

Series Sermon on the Mount #1

Scripture Matthew 5:1-10

Near the beginning of the second year of His public ministry, Jesus selected from among His many disciples the twelve men who would be His close companions and future kingdom leaders. From the Gospel of Luke we learn that Jesus chose these men following a full night of prayer (*Luke 6:12*). The choice of the men was of strategic importance. They were designated by Jesus as “apostles,” which means individuals who are “sent with a special commission.”

From the morning of their selection, up until the night of His arrest and subsequent crucifixion, Jesus focused a lot of His time and energies on the spiritual development of the Twelve. This was not always easy or convenient. Jesus was often surrounded by crowds of people — individuals who had come from near and far to “hear Him and to be healed of their diseases.” This meant that He often taught the Twelve in the presence of many other people. That was the situation when Jesus presented the teaching we have come to know as the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is in the Gospel of Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Read Matthew 5:1-10

Jesus began this teaching just a few short hours after He selected the Apostles. He didn’t waste any time before introducing them to the attitudes and lifestyle that He expected of them.

Jesus knew that the thinking of the Apostles had been shaped by centuries of misinterpretations of the Old Testament Law and misrepresentations of the purposes of the Law. If the Twelve were to be engaged in future ministry as leaders of the Church, they needed to be reoriented to the truth of God and to know how things worked in God’s kingdom. That was the purpose of the teaching.

The Sermon on the Mount must be understood in the overall context of Jesus' ministry. The theme of His message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (*Matthew 4:17*). Matthew chapter 4 explains that "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (*Matthew 4:23*).

The three key words to describe Jesus' early ministry are "repentance," "good news," and "healing." Repentance was the spiritual change of direction required of a person before that individual could enter the kingdom of heaven. The good news was that a transformed life — a new spiritual outlook on life, was available so that people could become citizens of the kingdom. The miraculous healings proved that the consequences of sin were being overcome by the authority of the kingdom.

As the result of Jesus' preaching and healings, "large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and the region across the Jordan followed him" (*Matthew 4:25*), and "when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down, ... and He began to teach them," and His subject was the kingdom of God.

Jesus began by describing the characteristics of the people who were members of the kingdom. He did this by proclaiming a series of beatitudes. Beatitudes are like proverbs. They are short and precise statements, full of meaning. There is a separate biblical theme in each beatitude, and, taken together, they give us a picture of the character and righteousness of the true people of God — those who are members of His kingdom.

The beatitudes describe the "blessedness" and "happiness" of individuals who have a share in the kingdom of God. The Greek word translated "blessed" or "happy" describes the person who is uniquely favored by God and therefore is, in some sense, satisfied, joyful, and content. The Beatitudes do not explain how to become blessed and happy. Jesus did that when He encouraged the people to "repent." Rather, the Beatitudes describe the character of people after they come under the gracious rule of God. That's when people can experience the benefits of the kingdom. Such people are "blessed" and "happy."

The Greek noun translated "poor" speaks of extreme poverty. It refers to a person without any means of self-support. The "poor" were people who had to beg for whatever they needed. [*The word "beggar" in Luke 16:20 and 22 is the same word as "poor" in Matthew 5:3*] Because they were without resources of their own, the "poor" were dependent on others to mercifully provide the material things they needed.

Verse 3 speaks of those who are "poor in spirit." This is a reference to people who understand their total dependence on God for the ultimate blessings of life. People who cling to illusions about their own spiritual resources and merit will never receive from God what they need in order to be saved from their sins. Self-sufficient people are not eligible to enter the kingdom of heaven. A person's acknowledgement of personal poverty of spirit is an absolute prerequisite.

Kingdom people look to God for all their needs. When they pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth" ... and "Give us this day our daily bread," they are thinking of themselves as beggars, asking God for help. When people realize that they have nothing in this life that will help them get into the kingdom of heaven, they will humble themselves and repent of their sins with deep contrition. Then, as helpless beggars, they will be accepted by the king of heaven. They cannot come with arrogance, self-righteousness, and assumptions of self-sufficiency.

On one occasion, Jesus told a parable to illustrate the widely differing attitudes of a helpless sinner and a self-sufficient person who was relying on his own spiritual accomplishments and goodness. Jesus directed the parable to individuals who were "confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else." I am quoting from verses in Luke 18: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God have mercy on me, a sinner.'" Jesus then added, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (*Luke 18:10-13*).

That's the message of verse 3: People who come to God as beggars will be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. The good news for the spiritually poor and oppressed in this world is that, while salvation cannot be earned, it is available as a gift from God. Spiritually poor people will be accepted because they recognize their poverty. On the other hand, people who think they have it all will be excluded because of their self-righteousness. Everyone must be humble before the Lord in order to enter the kingdom, and when a person becomes so, he/she begins to experience the benefits of heaven.

Notice that the verbs in verse 3 are in present tense: "Blessed are you," and "yours is the kingdom." Jesus did not say "yours will be." The point is that kingdom blessings begin in this life and carry over into eternity. Hence, those who are "poor" are able to rejoice even in the midst of their earthly destitution.

This first beatitude is the foundational truth on which the other beatitudes are based. The acknowledgement of spiritual impoverishment is what allows God's Spirit to begin to form in us other kingdom attitudes. Verse 4 declares that those who "mourn" "will be comforted." Mourning is closely linked to being "poor in spirit." Mourning is also closely associated with begging and prayer. Mourning is an acknowledgement that circumstances are not good. It is a plea that conditions should be better. Some parents grieve over their disappointments concerning their children. Jesus wept over the pride and arrogance of the people of Jerusalem. Believers grieve over the dishonor shown to God by the behaviors they see in our evil world. In all such cases, the mourner is eager for the circumstances to change.

