

**How to Get into Heaven:
Jesus Teaches Us in the Sermon on the Mount
Session One**

One of the most pressing questions among all people who believe or who wonder about the afterlife is: will I get into Heaven? Some people are quite certain they know who is in and who is out, but even the most faithful of us feel a twinge of doubt. On that big day, will we or won't we make it through those pearly gates?

Well, good news! Jesus tells us exactly what to do to make it into Heaven and those nice evangelists (the good-news bringers) took the time to write it down in the Gospels for us! We can be especially grateful to Matthew and Luke because they each pretty much summarized Jesus' instructions in a nice package. Matthew did so by gathering the information in what has been labeled the Sermon on the Mount and Luke followed suit in what is called the Sermon on the Plain.

The two Sermons are very similar although Luke's Sermon is much shorter than Matthew's. We know that Jesus spoke the words present in each of the Sermons just as Jesus said and did what is

presented in all four of the canonical Gospels; however, each evangelist organized Jesus' words and actions in a specific manner which stressed certain facets of Jesus and His teaching.¹ All of the teachings contained in Matthew's Sermon can be found in the Gospel of Luke, just not all in the Sermon on the Plain.

Now, did Jesus actually sit upon a Mount as described by Matthew and give such a lengthy, detailed description of the boxes that need to be checked in order to make it into Heaven? Absolutely not. As one scholar notes, "Had Jesus delivered all the verses in Matthew 5-7 at one time, the disciples' heads would have exploded. There's too much in these chapters to absorb in a single lesson."² Luke's shorter version, which appears in Luke 6:20-49, is a more probable length for a teaching session. However, Matthew's Sermon is a good handy summary of what we need to do for our salvation.

Now, Jesus gives a lot of teaching and advice throughout the Gospel of Matthew; what makes the Sermon so central? Quite simply, this sermon is how we learn how to develop right relationship with

¹ Dennis Hamm, SJ, *Building Our House on Rock: The Sermon on the Mount as Jesus' Vision for Our Lives as Told by Matthew and Luke* (Frederick, MD: The Word Among Us Press, 2012) Kindle eBook location 187.

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020) xi.

God, ourselves, others and all creation (true *shalom*), bring forth the kingdom of God into the world and truthfully call ourselves disciples of Jesus or Christians. As scholars have said, quoting Jesus in the Sermon, “This is what it means to ‘build our house on rock.’”³ We can especially note how through the centuries since Jesus first spoke these words, not only has this Sermon been the most commented upon and quoted portion of the Bible within Christianity,⁴ but the Sermon was considered “as casting a foundational vision for the virtuous Christian life.”⁵

Matthew sets the stage carefully before having Jesus pronounce the pathway to Heaven. Jesus has been baptized and tempted. Now prepared to withstand the tribulations of ministry, Jesus begins.

What is Jesus’ ministry? Jesus sums it up in one statement at the outset of His ministry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17).⁶

³ Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 11, quoted in Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2017), 4.

⁴ Pennington, *The Sermon...and Human Flourishing*, 3 footnote 2.

⁵ Pennington, *The Sermon...and Human Flourishing*, 5.

⁶ Jesus says “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel” at the beginning of His ministry in Mark 1:14-15.

Because this statement is central to the Sermon on the Mount and to Jesus' entire ministry of teaching and healing, let us examine it carefully.

The very first word, translated as “repent” is actually the Koine Greek⁷ word “*metanoayte*” which means “be converted.”⁸ The sense of this word is best understood in its Jewish context, since Jesus was a Jew speaking to other Jews when He said it. The Hebrew verb with the closest meaning to “*metanoayte*” is “*shuv*” which, in certain forms, means “to bring back,...to convert from evil.”⁹ This sense of “turning” or “returning” to God “was the standard prophetic and Jewish means of reconciliation with God. The word does not picture sorrow or remorse, but a change in the direction of one's life. 'Get yourself a new orientation for the way you live, then act on it' catches both the Greek and Hebrew connotations”¹⁰ of what the word means here.

⁷ Koine Greek is the language the entire New Testament was written in as opposed to Classical or Attic Greek which is an earlier form of Greek.

⁸ Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BDAG)*, 3rd ed, (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000) μετανοείτε, 640.

⁹ Koehler & Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)* vol. 1 (Leiden, the Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2001), שׁוּב, 1427-1434.

¹⁰ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in *New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 3 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 167.

Thus, Jesus' ministry begins with Jesus calling everyone within hearing distance to change the path of their life that led them away from God and set their feet upon the path that would lead them towards God.

This message of Jesus also had a sense of urgency. He stated this needed to be done because the kingdom of heaven was at hand, it was approaching, it would be here soon. The Greek word used in Matthew 4:17, "*engiken*," means "has drawn near" or "has approached" in the temporal sense.¹¹

And what will be here soon? The kingdom of heaven!

