

FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM**MATTHEW 5:1-12***by Elaine Poproski*

Do you know what I mean when I refer to the Sermon on the Mount? It's one of the best known New Testament passages. It's a compilation of Jesus' teaching that Matthew organized into a single teaching event right near the beginning of the gospel, in chapters 5 – 7. It includes things like the Beatitudes, which I just read; it includes a bunch of statements in which Jesus says, "You have heard it said... But I say..." – things like, "you have heard it said, 'don't murder,' but I say, 'Don't even get angry,'" or "you have heard it said, 'love your neighbour,' but I say, 'love your enemy as well'." The Sermon on the Mount includes teaching on prayer, which includes the Lord's Prayer, as well as teaching on things like worry, and judging people, and what it means to be a true disciple. It covers a lot. Today we're starting to explore the Sermon on the Mount, which we'll be doing for the next couple of months.

Last week we heard that Jesus' message was this: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.ⁱ It was the same message John the Baptist had been preaching. It was an invitation – a plea, really – to turn back to God – to reorient themselves to God's values. Everything Jesus did and said for the rest of his life was about that invitation: Repent! for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Every person he healed, every truth he taught, the entirety of his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection... It was all connected to that singular message: Repent! for the kingdom of heaven has come near!

The first thing Jesus did when he began his ministry, was invite Simon, Andrew, James, and John to be his disciples. Then, with the brothers in tow, we read at the end of Matthew 4 that he "went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and illness among the people. News about him spread," not just throughout Galilee, but throughout Syria to the north, Judea to the south, the region across the Jordan to the east and all through the Greek cities east of the Sea of Galilee.ⁱⁱ

That is the backdrop to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was famous. People heard about him; people sought him out, bringing the sick and the crippled in hopes of a miracle. Every single time someone was healed, they experienced a little taste of that kingdom of heaven Jesus proclaimed. But he didn't just do miracles. He taught people and he demonstrated the ways of God's kingdom in his own interactions and conversations with people.

God's people had lost their way long ago. They'd forgotten what it meant that they were God's people. They knew full well that the world they lived in was nothing like the world as it was supposed to be, but they'd lost the hope of God's promised kingdom. Perhaps they'd given up waiting. Maybe some of them didn't actually know there was something different – something better – than the world they lived in. That's why God sent John the Baptist – to remind them who they were – to remind them that they were God's people, chosen to be a blessing to the nations,ⁱⁱⁱ to be a living example of God's kingdom – to call them back, to repent and be that blessing to the nations once again.

Jesus picked up John's message. Repent! for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Turn back to God. Remember God's ways. Live like the citizens of God's kingdom you are supposed to be.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' manifesto. It's the constitution of God's people. It's God's vision for humanity.

These three chapters of Matthew's gospel that we call the Sermon on the Mount, have been the subject of intense study and interpretation from at least the late 300s AD, when a guy named Saint Augustine published what is quite possibly the very first commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.^{iv}

Saint Augustine declared that in the Sermon on the Mount we find "the perfect standard of the Christian life."^v That's a pretty popular understanding of the Sermon – to see it as a kind of Christian ethic – a statement of morality or a rule of life for Jesus' followers. The problem with that understanding is that the ethical demands of the Sermon are pretty much impossible to live up to, which means Jesus is, on the one hand saying, live like this, and on the other hand knowing full well that we can't live like that.

For instance, in Matthew 5:22, Jesus says that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. There's no wiggle room there; it's really quite simple: Don't be angry. The problem is that it's impossible to never be angry. Anger is an emotion; it rises and falls as it pleases; it's a chemical response in our brains. Of course, we can control what we do with our anger, but the anger itself just happens. If that instruction to not be angry is an ethical standard Jesus demands of his followers, we're all doomed – we are all, as Jesus warns, subject to judgment.

