


1-1-1969

Covenant Relations of the Sermon on the Mount

Robert A. Hawkins

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hawkins, Robert A. (1969) "Covenant Relations of the Sermon on the Mount," *Restoration Quarterly*: Vol. 12 : No. 1 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly/vol12/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Restoration Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ ACU.

RESTORATION QUARTERLY

CONTENTS

Covenant Relations of the Sermon on the Mount—Robert A. Hawkins	1
The Meaning of Secularization—James Robert Ross	10
Which Version Shall We Use?—William M. Green	26
Reaction to Dr. William Green's Paper "Which Version Shall We Use?"—Neil R. Lightfoot	37
Book Reviews	42

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP
VOL. 12, NO. 1, FIRST QUARTER, 1969

Covenant Relations of the Sermon on the Mount

ROBERT A. HAWKINS

Few pieces of literature have ever been more highly regarded by so many as the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 5-7. Yet with its greatness and tremendous effect on countless lives, scholars have puzzled over many problems in the interpretation of the Sermon. Among the problems involved, one of the most important is the relationship of the Sermon to the Old and New Covenants. Was it the purpose of Jesus merely to point out the correct meaning of the Law of Moses, or was He setting forth new principles, opposed to or higher than the principles of the Law, which were to become the constitution of the Kingdom? Or is it just possible that He spoke rather uniquely in the Sermon both of principles within the Law and also of those to be incorporated in the New Covenant?

Limits of time and space make it impossible to treat many problems, the solution of which sets the framework for a proper discussion of this question. For instance, to whom is the Sermon addressed? Matthew records, "Seeing the multitudes, he went up into the mountain: and when he had sat down, his disciples came unto him."¹ It is assumed that Jesus spoke both to His disciples and to a multitude of Jewish people. Also considerable controversy is observed on the writing of Matthew—his sources, when he wrote, or whether he himself wrote the gospel, the unity of his discourses and their purpose. Though the unity of the Sermon has been much questioned, it is here assumed, accepting the representation of Matthew, that it was one address on a single occasion.

INTERPRETATION OF THE SERMON THROUGH THE AGES

Solution of the problem of the relation of the Sermon to the Old and New Covenants is not an easy one because of the material within the Sermon and especially because of the numerous divergent interpretations concerning it.

¹Matthew 5:1 (American Standard Version). Matthew 7:28 says the multitudes were astonished at His teaching. If Luke 6:17 speaks of the same setting and Sermon, it speaks both of a great multitude of disciples and a great gathering of people.

Early church writers hesitated to see in the Sermon any teaching which went beyond the Law,² but later Catholic writers saw it as completing or even extending the Law, and only to be kept by those of "perpetual chastity and perfect obedience."³ Scholars of the Reformation opposed the Catholic position and emphasized the relation of the Sermon to the Old Covenant.⁴

In recent times the Sermon has been attacked in various ways so as to question its current relevance. Humanism, for instance, completely sets aside the material, believing that no carpenter of 2,000 years ago could contribute the final word on human relations.⁵ Liberalism rejects the supernatural but stresses that Jesus did inculcate principles which should be used by modern man to build a better social structure.⁶ Albert Schweitzer believed that Jesus expected the end of the world to come soon and that he gave the Sermon as temporary ethics to be kept only as an emergency measure.⁷ Since the world did not end and, according to this view, the principles of the Sermon are impossible to be kept in ordinary times, the Sermon is relegated to some eschatological kingdom.

Neo-Orthodoxy, with its emphasis on despair and the fallen state of man, does see the Sermon as containing valid ethics for today. However, each person applies the prin-

²Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," Chapter XIII, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), I, 168; Tertullian, "Five Books Against Marcion," IV, 16, *Ibid.*, II, 370f.

³Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp. 24, 25; Francis J. Connell, *The New Confraternity Edition Revised Baltimore Catechism*, No. 3 (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1949), p. 117.

⁴Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, translated and edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (Vol. XXI in *Luther's Works*; Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 70; John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Vol. XX in *The Library of Christian Classics*, John Baillie, et al., eds.; London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1958), 373f.

