

The Sermon on the Mount: Do You See What I See?

1Cor.1:25-29 Matthew 5:1-12

Sermon series for fall: the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7). This will take us right up to Advent. See outline; this gives you a look at the flow of the Sermon on the Mount, and the topics covered. This is a brilliant presentation by Jesus in how he arranges this set of teachings.

As we go along, we will see that Jesus covers some down-to-earth topics that border on meddling: from money to marriage to loving enemies to dealing with anger. We've heard that phrase, "Jesus saves." And it's true, Jesus saves. But Jesus also *meddles*, as part of his saving work. He meddles with our lives *throughout* the gospel, when we take it to heart—but he meddles with the intent to bless and to transform and reconcile. So that's my new bumper sticker: Jesus meddles!

The invitation to us in this series is to allow Jesus to meddle in our lives, to welcome the challenges so that he can bring the grace and transformation we need and want, as we become a blessing and a gracious presence to others. Especially these days! Because the Sermon on the Mount will help keep us grounded during this tumultuous time. We're going to receive down-to-earth and

practical instruction about how to live life in a changing world, and be reminded of our identity, in Christ, when we're tempted to think or act in unhelpful ways.

As you see from the outline, the first part of the Sermon on the Mount is preamble, or prelude. These first three utterances of Jesus are the preamble of grace. From the very beginning of Jesus' teaching, we are given grace before he gives us anything to **do**.

Today we begin with the beatitudes; again, these are not so much something we're supposed to **do** as much as something we're supposed to **see**.

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 `Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 `Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 `Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 `Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 `Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 `Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 `Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Here—and in the rest of the sermon on the mount—Jesus is describing what has been called the upside down Kingdom (book title by Donald Kraybill, 1979). Where everything they understood from their culture as to who was blessed by God and who wasn't, and what it meant to live for God, is completely turned on its head, and turned around. Jesus often used these backward, paradoxical phrases: the last shall be first, the least shall be the greatest, and so forth. Upside-down and backwards.

What he's telling us is that his people, the church, are called to be a community that is alternative to the dominant culture around us. We'll talk about this as we go along in this series. We are to be different—not because we are better than others, or perfect, but because we live our lives by a **completely different vision** of the world, of ourselves, and of others, based on God's love and

redemption of us, and based on the reality of the Kingdom of heaven. And to the culture around us, it's upside down and backwards.

As it says in 1Cor.1:25-29:

25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

Author and activist Shane Claiborne has said that God wants to "save the world through fascination." Save the world through fascination. The idea is that people would look, for example, at the Israelites (in their day) and say, "What is up with these people? Why do they live and act that way? It's so weird. But, maybe it's worth looking into." The surrounding peoples looked at the people of Israel and were fascinated; because they lived by such a different vision.

And in this preamble of grace, and throughout the sermon on the mount, Jesus is in some ways saying, "I want you to see the world, yourselves, and others

so differently, and *treat* the world, yourselves, and others so differently that you become a fascination to others. An oddity.”

One of my favorite short story authors is Flannery O’Connor. And Flannery O’Connor once paraphrased John 8:32 this way: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.” What Shane Claiborne and Flannery O’Connor are saying is: when you follow the way of Christ, what identifies you as a follower of Christ is that you’re a little different, maybe even a little weird. A fascination to others. The Apostle Paul picks up on this in 1st Corinthians when he says that God chose the foolish things of this world, the weak things, the *odd* things, to demonstrate his love and his power. It’s a fascination to others.

With that in mind, in the beatitudes, Jesus is inviting us to see the world through his eyes, and his Father’s eyes—and it’s odd, upside down and backwards, even a fascination. He is inviting us to see what he sees; to see the world through his eyes. Right at the outset of the sermon on the mount, Jesus wants to make it very clear that he sees very differently than the world sees. He sees *people* very differently than the world sees them, and we are invited to see as he sees, as God our Father sees.

