

## 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 **chiasmus, or chiasm**, is a literary structure that borrows its name from the Greek letter *chi* ( $\chi$ ). 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**.<sup>1</sup> You may have better captions.

- A 5:1-2            Frame: Situation
- B 5:3-16           Intro. – beatitudes and persecution (5:3-10 is 3<sup>rd</sup> person  
[‘theirs’ or ‘they’; 11-16 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> person;  
21-27 3<sup>rd</sup> person)
- A` 7:28-8:1a      Frame: Reaction (7:28-8:1a) – response of the audience

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<sup>1</sup> Brandon D. Crowe, *The Obedient Son: Deuteronomy and Christology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 2012), 169.