

Homiletics Analysis: Matthew 5

Content & Intent

Broader Unit — The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7): Matthew 5 opens the Sermon on the Mount, the first of five major teaching discourses in Matthew’s Gospel. The broader unit (chapters 5–7) presents Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of covenant life — the new Moses on a new mountain, not abolishing the Law but fulfilling it and now applying it to the community gathered around Him. Within this broader unit, chapter 5 functions as the foundational declaration: who belongs to the kingdom, what kingdom righteousness looks like in character and conduct, and how that righteousness surpasses anything the scribes and Pharisees have managed. Chapters 6–7 build on this foundation by addressing kingdom priorities and kingdom integrity. Chapter 5 cannot be fully understood apart from this unit, but it makes its own complete and sequential argument and is treated here as the primary unit of analysis, with the Sermon on the Mount as its essential frame.

This Text — Content: Matthew 5 opens with the Beatitudes (vv. 1–12), a series of pronouncements identifying the spiritually and socially surprising people who are blessed — the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers, the persecuted. These are not entry requirements but descriptions of kingdom citizens. Verses 13–16 then declare the identity and vocation of this community: salt of the earth, light of the world. Jesus then states His relationship to the Law and Prophets (vv. 17–20): He has not come to abolish but to fulfill; not a jot or tittle passes away; and the righteousness required exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. The remainder of the chapter (vv. 21–48) is structured as six “Antitheses” — “You have heard that it was said... but I say to you” — covering murder and anger, adultery and lust, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and love of enemies. The chapter closes with the command to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48).

This Text — Intent: God is seeking through this chapter to shatter any comfortable, surface-level understanding of covenant faithfulness and replace it with a vision of kingdom righteousness that is simultaneously impossible apart from grace and absolutely non-negotiable as a description of kingdom life. The chapter confronts self-satisfied religiosity (the scribes and Pharisees model), calls the reader to genuine heart-level transformation, and grounds that transformation in the character of God Himself (“be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”). The intent is not primarily to produce guilt — though conviction is a necessary stop along the way — but to reorient the hearer toward the kind of life that flows from belonging to the kingdom of heaven. Beatitude, identity, and radical demand are delivered together as a unified word: *this is who you are, therefore this is how you live, and this is who you are becoming.*

Subject Sentence: Jesus redefines covenant faithfulness as heart-deep kingdom righteousness exceeding all human religious achievement.

Primary Claim: The King has arrived, and with Him a righteousness so thoroughgoing — reaching to anger, lust, speech, retaliation, and love of enemies — that no one can achieve it by religious effort alone; those who belong to His kingdom receive it and are being formed by it, and this transformation displays to the watching world the character of their Father in heaven.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Antitheses: Intensification or Replacement? The most significant interpretive question in Matthew 5 concerns the six Antitheses (vv. 21–48). Do they intensify the Mosaic Law, replace it, or fulfill it in some third sense? Three broad readings compete. (1) *The intensification reading* (dominant in Reformed and Lutheran exegesis) holds that Jesus is not setting aside the Mosaic commands but driving them to their root — anger is the murderous heart, lust is the adulterous heart — and thus exposing the full demand of the Law that the scribal tradition had managed to externalize. (2) *The replacement reading* (favored in some Anabaptist and Baptist traditions, and in certain Dispensational schemes) holds that Jesus is introducing genuinely new commands for a new covenant community, in contrast to the Mosaic commands. (3) *The fulfillment reading* (which is actually the best reading and encompasses (1)) understands Jesus as neither abolishing nor merely intensifying, but as the one in whom the Law finds its telos — He Himself fulfilling what the Law pointed toward, and now articulating what life in the kingdom He inaugurates actually looks like from the inside out.

The text supports the fulfillment-intensification reading strongly. The programmatic statement of v. 17 — “I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” — controls the entire Antithesis section. The word *plēroō* (fulfill) here carries the weight of Matthew’s whole fulfillment theology. The replacement reading creates an unnecessary tension with v. 17 and renders the “but I say to you” constructions as simple contrasts when the Greek supports a contrast-of-depth rather than a contrast-of-direction. The intensification reading is largely correct but can be qualified: this is not mere intensification (as if Jesus is simply raising the bar) but *incarnational fulfillment* — the Lawgiver Himself standing inside the Law and showing what it has always meant, applied now to the community gathered around Him.

