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*The Sermon on the Mount and the
Puritan Piety of William Perkins*

J. Stephen Yuille



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Living Blessedly Forever

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For Emma

Introduction

I expect the title for this book, *Living Blessedly Forever: The Sermon on the Mount and the Puritan Piety of William Perkins*, will raise a number of questions.

First, why study Puritan piety? In the opinion of some, we have come such a long way since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What could the Puritans possibly teach us? According to J. I. Packer, “The answer, in one word, is maturity. Maturity is a compound of wisdom, goodwill, resilience, and creativity. The Puritans exemplified maturity; we don’t. We are spiritual dwarfs.... The Puritans, by contrast, as a body were giants. They were great souls serving a great God.”¹ Packer’s criticism of contemporary Christianity is painfully blunt, yet even a cursory glance at today’s *evangelicalism* confirms his assessment.² To put it simply, we need the Puritans (their piety in particular) because they were strongest where perhaps we are weakest.

Second, why study William Perkins (1558–1602)? After all, he lived more than four hundred years ago, and most people have never even heard of him.³ In the words of Ian Breward, what makes Perkins

1. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990), 22. Packer proceeds to explain how the Puritans speak to three specific groups within “today’s evangelical world”: “restless experientialists,” “entrenched intellectualists,” and “disaffected deviationists” (*Quest for Godliness*, 30–34).

2. Some critics have gone so far as to describe the evangelical movement as “the Disneyfication of God” (John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World* [New York: Penguin, 2009], 189).

3. When it comes to the “old” authors, I appreciate C. S. Lewis’s advice: “If [one] must read only the new or only the old, I would advise him to read the old.... It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you

“so important is that by the end of the sixteenth century his writings had begun to displace those of Calvin, Beza, and Bullinger.”⁴ That should catch our attention for at least two reasons. First, it obviously means Perkins’s writings are beneficial. If he is numbered among the likes of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Heinrich Bullinger, then he must have produced some worthwhile reading material. Second, it means Perkins’s writings are influential. The popularity of his treatises makes him pivotal to the development of Puritanism on both sides of the Atlantic—a movement that has profoundly shaped Christianity in the West. That Perkins’s work is both beneficial and influential surely makes him worthy of our consideration.

Third, why study the Sermon on the Mount? John Stott provides a good reason: “The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed.”⁵ Over the centuries, there have been a plethora of unhelpful interpretations and applications of this sermon. A need remains, therefore, to hear it expounded accurately and applied faithfully. Martyn Lloyd-Jones provides another reason for studying the Sermon on the Mount: “I feel the particular reason for doing so is the peculiar condition of the life of the Christian Church in general at the present time. I do not think it is a harsh judgment to say that the most obvious feature of the life of the Christian Church today is, alas, its superficiality.”⁶ Lloyd-Jones uttered those words more than fifty years ago. One can only imagine what he would think of the contemporary scene. The state of the church is reason enough to turn yet again to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount.

have read an old one in between” (*God in the Dock* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], 201–2).

4. Ian Breward, “The Significance of William Perkins,” *Journal of Religious History* 4 (1966): 116. Breward gives two reasons for this interest in Perkins: his “ability to clarify and expound complex theological issues which aroused the respect of fellow scholars” and his “gift for relating seemingly abstruse theological teaching to the spiritual aspirations of ordinary Christians” (“Significance of William Perkins,” 113).

5. John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978), 15.

6. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 1:9.

It remains only to say a few introductory words about what the reader can expect in the pages that follow. Chapter 1 includes a brief account of Perkins's life and ministry. Chapter 2 considers several factors that shape Perkins's interpretation and application of the Sermon on the Mount. Chapters 3 to 8 present Perkins's exposition of Matthew 5–7, organized around six marks of godliness: blessedness, repentance, righteousness, sincerity, contentment, and faithfulness.⁷ The conclusion highlights Perkins's challenge to join "practice with knowledge of the word of Christ."

Foundational to Perkins's concept of godliness is his conviction that God is at the center of human existence.⁸ The soul is eternal; it cannot be satisfied by something not equal to its own duration—the temporal. The soul is spiritual; it cannot be satisfied by something not equal to its own nature—the material. The soul is exceptional; it cannot be satisfied by something not equal to its own quality—the trivial. All of this means that man can find satisfaction in God alone. Perkins describes God's all-sufficiency as His "blessedness,"⁹ and it is this view of God that ultimately shapes his piety. In a word, godliness flows from the enjoyment of God.

