

# John Wesley's Explanatory Notes - Matthew 5

by John Wesley

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*John Wesley's sermon on Matthew 5 emphasizes the characteristics of true happiness and righteousness as taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:3-17, Matthew 5:20, Matthew 5:44-48

**Topics:** "The Beatitudes", "Happiness in Holiness"

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## Description

John Wesley expounds on Matthew 5, emphasizing that Jesus' teachings provide the true path to happiness and holiness. He highlights the Beatitudes, where Jesus pronounces blessings on the poor in spirit, the meek, and those who hunger for righteousness, illustrating that true happiness is found in spiritual humility and compassion. Wesley notes that Jesus' approach is gentle and inviting, encouraging believers to embody these virtues and share them with others. He warns against the false interpretations of the law by the Pharisees and calls for a deeper understanding of righteousness that transcends mere outward actions. Ultimately, Wesley concludes that the call to holiness is a call to perfection, reflecting God's character in our lives.

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## Transcript

V.1. And seeing the multitudes - At some distance, as they were coming to him from every quarter. He went up into the mountain -Which was near: where there was room for them all. His disciples - not only his twelve disciples, but all who desired to learn of him.

Verse 2. And he opened his mouth - A phrase which always denotes a set and solemn discourse; and taught them - To bless men; to make men happy, was the great business for which our Lord came into the world. And accordingly he here pronounces eight blessings together, annexing them to so many steps in Christianity. Knowing that happiness is our common aim, and that an innate instinct continually urges us to the pursuit of it, he in the kindest manner applies to that instinct, and directs it to its proper object. Though all men desire, yet few attain, happiness, because they seek it where it is not to be found. Our Lord therefore begins his Divine institution, which is the complete art of happiness, by laying down before all that have ears to hear, the true and only true method of acquiring it. Observe the benevolent condescension of our Lord. He seems, as it were, to lay aside his supreme authority as our legislator, that he may the better act the part of: our friend and Saviour. Instead of using the lofty style, in positive commands, he, in a more gentle and engaging way, insinuates his will and our duty, by pronouncing those happy who comply with it. Chapter Overview

3. Happy are the poor - In the following discourse there is, 1. A sweet invitation to true holiness and happiness, verse 3-12.

Matthew 5:3-12. 2. A persuasive to impart it to others, verse 13-16.

Matthew 5:13-16. 3. A description of true Christian holiness, verse 17; chap.

ii,12, Matthew 5:17; Matthew 7:12. (in which it is easy to observe, the latter part exactly answers the former.) 4. The conclusion: giving a sure mark of the true way, warning against false prophets, exhorting to follow after holiness. The poor in spirit - They who are unfeignedly penitent, they who are truly convinced of sin; who see and feel the state they are in by nature, being deeply sensible of their sinfulness, guiltiness, helplessness. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven -The present inward kingdom: righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, as well as the eternal kingdom, if they endure to the end. Luke 6:20.

Verse 4. They that mourn - Either for their own sins, or for other men's, and are steadily and habitually serious. They shall be comforted -More solidly and deeply even in this world, and eternally in heaven.

Verse 5. Happy are the meek - They that hold all their passions and affections evenly balanced. They shall inherit the earth - They shall have all things really necessary for life and godliness. They shall enjoy whatever portion God hath given them here, and shall hereafter possess the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

Verse 6. They that hunger and thirst after righteousness - After the holiness here described. They shall be satisfied with it.

Verse 7. The merciful - The tender-hearted: they who love all men as themselves: They shall obtain mercy - Whatever mercy therefore we desire from God, the same let us show to our brethren. He will repay us a thousand fold, the love we bear to any for his sake.

Verse 8. The pure in heart - The sanctified: they who love God with all their hearts. They shall see God - In all things here; hereafter in glory.

Verse 9. The peace makers - They that out of love to God and man do all possible good to all men. Peace in the Scripture sense implies all blessings temporal and eternal. They shall be called the children of God - Shall be acknowledged such by God and man. One would imagine a person of this amiable temper and behaviour would be the darling of mankind. But our Lord well knew it would not be so, as long as Satan was the prince of this world. He therefore warns them before of the treatment all were to expect, who were determined thus to tread in his steps, by immediately subjoining, Happy are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Through this whole discourse we cannot but observe the most exact method which can possibly be conceived. Every paragraph, every sentence, is closely connected both with that which precedes, and that which follows it. And is not this the pattern for every Christian preacher? If any then are able to follow it without any premeditation, well: if not, let them not dare to preach without it. No rhapsody, no incoherency, whether the things spoken be true or false, comes of the Spirit of Christ.