'But Elaine,' you might be thinking, 'that's not really a problem, is it? Isn't that exactly why Jesus went to the cross? to take that judgment on our behalf because we can't do and be everything we're supposed to?'

Yes, that is true. We are completely dependent on God's grace and forgiveness. And that grace and forgiveness is not something we are owed or can earn, it's a gift.

However, as soon as we suggest that Jesus' teaching – Jesus' ethical demands – can't be met, what we're saying is that those demands are simply ideals – that Jesus never really intended us to take them literally. It's like we're suggesting they're a high bar to strive for, but that Jesus knew all along that we'd never reach it. And if that's what's going on here, then this code of ethics that is the Sermon on the Mount isn't really essential. It can't be. It can't be both required and impossible.

By the Middle Ages, a lot of people had made a lot of suggestions of how to deal with the impossibility of the Sermon's ethical demands. One of the prominent suggestions that was made was that the ideals of the Sermon weren't actually expected of regular people. They were meant for those 'special' men and women who lived as monks and nuns, cloistered away from the world and all its temptations. In other words, if Christianity had levels, like level 1 is you accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour and level 5 is you live the perfect, holy, righteous life outlined in the Sermon on the Mount, then what we're saying is that level 5 is great for those who can do it, but all you really need is level 1. What matters is what you believe. How you live is important, but not salvation level important. So long as you believe the right things, everything else is

gravy, as they say. All the things from the Sermon on the Mount are great ideals, but not realistic – and therefore not truly expected – especially of regular people like you and me.

I don't know about you, but when I put it like that – like the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are suggestions rather than essentials – it makes me uncomfortable. Part of why I get uncomfortable is because there are a lot of people out there who believe that it's enough to just say the right things – to say, "I believe," and then go about living however I want to live. I suspect that most of us in this room sense that there's something wrong with that interpretation. Surely Jesus did actually intend that his followers would live like he told them to live. Surely Jesus wasn't just painting some kind of idealized picture with little to no basis in reality. What would be the point?

What if the answer to our conundrum lies in that initial assumption of St. Augustines, that the Sermon on the Mount is simply a moral or ethical code? What if the Sermon on the Mount isn't that? What if it's not a Christian rule book? What if it's not a new 10 commandments? What if the Sermon on the Mount is instead a prophetic picture of hope? What if it's a description of the kingdom of God – the kingdom of heaven, as Matthew calls it - that Jesus, and John the Baptist before him, were calling people back to? What if Jesus isn't saying "Do this and this and this; I know it's impossible, but do it anyway," but "This is what it looks like," and asking, "Do you want to be part of it?"

One of my favourite contemporary theologians (someone who studies God and tries to understand all sorts of things connected to God) wrote this about the Sermon on the Mount: "You cannot live by the demands of the sermon on your own, but that is the point. The demands of the sermon are designed to make us depend on God and one another."^{vi} Let's pause with that for a moment. "You cannot live by the demands of the sermon on your own, but that is the point. The demands of the sermon are designed to make us depend on God and one another."

God is the one who makes us holy. God is the one who makes us righteous. God is the one who makes us like Jesus. None of that is possible in our own power. The kingdom of heaven proclaimed by Jesus is populated by people God made worthy. The kingdom of heaven has the character it has because it and its people are shaped by God. John Stott, one of the most influential Christians of the 20th century, wrote that the Sermon on the Mount "describes what human life and community look like when they come under the rule of God."^{vii} Jesus' sermon isn't a list of rules we'd better follow or else... It's a description – a portrait painted with words – of God's kingdom – of that new reality Jesus brought to life.

Over the coming weeks, as we dig into the Sermon on the Mount, it's really important that we not lose sight of this truth. If we forget that we're reading a description of God's kingdom – if we forget that God is the one shaping us to be citizens of that kingdom – we will either burn ourselves out with all the trying to be perfect like the Sermon demands, or we will give up altogether – throw our hands in the air and walk away.

