

# Introduction

If the Sermon on the Mount is to be properly understood and is to challenge people to aim for a better righteousness, which is my purpose in writing the present book, it requires clarification and careful attention especially at two points. The lead articles in Part 1 discuss these issues in some detail. First, it must be remembered by people living in a modern culture where most things are read, not heard spoken aloud, that the Sermon on the Mount was created in an oral culture where people would only hear it when it was read aloud in public worship or on some other occasion. Hearing, not seeing, was everything. Chapter 1, “Rhetoric and Composition in Matthew,” discusses the oral provenance of the Sermon, giving particular attention to the balancing of “blessings” and “woes” in Matthew’s Gospel. This Gospel is a new covenant document, about which the New Testament is otherwise almost completely silent, and Matthew in his composition is seen to have given a new twist to the Old Testament covenant document of Deuteronomy. Chapter 2, “The New Covenant in Matthew,” discusses further the new covenant in early Christianity, putting it in the context of other biblical covenants.

Second, modern interpretation of the Sermon largely takes the words of Jesus, as presented by the Gospel writer Matthew, as being

completely out of reach, making the Sermon for many a great teaching but one that cannot be taken seriously. But if one cannot live by this Sermon, then why even try? Chapter 3, “At What Elevation Is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount?” and chapter 4, “*Imitatio Dei* in the Sermon on the Mount,” seek to correct this misinterpretation. The *Imitatio Dei* concept in Judaism (given that Latin title in Christianity) helps explain Jesus’ directive in Matt. 5:48: “You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” It is somewhat of an irony that the Sermon must be brought down from unreachable heights before it can become the teaching it was meant to be, namely, one intended to raise the level of human behavior above the mediocrity attributed here to the Pharisees and the Gentiles.

Part 2, the verse-by-verse commentary on the Sermon, proceeds with these larger points as background and interprets the various teachings of the Sermon in the light of teachings in the Old Testament and in rabbinic Judaism, both of which are often insufficiently known and understood by the majority of people reading Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.