The Beatitudes: Entry Requirements or Descriptions? A second interpretive question concerns the Beatitudes. Are these entrance conditions (you must be poor in spirit to enter the kingdom) or descriptions (those who are in the kingdom are characterized by this poverty of spirit)? The Wesleyan/Methodist tradition has sometimes read them as progressive stages of sanctification or even as conditions of grace. The Reformed tradition

rightly reads them as descriptions of kingdom citizens — the Beatitudes are not the gospel of the kingdom but the *character* of its citizens, announced by the King Himself. They pronounce blessing on those who already exhibit these characteristics as the fruit of belonging to the kingdom, not as prerequisites for earning it. This reading is supported by the passive divine constructions (“they shall be comforted,” “they shall inherit”) — these are divine acts, not human achievements — and by the framing of Matthew’s Gospel, in which the kingdom is always received, never achieved.

“Be Perfect as Your Heavenly Father Is Perfect” (v. 48): Moral Perfectionism or Eschatological Telos? A third issue concerns v. 48. Wesleyan/Arminian and Holiness traditions have read this verse as a mandate for entire sanctification — a second work of grace resulting in moral perfection in the present life. The Roman Catholic tradition has sometimes read it through a works-infused sanctification lens. The Reformed reading is that *teleios* here means “whole, complete, undivided, mature” — not sinless perfection in the philosophical sense but the wholeness of character that the preceding verses have described, specifically the undivided love that loves even enemies (vv. 43–47 immediately precede v. 48, making the context explicit). The Heavenly Father’s perfection in view is His non-discriminating love — “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good” (v. 45) — not His metaphysical attributes. The Reformed reading is preferred: v. 48 is the eschatological telos toward which kingdom citizens are being formed, not a present achievement to be claimed. The Wesleyan tradition’s emphasis on genuine heart transformation is worth retaining; the conclusion of perfectionism in the present is not supported by the text’s own frame.

Dispensational Reading: Dispensationalist exegesis has sometimes treated the Sermon on the Mount as intended for a future millennial kingdom ethic rather than for the present church age — on the grounds that its demands are impossible to fulfill in the current dispensation. This reading does not account for Matthew’s intent in placing this discourse first in Jesus’ public teaching, addressing His disciples (v. 1: “His disciples came to him”), nor does it account for the fact that the New Testament epistles repeatedly apply Sermon on the Mount ethics to the church (cf. Romans 12:9–21, James 4, 1 Peter 3). The Reformed reading — that the Sermon on the Mount is kingdom ethics for the community now gathered around the King — is to be preferred, while acknowledging that the fullness of its realization awaits consummation.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 18:15–19** — Moses’ prophecy of the Prophet to come who would speak God’s words with authority; Matthew 5 presents Jesus as that Prophet, but one greater than Moses — not merely delivering the Law from outside but fulfilling it from within.
- **Psalms 24:3–4** — “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.” The inward righteousness the Psalm identifies as the condition of

God's presence becomes the very character Jesus describes in the Beatitudes and Antitheses — and provides the Old Testament ground for why heart-level transformation, not external compliance, has always been God's aim.

- **Ezekiel 36:25–27** — God's promise of the new covenant: a new heart, a new spirit, the law written within. Matthew 5's demand for heart-level righteousness is the announcement that the Ezekiel promise is being fulfilled — the community Jesus is forming is the community with God's law internalized by the Spirit.
- **Jeremiah 31:31–34** — The new covenant explicitly states that the law will be written on the heart, not stone tablets. The Antitheses in Matthew 5 are not new demands but the revealed interiority of a law that was always meant to reach the heart — now articulated by the covenant Lord Himself.
- **Romans 8:3–4** — “What the law could not do... God did by sending His own Son... in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.” Paul's argument demonstrates that the righteousness Matthew 5 demands is provided in Christ and worked in His people by the Spirit — the Sermon on the Mount and Pauline soteriology are not in tension but in harmony.

