

# SALT AND LIGHT: BEING IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD

*Matthew O. Richardson*

After the Passover meal, Jesus spoke to his disciples about their pending future. He explained that the world would love them if they were “of the world” because “the world would love his own” (John 15:18). Because they followed him, he said they were “not of the world,” and thus the world would hate them (John 15:19). Jesus concluded by stating, “In the world ye shall have tribulation” (John 16:33), something they had personally experienced since following Christ some three years earlier. But this was not meant to discourage his followers, for Christ wanted them to have peace—in him. So Christ immediately encouraged them to “be of good cheer,” for he had “overcome the world” (John 16:33). This triumphant declaration adds new light to his statement, “I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father” (John 16:28). Certainly this statement prophesies that Christ would soon be killed, but it also underscores Christ’s victory over the world—he was able to overcome worldliness and would soon return to the Father.

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*Matthew O. Richardson is a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.*

Immediately following these teachings, Jesus began his great Intercessory Prayer. It was in this prayer just prior to the unparalleled events of Gethsemane that Christ, as Elder Russell M. Nelson described, “prayerfully interceded with His Father for the benefit of His disciples.”<sup>1</sup> As Christ expressed his longing for his disciples to have joy and to be with him and the Father, one might assume that Jesus would ask the Father to intercede on behalf of the disciples and make them conquerors over the world by removing them from the world. Jesus did not, however, and asked the Father to keep them in the world but help them to overcome it. This is why Christ petitioned God to intercede by keeping “them from *the evil*” (John 17:15; emphasis added). Notice this verse speaks of “*the evil*” rather than evil in general. Christ’s teachings were focused on overcoming the world just as he overcame it. With this in mind, “the evil” referred to here is the world, or worldliness. Because of the prevailing pull of the world on his disciples and their need to overcome it, Christ petitioned for divine intercession to keep his disciples “not of the world” by being sanctified through the word of God, which is truth (see John 17:16–17).

When considering the word of God and its sanctifying effect on discipleship, it is important to consider Christ’s sermon given in Galilee during his early mortal ministry. This sermon, known as the Sermon on the Mount, is thought by some to be the “authoritative declaration of the characteristics” of Christ’s disciples.<sup>2</sup> Thus the Sermon on the Mount seems to be a disciple’s manual to be in the world and yet not worldly. New Testament editor John Stott felt the sermon “is the most complete delineation anywhere in the New Testament of the Christian counter-culture”<sup>3</sup>—in other words, a new culture countering the prevailing views of the time. This chapter considers how the Sermon on the Mount inspires and directs disciples in the world to overcome worldliness.

### THE MOUNTAIN SETTING

Before considering the content of the sermon, it is important to consider its mountain setting. Dennis Duling sees the setting of the Sermon as a “parallel to Moses receiving the Torah on a mountain.”<sup>4</sup> Matthew’s statement that Jesus “went up into a mountain” (Matthew 5:1) does conjure a parallel to Moses going up to Sinai.

*Enlightenment and illumination.* Mountains have long been considered “a place of epiphany and supernatural encounter.”<sup>5</sup> While some see a mountain as an escape from the world they already know, others see it as a portal to a new and better world. The mountain has been a symbol of illumination, and because of this, people often gravitate to places they perceive as otherworldly. As such, going to a mountain is a distinct effort to leave worldly knowledge, understanding, and wisdom behind to find knowledge, understanding, and wisdom that is not of the world.

