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The Sermon at the Temple

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Chapter 74

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3 Nephi 11:1 "There were a great multitude gathered together, of the people of Nephi, round about the temple which was in the land Bountiful."

No sermon is more famous than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. These unforgettably simple words are prime movers of the Christian world. Yet no sermon is more challenging to the scholars, for "New Testament scholarship up to the present has offered no satisfactory explanation of this vitally important text."¹The Book of Mormon here makes a unique and marvelous contribution.

One of the main problems facing the scholars is their lack of context in which to view the Sermon on the Mount. To whom was Jesus speaking? How did he intend his words to be understood—as ultimate ideals or as practical ethics? Hundreds of interpretive essays have been written, failing to settle such issues. Third Nephi 11-18, however, offers clues to connect the Sermon on the Mount with the context of making covenants at the temple.

The first clue is that Jesus spoke to the Nephites at their temple (see 3 Nephi 11:1). For this reason, this speech may well be termed the Sermon at the Temple. Indeed, the term "sermon *on the mount*" recalls the fact that the temple in Israel was equated with "the mountain of the Lord" (see Isaiah 2:3).

Second, the Sermon at the Temple was delivered to the Nephites in a covenant-making context. Priesthood ordinations and baptismal instructions came at the beginning of the discourse (see 3 Nephi 11:18-28); the administration of the sacrament came at the end (see, e.g., 18:1-11); and the theme of covenant was strong throughout (see, e.g. 16:11). According to this interpretation, the Lord's promises ("they shall be filled," "they shall see God," etc.) and the stated obligations ("deny yourself," "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven," etc.) can be understood covenantally.

Third, Jesus gave the stipulations found in the Sermon at the Temple by way of commandment. He called his words in the Sermon at the Temple "commandments"

(12:20), and he invited the people to indicate, by partaking of the sacrament, their willingness to keep these very commandments that he had given them (see 18:10).

Fourth, the stated purpose of the Sermon at the Temple is to show the disciple how to be exalted at the final judgment. Jesus said, "Whoso remembereth these sayings of mine and doeth them, him will I raise up at the last day" (15:1). The Sermon contains, therefore, not just broad moral platitudes, but a concise presentation of conditions that must be satisfied in order to be admitted into God's presence (see 14:21-23).

Looking at the Sermon at the Temple in a covenant-making context dramatically enhances its meaning. For example, the prerequisite that no person should come unto Christ having any ill feelings toward a brother (see 12:23-24) then has new meaning. The instruction that people should swear their oaths simply by saying "yes" or "no" (12:37) makes eminent sense as covenantal promises are being made. The reciting of a group prayer ("when ye pray" in 13:7-9) appears to call for a collective petition to the Lord. And the obligation of secrecy, that one "give not that which is holy unto the dogs," with its accompanying threat that violators will be trampled and torn (14:6), fits a covenant-making context exactly, even though it has been one of the most puzzling parts of the Sermon on the Mount for many scholars.

Furthermore, the laws and commandments required here by Jesus could hardly be a more succinct preparation for the making of temple covenants. He gave the Nephites laws regarding obedience and sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit (see 12:19), evil or angry speaking of a brother (see 12:22), chastity and strict attitudes toward divorce (see 12:28), love (see 12:39-45), giving to the poor, and serving God, not Mammon (see 13:3, 19-24).

Christ figured centrally in the Nephites' covenantal experience at the temple. They touched the marks of the wounds on his body with their hands (see 11:14). They solemnly promised to remember his body, which he had shown them (see 18:7). Ultimately they were promised that if they would make a threefold petition (see 14:7), they would have a way opened unto them (see 14:7, 14), and there they would be recognized by the Lord and allowed to enter (see 14:21-23).

Interestingly, a few New Testament scholars have begun hinting that the Sermon on the Mount had cultic or ritual significance in the earliest Christian community. Betz, for example, sees the Sermon on the Mount as revealing the principles that "will be applied at the last judgment,"² and thinks that the Sermon on the Mount reminded the earliest Church members of "the most important things the initiate comes to 'know' *through initiation*," containing things that "originally belonged in the context of *liturgical initiation*."³ Indeed, the word "perfect" (*teleios*, Matthew 5:48) has long been associated with becoming initiated into the great religious mysteries.⁴

Obviously, we have only begun to scratch the surface of the Sermon at the Temple. It is a remarkable text, wonderfully suited to the Nephites. It is a rich text, capable of multiple meanings at whatever level the hearer is ready to receive. More than we may have ever imagined, the Sermon at the Temple may prove instrumental in showing us how the Book of Mormon indeed contains the fulness of the gospel (see D&C 20:9) and restores, among other things, the plain and precious covenants (see 1 Nephi 13:26) that were lost as the gospel went forth into Gentile Christianity.

Based on research by John W. Welch, March 1988. For extensive information on this interpretation of Jesus' sermon, see the book-length study on this topic by John W. Welch, The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990).

Footnotes

1. Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. L. L. Welborn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), ix.
2. *Ibid.*, 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 28; italics added.
4. Henricus Stephanus, *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* (Graz: Akademische Druck-und Verlagsanstalt, 1954), 8:1961 and 8:1974.