I trust this concept will be evident as you make your way through the following chapters. And I pray you will see something of the nature of true theology—what Perkins calls, "the science of living blessedly forever."¹⁰

7. For the purpose of comparing, contrasting, and clarifying, I have included (in the footnotes) insights from authors old and new, plus several insights of my own.

8. This stands in marked contrast to many modern-day concepts of spirituality, which are essentially man-centered. For a helpful examination of this trend, see David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), particularly the chapter titled "Self-Piety."

9. William Perkins, *A Golden Chain; or, The Description of Theology Containing the Order and the Causes of Salvation and Damnation, according to God's Word*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (London, 1608), 13.

10. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:11.

CHAPTER 1

William Perkins

Elizabeth I is undoubtedly one of the most famous English monarchs. She was born in 1533, the fruit of that fateful union between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. In 1558, after the death of her Protestant half-brother, Edward, and the death of her Catholic half-sister, Mary, she ascended the throne. She was immediately besieged from all sides. Domestically, she struggled with the religious establishment, seeking a *via media* between Catholics, who denied the legitimacy of her birth, and Puritans,¹ who rejected prelacy, which she viewed as pivotal to the monarchy's survival. Internationally, she had to contend with countless enemies, culminating in the Spanish Armada's thwarted invasion in 1588. Elizabeth withstood it all admirably and turned England into the foremost Protestant power by the time of her death in 1603.

Coinciding with the years of Elizabeth's illustrious reign is the life of one of England's most influential theologians, William Perkins.² He was born in the village of Marston Jabbett, in Bulkington

1. In this instance, I am using the term *Puritan* in reference to those who desired a Presbyterian form of church government.

2. William Haller describes the extent of Perkins's influence as follows: "No books, it is fair to say, were more often to be found upon the shelves of succeeding generations of preachers, and the name of no preacher recurs more often in later Puritan literature" (*The Rise of Puritanism* [New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957], 65). Similarly, Louis Wright commented in 1940, "The writings of the Reverend William Perkins, sometime fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, have not been republished since the seventeenth century; no modern anthology includes anything from his pen; few teachers of history, literature, or theology mention his name in their classes. Yet this man's works were once so popular that they appeared in English, Latin, Dutch, Spanish, Welsh, and Irish, and they influenced the lives of thousands of Englishmen

parish, in Warwickshire.³ Very little is known of him until, at nineteen years of age, he enrolled at Christ's College, Cambridge. The university had been a major player in the English Reformation. From 1511 to 1514, Erasmus lectured in Greek while preparing his translation of the New Testament. Within ten years, William Tyndale prepared his English translation from Erasmus's text. By the 1520s, Luther's works were circulating among scholars. In 1534, Cambridge accepted Parliament's Act of Supremacy, thus recognizing the king as the head of the Church of England. And, in 1549, the divinity chair was offered to Martin Bucer, thereby demonstrating the success of the Cambridge Reformers.⁴

It was at this decidedly "Protestant" institution where Perkins began his lifelong studies in 1577. He soon made a name for himself but not for the reasons we might expect. By his own admission, he was given to recklessness and drunkenness.⁵ Such behavior, compounded by an interest in witchcraft,⁶ seemed to demonstrate Perkins's desperate spiritual state. But God soon began to work in his heart, producing conviction for sin. Benjamin Brook records a particularly noteworthy incident in which God brought Perkins face to face with his own wretchedness: "As he was walking in the skirts of the town, he heard a woman say to a child that was forward and peevish, 'Hold your

on both sides of the Atlantic" ("William Perkins: Elizabethan Apostle of 'Practical Divinity,'" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 3 [1940]: 171).

3. For an account of Perkins's life, see *The Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. S. Lee (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1909). Also see Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 469–80; and Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans* (1813; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), 2:129–36.

4. Harry Porter, *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 51.

5. In his will, Perkins bequeathed his Bible to his son-in-law. This poses a problem, as Perkins did not marry until eight years prior to his death. When Perkins died, his children would have been too young to have been married. How do we explain his son-in-law? A possible explanation is that Perkins fathered a child out of wedlock, prior to his conversion.

6. During his early years at Cambridge, Perkins appears to have dabbled in astrology. This struggle may account in part for his treatise, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, in *The Works of William Perkins: Vol. 3* (London, 1631).

tongue, or I will give you to drunken Perkins yonder.”⁷ Before long, Perkins—burdened with the weight of his sin—turned to Christ, the Savior of sinners.