With this symbolism in mind, consider the significance of going up to the mountain. Before the actual teaching even began, the disciples may have anticipated that this sermon would be elevated above other sermons simply because of the setting. Their deep heritage of connecting mountains with divine illumination may have escalated the disciples’ psychological, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual expectations. Perhaps they too drew a comparison between their unfolding experience and that of Moses. Moses had retreated to the mountain to receive higher thought and greater illumination just as they were doing. The image of Jesus going up to deliver the sermon prompted Bart Ehrman to say, “If the Law of Moses was meant to provide guidance for Jews as the children of Israel, the teachings of Jesus are meant to provide guidance for his followers as children of the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>6</sup>

*To be with God.* Mountains are often viewed as “the point where the earth touches the divine sphere.”<sup>7</sup> In this light, going to a mountain could be more than just finding clarity or illumination. From this perspective, going to the mountain is an attempt to leave the world behind for the purpose of approaching God. Thus, more than just searching for illumination, one is searching for God’s guidance—to be with him and illuminated by him. As one leaves the world and ascends the mountain, the goal is eventually to cross over into the divine sphere or dwelling place of God. Moses went to the mountain to be with Jehovah and to receive the first law or covenant. Upon receiving the law, Moses brought it to the people, becoming the great lawgiver (see Exodus 19–21). Of course, it is easy to draw similarities between this experience and the experience of Christ on the mount, but there are important differences. While Jesus Christ followed a similar revelatory pattern of going to the mountain, his purposes were different. Rather than going to the mountain to meet the

Father, receive the new law, and then return to the people to give them the law as Moses did, Jesus desired the people to climb the mountain to be with him (even Jehovah), receive the law from him, and return to the world and live in a way that is not of the world.

Perhaps the reason Jesus left the multitudes to go into the mountain (see Matthew 5:1) was not merely to “withdraw from the great crowds,”<sup>8</sup> as Stott suggests, but rather to reinforce the imagery that disciples would have to leave their world behind and escape into a new world. This imagery actually illustrates another important and related part of discipleship. According to Vaught, Jesus gives a “clear indication . . . of the kind of response that [He] demands from His followers.” Vaught concludes that Christ expects his disciples to “make an initial commitment.”<sup>9</sup> As disciples choose to leave the world behind and come unto Christ, they find strength, renewal, and happiness unlike anything the world can offer. Jesus built upon this concept during his Judean ministry when he invited, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

After considering the imagery of Moses going to the mountain with that of the Sermon on the Mount, Barr writes, “Now, like Israel of old, we come to the mountain of revelation, where God is present and the Law . . . is given.”<sup>10</sup>

#### THE BEATITUDES (MATTHEW 5:1–12)

Jesus begins the sermon with nine simple statements known as the Beatitudes, from the Latin *beatitudo*, meaning “blessed.”<sup>11</sup> “Blessed,” from the Greek *makarios*, is typically translated “happy.” There are other ways “blessed” has been translated. For example, Guelich presents translations such as “fortunate” and even “congratulations” as viable possibilities.<sup>12</sup> To a person both in the world and immersed in worldliness, the Beatitudes make little sense. After all, the sermon praises those who are poor in spirit, mourn, are meek, or are persecuted for doing good. To the worldly, such characteristics are pitiable—not fortunate—and would merit condolences rather than congratulations. To the world, these scriptures are filled with bitter irony.

For disciples, on the other hand, *blessedness* is a state very distinct from anything the world might offer. In fact, the Greek *makarios* is also

translated as “privileged recipient of divine favor.”<sup>13</sup> As Vaught explains, blessedness “points beyond human happiness to a divine realm and to the kind of happiness appropriate to it.”<sup>14</sup> President Harold B. Lee defined blessedness as a state that is “higher than happiness.”<sup>15</sup> This type of happiness is disconnected from the transitory and temporary world and as such is independent from the influence of the world. Dummelow, in clarifying this difference, wrote, “Happiness comes from without, and is dependent on circumstances; blessedness is an inward fountain of joy in the soul itself, which no outward circumstances can seriously affect.”<sup>16</sup>

The Beatitudes teach that these uncommon blessings are intended only for the uncommon person whose character centers not on traits valued by the world but traits favored by God. Such traits may appear completely foreign to some of the world’s more “natural” citizens and are not readily embraced—at least not without prodding or compulsion. King Benjamin taught that the natural man will always be an enemy of God unless he “putteth off that natural man” (Mosiah 3:19). Abinadi later warned that he who refused to put off his natural state and persisted “in his own carnal nature” would remain in that natural or fallen state (Mosiah 16:5). When disciples abandon the characteristics espoused by the world and yield “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit” (Mosiah 3:19), they experience uncommon change and uncommon joy even though they are still in the world.