Aim: To show that the righteousness Jesus demands in Matthew 5 is simultaneously beyond human achievement and inseparable from kingdom life, so that the hearer is moved from self-satisfied religion toward genuine heart-level transformation grounded in the grace of the King.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Setting: Jesus ascends the mountain, sits, His disciples come; He opens His mouth and teaches	Mountain setting echoes Sinai; seated posture = authoritative rabbinic teaching position
3	Blessed are the poor in spirit — theirs is the kingdom of heaven	Present tense: “is” — not future; poverty of spirit = awareness of spiritual bankruptcy before God
4	Blessed are those who mourn — they shall be comforted	Future divine passive — God will comfort; mourning over sin and the brokenness of the world
5	Blessed are the meek —	Echoes Psalm 37:11;

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	they shall inherit the earth	meekness ≠ weakness; strength under divine control
6	Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness — they shall be satisfied	Appetite metaphor; righteousness here likely both imputed and lived-out
7	Blessed are the merciful — they shall receive mercy	Vertical and horizontal mercy mirror each other
8	Blessed are the pure in heart — they shall see God	Purity of motive and desire, not merely external compliance; connects to v. 48
9	Blessed are the peacemakers — they shall be called sons of God	Peacemaking as family resemblance to the Father
10	Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness — theirs is the kingdom of heaven	Same possession as v. 3: the kingdom; persecution brackets the Beatitudes
11–12	Extended blessing on those persecuted for Jesus' sake; rejoice and be glad — reward is great in heaven; so were the prophets persecuted	Personal “for my sake” — connects discipleship to Jesus personally; prophetic succession
13	You are the salt of the earth; if salt loses its taste it is no longer good for anything	Identity declared, not commanded; present tense; salt = preservative and flavoring — arresting decay
14–15	You are the light of the world; a city on a hill cannot be hidden; lamp not hidden under a basket	Corporate and visible identity; light as inherently public and revealing
16	Let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father	Purpose of visible kingdom life: not self-glory but Father-glory
17	“Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to	Programmatic statement governing the entire Antithesis section; <i>plēroō</i> =

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	abolish them but to fulfill them”	fulfill/complete/bring to telos
18	Not a jot or tittle passes from the Law until all is accomplished	Highest possible affirmation of Scripture’s permanence and precision
19	Whoever relaxes the least commandment and teaches others to do so will be least; whoever does and teaches them will be called great	Kingdom grading on faithfulness to the whole Law as Jesus fulfills it
20	“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”	The hinge verse: sets up all six Antitheses; scribal righteousness = external compliance; kingdom righteousness = something more
21–22	Antithesis 1: You have heard “do not murder”; I say anger and contempt constitute the same violation	Drives the command to its root; <i>raca</i> and “fool” = contempt that destroys personhood
23–24	Reconciliation precedes worship; leave the gift at the altar	Relational integrity as prerequisite to right worship
25–26	Settle with your accuser quickly	Practical wisdom illustration for urgency of reconciliation
27–28	Antithesis 2: You have heard “do not commit adultery”; I say lustful looking is adultery of the heart	The act forbidden because the desire is the act in seed form
29–30	Radical surgery: gouge out the eye, cut off the hand	Hyperbole for absolute seriousness of dealing with sin at its source
31–32	Antithesis 3: On divorce; anyone who divorces except for sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery	Tightening of Deuteronomy 24:1 against casual divorce; protects the dignity of women
33–37	Antithesis 4: Do not swear falsely; let your yes be yes and your no be no	Oaths unnecessary if speech is always truthful; going beyond yes/no “comes from evil”

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
38–42	Antithesis 5: You have heard “an eye for an eye”; I say do not resist the evil person; turn the other cheek; give your cloak; go two miles; give and lend	Not abolishing civil justice (lex talionis was a limiting principle, not a mandate) but addressing personal retaliation; kingdom citizens absorb cost rather than escalate
43–47	Antithesis 6: You have heard “love your neighbor and hate your enemy”; I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you	“Hate your enemy” was not Mosaic law — a scribal addition; Jesus restores and radicalizes love
45	“So that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good”	God’s non-discriminating love as the ground and model for enemy-love
46–47	Tax collectors and Gentiles love those who love them — what more are you doing than others?	Unregenerate love is only reciprocal; kingdom love exceeds this
48	“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”	<i>Teleios</i> = complete, whole, undivided — the telos toward which kingdom citizens are being formed; contextually = undivided love

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	Setting: The King Sits to Teach
2	3–12	The Beatitudes: The Character of Kingdom Citizens
3	13–16	The Vocation of Kingdom Citizens: Salt and Light
4	17–20	The Hermeneutical Hinge: Fulfillment, Not Abolition
5	21–26	Antithesis 1: Anger and Murder
6	27–30	Antithesis 2: Lust and Adultery
7	31–32	Antithesis 3: Divorce
8	33–37	Antithesis 4: Oaths and Truthful Speech
9	38–42	Antithesis 5: Retaliation and Absorbing Cost

Division	Verses	Label
10	43–47	Antithesis 6: Love of Enemies
11	48	The Telos: Be Perfect as Your Father Is Perfect

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Jesus redefines covenant faithfulness as heart-deep kingdom righteousness exceeding all human religious achievement.