After his conversion, Perkins devoted himself to his studies, receiving his BA in 1581 and his MA in 1584.⁸ After graduation, he was appointed lecturer at St. Andrew’s Church—a position he held until his death. He wielded great influence as a preacher. According to Brook, “[Perkins] used to apply the terrors of the law so directly to the consciences of his hearers that their hearts would often sink under the convictions; and he used to pronounce the word *damn* with so peculiar an emphasis, that it left a doleful *echo* in their ears a long time after.”⁹

Around the time of his appointment to St. Andrew’s, Perkins was also elected to a fellowship at Christ’s College. In this position he could influence a generation of young students, and during the next decade, his reputation as a teacher was unrivaled. When Thomas Goodwin enrolled at Cambridge in 1613, a full ten years after Perkins’s death, he could write, “The town was then filled with the discourse of the power of Mr. Perkins’s ministry, still fresh in most men’s memories.”¹⁰

While at Cambridge, Perkins engaged in several notable controversies. The first was ecclesiastical in nature. When Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558, most of the English Protestants who had fled to the Continent during the reign of Bloody Mary returned to England. Some were discouraged with the state of the church, desiring to remove all remnants of Roman Catholicism. Some of them also desired to reform the church’s government on the basis

7. Brook, *Lives of the Puritans*, 2:129. This account may be apocryphal, but even if it is, it does not change the reality of Perkins’s conversion. By his own account, his conversion was a radical transformation that he attributed entirely to God’s sovereign grace.

8. While at Cambridge, Perkins came under the influence of Laurence Chaderton, Richard Greenham, and Richard Rogers.

9. Brook, *Lives of the Puritans*, 2:130 (emphasis in original).

10. Thomas Goodwin as quoted by Ian Breward (ed.), *The Works of William Perkins*, in *The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics* (Appleford, U.K.: Sutton Courtenay, 1970), 3: 9.

of Presbyterianism.¹¹ These men encompassed a broad spectrum of opinion, yet all shared one common denominator—dissatisfaction with the extent of the Reformation in England. As Neil Keeble notes:

The term “Puritan” became current during the 1560s as a nickname for Protestants who, dissatisfied with the Elizabethan Settlement of the church by the Act of Uniformity of 1559, would have subscribed to the contention of the Admonition to Parliament of 1572 that “we in England are so far off, from having a church rightly reformed, according to the prescript of God’s word, that as yet we are not come to the outward face of the same.”¹²

Perkins never openly allied himself with the likes of Thomas Cartwright, an outspoken proponent of Presbyterianism. Yet he did express his dissatisfaction with the Church of England to such an extent that on January 19, 1587, he was called before the vice-chancellor at Cambridge to give an account for a sermon in which he allegedly railed against “superstitious” practices within the church. After this brush with the authorities, it appears Perkins intentionally steered clear of such controversies, perhaps realizing that his time was better spent on more pressing matters.¹³

In the 1590s, ecclesiastical concerns were overshadowed by more important theological questions regarding the nature of grace.¹⁴ Peter

11. For an overview of the Admonition to Parliament in 1572, see Peter Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans? Presbyterianism and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

12. Neil Keeble, “Puritan Spirituality,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. G. S. Wakefield (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 323.

13. While uncomfortable with some practices within the Church of England, Perkins was decidedly against separatism. He writes, “No man ought to sever himself from the Church of England, for some wants that be therein: We have the true doctrine of Christ preached among us by God’s blessing, and though there be corruptions in manners among us, yea, and though they could justly find fault with our doctrine; yet so long as we hold Christ, no man ought to sever himself from our Church” (*A Godly and Learned Exposition upon Christ’s Sermon on the Mount*, in *The Works of William Perkins* [London, 1631], 3:264).

14. For more on this controversy, see Mark Shaw, “William Perkins and the New Pelagians: Another Look at the Cambridge Predestination Controversy of the 1590s,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 58 (1996): 267–301.