#### SALT AND LIGHT (MATTHEW 13–16)

Following the Beatitudes, Jesus addresses the need to be in the world as well as overcome the world through two analogies. “Ye are the salt of the earth,” Christ states metaphorically and then adds a second comparison, “Ye are the light of the world” (see Matthew 5:13–14).<sup>17</sup> Some may think Christ is using symbols to describe what type of people his disciples are. But when considering Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of these verses, we find a different tone and meaning emerging. Rather than merely stating that his disciples were “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world,” the inspired translation reveals that Christ actually said, “I give unto you to be the salt of the earth” (JST, Matthew 5:13) and “I give unto you to be the light of the world” (JST, Matthew 5:14). These small variations actually bring about important differences. Rather than telling

the disciples what they already are, for example, Jesus Christ is actually challenging his disciples to become something new. They are *called to be* the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

For many, the whole experience of living in a sinful world may seem counterproductive to the Lord's purposes. But it is possible to be in the world while not of the world. "In spite of all the wickedness in the world, and in spite of all the opposition to good that we find on every hand," Elder M. Russell Ballard counseled, "we should *not* try to take ourselves or our children *out* of the world." Elder Ballard then concludes, "The Lord does not need a society that hides and isolates itself from the world. Rather, he needs stalwart individuals and families who live exemplary lives *in* the world and demonstrate that joy and fulfillment that come not of the world but through the spirit and doctrine of Jesus Christ."<sup>18</sup>

*The salt of the earth.* When Jesus Christ admonished the disciples to be the salt of the earth, he underscored the importance of *being in the world* in two primary ways. First, he clarified that the Saints' participation with the world was not optional and, second, he demonstrated how discipleship benefits the world. By modern standards, salt sustains both our nutritional and physiological processes. Salt is not optional to sustaining our health and strength. Thus, just as mankind cannot endure without salt, the world would not endure without the disciples of Jesus Christ. In addition to being considered essential to the nutritional and physiological aspects of sustaining life, salt also benefited the ancient world in other ways, both literally and symbolically. New Testament scholar R. T. France points out that "the two most significant uses of salt in the ancient world were for flavoring and for the preservation of food."<sup>19</sup> Since salt is the "flavoring of the earth" and the "preservation of the world," then Christ's disciples—metaphorically speaking—need to flavor the earth and preserve the world as well.

*Salt as flavoring.* Rather than replace the flavor of food, salt enhances the flavor. When added properly, salt makes food taste better. If it did not make the food different, it would be good for nothing. In the same manner, if disciples offer the same flavor provided by the world, they are not enhancing the world. France points out that "salt has its effect only because, and for as long as, it has a distinctive saltiness."<sup>20</sup> In other words, "to perform our covenant duty as the salt of the earth, the disciples must,"

as Elder Dallin H. Oaks teaches, “be different from those around us.”<sup>21</sup> Both Oaks and France affirm that disciples’ ability to flavor the world depends on whether their lives are distinctly different from those of the world. Without intentional effort, however, disciples in the world struggle with being not of the world. “We are in the world, and I fear some of us are getting too much like the world,” President Ezra Taft Benson worried. “Rather than continue a peculiar people, some are priding themselves on how much they are like everybody else. . . . As Latter-day Saints, we too have been called out of the world.”<sup>22</sup> All disciples of Christ have been likewise called to be different from the world so they give the world a distinctive flavor.