⁵John Herman Randall, *Religion in the Modern World* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1923), p. 82.

⁶Hans Windisch, *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount*, translated by S. MacLean Gilmour (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1941), pp. 168-169.

⁷Amos N. Wilder, "The Teachings of Jesus: II. The Sermon on the Mount," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1951), III, 161.

ciples to himself, for the Sermon gives only general principles and attitudes—not actual commands. Brunner says, “None of the commands in the Sermon on the Mount can be understood as laws, so that those who hear them can go away feeling, ‘Now I know what I have to do!’”⁸ Dispensationalists believe that the Sermon contains principles for the future millennial kingdom but is not intended for the present age.⁹

With great differences of opinion existing in interpretation, as noted above, unity of understanding is made very difficult. As usual, the hermeneutical method used in interpretation greatly affects understanding. As in understanding other material, the Grammatico-Historical method commends itself to the judgment of many scholars. This means that if Jesus stated real commands through the imperatives of the Sermon and these are understood literally, of course in the sense given, unity can be attained. Also, if the Sermon contains principles effective for the Kingdom, the discourse is of great importance today. It is not to be represented as the ultimate or complete plan of ethics or salvation but contains useful principles for the modern Christian.

RELATION OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT TO THE OLD COVENANT

The relationship of Jesus to the Law and the Sermon to the Old Covenant needs to be observed. Jesus accepted the Law as authoritative and obeyed it during His lifetime. Matthew 5:17-20 emphasizes that He came “not to destroy the Law or the prophets: . . . but to fulfill.” By this Jesus showed that He would fully keep the Law, fulfill all the prophecies concerning Himself, and be the destined end to which the Law looked forward.¹⁰ Jesus is not to be set in opposition to the Mosaic Code, for His abrogation of the Law was to be by fulfillment—not destruction. Matthew

⁸Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, translated by Olive Wyon (London: Lutherworth Press, 1937), p. 136.

⁹Lewis Sperry Chafer, “The Teachings of Christ Incarnate,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, CVIII (January-March, 1951), p. 395.

¹⁰W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 100.

5:20 shows that the people's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, and the remainder of the Sermon deals in detail with what this righteousness must include. The contrasts of Matthew 5:21-48 give the correct understanding of the commands of the Law which had been covered over by the current rabbinical teachers within Judaism.¹¹ The Law did include the inward motive as well as the outward action, but this had not been seen by Old Covenant people as it should have been. Jesus, therefore, sharpened the point of the Law to indicate how deeply it cut into the pattern of daily living.

"Ye have heard . . . but I say" is a Rabbinic type of construction used to show what the people had heard from their teachers and what Jesus in contrast authoritatively stated the Law really meant.¹² In this manner Jesus showed that the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" included not to hate or do evil with the heart.¹³ The commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" involved also lust and evil thoughts or coveting a wife, as noted in the tenth command. People had come to believe that one could lust after a woman, as long as the act of fornication was not committed. But Jesus showed that this understanding was foreign to the actual command by Moses. In the statement on divorce (Matthew 5:32) Jesus did not intend to settle the discussion of the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 but showed the evil of divorce and the setting aside of the Law as practiced by the Jews. God hated divorce in the Old Covenant,¹⁴ and Jesus brought this back to their minds.

Violations concerning oaths and swearing are treated in Matthew 5:33-37. Certain oaths could be taken in the name of the Lord, but Christ was condemning the promiscuous

¹¹Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), pp. 68f.

¹²David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, Second Jordan Bequest Lectures delivered at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1952 (London: University of London: The Athlone Press, 1956), pp. 55-57.