Baro argued that God's work of predestination is based upon His foreknowledge of an individual's faith and works.¹⁵ Perkins responded with *A Golden Chain (Armillæ Aurea)*, in which he openly challenged Baro's position. "God's decree," declares Perkins, "in as much as it concerneth man, is called Predestination: which is the decree of God, by which he hath ordained all men to a certain and everlasting estate: that is, either to salvation or condemnation, for his own glory."¹⁶ For Perkins, God's execution of His decree involves four "degrees":¹⁷ (1) effectual calling, whereby "a sinner, being severed from the world, is entertained into God's family";¹⁸ (2) justification, whereby "such as believe, are accounted just before God, through the obedience of Christ Jesus";¹⁹ (3) sanctification, whereby "such as believe, being delivered from the tyranny of sin, are by little and little renewed in holiness and righteousness";²⁰ (4) glorification, whereby the saints

15. Paul states, "For whom [God] did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29). Baro argued that foreknowledge is to know in advance. This means that God foreknew (knew in advance) those who would believe in Him. There are three reasons why that interpretation is implausible: (1) If God's foreknowledge is merely His knowledge in advance of those who will choose Him, then Paul defeats his own argument. In Romans 8:28–30, his purpose is to impart comfort by impressing upon us the fact that God causes all things to work together for good, because He is the author of our salvation from start to finish. This assurance disappears if God's role in salvation is dependent upon us. (2) If God's foreknowledge is merely His knowledge in advance of those who will choose Him, then Paul makes God's predestination of us contingent upon what we do. That clearly contradicts what he says in Romans 9:16, "So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy." (3) If God's foreknowledge is merely His knowledge in advance of those who will choose Him, then Paul contradicts what he says in Romans 11:2–5, where he equates God's foreknowledge with His "gracious choice." In brief, God's foreknowledge is not passive but active. God foreknew us, in that He set His love upon us before the foundation of the world.

16. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:16. Similarly, the Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter WCF) states: "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death" (3:3). Perkins's influence upon the Westminster divines is evident. Both equate predestination with God's decree, identify the purpose of predestination as God's glory, and emphasize double predestination.

17. The WCF identifies these four "degrees" as "means" (10:2; 11:1; 13:1; 32:1).

18. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:78.

19. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:82.

20. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:84.

are perfectly transformed “into the image of the Son of God.”²¹ This “golden chain” is, according to Perkins, the definitive word on God’s grace. From start to finish, salvation is of God.

This Reformed theology of grace invariably shaped Perkins’s piety. He was convinced that individuals must experience an affective appropriation of God’s sovereign grace, moving beyond intellectual assent to heartfelt dedication to Christ. And this “experimental” Calvinism earned Perkins the contemptuous label *Puritan*.²² He acknowledged this, writing, “For the pure heart is so little regarded, that the seeking after it is turned to a by-word, and a matter of reproach. Who are so much branded with vile terms of Puritans and Precisians, as those that most endeavor to get and keep the purity of heart in a good conscience?”²³ In another of his writings, he declares, “The due obedience to the moral law is nick-named and termed preciseness, and the professors thereof called Puritans and Precisians, for this cause only, that they make conscience of walking in obedience to God’s law.”²⁴

Given its negative connotation, Perkins would never have referred to himself as a Puritan, yet it is the very term that others

21. Perkins, *Golden Chain*, 1:93.

22. For definitions of Puritanism, see Ian Breward, “The Abolition of Puritanism,” *Journal of Religious History* 7 (1972): 20–34; Patrick Collinson, “A Comment: Concerning the Name Puritan,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31 (1980): 483–88; Michael Finlayson, “Puritanism and Puritans: Labels or Libels?” *Canadian Journal of History* 8 (1973): 203–23; Basil Hall, “Puritanism: The Problem of Definition,” in *Humanists and Protestants: 1500–1900* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 237–54; and Leonard Trinterud, “The Origins of Puritanism,” *Church History* 20 (1951): 37–57.

23. Perkins, *Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:15 (emphasis in original).

24. Perkins, *Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:195. Writing in 1611, Robert Bolton comments, “The world is come to that wretched pass, and height of profaneness, that even honesty and sanctification is many times odiously branded by the nickname Puritanism” (*A Discourse about the State of True Happiness: Delivered in Certain Sermons in Oxford, and at Paul’s Cross* [London, 1611], 132.) Writing in 1641, Thomas Wilson notes that “zeal” or “fervency in religion” is branded with the terms “indiscretion, rashness, puritanism or headiness” (*David’s Zeal for Zion, a Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons, April 4, 1641* [London, 1641], 14). Writing in 1658, Richard Baxter mentions that those who “will not take a dead profession, joined with civility, for true sanctification” are branded “with the name of puritans” (*The Practical Works of Richard Baxter: Select Treatises* [1863; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 530).

used (favorably or not) to describe that “zeal in religion” so prevalent in his life and ministry.²⁵ And it is to this Puritan piety—as found in his exposition of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount—that we now turn.