*Salt as a preservative.* Historically, salt has been used as a preservative because its natural antibacterial qualities prolong the decay of food. According to the metaphor, disciples of Christ likewise help preserve the earth. Consider, for example, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. When Abraham was told of the pending destruction, he inquired, “Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?” (Genesis 18:23). He then asked Jehovah if fifty righteous people could be found within the city, perhaps the city could be spared for their sakes. The Lord responded he would “spare *all the place* for their sakes” so long as fifty righteous individuals could be found (see Genesis 18:26; emphasis added). Unsure if fifty righteous individuals were indeed within the city limits, Abraham tested the lowest possible limit for Jehovah’s mercy and eventually arrived at the number ten (see Genesis 18:32). President Gordon B. Hinckley neatly explained the point of this illustration: “I think we stand in this dispensation like the righteous in the days of the cities of the plains when perhaps the Lord might spare the wicked, some of them, because of the righteous. That places upon us a great and significant burden. That’s why we are here, to make of ourselves more effective instruments, truer warriors under the direction of the Almighty to save His sons and daughters from those things which will destroy them in time and for eternity unless they turn their lives around.”<sup>23</sup>

While the righteous can preserve the world from immediate destruction, the real purpose of such preservation is not merely to prolong the inevitable. The real value to the world comes only if prolonging the Lord’s judgment permits opportunity for the world to repent and enter into the

covenant of the Lord. In 1833, as the Saints were struggling with building up Zion in Missouri, the Lord reminded Joseph Smith, “When men are called unto mine everlasting gospel, and covenant with an everlasting covenant, they are accounted as the salt of the earth and the savor of men” (D&C 101:39). Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught that those who entered into the covenant have “power . . . to be the seasoning, savoring, preserving influence in the world, the influence which would bring peace and blessings to all others.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, while covenant disciples may prolong the destruction of the wicked, their influence must also bring peace and blessing to all others. This influence is most effective as covenant members keep Christ’s counsel to “strengthen [their] brethren in all [their] conversation, in all [their] prayers, in all [their] exhortations, and in all [their] doings” (D&C 108:8).

*Salt and the covenant.* Anciently, the covenants between God and his disciples were called “covenant[s] of salt” (Numbers 18:19). Jehovah instructed Israel that “with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt” (Leviticus 2:13). The reason for using salt with sacrifices was not to flavor the meat nor to preserve it. When Jehovah taught Moses the method of performing the sacrificial rites, he said the sacrifice should be an offering “of a sweet savour unto the Lord” (Leviticus 1:17). When dealing with sacrifice, the word “savour” is typically not used to connote the sense of taste or flavor. For example, after Noah offered a burnt offering following the Flood, “the Lord *smelled* a sweet savour” (Genesis 8:21; emphasis added). The smell, or “sweet savour,” came from liberally applying salt to the offering.<sup>25</sup>

Today, disciples still enter into covenants, but rather than performing burnt offerings of flesh as tokens of the covenant, they offer a sacrifice of a broken heart, contrite spirit, and acts of righteousness. All sacrifices of the covenant should be presented with a sweet savour unto the Lord, or, in other words, with purity and humility, which are pleasing to the Lord.

This symbolism is seen in Christ’s sermon as he warns his disciples to take heed in observing their covenants. As individuals turn acts of righteousness into nothing more than means for receiving worldly praise and adulation, the sweet savor of sacrifice is lost, and the stench of the world sets in. With this in mind, Christ offers several examples of providing a savory sacrifice. He asks us to give our offerings in secret (see Matthew



6:1–3). Rather than commune with God as a public display of piety, we are to pray humbly in accordance with God’s will (see Matthew 6:5–15). Learning to pray in this manner carries the sweet smell of true discipleship. Finally, Jesus points out the rancor of hypocrisy when people present a “sad countenance,” “disfigure their faces,” or otherwise don a look of sacrifice when fasting (see Matthew 6:16). To be the savor of men requires disciples not only to provide a good example but to do it in a way that is palatable and savory to the Lord.

#### LIGHT OF THE WORLD

When John the Baptist preached in Jordan, he outlined the pending mission of the Savior. Among other things, he said that Christ would “be a light unto all who sit in darkness, unto the uttermost parts of the earth” (JST, Luke 3:7; Bible appendix). Following the Sermon on the Mount, during the second year of his ministry, Jesus taught unequivocally, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). In connection with these verses, some disciples feel uncomfortable considering themselves the light of the world because their light pales in comparison to the Savior’s light.