Scholars have been responsible for the felling of multiple forests to make the paper upon which they wrote their arguments over the question of what Matthew means by "the kingdom of heaven." The general consensus for years has been that Matthew was too deferential to God's holiness to use the more commonly used phrase for the reign of the Lord on earth, the kingdom of God, so he substituted "the kingdom of heaven." However, a modern commentary has rightly pointed out that in the Gospel of Matthew, the

¹¹ BDAG, ἐγγίζω, 270.

evangelist does use the phrase “the kingdom of God” as well as the word “God” some fifty times, so he cannot be so reverent that he avoids the term. Instead, the Gospel’s audience can see that when Matthew does use the phrase “kingdom of God,” he is “setting up a contrast between heaven and earth: heaven is where God’s will is done; heaven is where God rules rather than where the ‘kings of the earth’ who ‘take toll or tribute’ ([Matthew] 17:25) hold sway.”¹²

Earth is this place, the place of oppression and hate and pain and sin and death. Heaven is when the just, loving God rules and everyone is equal. Mary spoke of this time and place in her Magnificat: “He [God] has shown might with his arm; he has thoroughly scattered the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty” (Luke 1:51-53). Another way to envision the kingdom of God is that it is the time of “creation entering into its final Sabbath rest.”¹³

The understanding that God’s rule over the world is imminent is an apocalyptic or end-times way of thinking. Jews throughout the

¹² Levine, *Beginner’s Guide*, xiii.

¹³ Pennington, *The Sermon...and Human Flourishing*, 25-26.

time of Jesus believed that they were living in the end times. Jewish apocalyptic literature begins with the prophet Ezekiel (his writings begin around 575 BC) and thrives in the centuries before and at the time of Jesus. The Qumran Community of the Dead Sea Scrolls wrote numerous texts that spoke clearly of eschatology or the end times and indeed, many scholars conclude that the Community focused primarily on this event.¹⁴

For pious Jews, to be ready for the Last Day or the Day of the Lord, was to be ready for the Good Life, the time when the enemies of Israel (whoever had conquered them at the moment as well as their collaborators; in the time of Jesus, that meant the Romans and the Herods) would be kicked off the land and punished, and the Jews would be rewarded with eternal peace, freedom and justice. This Good Life was envisioned as the Eschatological Banquet, “a place and a time when past, present and future unite, when we recline at table with our ancestors, and when borders are open to the east and west so that Jews and Gentiles worship God together.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Randall J. Price, (2016) ["Eschatology of Dead Sea Scrolls" by J. Randall Price \(liberty.edu\)](#).

¹⁵ Levine, *Beginner's Guide*, xiii.

In preparation for this upcoming day, an individual had to clean the personal house of their heart and lifestyle. As one scholar notes: “The expectation of a new world entails the end of the present world and of its conventional customs and social arrangements; and if those customs and arrangements are soon to go, one’s present way of life can hardly continue as ever.”¹⁶

Jesus, like many of His contemporaries such as John the Baptist, realized that the time was ripe for God to come and establish His eternal reign over the world. Certainly, the kingdom of heaven did come when Jesus was born, however it does not yet hold complete sway over the universe. In the same way that we live in the time when sin, death and Satan have been conquered but they will not yet be fully erased from the universe until Jesus returns, so we can understand that the kingdom of God was established when Jesus came into the world but it will not be fully established throughout the cosmos until He comes again.

¹⁶ Dale C. Allison, Jr., “Apocalyptic Ethics and Behavior,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 297, quoted in Pennington, *The Sermon...and Human Flourishing*, 28.

Thus Jesus' rallying call, "Change your path, the kingdom of heaven is almost here!" is still imperative.

People tend to believe that Jesus and the Day of the Lord or Judgement Day will come when the world is bad enough. But perhaps the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God on earth, comes when we are good enough, when enough of us sign on and join the kingdom here and now. For nowhere does it say that Jesus accomplishes His mission of bringing the kingdom of heaven into this world alone. Indeed, everything in the Bible points to the fact that God regularly uses people to accomplish God's mighty works of salvation: Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel and Leah; the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah, Moses and Miriam and Aaron; Deborah, Gideon and Samson; Joshua, Rahab, David, the list is massive. In all of these situations, God could have acted directly, coming in a fiery chariot with an army of angels and taken care of business directly. But God didn't. God used humans to accomplish salvation. In fact, God came down as a human being personally in order to complete salvation.

We also must understand: salvation is not just a destination that awaits us after we die and are resurrected. Salvation is a condition, a

state of being. Jesus has already saved us through His death and Resurrection. Now we need to live like it. If we follow the precepts of the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, we are living in the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of heaven will be realized on earth. If everyone starts being merciful, being peaceful, forgiving, not judging, keeping to one's word, holding one's temper, praying, giving alms and honoring God, then earth will be more like heaven and we will be ready for Jesus.