25. Strictly speaking, Perkins was not a Puritan in terms of his ecclesiology, for he refused to align himself with the more militant figures of his era. Nor was he a Puritan in terms of his theology, for it is anachronistic to speak of Puritanism as a theological movement prior to the Arminian renewal in theology, which occurred within the Church of England during the reign of the Stuart kings. For more on this topic, see Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Puritanism, c. 1590–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

CHAPTER 2

The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount occupies a significant place in the church's history.¹ It has received the attention of the Christian in the pew, pulpit, and lectern.² Why? For Perkins, the answer is found in the sermon's all-encompassing message. In *A Godly and Learned Exposition upon Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, he states, "Hereof I have chosen to entreat, because it is a most divine and learned Sermon, and may not unfitly be called the 'Key to the whole Bible:' for here Christ opens the sum of the Old and New Testaments."³ In other words, for Perkins, the Sermon on the Mount is the key that unlocks the meaning of Scripture in its entirety. This observation is extremely significant, as it implies that Perkins's understanding of what Christ declares in Matthew 5 to 7 is pivotal to the development of his theology and, by consequence, his spirituality.

1. Luke Johnson writes, "In the history of Christian thought—indeed in the history of those observing Christianity—the Sermon on the Mount has been considered an epitome of the teaching of Jesus and therefore, for many, the essence of Christianity" ("The Sermon on the Mount," in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 654).

2. Jeffrey Greenham, Timothy Larsen, and Stephen Spencer recently published *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries from the Early Church to John Paul II* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007). Their historical analysis skips two centuries from John Calvin to John Wesley, thereby missing the entire Puritan movement. This is unfortunate, given the Puritans' love for the Sermon on the Mount and their profound influence on Christianity. I trust this study of Perkins will help to fill the gap.

3. Perkins, *Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, 3:1. This is not unlike Calvin's claim concerning the book of Romans: "When anyone gains a knowledge of this Epistle, he has an entrance opened to him to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture" (*Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], xxix).

Given the centrality of this sermon to Perkins's thinking, it is important to understand how he approaches it. In other words, it is important to understand those factors that influence him in his interpretation and application.

The Historical Context

The first factor influencing Perkins's views of the Sermon on the Mount was historical context. In the early sixteenth century, Henry VIII initiated a power struggle with the church hierarchy in Rome, which came to a head when the English Parliament passed the Supremacy Act by which Henry was declared "the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England."⁴ This act focused upon the authority of the pope, not the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. At heart, Henry still accepted many of the practices of Roman Catholicism, as is evident in the Six Articles passed by Parliament in 1539.⁵ There were those, however, who disagreed with these Six Articles, viewing the Reformation as more than freedom from papal intrusion into domestic affairs. Therefore, from the outset, the English Reformation actually "embraced two distinct tendencies."⁶ The first was semi-Roman while the other was anti-Roman. This struggle continued through the Elizabethan era into the reign of the Stuart kings.⁷

In a very real sense, therefore, Perkins was a reformer. He preached and lectured in the midst of a pitched battle with the Roman Church. As could be expected, many of his writings reflect this conflict. In one of his most well-known, *A Reformed Catholic*,⁸ he makes it clear that

4. Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 227.

5. They condemn all who oppose transubstantiation, vows of chastity, private masses, and auricular confession, and all who support the giving of the cup to the laity and the marriage of the clergy (Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 233–34).

6. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1:704.

7. These kings include, in chronological order, James I, Charles I, Charles II, and James II.

8. William Perkins, *A Reformed Catholic; or, A Declaration Showing How Near We May Come to the Present Church of Rome in Sundry Points of Religion, and wherein We Must Forever Depart from Them*, in *The Works of William Perkins: Vol. 1* (London, 1608).

“union of the two religions” (Protestantism and Catholicism) “can never be made, more than the union of light and darkness.” By way of explanation, he adds, “For though in words they [i.e., the Catholics] honor Christ, yet indeed they turn him to a pseudo-Christ and an idol of their own brain.”⁹ They have wandered so far from the teaching of Scripture that they have lost the true knowledge of Christ. In Perkins’s estimation, therefore, Roman Catholicism is not merely one of several acceptable Christian traditions; on the contrary, it is the “great whore” (Rev. 17:1–5).