When thinking of Christ’s invitation, it is helpful to consider the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 5:14: “I *give unto you* to be the light of the world.” In addition to extending a call for his disciples to be something new as we have already discussed, Christ is also making it possible for his disciples to take on his light and illuminate the way for those sitting in darkness, just as he did.

Upon entering sacred covenants including baptism, the Saints covenant to “stand as a witness of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in” (Mosiah 18:9). As witnesses of Christ, Jesus said the Saints “were set to be a light unto the world, and to be the *saviors* of men” (D&C 103:9; emphasis added). Elder Ballard helps us understand how disciples act as saviors of men. He said, “We can live in the world, brothers and sisters, without letting the world into us. We have the gospel message that can carry men and women buoyantly through the ‘mist of darkness’ to the source of all light.”<sup>26</sup>

Christ admonishes his disciples to “let your lights so shine before this world, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is

in heaven” (JST, Matthew 5:16).<sup>27</sup> Hans Dieter Betz notes that “the good deeds are now identified as the shining of the light; they are not the light itself, but only what the light does and reflects.” He then explains that “seeing the good deeds done by the insiders, the outsiders will be provoked to the praising of God.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the light of the disciples merely reflects the Savior’s light. If disciples replace Christ’s light with any other light—especially their own—they indulge in what Nephi called “priestcraft.” “Priestcrafts are that men set *themselves up for a light unto the world*,” Nephi explained, “that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion” (2 Nephi 26:29; emphasis added). Christ actually warned of a form of priestcraft in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matthew 7:15). False prophets may look like Christ’s prophets and even embrace the title, but they are wolves in disguise and have an agenda other than the Savior’s. In short, they desire to replace Christ with some other message, which is a form of priestcraft.

How can we safeguard ourselves against such deception? Christ counseled in his sermon, “Ye shall know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16). Some may argue that their fruits appear good, obscuring their true identity, but Jesus actually provided a way to accurately discern the nature of their fruits. The ultimate purpose for being a light—the ultimate fruit—is so others will “glorify your Father who is in heaven” (JST, Matthew 5:16). This is in stark contrast to those seeking to “get gain and praise of the world” (2 Nephi 26:29) or to replace Christ with another philosophy, theology, or practice.

For disciples to reflect the Savior’s light is far from blasphemy. “If we are to hold up this Church as an ensign to the nations and a light to the world,” President Hinckley taught, “we must take on more of the luster of the life of Christ individually and in our own personal circumstances.”<sup>29</sup> This is done as we emulate Jesus Christ and his mission. Part of Christ’s illuminating mission was to “be a light unto all who sit in darkness, unto the uttermost parts of the earth” (JST, Luke 3:5). Disciples are to do as Christ did and not put their light “under a bushel” but give “light unto all that are in the house” (Matthew 5:15). Only in this manner can their light so shine before the world (see Matthew 5:16).

Following the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the responsibility of taking the light to “the uttermost parts of the earth” fell upon his disciples. It seems clear, however, that Christ began preparing the disciples for that mission during the Sermon on the Mount. Later in the sermon, for example, Christ tells his disciples, “Go ye into the world” and, despite persecution and hatred, “go forth from house to house, teaching the people; and I will go before you” (JST, Matthew 6:25–26; Bible appendix). Near the conclusion of the sermon, Christ again admonishes the disciples, “Go ye into all the world, saying unto all, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come nigh unto you” (JST, Matthew 7:9; Bible appendix).

#### SAVOR AND SAVIOR OF MEN

Christ commanded his disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world to underscore the necessity for them to be in the world. If they fail to perform their labor, they lose their savor and fail to be saviors of men. At face value, the imagery of salt losing its savor does not make sense. Betz compares the concept of salt losing its saltiness to “water losing its wetness, a real absurdity.”<sup>30</sup> But by looking beyond face value of the symbol, however, we find there is more to this analogy in terms of avoiding the pull of the world.