Primary Claim: The King has arrived, and with Him a righteousness so thoroughgoing — reaching to anger, lust, speech, retaliation, and love of enemies — that no one can achieve it by religious effort alone; those who belong to His kingdom receive it and are being formed by it, and this transformation displays to the watching world the character of their Father in heaven.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Diagnose the Scribe in Yourself The scribes and Pharisees were not hypocrites because they were trying to deceive — many of them were deeply sincere. They were hypocrites because they had constructed a version of righteousness that ended at the skin. The categories Jesus provides in this chapter should prompt every reader to ask: in what areas of my life have I defined obedience as the absence of the external act, while the internal reality is something else entirely? You have not committed adultery — but where does your eye linger? You have not murdered — but what has contempt and unresolved anger done to a relationship? The invitation is not to shame but to honest self-assessment in light of a righteous King, because what you cannot see about yourself, He already knows and is already at work on.

2. [Affections/Worship] — Let the Beatitudes Reorder What You Want The Beatitudes are disturbing to our normal desire-structure. We do not naturally want to be poor in spirit, to mourn, or to be meek. We want to be strong, satisfied, and in control. But Jesus declares that it is precisely the people who have run out of self-sufficiency, who grieve over their sin and the world's brokenness, who have submitted their strength to God — these are the ones the kingdom belongs to. Let the Beatitudes function diagnostically on your desires: do you *want* the poverty of spirit that produces dependence on God? Do you *want* the hunger for righteousness that makes everything else feel insufficient by comparison? Worship is reordered when we begin to want what the King says is worth wanting.

3. [Will/Behavior] — Pursue Reconciliation Before It Becomes a Crisis Jesus' instruction in verses 23–26 is startlingly practical: leave the gift at the altar and be reconciled to your brother first. Go quickly to the one with whom you have a dispute before the situation escalates beyond repair. There is someone in your life right now — a family

member, a colleague, a fellow church member — with whom something is unresolved. Kingdom living means not waiting for them to come to you, not waiting for the “right moment,” not managing the relationship from a comfortable distance. Go. The urgency in the text (“quickly,” “while you are going with him to court”) is not metaphorical. The King is serious about relational integrity, and the appropriate response is a specific, concrete, near-term action.

4. [Affections/Worship] — Be Astonished That You Are Called Salt and Light Before Jesus issues a single command in this chapter, He declares who His people are: salt of the earth, light of the world. These are not goals to be achieved — they are identities already given. The world’s default is decay and darkness. That means the presence of a kingdom citizen — not a perfect person, but a person remade by the grace of the King — is genuinely significant to the people around them. Sit with the weight of this: God has placed you, specifically, in a particular family, neighborhood, workplace, and church, as both a preserving and a revealing presence. The appropriate response is not pride but awe — that God uses broken, redeemed people as His primary instrument of illumination in the world.

5. [Will/Behavior] — Practice Enemy-Love as a Deliberate, Specific Act Love of enemies (vv. 43–47) is the most counterintuitive command in the chapter precisely because it has no reciprocal mechanism — enemies do not reward you for loving them. Jesus’ command to pray for those who persecute you is structurally specific: not feel warmly toward them, not think charitably about them in the abstract, but *pray for them* — which means to bring them before God with the same intentionality with which you would bring a friend. Identify, specifically, someone who has wronged you, who holds you in contempt, who would not put you on their prayer list — and pray for them this week. Not for their defeat or exposure. For their good, their flourishing, their soul. This is the shape of love that resembles the Father.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Matthew 5 presents Jesus not merely as a teacher of ethics but as the Lawgiver Himself standing inside His own law, fulfilling it from within and extending its demands to the level of heart, motive, desire, and speech. The chapter teaches that God’s righteousness has always been concerned with the whole person — not external compliance but inward transformation — and that the arrival of the King makes this claim unavoidable. The Beatitudes reveal that God blesses the spiritually bankrupt, not the morally impressive, which establishes that kingdom life begins in grace, not achievement. The Antitheses demonstrate that sin is not merely behavioral but structural — rooted in desires, affections, and attitudes that produce external acts as their fruit. And the closing command to be “perfect as your Father is perfect” anchors the whole chapter in theology proper: the standard for kingdom righteousness is not a revised human ideal but the character of God Himself.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Matthew 5 is indispensable to Reformed soteriology and sanctification theology alike. The chapter functions, in part, as a thunderbolt of law — driving the reader to the conclusion that no one achieves this righteousness by effort (which is why v. 20 functions as the gateway to grace, not a works-righteousness program). The scribal tradition failed not because it was too zealous but because it aimed at the wrong target. Reformed theology insists that the righteousness exceeding the scribes and Pharisees is precisely the righteousness *given* in Christ — imputed to the believer, who is then being transformed by the Spirit into its reality (Romans 8:3–4; 2 Corinthians 3:18). The Beatitudes are not the *ordo salutis* but a description of Spirit-wrought character in those united to Christ. The Antitheses do not establish a new works-covenant but reveal the telos of the law always latent within it — now unveiled by the one in whom the law finds its fullness. The command to love enemies, to be salt and light, and to be perfect as the Father is perfect functions in sanctification as the Spirit-empowered conformity to Christ that is the goal of all redemptive history.