This conviction permeates Perkins’s writings. Unsurprisingly, it even appears in his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, in which he repeatedly argues that the Roman Church stands in direct correlation to the scribes and Pharisees of Christ’s day.¹⁰ According to Perkins, as the scribes and Pharisees distorted God’s word in Jesus’ day, so too did the Roman Church. As the scribes and Pharisees proclaimed a false way of salvation, so too did the Roman Church. As the scribes and Pharisees practiced terrible hypocrisy, so too did the Roman Church. As the scribes and Pharisees oppressed Christ and His disciples, so too did the Roman Church. For Perkins, the parallels were manifold and the points of application numerous. Running throughout his exposition, therefore, is a constant diatribe against Rome.¹¹

The Immediate Context

The second factor shaping Perkins’s approach to the Sermon on the Mount was his understanding of its “immediate” context. In his introductory remarks, he makes two important observations.

9. Perkins, *Reformed Catholic*, 1:549. In this treatise, Perkins addresses twenty-two issues. He identifies four as particularly worthy of “separation”: the meaning of (1) justification, (2) Christ’s satisfaction, (3) Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, and (4) prayers to saints.

10. Lloyd-Jones sees the same parallel, commenting, “The condition of the Jews in our Lord’s day was remarkably like that of people in this country before the Protestant Reformation” (*Studies in the Sermon*, 1:212).

11. For the most part, I have avoided the polemical side of Perkins’s exposition, choosing to focus on the personal and pastoral.

The Sermon's Form

The first observation concerns the sermon's form. Here, Perkins wrestles with the issue of whether or not Christ's words in Matthew 5 through 7 constitute a real sermon. Much of what Matthew records is scattered throughout Luke's gospel account. Is it not likely, therefore, that the so-called *sermon* is actually a compilation of material from Christ's entire ministry?¹² Despite the "apparent" discrepancy between Matthew and Luke, Perkins is adamant that Matthew 5–7 is a real sermon.¹³ Why? His reasoning focuses on two points. (1) The opening statement provides part of the answer: "And seeing the multitudes, [Jesus] went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him" (Matt. 5:1). From this, we learn that Christ preached the sermon at a specific moment ("seeing the multitudes, he went up"), at a distinct location ("into a mountain"), from a definite posture ("when he was set"), and to a particular audience ("his disciples came unto him"). (2) The closing statement also seems to indicate that the three chapters constitute a real sermon: "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine" (Matt. 7:28). From this, we learn that the sermon possesses a definite conclusion ("when Jesus had ended these sayings")¹⁴ and provokes a specific response ("the people were astonished at his doctrine").

For these reasons, Perkins views Matthew 5–7 as an actual sermon. Moreover, he believes it is the same sermon that is found in Luke

12. In the opinion of R. T. France, "All this suggests that these chapters do not represent a single actual sermon" (*The Gospel according to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 105–6).

13. For more on these arguments within the broader discussion of the "synoptic problem," see D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 139–49.

14. John Blanchard views this statement as a "striking piece of contextual evidence," supporting the view that Matthew 5–7 is a sermon. Why? It (or something very similar) is used in conjunction with each of Christ's major discourses; see Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1 (*The Beatitudes for Today* [Surrey, U.K.: Day One Publications, 1999], 16). For a helpful discussion of the relationship between the Sermon on the Mount and the rest of Matthew's gospel account, see Wayne Baxter, "The Narrative Setting of the Sermon on the Mount," *Trinity Journal* 25 (2004): 27–37.

6:20–49¹⁵ and bases his conclusion on two details. (1) The sermons share many similarities. For example, they have the same “beginning” (the Beatitudes), the same “matter” (the Golden Rule, the command to turn the other cheek, the prohibition against judging), and the same “conclusion” (the parable of the two house-builders). (2) The sermons share the same setting, namely, Christ’s selection of His twelve disciples. Perkins is aware that this assertion is open to criticism, in light of the fact that Matthew does not record this incident until chapter 10. He responds by noting that Christ’s instruction of His disciples in

