a commonality exists among some of the most leading outlines. A few examples make this clear.

Among thematic approaches to the Sermon, one of the most well-known belongs to Jack Dean Kingsbury. He finds the Sermon to be most concerned with "greater righteousness," outlining its contents as follows:

1. Introduction: On Those Who Practice the Greater Righteousness (5:3–16)
2. On Practicing the Greater Righteousness toward the Neighbor (5:17–48)
3. On Practicing the Greater Righteousness before God (6:1–18)
4. On Practicing the Greater Righteousness in Other Areas of Life (6:19–7:12)
5. Conclusion: Injunctions on Practicing the Greater Righteousness (7:13–27)

In support of Kingsbury's approach is how most sections spotlight the word "righteousness" (δικαιοσύνη) as a theme in leadoff or major passages (5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33). More interesting is how this outline, intentionally or not, draws attention to the Sermon's center. The three middle sections all discuss "practicing the greater righteousness," with righteousness before God at the very center. "In sum, therefore, it is love toward God and love toward neighbor that constitute the heart of the greater righteousness."¹¹

Dale Allison has a similar breakdown of the Sermon. Sandwiched between opening statements (5:3–12, 13–16) and closing warnings (7:13–27) is a central section he calls "The Three Pillars," which he subdivides into three more:

1. Jesus and the Torah (5:17–48)
2. The Christian Cult (prayer) (6:1–18)

⁵ Allison, "Structure," esp. 438–41; Glen H. Stassen, "The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–7:12)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 2 (2003): 267–308.

⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 22–23; Jack Dean Kingsbury, "The Place, Structure and Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount within Matthew," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 131–43; R. A. Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco: Word, 1982), 323–25.

⁷ Christoph Burchard, "The Theme of the Sermon on the Mount," in *Essays on the Love Commandment*, ed. Reginald H. Fuller (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 57–91.

⁸ Olav Hanssen, "Zum Verständnis des Bergpredigt," in *Der Ruf Jesu und die Antwort der Gemeinde*, ed. Eduard Lohse (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 94–111.

⁹ Michael Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), esp. 269; Austin Farrer, *St. Matthew and St. Mark*, 2nd ed. (London: Dacre, 1966).

¹⁰ Walter Grundmann believes petitions of the Lord's Prayer correspond to sections of the surrounding Sermon. Günther Bornkamm believes the same, but only for Matthew 6:19–7:11. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 1; 3rd ed. (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1972); Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977–78): 419–32.

¹¹ Kingsbury, "Place," 136–37. Guelich has a similar approach and outline (*Sermon*, 36–39).

3. Social Issues (6:19–7:12)

These areas, Allison argues, correspond to three classical pillars named by Simeon the Just (second century BCE) that reflect emphases of rabbinic interpretation at this time: the study of Torah, the Temple cult and prayer, and acts of lovingkindness (*m. 'Abot* 1.2; see also *'Abot R. Nat.* 4). Thus, Allison argues, the Sermon on the Mount is arranged to offer “a Christian interpretation of the three classical pillars.”¹² Though Allison does not rank the Sermon’s triad components, the centrality of the section on prayer and orientation toward God suggests a distinctive significance: it serves as a bridge and fulcrum between right Torah interpretation and right living.

No matter how one outlines the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:1–18 stands out as a distinctive unit at the center. By word count, it stands basically at the midpoint, with 820 words before and 720 words after.¹³ Even more, it has distinctive grammatical taglines, just as surrounding sections do: the section on Torah interpretation (5:17–48) repeats the language “You have heard it said, . . . but I say to you” (5:21–22, 27–28, 31–32, 33–34, 38–39, 43–44), and 6:19–7:12 is marked by a string of imperatives (negative: 6:19, 25; 7:1, 6; positive: 7:7, 12, 13, 15). Meanwhile, the central section features the language “And when you _____” (give alms, pray, fast; 6:2, 5 [7], 16). This language suggests activity the hearers are already engaged in (almsgiving, prayer, fasting), whether or not they implement other teachings in the Sermon. In that sense, the central section depicts a kind of starting point for the hearers—it addresses what they are *already doing*. Matthew 6:1–18, then, not only stands at the center of the Sermon; it also serves as a point of origin for hearers within the entirety.