The word for "mourn" is the strongest possible word in the Greek language for grieving. It is the word used when grieving the death of a loved one. It is grieving with such anguish that it consumes the whole person. The word "mourn" is in the verb form which indicates a present and on-going experience.

Jesus promised that people who presently mourn over spiritual conditions "will (future tense) be comforted." This is because circumstances will someday change to become what God wants them to be, and that will be an occasion of contentment and freedom from anxiety. Those who "mourn" over their circumstances, perhaps over their own sins, perhaps over the injustices and wicked behaviors of people in the world, know that their grieving is only for a limited period of time. Kingdom people know that sin and evil will not have the final victory. They know that the Messiah/King will turn all that away someday, and their hope for that future day brings them present day comfort.

The next statement was verse 5, “Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.” I’m sure Jesus’ listeners were beginning to furrow their brows and scratch their heads at His unexpected and paradoxical statements. Jesus was presenting a very unconventional philosophy of life. He was saying things which seemed to not make sense. The first Beatitude extolled those who were willing to openly acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy. The second those who had a deep anguishing grief over personal sin and adverse circumstances. And then Jesus brought up the subject of meekness and submissiveness.

Most of the individuals on the mountainside would be identified as unhappy discontented Jews because they were living under Roman domination. These Jews were hoping that Jesus was the Messiah who would authoritatively sweep the Romans out of the land and establish a strong earthly kingdom. Instead they were hearing Him extol the virtues of poverty of spirit, mourning, and meekness.

The word for “meekness” in verse 5 (*Greek: praotes*) actually has nothing to do with weakness. The word represented a "controlled desire to see someone else's interests advanced over personal interests." In ancient Greek literature, “meekness” described powerful war stallions that were responsive and submissive to their riders. It was strength under the control of a master. Meekness is the opposite of self-will. It is the attitude of submission to authority. That didn’t sound like an acceptable Jewish attitude.

The phrase, "For they shall inherit the earth," is from Psalm 37 (*verse 11*). This Psalm contrasts wicked people with those who are righteous. Throughout the Psalm it appears that the wicked are successful in every way and the righteous are losing. Compared to the wicked, it seems that the righteous were at a disadvantage. They were not to exploit and oppress others; they were not to retaliate or seek vengeance, they were not to be violent and or work for their own advantage. Instead, they were to meekly submit themselves to God's will by trusting in the Lord (*v.3*), delighting in the Lord (*vs. 4*), committing their way unto the Lord (*v.5*), and resting in the Lord (*vs. 7*). The result was that they would "inherit the earth." They would eventually triumph over their enemies and circumstances. They would receive a double portion of inheritance blessings from God because they were faithful — trusting God through everything, and allowing Him to be in control of their circumstances. Trusting God and waiting on Him to act, that was the requirement for Kingdom people.

The next Beatitude mentions those “who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” A starving person will expend every effort to satisfy the inner cravings of the body. Individuals who are “hungry” in a spiritual sense have an appetite for God’s provisions, and they are eager to receive the gifts of God’s grace. The promise to spiritually hungry people is that they will be satisfied.

Righteousness refers to purity of heart and correctness of behavior. There is both an individual and a corporate need of righteousness. Kingdom people want to please God in their personal lives — to do what God wants, and out of this personal desire grows the desire for the world to be filled with righteousness — for there to be social justice in this world that is unrighteous and unjust. Concern for personal righteousness cannot be separated from concern for the world around us.

No doubt the listeners on the mountain understood that righteousness was in relation to God and His Law. Their problem was their low view of God's righteous standards. The Jews, especially their religious leaders, were mostly concerned with the external requirements of the Law. They did not have a deep hunger for God's absolute standards of inner holiness. The words of Jesus were designed to get them to think deeper within themselves.

This Beatitude about hunger and thirst is a paradox within a paradox. It implies that the person who is hungry and thirsty may at the same time be filled, and the more that person is filled, the more he/she will be hungry and thirsty. There is a cycle of blessing here: hungering and thirsting, feeding on the things of God, being filled and satisfied, yet always longing for more — the true kingdom person will never have enough. Those with a voracious appetite for the Word of God and the Person of Jesus Christ will progress to higher and higher levels of spiritual maturity and understanding of God’s ways. Genuine kingdom citizens will never cease to crave for personal and social righteousness.

I hope you are beginning to recognize how significantly the Beatitudes contradict the world's philosophy and values. Personal power and influence, inner fortitude, and self-assertiveness — these are among the values that are emphasized by the world, and the successful people of the world frequently get what they want through intimidation, manipulation, and exploitation. This is not the way people of the kingdom should think and act. Kingdom ways are radical ways, unlike the ways of the world.

The words of Jesus did not resonate with many of the listeners on the mountainside, first, because they had preconceived ideas about the Messiah, and the teaching of Jesus seemed irrelevant to what they wanted. Second, the truths about the kingdom were not easily grasped by those who heard Jesus' teaching because the principles of God's kingdom were so radically different than anything they had previously heard. We can imagine the challenge faced by the Apostles as they began to think through and adjust to the new ways of Jesus. It's the same adjustment that new believers must make after they are selected and called to be with Jesus. Because the Holy Spirit is within them, their ways of thinking and acting will be radically different than previously.