15. Perkins, *Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:1. Perkins acknowledges an opposing argument; namely, they cannot be the same sermons because, according to Luke, Christ preaches while standing on a plain, whereas, according to Matthew, Christ preaches while sitting on a mountain. Perkins responds, “But Luke says not, that it was made by Christ in a plain, or standing: only this he says, that Christ coming from the mountain, stood in a plain place, and there wrought certain miracles, and then preached: now all this might be done, and yet Christ might preach this sermon in the mount sitting” (*Christ’s Sermon in the Mount*, 3:2). For a similar view, see William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 260. Calvin appears to agree in *Commentary on a Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 16:258. As for other differences between the two accounts, Perkins is silent. Why is Matthew’s account so much longer than Luke’s? Why does Matthew record eight beatitudes while Luke records only four, along with four corresponding *woes*? Why do Matthew and Luke use different vocabulary? Why does Luke omit so much of Christ’s teaching from the sermon, only to include it in different places throughout his gospel account? Carson believes the “apparent” discrepancies are easily harmonized when we accept three facts. (1) Christ preached primarily in Aramaic, whereas the gospel accounts are written in Greek. This explains some variations in vocabulary. (2) Christ preached more than what is recorded in the sermon. Both Matthew and Luke provide a condensed account. Furthermore, they have their own purposes in writing; hence, they select and arrange material accordingly. (3) Christ preached the same sermon on numerous occasions. Undoubtedly, He altered it slightly, adding and omitting material, according to His audience. If part of Christ’s sermon in Matthew is found in a different context in Luke, it may simply be because He preached it on different occasions (*Sermon on the Mount*, 143–49). Blanchard (like others) is noncommittal: “This is all very interesting, but at the end of the day it is not critically important. Not even the greatest biblical expert knows for certain whether the whole Sermon on the Mount was delivered at once, or whether Matthew and Luke are giving their versions of the same incident—and it makes not the slightest difference to the importance and relevance of what Jesus said” (*Beatitudes for Today*, 24). But can we dismiss the issue so easily? After all, if this is not a *real* sermon, then it certainly raises the issue of Matthew’s integrity. Would he not then be guilty of intentionally misleading his readers?

their calling, as found in the Sermon on the Mount, would have been impossible if they had not yet been called. He believes, therefore, that the call takes place prior to the sermon and that Matthew simply waits until chapter 10 to mention it because he wants to connect it to their commission to preach.

The Sermon's Purpose

The second important observation from Perkins's introductory remarks concerns the sermon's purpose. According to Perkins, Christ's aim is "to teach his disciples, with all that believe in him, to lead a godly, holy, and blessed life."¹⁶ Perkins proceeds to set this purpose in a specific context. Believing that Matthew and Luke record the same sermon, he turns to Luke 6:7 in order to identify that context: "And the scribes and Pharisees watched him, whether he would heal on the sabbath day; that they might find an accusation against him."¹⁷ In the verses that follow, we discover that Christ does indeed heal the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath day (Luke 6:8–10) and that the scribes and Pharisees respond spitefully: "And they were filled with madness; and communed one with another what they might do" (Luke 6:11). In reaction to their antagonism, Christ departs into the mountain (Luke 6:12). He prays before choosing His twelve disciples (Luke 6:13–16). Then the crowd gathers around Him, seeking to touch Him, so that they might be healed (Luke 6:17–19).

These details provide the setting for the Sermon on the Mount. According to Perkins, they demonstrate that Christ's teaching must be interpreted in the context of His ongoing conflict with the

16. Perkins, *Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, 3:1. For brief summaries of the various views of Christ's purpose in the Sermon on the Mount, see Carson, *Sermon on the Mount*, 151–57; and Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon*, 13–17. For a summary of the various interpretive approaches, see Harvey McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960). For a summary of the history of interpretation, see Lloyd Allen, "The Sermon on the Mount in the History of the Church," *Review and Expositor* 89 (1992): 245–64; and Robert Guelich, "Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 117–30. For a bibliography of interpretation, see Lorin Cranford, "Bibliography for the Sermon on the Mount," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 35 (1992): 34–38.

17. Perkins, *Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, 3:1.

scribes and the Pharisees. In Perkins's own words, "Christ's intent is to clear the true meaning of Moses and the Prophets, which was corrupted by the false gloss of the Jewish teachers."¹⁸ What is "the true meaning of Moses and the Prophets?" Perkins explains, "There cannot be given unto man a more perfect rule than Moses' Law, the sum and scope whereof is, *To love God with all the heart, with all the soul, and with all the strength.*"¹⁹ That is the unchanging message of Scripture, which Christ expounds against the backdrop of pharisaical misinterpretation.²⁰

Conclusion

To sum up, what is the significance of the sermon's immediate context (its form and purpose) for Perkins's exposition? To begin with, his understanding of the sermon's *form* led him to see the sermon as a complete unit. In other words, he viewed it as an exact account of what Christ preached to His disciples at the outset of their ministry.