¹³Man was destroyed in the Old Testament because of the wickedness of his heart (Genesis 6:5; Psalms 66:18) and was held accountable for his disposition and attitudes as well as the outward act (Amos 2:1, 6). ¹⁴Malachi 2:13-16.

oaths current in His day. By many the Mosaic precepts upon oaths had been reduced to a single prohibition against perjury. Jesus' statement "Swear not at all" is not an absolute prohibition against all oaths. It only concerns the particular types of oaths mentioned in the latter part of the statement. The statement is not followed by a period but by a series of negatives introduced by the particle *mete* (neither). This is one of the particles which "divide the negative item into its component parts" (Arndt and Gingrich).¹⁵ So the opposition of Jesus was to the unnecessary and false swearing of the Pharisees, not to valid swearing authorized by the Law.

In Matthew 5:38-42 Jesus explained that the principle of "an eye for an eye" was not to permit personal vengeance but legal civil justice. The Jews had taken this passage and distorted it to mean that every individual had the right to use vengeance on his own behalf. Truly the Law gave the next of kin certain authority to exercise God's vengeance, but not without court sanction.¹⁶ By this time retaliation in the case of damage to a person had been superseded by money penalties.¹⁷ The spirit of revenge was deeply ingrained in all Semitic life, but the people of God must eradicate it lest they be swept away by uncontrolled passions.¹⁸

That Jesus pointed out the Jewish attitude is seen in Matthew 5:43, when he said, "It was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy." Though this was the way many Jews felt, Jesus showed that the Law commanded an interest and concern for all. There had been no actual command to hate others, but a gradual decline from the ancient moral height commanded by the Law is seen in

¹⁵J. W. Roberts, "Exegetical Helps: Some Notes on Swearing," *Restoration Quarterly*, IV, 1 (1960), p. 31; citing William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (a translation and adaptation of Walter Bauer's *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments*; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 52.

¹⁶Numbers 35:21.

¹⁷Daube, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

¹⁸George A. Barton, "The Meaning of the 'Royal Law,' Matt. 5: 21-48," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, XXXVII (March-June, 1918), p. 62.

the New Testament.¹⁹ The Old Testament required "love for enemies,"²⁰ and Jesus was calling the people back to this high level of dealing which the "particularism" of the Jews had set aside.

As noted, Matthew five particularly shows how the people's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, but chapter six also shows their false righteousness in matters of giving alms, praying, and fasting. Further hypocrisy and carnality are seen in worldly anxiety, censorious judgments, false prophets, and hearing without obedience. The prayer of Matthew 6:9-13 was appropriate for Jews anticipating the coming of the Kingdom. Matthew 7:12 (the Golden Rule) has often been used as the ultimate goal of Christian ethics, but actually the verse is a key to understanding the Sermon in its Old Covenant relation. Jesus said, "This is the law and the prophets." The scribes and Pharisees had lowered this standard, but the Old Covenant had commanded "love as thyself" to the fellow-Israelite and the foreigner.²¹ So the Old Covenant must not be degraded to a carnal, outward law without spiritual interest, but in common with the New Covenant as trying to shape the ethical and spiritual lives of the people. From these points it is understood that the Sermon is related to the Old Covenant and the Jewish people hearing Christ at that time.

RELATION OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT TO THE NEW COVENANT

Is the picture complete if the Sermon merely speaks to the Jewish people without looking toward the New Covenant? The Jewish people looked forward to the Messiah, who would be a New Teacher coming with a New Law. This was promised in the Old Testament and anticipated as Jesus came.²² The Sermon on the Mount is represented by Matthew as the teaching of this Messiah and is spoken

¹⁹John 4:9 shows hatred of the Samaritans by the Jews. Also John 8:48. Hatred of all foreigners is noted by Matthew 15:21-28 and parallel references.

²⁰Proverbs 24:17, 19; 25:21.

²¹Leviticus 19:17, 18, 34.

²²Deuteronomy 18:15; Jeremiah 31:31-34.

with authority equal to any part of the Law of God. It states principles for those who will be a part of the Kingdom of heaven. The Kingdom was to be God's reign among His people in the new dispensation under the New Covenant. The Scriptures teach that the Law passed away,²³ but many of its eternal moral principles were incorporated into the Law of Christ. Man today, therefore, is not under the Mosaic Code but should have profound respect for the place it had in leading people to Christ. When Jesus is seen as the one who abrogated the Law by fulfillment, not destruction, the teaching of Jesus harmonizes with those of all the New Testament.

