

Matthew 5:1-16

*'the more I read these 3 chapters – Matthew 5, 6 and 7 –
the more I am both drawn to them and shamed by them.'* Don Carson

CENTRAL THEME: *The upside down kingdom*

The standards of the kingdom of heaven are not those of this world. Jesus calls his followers to live in a revolutionary, counter-cultural way. But we are to live out this new way of life in full view of the watching world.

Context:

Matthew structures his account around 5 blocks of teaching, each concluding with the phrase *'When Jesus had finished saying these things...'* (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1) The Sermon on the Mount forms the heart of the first section.

The arrival of king Jesus brings the announcement that *'the kingdom of heaven has come near'* (3:2). In the verses immediately preceding chapter 5 Jesus proclaims *'the good news of the kingdom'* and gives us a foretaste of life in the kingdom, as he gathers a great diverse crowd, and brings them physical healing and spiritual deliverance (4:23-25). Whilst it is true that God is king over all the universe, the kingdom of heaven refers to a subset of the universe – those people who willingly submit to God's kingship now. Hence not everyone will enter the kingdom (7:21). So the kingdom of heaven in Matthew refers to the dynamic reign of Jesus which brings salvation and life. It is both present and future in Jesus' teaching. We enter the kingdom now as we put our faith in Christ the king. But we will not enjoy it fully until Jesus' return. It is both *now* and *not yet*.

In ch 5-7 Jesus teaches the crowds what the values of the kingdom are. What lifestyle should characterise those who are part of the kingdom of heaven?

1. The Beatitudes:

'Blessed' means happy or fortunate or approved. Humans can bless God in the sense that we celebrate and approve of who he is and what he has done. For God to bless us is to declare us approved, which brings happiness.

Structure

Note that the first and the last beatitude promise the same thing – the kingdom of heaven. Note too that they promise it now, whereas the 6 beatitudes in between all promise blessings in the future. Martin Lloyd-Jones is probably right in seeing 1-3 as the fundamental attitude required to join the kingdom; 4-6 as concerning life in the kingdom, and the final two as preparing us for the inevitable opposition that comes to those in the kingdom:

Humble access

i. *Blessed are the poor in spirit...*

What does this mean? It is the opposite to pride. It is the attitude that does not think / assume that I deserve God's blessing or acceptance. In Isaiah 66:2 God declares *'These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit and who tremble at my word.'* It is no surprise that the kingdom of heaven belongs to

the poor in spirit since it is only people with that attitude who will come to God asking for the forgiveness and help which we need if we are to be made right with him.

ii. *Blessed are those who mourn...*

The context dictates that Jesus is not primarily speaking about bereavement, but rather lamenting our spiritual poverty before God. It is the attitude displayed by Isaiah when he had his glorious vision of God in Isaiah 6. His response was to cry 'Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.' The promise for those who share this demeanour is that they will know God's comfort.

This does not mean that Christians should be perpetually glum. Jesus says plenty about the rejoicing and life that he brings. However, it is right that sinful people are marked to an extent by a sorrow over their sins.

iii. *Blessed are the meek...*

Meekness is related to poverty of spirit, but it is not the same thing. Meekness concerns a refusal to promote self and a preference for the needs of others. It is perhaps seen most simply in whether we are more keen to listen or to speak. We dare not view it as weakness, because it was one of the hallmarks of the strongest man who ever lived – Jesus Christ. Indeed Paul's teaching in Philippians 2:1-11 is a celebration of Jesus' meekness and the exaltation that he earned through it. Just as his meek service led to his ultimate exaltation in that passage, so here Jesus promises that his meek followers will one day inherit the earth.

Pursuing righteousness

iv. *Blessed are those who hunger & thirst for righteousness...*

The NT speaks of righteousness in two (related) ways. First, it can mean the status which we need if we are to be accepted by God. Second it can refer to the pattern of behaviour which conforms with God's will. Clearly we should hunger for both. In that sense this is a bridge between 1-3 and 4-7. I wonder whether we ever hunger for the second kind of righteousness once we have the first? Once we've been justified through Jesus' death in our place, do we really hunger and thirst for more righteousness in our life, for greater holiness and less sin? Do we long for those things as a starving man longs for food and water? Wonderfully God promises that he will fill those who have this longing.