A stronger case for Matthew 6:1–18 as the center is made by those who see in the Sermon a chiasmic or “ring” structure (e.g., an A-B-A, or A-B-C-B-A pattern)—a symmetrical pattern of progression and parallel reversal, whose mapping would visually look like part of the Greek letter *chi* (X).¹⁴ Interpreters have discerned chiasmic patterns throughout the Hebrew Bible (Amos 5:4–6a; Isa 1:21–26; Gen 6–9), as well as in Matthew (6:24; 23:12).¹⁵ Also supporting this approach to the Sermon is the way it is bracketed by bookend references to its hearers (5:1–2; 7:28–29), making an *inclusio* pattern that suggests that similar parallels may appear throughout.

Several interpreters have proposed chiasmic structures for the Sermon on the Mount, but the most well-known belongs to Ulrich Luz (below).¹⁶

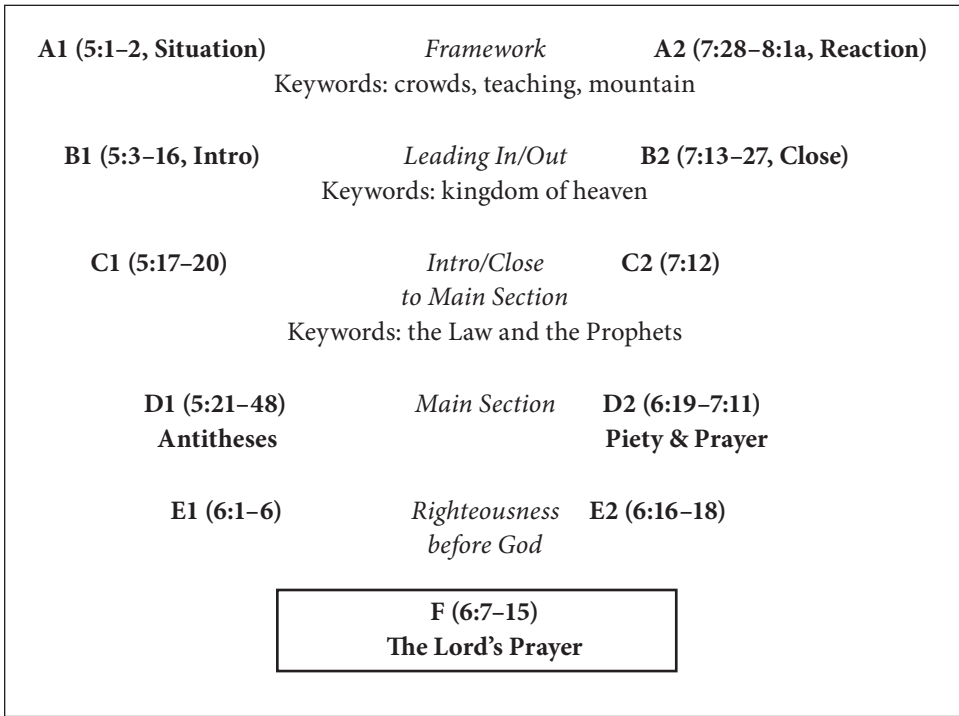
¹² Allison, “Structure,” 443, 445.

¹³ By my count of the Greek text (Nestle-Aland 28th ed., excluding disputed words) of Matthew 5:1–7:29 (1,883 words total).

¹⁴ Loosely supportive of this idea are the proposals of Bornkamm, “Aufbau”; Guelich, *Sermon*, 323–25; Stassen, “Fourteen Triads”; Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 215; and Daniel Patte, *The Gospel according to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew’s Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 65.

¹⁵ Luz also sees chiasmic patterns in Matt 9:1b–8; 13:13–18; 18:10–14 (*Matthew 1–7*, 40).

¹⁶ Developed and simplified from Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 211–13.



Luz sees the Lord’s Prayer as the center of the Sermon on the Mount. He is neither the first nor the only interpreter to do so.¹⁷ But his chiasmic analysis has so far been the most widely received, as well as the most theologically informed. For Luz, at the core of the Sermon is the practice of prayer. All ethical living and scriptural interpretation revolve around right orientation toward God, especially orientation grounded in prayer. As a result, “an interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is a misunderstanding if it overlooks the fact that the center of its practice is prayer.”¹⁸

Many leading studies of the Sermon on the Mount identify Jesus’s teachings on prayer and orientation toward God at the center. Whether the Sermon is a chiasm, a triadic progression, a treatise on righteousness, or something different, the center remains the same.