But Jesus didn't say all the things he said in the Sermon on the Mount to make us feel hopeless and useless. That's why he started with the Beatitudes – the blessing statements at the beginning of Matthew 5.

Consider who it was Jesus was speaking to. He was for sure speaking to his disciples. He was probably also speaking to some from the crowds who were following him. He was speaking to people who were poor and powerless, people who longed for a different kind of world. He was speaking to people who'd experienced God through Jesus' miracles of healing. It was to these people Jesus spoke these words: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Who are the poor in spirit? Different people answer that question differently. The poor in spirit have been described as those who are “worn down by the plight of poverty,”^{viii} those who “acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy before God,”^{ix} those who are “relationally poor.”^x The poor in spirit have been described as those who hold a “tremendous awareness of their utter nothingness as they come face-to-face with God.”^{xi} There's probably some truth in all these definitions. It's interesting that Luke's version of this Beatitude focuses solely in on the poverty. In Luke 6:20 we read, *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*

I think both Matthew's version and Luke's version are true to the things Jesus taught. Jesus was clearly concerned for those who lived in poverty. And Luke's gospel, more than the other 3, points to that truth consistently and repeatedly. But Jesus was also concerned with us understanding the glory and the majesty of God that Matthew's gospel, with its deep dependence on the Old Testament, seems to make a priority. I think it's fair to hear Jesus saying all of these things in this first beatitude: *Blessed are the poor, the worn down, the isolated and lonely, those who are humbled by their vision of God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Before moving on to the other beatitudes, we need to take a moment to make sure we understand what it means to be blessed. The Greek word that Matthew uses is *makarios*. It can be translated as blessed, happy, or fortunate. It refers to the privileged recipient of divine favour. It could be translated as greatly honoured. However we translate it, we must remember that the blessing in each of the beatitudes is the second part of the sentence. The first part of each beatitude describes who is blessed – who is the recipient of divine favour – who is greatly honoured by God. The second part explains how that person is blessed – what that divine favour looks like.

Blessed are the poor in spirit... This is the *who*. Their poverty is not what's blessed, neither is it the blessing. The poor in spirit is who God blesses. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* The kingdom of heaven is the blessing.

Imagine you're one of the people listening to Jesus. Imagine you're poor. Imagine you feel constantly unworthy of God's attention or of God's love. Some of us don't have to imagine very hard, do we? What is it like to hear Jesus saying that God's kingdom belongs to you? Nothing belongs to you. You're always dependent on other people – your boss, your teacher, your parents... But here sits Jesus telling you that God's kingdom – the kingdom of heaven – is yours.

Blessed are those who mourn – those who grieve, those who have lost, those who are living without. We usually think of mourning in terms of people. We mourn when someone dies. But in fact, we mourn more than just people; we mourn dreams that have not come to fruition, we mourn relationships that have ended, we mourn loss, whatever that loss might be. To mourn is not a blessing. But those who mourn are blessed because they will be comforted.

This room this morning is filled with people in mourning. Some of our griefs are old, they're like a persistent ache we've mostly learned to live with. Some of our griefs are newer – more raw and more intrusive. We are promised comfort. That is the blessing Jesus promised those who mourn. The kingdom of heaven Jesus proclaimed is a kingdom in which those who mourn are comforted.

Blessed are the meek – the gentle and the lowly. In the Old Testament the meek are those who are socially inferior, like servants and slaves. These are people who are owed nothing and who expect nothing. But Jesus says that they are blessed, *for they will inherit the earth*. It's the consistent message of the New Testament. God's kingdom, which will be on earth as it is in heaven, doesn't belong to the powerful and the prestigious; it belongs to the poor in spirit and to the meek. That's the blessing Jesus promises. You may be nothing and have nothing right now, but in God's kingdom you are everything and you have everything.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are those who are starving for some glimpse of goodness in the world. Blessed are those who are parched by the desert of injustice they see the world to be. Blessed are those who long for a better world – a world in which God's ways are the only way – a world in which things like love and grace and forgiveness are the norm. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*. What a promise that is! Don't we need a promise like that these days? Are you lamenting the state of the world? Are you longing for justice, for leaders who lead with integrity? You are blessed for your hunger and your thirst for righteousness will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are those who have compassion or pity for those who suffer. Blessed are those who show kindness to those in need. *For they will be shown mercy*.