Verse 10. For righteousness' sake - That is, because they have, or follow after, the righteousness here described. He that is truly a righteous man, he that mourns, and he that is pure in heart, yea, all that will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution, 2 Timothy 3:12. The world will always say, Away with such fellows from the earth. They are made to reprove our thoughts. They are grievous to us even to behold. Their lives are not like other men's; their ways are of another fashion.

Verse 11. Revile - When present: say all evil - When you are absent.

Verse 12. Your reward - Even over and above the happiness that naturally and directly results from holiness.

Verse 13. Ye - Not the apostles, not ministers only; but all ye who are thus holy, are the salt of the earth - Are to season others. Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34.

Verse 14. Ye are the light of the world - If ye are thus holy, you can no more be hid than the sun in the firmament: no more than a city on a mountain - Probably pointing to that on the brow of the opposite hill.

Verse 15. Nay, the very design of God in giving you this light was, that it might shine. Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16; .

Verse 16. That they may see - and glorify - That is, that seeing your good works, they may be moved to love and serve God likewise.

Verse 17. Think not - Do not imagine, fear, hope, that I am come - Like your teachers, to destroy the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy - The moral law, but to fulfil - To establish, illustrate, and explain its highest meaning, both by my life and doctrine.

Verse 18. Till all things shall be effected - Which it either requires or foretells. For the law has its effect, when the rewards are given, and the punishments annexed to it inflicted, as well as when its precepts are obeyed. Luke 16:17; .

Verse 19. One of the least - So accounted by men; and shall teach - Either by word or example; shall be the least - That is, shall have no part therein.

Verse 20. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees - Described in the sequel of this discourse.

Verse 21. Ye have heard - From the scribes reciting the law; Thou shalt do no murder - And they interpreted this, as all the other commandments, barely of the outward act. The judgement - The Jews had in every city a court of twenty-three men, who could sentence a criminal to be strangled. But the sanhedrim only (the great council which sat at Jerusalem, consisting of seventy-two men,) could sentence to the more terrible death of stoning. That was called the judgment, this the council. Exodus 20:13.

Verse 22. But I say unto you - Which of the prophets ever spake thus? Their language is, Thus saith the Lord. Who hath authority to use this language, but the one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Whosoever is angry with his brother - Some copies add, without a cause - But this is utterly foreign to the whole scope and tenor of our Lord's discourse. If he had only forbidden the being angry without a cause, there was no manner of need of that solemn declaration, I say unto you; for the scribes and Pharisees themselves said as much as this. Even they taught, men ought not to be angry without a cause. So that this righteousness does not exceed theirs. But Christ teaches, that we ought not, for any cause, to be so angry as to call any man Raca, or fool. We ought not, for any cause, to be angry at the person of the sinner, but at his sins only. Happy world, were this plain and necessary distinction thoroughly understood, remembered, practised! Raca means, a silly man, a trifler. Whosoever shall say, Thou fool - Shall revile, or seriously reproach any man. Our Lord specified three degrees of murder, each liable to a sorer punishment than the other: not indeed from men, but from God. Hell fire - In the valley of Hinnom (whence the word in the original is taken) the children were used to be burnt alive to Moloch. It was afterward made

a receptacle for the filth of the city, where continual fires were kept to consume it. And it is probable, if any criminals were burnt alive, it was in this accursed and horrible place. Therefore both as to its former and latter state, it was a fit emblem of hell. It must here signify a degree of future punishment, as much more dreadful than those incurred in the two former cases, as burning alive is more dreadful than either strangling or stoning.

Verse 23. Thy brother hath aught against thee - On any of the preceding accounts: for any unkind thought or word: any that did not spring from love.

Verse 24. Leaving thy gift, go - For neither thy gift nor thy prayer will atone for thy want of love: but this will make them both an abomination before God.

Verse 25. Agree with thine adversary - With any against whom thou hast thus offended: while thou art in the way - Instantly, on the spot; before you part. Lest the adversary deliver thee to the judge -Lest he commit his cause to God. Luke 12:58.

Verse 26. Till thou hast paid the last farthing - That is, for ever, since thou canst never do this. What has been hitherto said refers to meekness: what follows, to purity of heart.

Verse 27. Thou shalt not commit adultery - And this, as well as the sixth commandment, the scribes and Pharisees interpreted barely of the outward act. Exodus 20:14.