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¹⁷ So similarly Grundmann (*Evangelium*), Bornkamm (“Aufbau”), Guelich (*Sermon*, 323–25), Hagner (*Matthew 1–13*, 84), Jan Lambrecht, *The Sermon on the Mount: Proclamation and Exhortation* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1985), 26–29, 155–64. Cf. Patte, *Gospel*, 65.

¹⁸ Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 215.

righteousness, or something different, the center remains the same. What does this mean for interpreting the first, the longest, and by many accounts the most significant teaching segment in Matthew's Gospel?

PRAYER AND ETHICS IN MATTHEW'S SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Many people think of the Sermon on the Mount as primarily about faithful orientation toward others. It is no less about faithful orientation toward God.

However the Sermon is outlined, Jesus's teachings on prayer—especially the Lord's Prayer—stand at the center. This is not merely a matter of aesthetics. It says something significant about the relationship between prayer and ethics. It suggests that prayer and ethics are deeply interconnected in the eyes of Matthew's Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel is not often associated with a strong emphasis on prayer. Yes, the narrative boasts the fullest version of the Lord's Prayer. But Matthew's Jesus does not call God "Abba" like Mark's Jesus does. Nor does he pray at length the way John's Jesus does. Nor does Matthew's Jesus pray before major events and teach parables on prayer the way Luke's Jesus does. In fact, almost all of Matthew's references to and teachings about prayer come from traditions shared by other New Testament Gospels.¹⁹

A notable exception is the teachings at the center of the Sermon on the Mount. Most of the material is unique to Matthew (6:1–4, 5–8, 10b, 13b, 16–18). Furthermore, here and throughout the Sermon, Matthew brings together teachings on prayer that in other Gospels are scattered to various locations (Matt 6:5–18, 25–34; 7:7–11; cf. Luke 11:1–13). What Matthew's Gospel has to say about prayer, it says especially in the Sermon on the Mount.

In Matthew's Gospel, prayer is a simple, straightforward asking for what one needs (6:9–13; 7:7–11; 9:37–38), trusting that God knows our needs and will grant our requests (6:7–8, 32; 7:7–11). As the Lord's Prayer shows, prayer often focuses on practical things like daily bread and forgiveness (6:11–13). Prayer is an act of faith, as the Canaanite woman demonstrates by her persistent asking, eliciting Jesus's response: "Woman, great is your faith!" (15:28). For Matthew's Jesus, ideally prayer is not beset by doubt, but trusts that "whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive" (21:22; also 17:19–20). The point is not to villainize all forms of doubt, but to depict prayer as a simple act of trust, like a child's request from a generous parent.

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. . . . If you then . . . know how to give good gifts to your children,

¹⁹ Matt 6:25–34 (cf. Luke 12:22–32); Matt 7:7–11 (cf. Luke 11:9–13); Matt 9:37–38 (cf. Luke 10:2); Matt 11:25–26 (cf. Luke 10:21); Matt 15:21–28 (cf. Mark 7:24–30); Matt 17:19–20 (cf. Mark 9:28–29; Luke 17:6); Matt 18:18–20 (cf. John 20:23); Matt 21:21–22 (cf. Mark 11:22–25); Matt 26:36–46 (cf. Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:39–46); Matt 27:46 (cf. Mark 15:34).

how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matt 7:7–8, 11)

As the Sermon on the Mount shows, this kind of prayer is essential to being a disciple and engaging in ethical action.

There are different ways to understand the centrality of Jesus's teachings on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. For example, some read them as a word of grace, strategically placed between the demands of 5:21–48 and 6:19–7:12. This approach works better in theory than in practice. To characterize Jesus's teachings in 5:21–48 and 6:19–7:12 as pure demand, and those in between (6:1–18) as sheer grace, is too simplistic. While Jesus's teachings on prayer emphasize God's gracious provision, they also abound in imperatives (6:1–3, 5–6, 7–9, 16–18). And the surrounding sections are not devoid of emphasizing God's provision (5:45; 6:25–32; 7:7–11). We today may think of prayer and ethical action as opposites, but Jesus's teachings in Matthew 5–7 do not support that dichotomy very well.

