



Week 1

Day 1 – Matthew 5:1-2

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

Understanding the Passage

After Jesus was baptized, he fasted in the desert and was tempted, and then called his disciples. Before he gets too deep into the weeds of ministry, he gets his core group together and gives them a training. Though this sermon is read by all of Jesus' followers – and rightly so – it was originally only delivered to Jesus' disciples. It was meant to be a "leadership retreat" of sorts so that Jesus could get his disciples aligned with his mission.

He's not using this sermon to impose a new moral teaching, but to really paint a picture of how the Kingdom of God operates. The world will be changed; not because God imposes a new order, but because the followers of Christ will reflect a new way to live and love. Jesus uses this sermon to say, "this is what is going to be different about you."

He's also not using this sermon to demonstrate to them how they can earn God's grace. They already have it. And it is that grace, which has already been imbued to them, that will allow them to live in this way.

The scripture says that Jesus went up on a mountain to deliver this teaching. The Gospel of Matthew was written for the Jews to show them how Jesus fulfills all of the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible. Until Jesus, Moses was the greatest prophet of Judaism. He went up Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. In a parallel to this, Jesus goes up a mountain to deliver the fulfillment of the law to his disciples.

By the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 8:1), it says large crowds began to follow him as soon as he left the mountain. Since it was at the very beginning of his ministry and he was only teaching the disciples, how would these crowds have already known to follow him?

Lay archaeologist B. Cobbey Crisler and professional sound engineer Mark Miles did an experiment in 1970 in which they set up equipment at a cove on the shore of the Sea of Galilee near Tabgha. They found that the terrain served as a natural amphitheatre and would have projected Jesus' voice. They continued testing all around the Sea of Galilee and found that there are many "natural amphitheatres" around the sea.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How has the grace of God empowered you to live in a different way?
 2. Make a list of parallels between Moses and Jesus. Make a list of differences.
 3. How is living as a Christian more than just following a moral teaching?
 4. Do you think Jesus would have changed his sermon if it was meant for a full audience of followers rather than just his disciples?
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Day 2 - Matthew 5:3-12

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

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

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

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

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

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

Understanding the Passage

The beatitudes are blessings, not commands. But what follows them is Jesus' instructions for a new way of living, and it would be pretty darn hard to live out the commands in the rest of the sermon without putting your heart in the right place first.

The word "beatitude" comes from the Latin root word "beātītūdō", which means "blessedness" or "happiness". We tend to think of happiness as something we can only experience when things are going well in our lives, but this sermon clearly contradicts that line of thinking.

The rewards for those who Jesus says are blessed are not uniformly delivered. In verses 3 and 10 (poor in spirit and persecuted for righteousness' sake) the blessing is already there

– it says, theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven. They are already able to experience the nearness of God and the comfort that comes from the kingdom. But for those described in verses 4 to 9, the reward is coming in the future (“they **will**”). This demonstrates for us that we live in an “already / not yet” time. The kingdom is in-breaking, but it is not fulfilled yet.

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will teach the disciples a prayer, which we now commonly refer to as The Lord’s Prayer. In it, he prays, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This reminds us that there is much work still to be done and that the kingdom is not fully realized. But we get to be a part of that work. Living according to the Beatitudes is how we help bring about the kingdom here on earth.

The first Beatitude is confusing. What does it mean to be “poor in spirit”? That phrase comes from a Hebrew term: *anawim*. Hundreds of years before Jesus lives, the Israelites were exiled and almost all of them were taken out of Israel and Judea by the Assyrians and Babylonians. A few Israelites were permitted to stay – that is because they were unable to work and were worth nothing to their captors. The ones deemed totally useless were referred to as the “*anawim*.” When Jesus describes those who are “poor in spirit” as *anawim*, he is saying that they have no resources or strengths of their own – they are totally dependent on God. Though the world judges them and condemns them as useless, God sees their dependence and blesses them.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Why does Jesus begin this sermon by talking about those who are blessed?
2. What are some things that cause you to mourn? How do you feel comforted in the mourning? If you don’t, why do you think that is?
3. In Joel 2:12-13, the scripture tells us to bring our mourning to God and God will be compassionate. Do you usually turn to God first when you’re mourning or do you look to other people?
4. Rewrite the Beatitudes in your own words.

Day 3 - Matthew 5:3-12

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

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

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

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

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

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

Understanding the Passage

Frederick Buechner wrote,

The world says, 'Mind your own business,' and Jesus says, 'There is no such thing as your own business.'

The world says, 'Follow the wisest course and be a success,' and Jesus says, 'Follow me and be crucified.'

The world says, 'Law and order,' and Jesus says, 'Love.'

The world says, 'Get' and Jesus says, 'Give.'

Lots of elementary schools have "Opposite Day." The idea is that everything that happens that day will be the opposite of what normally takes place – shoes are worn on the wrong feet; dessert is eaten before lunch; most of the day is spent playing and singing and at recess. There is no question that the Beatitudes begin to paint a picture of an opposite world – often called an Upside-Down Kingdom.

Take a look at social media. The hashtag #blessed is ubiquitous. It is used when people post pictures of their new car, their fancy vacation, their kids' acceptance to a certain school. The meaning of blessing has been so distorted that it is narrowly interpreted to mean material goods or access to something exclusive. In Numbers 6, God tells Moses to offer this benediction to the Israelites:

"The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace."