29, 30. If a person as dear as a right eye, or as useful as a right hand, cause thee thus to offend, though but in heart. Perhaps here may be an instance of a kind of transposition which is frequently found in the sacred writings: so that the 29th verse may refer to 27, 28; and the 30th to verse 21, 22.

Matthew 5:29,27,28,30,21,22 As if he had said, Part with any thing, however dear to you, or otherwise useful, if you cannot avoid sin while you keep it. Even cut off your right hand, if you are of so passionate a temper, that you cannot otherwise be restrained from hurting your brother. Pull out your eyes, if you can no otherwise be restrained from lusting after women. Matthew 18:8; Mark 9:43.

Verse 30. See note ... "Mt 5:29"|.

Verse 31. Let him give her a writing of divorce - Which the scribes and Pharisees allowed men to do on any trifling occasion. Deuteronomy 24:1; Matthew 19:7; Mark 10:2; Luke 16:18.

Verse 32. Causeth her to commit adultery - If she marry again.

Verse 33. Our Lord here refers to the promise made to the pure in heart of seeing God in all things, and points out a false doctrine of the scribes, which arose from their not thus seeing God. What he forbids is, the swearing at all, 1, by any creature, 2, in our ordinary conversation: both of which the scribes and Pharisees taught to be perfectly innocent. Exodus 20:7.

Verse 36. For thou canst not make one hair white or black - Whereby it appears, that this also is not thine but God's.

Verse 37. Let your conversation be yea, yea; nay, nay - That is, in your common discourse, barely affirm or deny.

Verse 38. Ye have heard - Our Lord proceeds to enforce such meekness and love on those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (which he pursues to the end of the chapter) as were utterly unknown to the scribes and Pharisees. It hath been said - In the law, as a direction to judges, in ease of violent and barbarous assaults. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth - And this has been interpreted, as encouraging bitter and rigorous revenge. Deuteronomy 19:21.

Verse 39. But I say unto you, that ye resist not the evil man - Thus; the Greek word translated resist signifies standing in battle array, striving for victory. If a man smite thee on the right cheek -Return not evil for evil: yea, turn to him the other - Rather than revenge thyself. 40, 41. Where the damage is not great, choose rather to suffer it, though possibly it may on that account be repeated, than to demand an eye for an eye, to enter into a rigorous prosecution of the offender. The meaning of the whole passage seems to be, rather than return evil for evil, when the wrong is purely personal, submit to one bodily wrong after another, give up one part of your goods after another, submit to one instance of compulsion after another. That the words are not literally to be understood, appears from the behaviour of our Lord himself, John 18:22,23.

Verse 41. See note ... "Mt 5:40"|.

Verse 42. Thus much for your behaviour toward the violent. As for those who use milder methods, Give to him that asketh thee -Give and lend to any so far, (but no further, for God never contradicts himself) as is consistent with thy engagements to thy creditors, thy family, and the household of faith. Luke 6:30.

Verse 43. Thou shalt love thy neighbour; And hate thy enemy - God spoke the former part; the scribes added the latter. Leviticus 19:18.

Verse 44. Bless them that curse you - Speak all the good you can to and of them, who speak all evil to and of you. Repay love in thought, word, and deed, to those who hate you, and show it both in word and deed. Luke 6:27,35.

Verse 45. That ye may be the children - That is, that ye may continue and appear such before men and angels. For he maketh his sun to rise - He gives them such blessings as they will receive at his hands. Spiritual blessings they will not receive.

Verse 46. The publicans - were officers of the revenue, farmers, or receivers of the public money: men employed by the Romans to gather the taxes and customs, which they exacted of the nations they had conquered. These were generally odious for their extortion and oppression, and were reckoned by the Jews as the very scum of the earth.

Verse 47. And if ye salute your friends only - Our Lord probably glances at those prejudices, which different sects had against each other, and intimates, that he would not have his followers imbibe that narrow spirit. Would to God this had been more attended to among the unhappy divisions and subdivisions, into which his Church has been crumbled! And that we might at least advance so far, as cordially to embrace our brethren in Christ, of whatever party or denomination they are!

Verse 48. Therefore ye shall be perfect; as your Father who is in heaven is perfect - So the original runs, referring to all that holiness which is described in the foregoing verses, which our Lord in the beginning of the chapter recommends as happiness, and in the close of it as perfection. And how wise and gracious is this, to sum up, and, as it were, seal all his commandments with a promise! Even the proper promise of

the Gospel! That he will put those laws in our minds, and write them in our hearts! He well knew how ready our unbelief would be to cry out, this is impossible! And therefore stakes upon it all the power, truth, and faithfulness of him to whom all things are possible.

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