For Matthew's Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, prayer and ethics are not opposites, but are connected as two sides of the same coin. As Ulrich Luz words it:

For Matthew, prayer is not a flight from practice but its innermost side. Prayer makes it possible for the disciples of Jesus to experience the demands of Jesus as the will of the Father and to draw strength from this. Prayer does not become superfluous by acting, but the acting remains constantly dependent on prayer.²⁰

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount gives a vision of discipleship that integrates prayer into the heart and soul of discipleship in ways that support and foster ethical living. At the same time, ethical living surrounds and galvanizes prayer. Ethical activism becomes the basis for prayer, as well as the yielded result. Living ethically toward the neighbor comes before, after, and throughout practices of prayer.

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In short, each component—prayer and ethics—is critical to the vitality of the other. Both prayer and ethical action are integral to seeking and embodying the righteousness (or piety, justice) of Jesus (Matt 5:20; 6:1, 33). Both prayer and ethical living become calls to action and sources of God's provision for disciples. Prayer and ethics, according to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, are intimately interwoven.

²⁰ Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 389.

CONCLUSION: *ORA ET LABORA*

In some sectors of Christianity today, there is a perceived divide between more “vertical” (i.e., oriented toward God) spiritual practices like prayer, fasting, and contemplation, and more “horizontal” (i.e., oriented toward the neighbor) practices of Christian ethics and justice-seeking. As a result, church communities, denominations, and individuals tend to prioritize one over the other. Those who prioritize vertical spirituality believe it to be more theologically oriented or spiritual, finding other priorities to be overly focused on achievement, activism, and relevance. Those who prioritize horizontal spirituality believe it makes a tangible difference to people in Jesus’s name, finding other priorities to be too insular, self-focused, and irrelevant to the world. Named or not, most church groups and associations can easily identify themselves somewhere along this spectrum.

Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount simply does not support this dichotomy. It gives us a different vision: one where the more vertical spiritual practices of prayer and fasting support ethical activism, and where the more horizontal practices of justice and neighbor-love support relationship with God. The two are not to be separated easily. Vitality in *each* area, in fact, depends upon a healthy engagement with the other.

Instead of an “either/or” approach to these two poles of spirituality, a better model may be “both/and” or even “back-and-forth.” Certainly, some practices of spirituality focus more on embracing the divine, while others focus more on tangibly assisting the neighbor. But each emphasis, when healthy and vital, leads toward and encourages the other. True prayer encourages and fosters ethical activism, just as true ethical activism encourages and fosters prayer. When isolated from the other, each spiritual emphasis tends to grow stale, dogmatic, and narrow-minded. When practiced in tandem with the other, each spiritual emphasis yields fruitful growth. Like a tree that benefits from cross-pollination, authentic spirituality thrives from multiple resources. As the structure of the Sermon on the Mount suggests, these two emphases of spirituality are not only complementary; they are interconnected in a vision of holistic faithfulness.

A mantra traditionally associated with the Order and Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia states: *Ora et labora* (“pray and work”).²¹ The phrase succinctly unites two activities in ways that resonate with the overall design of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. Other language, which comes from Jesus’s words in the Sermon’s closing parable, might be ἀκούετε καὶ ποιεῖτε (“hear and do”; Matt 7:24, 26). To seek God’s reign and righteousness is, finally, to pray and act, to hear and do. At the risk of oversimplifying, these three-word phrases summarize a major takeaway from the design of the Sermon on the Mount.

At the end of the day, in Matthew 5–7 Jesus gives a vision of a spirituality that is both inward and outward, both contemplative and active, focused on both

²¹ Though this Latin phrase nowhere appears in his *Rule*, Benedict did speak of prayer as “the work of God” and manual labor as the antidote for idleness, “the enemy of the soul” (*Rule of St. Benedict*, 43, 48).

listening and doing, and attentive both to God and to the neighbor. In fact, each element in these polarities thrives best in the presence and vitality of the other. This is what it looks like both to hear Jesus's words and to put them into practice.



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