The blessing that God is promising them is that God will be with them. That God will make God's face shine upon them – to be present and near to them. That God will be gracious – quick to forgive. That God will give them peace.

Nowhere in there does it say, "The Lord bless you and give you mounds of disposable income" or "The Lord bless you and give you perfect health."

According to Jesus, it is the impoverished, the people without power, the lonely folks who are blessed. It is not, inherently, the ones who are powerful or attractive or rich. The true measure of a person is not their action, but the contents of their heart.

You might be thinking, "Well, this seems impossibly hard. No one of the world can be this way. This is so counter-cultural." The truth is, yes, it is hard. And Christ-followers don't fit into the world as it is. Nor are we meant to escape it. Jesus tells us, "You will not fit in—and that is the point—but this is still how you're supposed to live in the world and amongst other people so that you can be a reflection and a foretaste of the Kingdom of God."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Who does the world seem to believe will “inherit the earth?” What is the difference between them and the meek?
 2. Have you ever described yourself as “blessed” in a way that now seems in conflict with what it means to experience blessing as God’s presence?
 3. Which of the Beatitudes is the most counter-cultural to you? Why?
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Day 4 - Matthew 5:13-16

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Understanding the Passage

In the time of Jesus, salt was used as a currency, to preserve foods, and to flavor foods. It was one of the more valuable commodities that existed at the time, and the connotations to currency would have been widely understood by those who heard Jesus’ words that he was talking about something important when he used salt as an example.

It was also used to preserve foods – most specifically, it was used to keep meat and fish from becoming rotten. In that same way, Jesus wants his followers to help keep the world from rotting. Instead of contributing to the decay of the world around us, Christians are meant to bring life.

Salt was also used to flavor food because it is so distinct from other seasonings. When you take a bite of scrambled eggs without salt, they are fine but not especially compelling. But when they have a bit of salt sprinkled in them, it transforms the eggs completely. In the same way, if you’re not different than the world around you – if people can’t taste you – then what’s the point?

The scripture says, “you **are**.” It does not say, “you can be” or “you will eventually be.” No, just as salt and light have inherent qualities that come from the creator, you do too. You do not have to work to become salt or light. You are imbued with a purpose. The important thing is that you recognize that purpose and live into it rather than trying to minimize it.

In the way that salt changes the taste of food and light brings a new perspective to things, Christ followers change the very nature of the world they are in.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. In the way that salt stands out because its different than other seasonings, does your faith make you stand out in the midst of the world?

2. How do Christians stand out enough to make a difference when they've assimilated to our culture?
 3. What qualities do you feel that God has imbued you with in order to be a beacon for the Kingdom?
 4. When your light shines before others, what is it that they are able to see? What qualities or actions become apparent to others?
 5. How is the church a light to the world?
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Day 5 - Matthew 5:17-20

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Understanding the Passage

In this passage, Jesus paints the picture of a middle road between those who want Christianity to be about rules and laws, and those who are so focused on grace that they don't feel bound to obedience. He does not reject the law – in fact, the opposite is true: he emphasizes a deepening of the law.

The Hebrew Bible, which we call the Old Testament, is divided into three sections: Law, Prophets, and Writings. In this passage, Jesus says he did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. The Greek word for fulfill (πληρώω) means “to give the true meaning to or to provide the real significance of something.” That fulfillment came in the form of Jesus's life, death and resurrection.

Because we, as humans prone to sin, cannot keep the law on our own, the only way we can be righteous (with righteousness exceeding the scribes and Pharisees) is by staying in relationship with the one that is utterly righteous. We enter the kingdom of heaven by being in a relationship with Jesus and submitting to his instruction.

Part of the reason that this is so hard for 21st century Americans to hear is that we think of rules as fun-killers, and laws are a form of rules. We see them as restrictive, when in fact, they give us a great deal of freedom. When we know the outer edges of how we should act, we have more freedom. The lane stripes on the road keep us safe by showing us the outer edges of where we are allowed to be.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What are some boundaries, like lane stripes on a road, that are in place in your life that help you obey God?

2. What do you think of the Old Testament laws? Do you have a negative view of them?
 3. How does this instruction from Jesus convict us for our tendencies to both legalism and cheap grace?
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Video Questions:

1. The Sermon on the Mount is probably one of the most quoted parts of the Bible. It has been said that it is so well liked because people don't really understand it. What do you think of that?
2. How would you sum up the Beatitudes in one phrase or sentence?
3. What are some of the practical ways that you feel God's grace has created a new operating system in you?
4. Dr. Pace and Rev. Montgomery Mears talked about how the followers of Jesus in a community – churches – are meant to be distinctive from the way the world operates. When you think about the community of Christ-followers you're a part of, does it seem distinctive from the rest of the world?
5. What are some ways that you put the lamp under the bushel?
6. What does it mean to point to the Light of the World? What are some tangible ways you can do that?
7. The way that we respect and respond to the Law is directly correlated to the way we feel about God. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? What does your behavior reflect about the way you feel about God?
8. Notes, reflections, and prayer requests.