18. Perkins, *Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, 3:1.

19. Perkins, *Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, 3:1 (emphasis in original).

20. Augustine finds the sermon's theme in its introduction: "And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him" (Matt. 5:1). Augustine believes the "mountain" symbolizes the "greater righteousness" of the kingdom of heaven (*Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, According to Matthew*, trans. W. Findlay, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. P. Schaff [New York: Random House, 1948], 6:4). Augustine makes this conclusion on the basis of David's words in Psalm 36:6, "Thy righteousness is like the great mountains." For Augustine, this "greater righteousness" constitutes the sermon's central theme. He re-emphasizes this interpretation when he arrives at Matthew 5:14, affirming that the "hill" is the same "great and distinguished righteousness." Matthew Henry agrees, "When the law was given, the Lord came down upon the mountain; now the Lord went up; then, he spoke in thunder and lightning; now, in a still small voice; then the people were ordered to keep their distance; now they are invited to draw near" (*The Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible*, ed. L. F. Church [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969], 1219). In other words, there is a symbolic relationship between the mountain where Moses received the law and the mountain where Christ expounded the law, thereby revealing the sermon's central theme: righteousness. In the opinion of others, the "mountain" analogy is forced. As France states, "The mountain is not a specific place, but a general term, as we might say 'into the hills.'... It is therefore unlikely that any allusion is here intended to Moses' ascent of the specific peak Sinai to receive the law, thus portraying Jesus as a new lawgiver like Moses" (*Gospel according to Matthew*, 107).

This was a key interpretive tool for Perkins because it implies that the sermon's individual parts are all related. They build on one another, bringing continuity from beginning to end.

Perkins's understanding of the sermon's *purpose* is significant because it shaped his overall interpretation of Christ's message. As already mentioned, he believed Christ's goal was "to teach his disciples, with all that believe in him, to lead a godly, holy, and blessed life." In other words, Christ was not instituting a legalistic system of morality; nor was He establishing a social gospel movement; nor was He proclaiming a standard of ethics for a future millennial kingdom.²¹ On the contrary, He was revealing the nature of true godliness. This purpose provides the basic framework for Perkins's approach to the sermon.²²

21. Some dispensationalists maintain that the Bible provides three different codes of ethics: the Decalogue for the Old Testament, the Sermon on the Mount for the future millennium, and the teaching of the New Testament (except the Synoptics) for the church. For more on the dispensational view of the Sermon on the Mount, see James Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 11–13; Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon*, 14–16; Blanchard, *Beatitudes for Today*, 35–47; and Carson, *Sermon on the Mount*, 155–57.

22. In his exposition, Perkins divides Christ's "revelation" into twelve "branches" or "places of doctrine" (*Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, 3:3). Augustine finds the sermon's structure in Psalm 12:6, "The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times." Augustine relates the number "seven" to the "seven sentences" at the beginning of the sermon (*Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, 6:63). By "sentences," he means the Beatitudes. There are seven rather than eight, because the first and eighth contain the same phrase—"theirs is the kingdom of heaven"—thereby making them one. Augustine proceeds to expound the entire sermon according to these seven "sentences." Stott provides a helpful structure: (1) the Christian's character (5:3–12); (2) the Christian's influence (5:13–16); (3) the Christian's righteousness (5:17–48); (4) the Christian's piety (6:1–18); (5) the Christian's ambition (6:19–34); (6) the Christian's relationships (7:1–20); and (7) the Christian's commitment (7:21–27) (*Christian Counter-Culture*, 24–26). Terry Johnson alters this slightly: (1) Jesus discloses His disciples' character (5:3–12); (2) Jesus explains His disciples' influence (5:13–16); (3) Jesus speaks of His disciples' righteousness (5:17–48); (4) Jesus describes His disciples' piety (6:1–18); (5) Jesus describes His disciples' life of faith (6:19–7:6); and (6) Jesus explains His disciples' commitment (7:7–29) (*When Grace Transforms: The Character of Christ's Disciples Envisioned in the Beatitudes* [Fearn, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2002], 14–18).