So the beatitudes aren't so much something we're supposed to **do**, as much as something that we're supposed to **see**. This is the world as God sees it, where the poor in spirit, the meek, the suffering, the simple-hearted, the ones who mend relationships are blessed. Christian writer Dallas Willard puts it this way:

*"The beatitudes are **not** teachings on how to be blessed. They are not instructions to do anything. No one is actually being told that they are better off for being poor, for grieving, for being persecuted, and so on... The beatitudes cannot be good news if they are understood as a set of how-to's for achieving blessedness. They would only amount, then, to a new legalism, a new Phariseeism."*

So, there is nothing to do here except to adjust our vision. And Jesus will pepper his teaching in the sermon on the mount with reminders to keep our vision clear, as he does throughout all his teaching. He gives us corrective eye exams from time to time! This is Jesus, our optometrist/ophthalmologist.

With the beatitudes, Jesus is simply making a series of statements based on Kingdom realities; this is the world as he sees it. And it's completely the opposite of how people often see it—by nature and by cultural conditioning.

Jesus is describing the upside-down, backwards Kingdom. Where everything is turned on its head, or turned around. For example, the world sees,

and says, “Happy are those who have it all together and don’t need help because they pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.” Jesus sees (differently) and says, “blessed by God are those who know they *don’t* have it all together, and aren’t afraid to admit that they need help.”

The world sees and says, “How happy are the go-getters and the achievers who get things done and know how to get their way.” Jesus sees and says, “blessed by God are those who put *others* first, and are hungry for God to get *his* way.”

The world sees and says, “How happy are those who have made it to the top and who have achieved the pinnacle of success.” Jesus sees and says, “Blessed by God are those who choose to humble themselves and live on a path of downward mobility.”

And the rest of the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is going to reflect the upside-down, backwards nature of this Kingdom:

- where we take steps *toward* people in reconciliation, instead of avoiding them or holding onto resentment;
- where we turn the other cheek and *love* our personal enemies instead of retaliating against them;

- where we choose a path of simple trust and generous downward mobility, rather than anxiously acquire and keep;
- where we don't criticize and judge others, but bless them and do good to them;
- a Kingdom where Jesus-people bring wholeness and well-being to others; shalom, peace—whether at home or in the workplace or school wherever we find ourselves in the world. Because, as Jesus will tell us next week, we are salt *of the earth* and light *to the world*.

So the beatitudes are really an introduction to the entire sermon on the mount: What Jesus is saying is, before I teach how I want you to live and *act*, let me first tell you what *I see*, and what I want *you to see* and affirm as true. Then the rest of this teaching will make sense to you.

The beatitudes are a call for us to see as God sees. And in doing that we gradually, in an un-self-conscious way, become what the beatitudes declare, and we discover that *we are* blessed. So they aren't rules or expectations to live up to, but qualities that are formed in us when we see rightly, and follow the Jesus way.

These beatitudes are an invitation to a new way of seeing. To affirm as blessed what & who God affirms as blessed. Jesus wants us to hear these words and say “yes.” Yes, the poor in spirit are blessed—I see it. Yes, the meek are blessed—I see it. Yes, those who hunger and thirst for right relationship are blessed—I see it.

Now, I’m guessing that when the disciples first heard these words, these pronouncement of blessings (and the teaching that follows), I’m guessing that this was so shocking to their right side up, ‘the-first-shall-be-*first*’ world view, that their gut reaction would have been to say (inwardly), “No! That isn’t how the world works. That isn’t how God works.”

The poor, the meek, those who are mourning are **not** blessed—by definition and by cultural norm. Having it all together and being prosperous and happy all the time was a sign of God’s *true* blessing in their Jewish/eastern worldview and history. So, no! What are you talking about, Jesus?!?!

And the rest of the Sermon on the Mount comes as a shock as well: don’t hold onto anger? No! Turn the other cheek and not retaliate? No! *Love* your enemies? You can’t be serious?!? Consider the lilies of the field? That’s unproductive and a waste of time; get to work!

To get an idea of how radical and upside down and odd this would've sounded to the ears of Jesus' followers, picture the Israeli-Palestinian conflict today, and the prevailing world views and attitudes and actions they take against each other. Can you picture it? Can you see these people hurling insults at each other, bulldozing homes, throwing rocks, planting roadside bombs, hurling grenades at each other? Can you picture it? Now, picture Jesus stepping into *that* and saying "blessed are the meek;" "love your enemies," and so forth.