Main Takeaway

The King has come, and He has come with a righteousness that will not stop at your behavior — it reaches your anger, your desire, your words, your enemies, your heart. You cannot get there by trying harder. But those who belong to Him are being formed into exactly this kind of people, by the same grace that declared them blessed when they had nothing to offer. Stop measuring your faithfulness by what you haven't done. Start asking what kind of person you are becoming — and whether that person looks like the Father.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Preaching the Beatitudes as entry requirements or a spiritual achievement ladder.** The most common misreading of the Beatitudes is treating them as conditions the seeker must meet to qualify for the kingdom, or as progressive spiritual disciplines the believer climbs in sequence. This turns grace upside down. The Beatitudes are pronouncements — the King declaring who the blessed are — not prescriptions. Preaching them as requirements collapses them into a subtle works-righteousness program and misses their radical grace-structure: the *poor in spirit* are the ones who have nothing to offer, and Jesus says the kingdom is *theirs*.
- **Moralistic application of the Antitheses — “try harder at the heart level.”** The Antitheses produce a predictable homiletical failure: the preacher rightly identifies that Jesus is addressing the heart, then simply commands the hearer to “deal with

anger,” “guard your eyes,” and “speak truthfully” — with no gospel ground. This is moralism one level deeper. The issue is not that these applications are wrong but that they are groundless without connecting them to the grace by which this kind of transformation becomes possible. The Antitheses should drive the hearer to the King who fulfills the law they cannot, before they are deployed as behavioral commands.

- **Treating the Sermon on the Mount as a dispensational irrelevance or a future kingdom ethic.** Dispensationalist preachers who defer the Sermon on the Mount to a millennial application cut the church off from one of the most significant apostolic ethical resources in the New Testament. The disciples hearing this sermon are the same disciples sent to make disciples and teach them “everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). The commanded content and the Great Commission’s content overlap precisely here.
- **Extracting the “salt and light” section (vv. 13–16) as a standalone evangelism or cultural engagement text, separated from the Beatitudes.** The salt and light declaration is grounded in the Beatitudes — it is the *poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the merciful* who are salt and light, not the culturally impressive or the publicly vocal. When vv. 13–16 are preached without the character description of vv. 3–12, “light” becomes a license for self-promotion rather than a description of Spirit-formed kingdom character on display.
- **Missing the Christological center by preaching Matthew 5 as ethics rather than as the announcement of a King.** The Sermon on the Mount is delivered by one who speaks “as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:29). The “but I say to you” constructions are not a rabbi’s interpretation — they are a Lawgiver’s self-disclosure. A sermon on Matthew 5 that does not land on the astonishing claim Jesus is making about Himself has missed the chapter’s deepest note. The ethics cannot be preached faithfully apart from the King who makes them possible and who Himself perfectly fulfills every word of them.
- **Preaching v. 48 (“be perfect”) as either an impossible counsel of despair or a present-tense perfectionist achievement.** Two opposite errors threaten this verse. On one side, the preacher sighs and says “of course no one can do this, which is why we need Jesus” — and moves on without letting the verse do its sanctifying work. On the other side, the perfectionist preacher claims present moral wholeness as an attainable state. The text warrants neither. *Teleios* here is the telos — the direction, the trajectory, the goal toward which kingdom citizens are being formed — and the immediate context (vv. 43–47) specifies what kind of perfection is in view: the undivided, non-discriminating love that mirrors the Father’s own character. Preach it as eschatological telos being worked into present life by the Spirit, not as either impossibility or achievement.