Some postulate that salt will lose its savor when exposed to harsh elements, especially over a long period of time. But pure salt (sodium chloride) is actually a very stable compound, making it resilient to change. How, then, might salt lose its saltiness? Elder Carlos E. Asay provided this insight: “A world-renowned chemist told me that salt will not lose its savor with age. Savor is lost through mixture and contamination.”<sup>31</sup> For Saints living in the world, their discipleship is endangered if they pollute their status by mixing worldliness with their discipleship. This was evident when the Savior explained why the Saints were having so many problems with establishing Zion in Missouri: “Behold, I say unto you, there were jarrings, and contentions, and envyings, and covetous desires among them; therefore by these things they *polluted* their inheritances” (D&C 101:6; emphasis added). Elder Ballard said, “Members of the Church need to influence more than we are influenced.”<sup>32</sup> President Spencer W. Kimball worried that “the encroachment of the world into

our lives is threatening! How hard it seems for many of us to live *in* the world and yet not *of* the world.”<sup>33</sup> To this challenge, Elder Asay observed, “We must fight daily to retain our savor, our purity. We must press forward, clinging to our standards of holiness, remembering all the while that we are called to be the savor of men.”<sup>34</sup> Fortunately, almost every aspect of the Sermon on the Mount helps us differentiate between the Lord’s standards and those of the world. The sermon truly helps the disciples of Christ become the pure salt of the earth—the savor of men, and the light of the world, even the saviors of men.

#### EXCEEDING THE STANDARD OF THE RELIGIOUS WORLD (MATTHEW 5:17–47)

The next section of the sermon focuses on the degree of righteousness required to enter into the kingdom of heaven (see Matthew 5:20). This section compares and contrasts the standards of righteousness as outlined by different laws. When Moses delivered the first law to the covenant people, it stretched them both spiritually and temporally. It was clear that the law of Moses presented standards and expectations that exceeded the common standards of the world. The moral law presented in the Decalogue, for example, outlined the proper worship of the one true God and proscribed any type of idolatry. It prohibited murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, and coveting. It required honoring parents and revering God through efforts of worship and boycotting worldly pleasures and duties on God’s consecrated day. This fundamental moral law still challenges those in and of the world.

Just as the law of Moses was a higher law than the law of natural man, the Sermon on the Mount presented new standards that required additional faith and discipline, which yielded deeper righteousness and happiness. Christ declared, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets” (Matthew 5:17). He had no intention of destroying the law of Moses, for it was a necessary step toward the higher law about to be instituted. Another way to see the first law was how the Apostle Paul described it as a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ (see Galatians 3:24–25). With this in mind, we better understand Christ’s next statement, “one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Matthew 5:18). According to Stephen E. Robinson, this meant

“that the old rules were no longer adequate and that those who wished to enter the kingdom of heaven must subscribe to a new standard of righteousness.”<sup>35</sup> Christ taught that the new standard must exceed that of the current model when he stated, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom” (Matthew 5:20).

Christ desired all people to first excel beyond the standard practices of the world by adhering to the basic laws presented to Moses. He then extended the expectation for his disciples to move beyond the religious status quo of the day, propelling them toward perfection. In this sense, the Savior emphasizes overcoming the world.

There was no need to compare the worldly standards with the expectations of the first law received by Moses during the Sermon on the Mount. This was the responsibility of the prophets from Moses leading up to Christ. But now a new law and covenant was instituted, so it makes sense that a comparison between the first law of Moses and the law of Christ would be employed. In the antitheses, or contrary statements, Jesus presents six Jewish laws and then sets a higher interpretation or standard for each.<sup>36</sup> Higher standards of discipleship included controlling one’s anger rather than killing (see Matthew 5:21–22) and accommodating reconciliation rather than strict compensation (see Matthew 5:23–26). Jesus raised the moral law from controlling immoral practices alone to controlling immoral thoughts (see Matt 5:27–28). In addition to these changes, Jesus also stressed that disciples should go beyond the Mosaic code’s comprehensive fairness of requiring “an eye for an eye” but should first seek to forgive and love our enemies (see Matthew 5:38–47).

