

Becoming Spiritually Perfect



45 ▼ THE GOSPEL OF SAINT MATTHEW

Tradition ascribes authorship of the *Gospels*, the four major accounts of Jesus of Nazareth's life and teachings, to authors known as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The early Christian Church believed that Matthew had been one of Jesus' *Twelve Apostles*, or major companions, and accepted his Gospel as the authoritative remembrances of a divinely inspired author. Modern scholarship dates the work to the period around 85 or 90, or approximately fifty-five to sixty years after Jesus' ministry. Its author appears to have been a Christian of Antioch in Syria and possibly a disciple of the Apostle Matthew, but probably not the apostle himself. The author clearly was trained in the Jewish rabbinical tradition but was equally comfortable with the Greek language and Hellenistic culture, and he seems to have addressed his Gospel to a cosmopolitan Christian community made up of former Jews and gentiles.

The central theme of the Gospel of Matthew is that Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfillment of the promises made by God through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. For Matthew, Second Isaiah was the greatest of the prophets, the one who had most clearly foretold Jesus' mission of salvation and who had preached that the universal reign of the Lord was imminent. In the following selection Matthew presents what is commonly known as the *Sermon on the Mount*. Here Jesus instructs his followers about what the *Kingdom of God* requires of all its members. In all likelihood, what Matthew presents is not a verbatim account of a specific sermon that Jesus delivered on some mountainside but a distillation of Jesus' core moral and theological teachings. As you read this excerpt, keep in mind that Jesus lived in the environment that produced Rabbinical Judaism and was, himself, considered a rabbi, or teacher.

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

"Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in Heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you. . . .

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till Heaven and Earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of Heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of Heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the

scribes and the Pharisees,¹ you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council,² and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. . . . You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in Heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? . . . You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. . . .

"And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this:

Our Father who art in Heaven.
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On Earth as it is in Heaven.

¹The *scribes* were nonpriestly professionals who copied, interpreted, and applied the oral traditions that supplemented written biblical Law. The *Pharisees* were members of a Jewish religious party who stressed that all of this nonscriptural, oral law had to be observed as equally and as fully as the written Law of Moses. Eventually this *Oral Torah*, as it was

often called, became codified in the *Talmud*, which was codified in two major editions between about 200 and 600 C.E.: an earlier and shorter one in Palestine and a later and fuller one in Babylonia. The Talmud has served as a major source for Rabbinical Judaism to the present.

²The *Sanhedrin*, Judaism's chief religious and judicial body.

Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our debts,

As we also have forgiven our debtors
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. . . .

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on Earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is,

there will your heart be also. . . . Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. . . .

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. . . .”

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.