v. *Blessed are the merciful...*

On the surface this appears to be legalistic – we must earn God's mercy through showing mercy to others. However, this simply cannot be the case, for it would cease to be mercy if we earned it! Mercy is about God withholding judgement from us in spite of what we deserve, not because we have earned such treatment from him. The point rather is that as sinners who have been shown mercy by God in the past, and who will receive his mercy in full at judgement day, we should be marked by our merciful treatment of others. Matthew 18:21-35 shows what a serious matter it is for those who are recipients of God's mercy to fail to show it to others

vi. *Blessed are the pure in heart...*

The heart is not the seat of emotions in Hebrew thought, but the centre of being. Jesus warns that it is where sin comes from in us (Matthew 15:19ff). His followers though are to seek inward purity. Jesus warns in verse 20 that we cannot see the kingdom of heaven unless our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees. Theirs was an outward righteousness. God longs that purity should not be a matter of outward action, but also be an inward reality – purity of intention and of desire; purity in the things we daydream about and live for; purity in what we value and approve of.

vii. *Blessed are the peacemakers...*

Jesus is the great peacemaker (Ephesians 2:11-22), reconciling us to both God and each other. The gospel is the message of peace with God. But Jesus' words are not limited to gospel proclamation. In our relationships with friends and family, we are to be peacemakers. Those who do so will be called children of God. That is no surprise. In the Bible the fundamental characteristic of sons is that they are like their fathers (eg John 8:39, 44).

Persecuted for righteousness

viii. *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness*

This is the most surprising blessing of all – count yourself blessed when people persecute you! Note that it's not any persecution that is blessed, only persecution that comes from righteous conduct (cf 1Peter 3:13ff; 4:12-16). This, like verse 3 is linked to present enjoyment of the kingdom of heaven. Just as it's impossible to enter the kingdom without being poor in spirit, so following Jesus will inevitably lead to opposition and even persecution sometimes. We cannot expect to live differently from the world and be accepted and affirmed by the world. However, we will not always find this response. Verse 16 explains that sometimes people will see the light of our lives and glorify God (cf 1Peter 2:12).

Blessed are you when persecuted because of Christ

Verses 11-12 expand on the theme of persecution. It is tied now to personal allegiance to Jesus. Righteousness can't be defined apart of Jesus. As well as assurance of heavenly reward, Jesus now teaches how we should respond – with rejoicing. This is a striking theme throughout the New Testament (see Acts 5:41; 16:25).

2. Salt & light

Two very simple metaphors follow in verses 13-16.

The link with what comes before is clear: one might be tempted to think that their only hope of living out such radically counter-cultural standards is to retreat from the world into a pure, monastic community. But that is not what Jesus requires. He calls his people to live as citizens of heaven in the middle of the world.

Salt was a flavouring and a preservative. Christians are to be a blessing to the wider culture as we encourage others to live

The light image is even simpler. In a world of darkness and confusion the church is to show a better way of living that will attract the world to the ways of God.

APPLICATION

The aim of the Sermon on the Mount is not primarily to induce guilt – look at how far short we fall from these perfect standards! Rather it is to set before us a glorious vision of a better way of life. Who would not want to be part of a kingdom where people behave like this?! Inevitably though we will feel a rightful sense of guilt and shortcoming as we study these standards. Such feelings should drive us back to our king, and to the first two beatitudes!

QUESTIONS

- What are the values that your friends and colleagues live by?.
- Where are you most aware of the differences between your values and theirs?
[Now read the passage. You may want to introduce the theme of the kingdom of heaven through explaining 4:23-25 and the model of the kingdom we see there]

Verses 1-5:

- Who is Jesus teaching? [*both his disciples and the crowd*]
- What links the first 3 beatitudes in verses 3-5? What behaviour is being commended?
- What reward is promised, and when?
- How is this counter-cultural?

Verses 6-9

- What does it mean to hunger for righteousness?
- Does being forgiven mean you are more or less likely to hunger for righteousness in your life?
- How do we know that we shouldn't read verse 7 legalistically?
- What is required and what promised in verses 8-9?
- What reward is promised?

Verses 10-12

- What is the theme here? Why might it follow on from verses 3-9?
- What reward is promised?
- Will the response to a godly life always be persecution? [*see verse 16 and perhaps remind us of 1Peter 2:12*]

Verses 13-16

- What is the meaning of the two images Jesus gives in 13-16?
 - Why might we particularly need to hear that after verses 3-12?
 - How do these verses encourage us?
- What do you find most encouraging, and what most challenging in Jesus' teaching here?