#### SEEKING PERFECTION (MATTHEW 5:48)

The very essence of the Sermon on the Mount comes after explaining the new standards that exceeded the law of Moses. Here Christ declares, “Ye are therefore commanded to be perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (JST, Matthew 5:48; footnote). It is clear that “mere conformity to popular morality and convention does not suffice,”<sup>37</sup> and that Jesus has divine designs of grandeur for his disciples. If there was ever a call to forsake this world and all its trappings, this is it.

To fully understand the Lord's command for perfection, we must forsake the world, or at least the world's understanding of perfection. The common view of being perfect is to be without blemish, error, or flaw. But the word translated as "perfect" in the sermon focuses on the end result. "Perfect," as used in Matthew 5:48 is translated from the Greek *telios*, meaning "end" or "distant." Elder Russell M. Nelson points out that "the infinitive form of the verb is *teleiono*, which means 'to reach a distant end, to be fully developed, to consummate, or to finish.'"<sup>38</sup> In fact, becoming like God is the long-term goal of our development. Elder Nelson underscored the concept that perfection is a long process when he exclaimed, "perfection is pending." Because of this, "we need not be dismayed if our earnest efforts toward perfection now seem so arduous and endless."<sup>39</sup>

With the goal of perfection in place, Christ teaches the disciples about the heart. While giving, praying, and fasting may help us become more like God, such acts of righteousness must be done for righteousness' sake. If the world's approval is the prime motivation for any act—even acts of righteousness—then personal development is diminished, which in turn stalls perfection. Thus Christ instructs, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19–20). The essence of all of these teachings comes in the next verse, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21). The Bible portrays the heart as the center of human character. The question therefore, is whether our hearts align with the quest for eternal perfection or with the trappings of the world. Jesus taught that a divided heart yields distortion (darkness), which prohibits our ability to see with clarity (see Matthew 6:22–23).

Christ makes it clear that one cannot have the best of both worlds, for those worlds will compete for our attention and devotion. "No man can serve two masters," Christ warned, "for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other." Jesus then concluded, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). "Mammon" refers to wealth, property, or materialism. Betz points out that "the relentless pursuit of money and possessions is tantamount to the worship of a pseudo-deity." He then explains, "To many of those who are in the service of this pseudo-deity, the worship of the true God may appear to be compatible. Things could be neatly arranged: serving

materialistic goals in the secular world and serving God in the religious world. Such a combination, popular as it may be, however, renders the service of the true God impossible.<sup>340</sup> In fact, the worldview of materialism enslaves rather than liberates. The disciples of Christ cannot adopt the world, for as they do, they forfeit their quest to become like him. Because of this, Christ admonishes his disciples, “Wherefore, seek not the things of this world but seek ye first to build up the kingdom of God, and to establish his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (JST, Matthew 6:33; footnote). The Prophet Joseph Smith received similar counsel when the Lord admonished, “Lay aside the things of the world, and seek ye things of a better” (D&C 25:10).

#### BUILDING UPON THE ROCK (MATTHEW 7:24–29)

Jesus knew the importance of his disciples being in the world even though it posed significant challenges. “Part of mortality’s great test,” Elder Robert D. Hales observed, “is to be in the world without becoming like the world.”<sup>341</sup> President Joseph Fielding Smith explained, “We are living in an evil and wicked world. But while we are in the world, we are not of the world. We are expected to overcome the world and to live as becometh saints.”<sup>342</sup> Almost everything about the Sermon on the Mount—from the symbolism of its setting to its principles, practices, and metaphors—teaches the importance of being in the world while rejecting worldliness.

At the conclusion of his sermon, Jesus said, “Therefore, whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken unto a wise man, who built his house upon a rock” (Matthew 7:24). Jesus promised that when such a house was tested, it would not fall. In contrast, Jesus said that any hearing his teachings who did not implement them was like “a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand,” which would fall under adverse conditions (see Matthew 7:26–27). Comparing the wise man with the foolish man is a fitting conclusion to Christ’s sermon. After all, the sermon compared the motivations, practices, and dispositions of the disciples of Christ and the disciples of the world, who are built on shifting sand.