How do you think these high conflict middle easterners from Israel, Palestine, Syria, Iran, today would respond to these beatitudes and the rest of this teaching in the Sermon on the Mount! If you think about it, these were the same kinds of people Jesus was speaking to back then; these conflicts are very deep, and very old. How would they react *today* if they heard these words from Jesus? I think some would laugh at him; some would run him out of town; and some would want to kill him. They would say "no!" Get out of our way. You're a loser.

Remember the disciples, who return from a short-term reconnaissance mission trip among the Samaritans who did not welcome them because Jesus and they were heading to Jerusalem? Here's a mini Israel-Palestine conflict—Jews and Samaritans hated each other. So when Jesus sends a few of his people ahead

of the larger group into Samaria to make their air b&b reservations and announce Jesus' arrival, the Samaritans told them they're not welcome—because they are Jews headed to Jerusalem. How did the disciples react to that? What did the disciples say to Jesus when they came back? (Luke 9:52) "*Jesus, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them??*" That was their solution to their problems! Incinerate 'em! I suppose this is one conflict management strategy! (and it's often our reaction too, isn't it?)

After the disciples ask that question, all Luke tells us is that Jesus rebuked them, and they went on their way. I jokingly think that Luke didn't record Jesus' actual words of rebuke because there would've been too many "bleeps." It got censored out by Luke. But that was, and still is—as we know—the prevailing cultural mindset. Where you do hold grudges; you do get even and retaliate. And Jesus is saying to his followers, "You are going to see and live differently. I know, it's odd. It may be a little difficult. However, this is the Kingdom way."

So, the reflexive reaction to Jesus' blessings, and the rest of the teaching, is to say "no." And it's not just they who said no to this reflexively. We all do. I do. It's human nature. Which is why, by God's grace, ***we have to learn how to think things and do things that don't come naturally to us.*** We have to learn how to

think things and do things that don't come naturally to us—at least not right away. It will gradually become more reflexive and natural as we grow and practice the Jesus way, the Kingdom way. Because the natural reaction to this teaching, if we take it to heart, is to say no. Or not yet. Or not me. Or that sounds like a good idea, but what planet are you coming from, Jesus? Be realistic. C'mon. Like the disciples did at first.

But we know that over time these disciples began to say “yes.” It took them a while; not until the middle of the book of Acts, especially in Acts 10 when Peter has a transformative experience. So it took them a while. And it may take us a while too—to learn to see as God sees, and affirm as blessed what & who God affirms as blessed, and then act accordingly.

A few years ago someone asked me to help them find a quote in the Bible. Here is what they asked, “Can you help me find in Scripture where it says, “God helps those who help themselves.”

We know that it doesn't say that in the Bible. Jesus didn't say that. That's from the protestant work ethic Bible—no thanks to Benjamin Franklin (actually it was Sidney Algernon before him; Ben Franklin just made it famous because he

liked it so much). This earnest individual was disappointed to learn that it's not in the Bible, nor is it a Biblical concept. It's a works-oriented concept.

Now, there is *some* truth to this saying: you know, don't be lazy, don't expect others to do what you can be responsible for doing yourself. There is some truth to it. But it's a graceless truth.

The offense of Christianity, and of the grace of the beatitudes, is that God helps those who *can't* help themselves. And, God helps those who help others.

I'm looking forward to the next few weeks and how Jesus will help me and us adjust our vision and learn to live in his way. The invitation to us is to see this upside-down, backwards Kingdom.

SERMON SERIES

The Sermon the Mount: Matthew 5-7 The Kingdom of Right Relationships

Preamble of Grace: Putting on Our Christ-Colored Glasses

The Upside-Down, Backwards Kingdom (5:1-12)

Our Positive Influence in the World (5:13-16)

Jesus Fulfills: The Real Meaning of Righteousness (5:17-20)

Relationship with others

Reconciliation (5:21-26)

Lust, Adultery, Divorce, oh my! (5:27-32)

Just Say Yes—or No (5:33-37)

Enemy Love (5:38-48)

Judging Others, the Golden Rule (7:1-6, 12)

Relationship with God

Living for an Audience of One (6:1-18)

Real Trust: Money and Possessions (6:19-34)

God's Open-Door Policy (7:7-11)

Putting it Into Practice, or, The Practicing Church (7:13-27)