The Sermon on the Mount has a distinct place in the New Covenant. The Gospel of Matthew has five great teaching sections,²⁴ each related in some way to the Kingdom. The Sermon is the first of these and shows the righteousness of subjects of the Kingdom. Many of the exact statements of the Sermon, as the beatitudes, are used or echoed by New Testament writers. The contrasts of Matthew five are applied in the New Covenant. Killing is, therefore, still forbidden and includes heart murder.²⁵ Adultery and divorce are clearly regulated by those statements of Jesus. Paul in I Corinthians 7:10, 11, applies the rule of Matthew 5:12. Upon the command of Jesus in Matthew 5, all the rest that Paul said is built and must be considered. Since Paul cited this rule on marriage, adultery, and divorce as a basic law for the Corinthians, it is evident that the Sermon was intended to be used as law for the people of the New Covenant.

Swearing is regarded in the same light, and James used the words of the Sermon with most likely the same interpretation.²⁶ Revenge and resistance are similar to the Old Covenant rule, though the instrument of vengeance has changed.²⁷

²³Galatians 3:19, 23-25; Hebrews 7:12; 8:6, 7, 13; II Corinthians 3:6-11; Ephesians 2:13-16; and Colossians 2:13f.

²⁴Matthew 5-7; 9:35-10:42; chapter 13; chapter 18; and chapters 23-25.

²⁵James 2:10-12; I John 3:15.

²⁶J. W. Roberts, *A Commentary on the General Epistle of James* (Austin: R. B. Sweet Company, Inc., 1963), p. 199.

²⁷I Peter 2:20; 3:8f.; I Thessalonians 5:15; Romans 13:1-4.

Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give place unto the wrath of God: for it is written, Vengeance belongeth unto me; I will recompense, saith the Lord. But if thine enemy hunger, feed him, if he thirst, give him to drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head.²⁸

So the New Covenant shows the same position toward personal vengeance and the hatred and animosity which it involves. The principle of love spoken of in 5:43-48 is seen throughout the New Covenant, though elsewhere love is raised to greater heights.²⁹ The Golden Rule expresses the type of love which they had heard from the beginning (I John 3:11, 23). It was true and good in olden times, but also for New Covenant Christians. The Golden Rule is a basic minimum of duty, but a higher love, "as Christ loved us," is required.

In addition to observing the use of the Sermon by New Testament writers, early church writers frequently used material from the Sermon to enforce their teachings for Christians.³⁰ Never was there any feeling that it did not apply, even though they believed it to be in perfect harmony with the Law. It is very important, therefore, to observe the place of the Sermon, for these principles properly kept not only helped people of the Old Covenant, but also aid people of this age.

But the question looms paramount: "How can the Sermon apply both to people of the Mosaic Age and the present dispensation?" The answer suggested by this study is that there are eternal moral principles common to all God's dealings with man. Since some of the Old Testament principles were eternal in nature, they naturally found place in the New Covenant. The Sermon concerns itself with this type of material and, therefore, may be applied to people of both Covenants. This understanding also makes unnecessary a distinction between the Moral and Ceremonial Laws, but permits that all the Law, including the Ten Commandments, was abrogated in the death of Christ.

²⁸Romans 12:19, 20, as it quotes Deuteronomy 32:35 and echoes Proverbs 25:21f.

²⁹John 13:34f.; I John 2:7f.

³⁰McArthur, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

The life and many times the teachings of Jesus were transitional in nature. This is the place of the Sermon on the Mount, as it contains principles shared by both Covenants. One can look to it not only for explanation of Old Testament laws and ethics, but also accept it as an authoritative message to those under the New Covenant. It is germane to the solution of the problems of today's generation and with renewed interest should be used by all. That these principles may again thrill the hearer and challenge the believer, as they did on the day they fell from the lips of Jesus, is the hope and goal of this study.

Lubbock Christian College