## CONCLUSION

As evidenced by the Sermon on the Mount, Christ understood long before offering the great Intercessory Prayer that his disciples must be in the world but “not of the world, even as [he was] not of the world” (John 17:16). Thus Christ prayed for intercession that God would “keep them from the evil” and “sanctify them” (John 17:15, 17). Under these circumstances, the Sermon on the Mount serves as “a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psalm 119:105). This light illuminates the way for every disciple seeking to avoid being overcome by the world. According to President Harold B. Lee, “Happy is that one whose feet are shod with the preparation of these teachings” (the Sermon on the Mount), for they are “a veritable blueprint for [our] course through life.”<sup>43</sup>

## NOTES

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Lessons from the Lord’s Prayers,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 47.
2. Warren Carter, *What Are They Saying About Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 80; see also Terence Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology*, JSNTSS 8 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1885), 105–21.
3. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5–7) (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 19.
4. Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: History, Literature, and Social Context*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 346.
5. Charles Edwin Carlston, “Transfiguration and Resurrection,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80, no. 3 (September 1961): 237.
6. Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93.
7. Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 7–8.
8. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 20.
9. Carl G. Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Theological Investigation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2001), 5.
10. Barr, *New Testament Story*, 308.
11. While eight traits are outlined in Matthew 5:1–12, the Joseph Smith Translation adds one additional state of blessedness in Matthew 5:2: “Blessed are they who shall believe on me; and again, more blessed are they who shall believe on your words when ye shall testify that ye have seen me and that I am. Yea, blessed are they who shall believe on your words and come down into the depth of humility and be baptized in my name; for they shall be visited with fire and the Holy Ghost, and shall receive a remission of their sins” (Thomas A. Wayment, ed. *The Joseph*



*Smith Translation of the New Testament: A Side-by-Side Comparison* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005], 11).

12. Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 67.

13. Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 486.

14. Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 12.

15. Harold B. Lee, *Decisions for Successful Living* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 56.

16. J. R. Dummelow, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 639.

17. Wayment, *Complete Joseph Smith Translation*, 12.

18. M. Russell Ballard, "The Effects of Television," *Ensign*, May 1989, 80.

19. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 174; see also W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *International Critical Commentary: Matthew 1-7* (London: T&T Clark, 1988), 472-73.

20. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 171.

21. Dallin H. Oaks, "Repentance and Change," *Ensign*, November 2003, 39.

22. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, October 1964, 56.

23. Gordon B. Hinckley, Eugene, Oregon, regional conference, priesthood leadership meeting, September 14, 1996, in "Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley," *Ensign*, September 1997, 73.

24. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 668.

25. LeGrand L. Baker, "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, April 1999, 53.

26. M. Russell Ballard, "The Effects of Television," *Ensign*, May 1989, 80.

27. Wayment, *Complete Joseph Smith Translation*, 12-13.

28. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain* (Minneapolis: Ausberg Fortress, 1995), 163.

29. Gordon B. Hinckley, "An Ensign to the Nations, a Light to the World," *Ensign*, November 2003, 84.

30. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 163.

31. Carlos E. Asay, "Salt of the Earth: Savor of Men and Saviors of Men," *Ensign*, May 1980, 42.

32. Ballard, "The Effects of Television," 80.

33. Spencer W. Kimball, "Guidelines to Carry Forth the Work of God in Cleanliness," *Ensign*, May 1974, 5.

34. Asay, "Salt of the Earth," 43.

35. Stephen E. Robinson, "The Law after Christ," *Ensign*, September 1983, 70.

36. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 94.

37. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 321.

38. Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," *Ensign*, November 1995, 86.

39. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," 88.

40. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 458.

41. Robert D. Hales, "Christian Courage: The Price of Discipleship," *Ensign*, November 2008, 74.

42. Joseph Fielding Smith, "President Joseph Fielding Smith Speaks to 14,000 Youth at Long Beach, California," *New Era*, July 1971, 10.

43. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 334.