Chiastic Structure for the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)

1. Understanding the structure of a text of the Bible is an important element for understanding the purpose and meaning of that text. In other words, form leads to function.

2. As with the other major discourses, or teaching sections, of Matthew (10:1-42; 13:10-53; 18:1-35; 24:3-25:46; 28:16-20), it appears that the structure or form of the Sermon on the Mount is chiastic. What does “chiastic,” or chiasmus mean?

3. A chiasm, or chiasmus, is a literary structure that borrows its name from the Greek letter chi (χ). The “ch” is pronounced like the “ch” in Christ.

A chiasm is a type of concentric structure (e.g., A-B-C-X-C`-B`-A`). This type of structure is an inverted parallelism or sequence of words or ideas in a phrase, sentence, or any larger literary unit. A and A` correspond to each other in some way; B and B`; and so forth. Typically, the climax is located at the central “X.”

Recognizing a chiasm is helpful for:

- Determining the limits of a literary unit;
- Interpreting subunits within a chiasm by the interplay of other subunits. For example, A-A` play off each other thematically by contrast or comparison; and,
- Identifying the purpose or climax of the chiastic unit.

One caution: chiasms are not everywhere. Be sure to have some concrete indicators of a (probable) chiasm such as common themes, recurring words and phrases, and/or an inclusio (i.e., a “picture frame” such as the occurrences of “the Law and/or the Prophets in Matthew 5:17 and 7:12).
Following Bible scholar, Ulrich Luz, and others, here is the proposed structure of the Sermon on the Mount.¹ You may have better captions.

A 5:1-2 Frame: Situation

B 5:3-16 Intro. – beatitudes and persecution (5:3-10 is 3rd person ['theirs' or 'they'; 11-16 2nd person ['you' or 'your'])

C 5:17-20 Introduction of the Main Section – Law and prophets

D 5:21-48 Main Section – Surpassing the Law – the antitheses

E 6:1-6 Righteousness before God – almsgiving

F 6:7-8 Prayer words (not empty words)

X 6:9-13 The Lord’s Prayer (the center or climax)

F` 6:14-15 Prayer words (need for forgiveness)

E` 6:16-18 Righteousness before God – fasting

D` 6:19-7:11 Main Section – on possessions, judging, and asking

C` 7:12 Conclusion of the Main Section – Law and prophets

B` 7:13-27 Conclusion (contrasting parables – 7:13-20 is 2nd person; 21-27 3rd person)

A` 7:28-8:1a Frame: Reaction (7:28-8:1a) – response of the audience