Blessed are the pure in heart. The *heart* – the *kardia*, in Greek – isn't just the organ pumping blood through our bodies that we think of when we hear the word *heart*. It's the entirety of a person's being, it's the centre of a personality, it's "the fount out of which everything else comes."^{xiii} It includes the will and the intellect, not just emotions and feelings. *Blessed are the pure in heart* – those who are pure at the very centre of their being, those who are innocent, guiltless, upright, not just on the surface, but all the way into the essence of their being.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. When Moses asked to see God, God told him, "No one can see me and live."^{xiii} But here we have Jesus telling us that those who are pure in heart will see God. What I love about this is that this purity of heart Jesus is talking about is exactly what the Holy Spirit makes of us as we follow Jesus. We become pure in heart, not by our own efforts, but through God's gift of the Holy Spirit living in us, transforming us into Jesus' likeness. And as we surrender to that Holy Spirit work in us, we are promised that we are blessed because we will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers. In a world of violence and war, *blessed are the peacemakers*. In a world that is fractured and divided, *blessed are the peacemakers*. *For they will be called children of God*. God is the ultimate peacemaker. He overcame all the violence, all the division, all the hostility, all the sin of humanity through the blood of the cross. And when we are peacemakers we are like him, as children are like their parent. *Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God*.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness... Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Jesus... It is a reality that has been proven time and time again, that those who follow Jesus – those who are becoming like Jesus – will not always be well received by the world. That’s because Jesus’ ways are not the world’s ways. But those who are persecuted because of righteousness – because of Jesus – are blessed, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. That’s the crux of it all – not just in this beatitude, but all of them. The blessing is the kingdom of heaven. The blessing is the presence of God among the citizens of his kingdom. The blessing is a future in which only God rules.

Whatever is going on right now, whatever sorrow or struggle you face, whatever ugliness in the world or in the people around you, those who respond to Jesus’ call to repent – to return to God and God’s ways – are blessed. God’s kingdom is the blessing. It’s a kingdom populated by the poor in spirit, by those who mourn, by those who have nothing and are nothing by the world’s standards; it’s a kingdom populated by those longing for a better world, doing what they can to make peace among the world’s people, showing compassion and mercy; it’s a kingdom populated by those with pure hearts. And in that kingdom there is comfort, mercy, adoption, and freedom. God is there with arms outstretched like a loving parent, having overcome all sin and all death. This is the blessing Jesus promised. This is the blessing Jesus promises. Will you receive it?

ⁱ Matthew 4:17.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 4:23-25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 22:18.

^{iv} Robert Guelich. *A Foundation for Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1982), 15.

^v Steven Jonathan Rummelsburg. “[St. Augustine on the Beatitudes](#).” *Integrated Catholic Life*. March 22, 2014. (Accessed Jan. 27, 2023).

^{vi} Stanley Hauerwas. *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), 61.

^{vii} John Stott. *The Beatitudes: Developing Spiritual Character*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Connect, 1998), 5-6.

^{viii} Jillian Engelhardt. “[Commentary on Matthew 5:1-12](#).” *Working Preacher*, 2023. (Accessed Jan. 25, 2023.)

^{ix} Stott, 13.

^x Eric Barretto. “[Commentary on Matthew 5:1-12](#).” *Working Preacher*, 2020. (Accessed Jan. 25, 2023.)

^{xi} D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 41.

^{xii} *Ibid*, 93.

^{xiii} Exodus 33:20.