

Questions:

- What are you having trouble leaving behind in order to follow Jesus?
- What kind of king builds his following with the weakest in the kingdom?
- Why is this good news for you and me?

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Chapter 5

At first glance, Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 (often called the Beatitudes) seems straightforward: "If you're like this, you'll be blessed, right? So, be like this." Except who wants to be poor in spirit, meek, mournful, or all those other things listed? And how do you become those anyway?

That's actually not what Jesus intended this to be—a set of character traits we should all try to emulate in order to secure God's blessing. He's doing something different.

After his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus begins his ministry, proclaiming, "Turn around! God's kingdom is here!" We don't live in a monarchy, so it's tricky to understand the rule of a king. It may help to think of it like this, "Wake up! Change your life! God's economy is now. He's in charge."

Matthew 5:1-12, the Beatitudes, begin Matthew's recollection of the Sermon of the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7 gives us the main themes of Jesus' teaching and illustrates the reality of God's kingdom/economy—who is included and how to live as part of it.

Read 5:1-4. Jesus had collected a few disciples and began traveling all around Galilee, teaching in synagogues the good news that God's kingdom was here and now. He healed diseases, aches, and pains—everything. And great crowds followed him. "Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them..."

Who is in the crowd? Look out on the hillside and imagine: What kind of people make up the multitude? Can you see them? They are people who have hunted him down for healing. The sick, afflicted, those oppressed by demons. Certainly, their caretakers and close community were there as well and probably others in search of great teaching, but Matthew specifically describes the crowd as a group of people who would have been discarded and dismissed by most of Jewish and Roman society.

These are the people to whom Jesus says: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted... Nobody would ever consider these categories of people blessed, or flourishing, or having the good life. The list of "blesseds" he offers to describe the folks who were chosen last on the soccer team, who weren't at homecoming because they didn't get a date. But Jesus is inviting them to dance in the kingdom. They don't have to sit on the bench anymore.

Dallas Willard writes: "The Beatitudes serve to clarify Jesus' fundamental message: the free availability of God's rule and righteousness to all of humanity through reliance on Jesus himself, the person now loose in the world among us...the fact of God's care and provision proves to all that no human condition excludes blessedness, that God may come to any person with his care and deliverance. God does sometimes help those who cannot, or perhaps just do not, help themselves. The religious system of his day left the multitudes out, but Jesus welcomed them all into his kingdom. Anyone could come as well as any other.

They still can." (Divine Conspiracy, p. 116)

Questions:

1. Set a one-minute timer. Write as many words or phrases as you can to complete this sentence:
Happy are those who _____. (i.e. live debt-free, have healthy kids, etc.)
2. What does your list reveal about who you think is blessed?
3. How does it compare to Jesus' list?

4. Now set a one-minute timer again. Write as many words or phrases as you can to complete this sentence: Unfortunate are those who are: _____. (i.e. celibate, homeless, lonely, etc.)

God invites these people specifically (though not exclusively) to have a healing relationship with Him. He sees them. He loves them. And He invites them to the party. And in God's kingdom, even they will experience the fullness of blessing, happiness, and joy, available through Jesus.

N. T. Wright says this: People often say what a wonderful teaching the Sermon on the Mount is, and that if only people would obey it the world would be a better place. But if we think of Jesus simply sitting there telling people how to behave properly, we will miss what is really going on. These *blessings*, the *wonderful news* that he's announcing, are not saying "Try hard to live like this." They are saying that people who already *are* like this are in good shape.

The first word of each verse 3-11 is traditionally translated as *Blessed* or *Happy* (from the Latin word *beatus* which means blessed.) Because we know some mourners go uncomfited and some of those who long for justice are disappointed this side of the grave, Jesus doesn't suggest these are timeless truths or a philosophical analysis of the world. He is announcing that within his work these outcomes start to come true. This is not good advice, it is good news, wonderful news.

Questions:

- What is wonderful, good news to you in these well known but little understood beatitudes?

Read verse 5-6. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

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

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

If these are the people who are blessed, who are they? What do these words actually mean?

Blessed are - What it Means

The Poor in Spirit - Dallas Willard calls these "the spiritual zeros." They aren't particularly moral and probably wouldn't be caught dead in church. They've got nothing worthy to bring to the altar. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is theirs. It's open to them too. Even these people experience his presence, healing, and love. And when they do, they are blessed.

Those who Mourn - These are the broken-hearted, the rejected, those grieving death and divorce, and dysfunction. As these people learn to live in God's kingdom, they find comfort and healing, and

hope. And when they do, they are blessed.

The Meek - These are people who are unimpressive, intimidated, shy. They are often steamrolled and overlooked. They shrink back and often go unseen. In God's kingdom, they are seen and drawn out from the shadows. They learn the whole earth is their Father's and it has been given to them too. And when they do, they are blessed.

Those who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness - These are the people who ache for things to be made right. They experience the pain of broken people and parts—in the world and in their own souls—and they long for wholeness. In God's kingdom, their thirst will be quenched because He brings justice and He restores what's been destroyed in us and around us. And when He does, they are blessed.

Questions:

1. Who do you know who is poor in spirit, grieving, meek, or hungry for justice?
2. Knowing that they are included in God's kingdom, that He sees them and can satisfy their deep longings, how can you show up for them today in a way that does the same?
3. If this describes you, spend a few moments in prayer, asking God to help you taste and see His goodness in the midst of your condition.

Read Matthew 5:5-7. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

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

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Let's walk through the same practice:

Blessed are - What it Means

The Merciful - These people are not quick to anger and are not easily offended. They don't strive to set the record straight or settle accounts but instead offer forgiveness and compassion. As a result, they can be taken advantage of or perceived as weak. In God's kingdom, they too are shown mercy. They

find that Jesus doesn't settle accounts, but covers every shortfall with forgiveness and compassion. And because of it, they are blessed.

The Pure in Heart - Willard calls these people the perfectionists, people for whom nothing is good enough. They constantly find fault in others and in themselves and cannot sit still until the paintings on the wall are straight, the dishes are loaded properly, and their motives for doing it all are right. In God's kingdom, they see the King who embodies the goodness they have been looking for all along. And when they do, they are blessed.

The Peacemakers - These are the people who are caught in the middle, trying desperately to reconcile and make right. These are people who move toward the wrongdoer. They reach across the aisle, even when it's costly, to bind up wounds and make things whole. In God's kingdom, people look at their efforts to make peace and see how much it resembles the King, and how He makes peace with us. And when they are called sons and daughters of God, they are blessed.

Questions:

1. Who do you know who has shown mercy, struggles with perfectionism and makes peace?
2. Knowing that they are included in God's kingdom, that He sees them and can satisfy their deep longings, how can you show up for them today in a way that does the same?
3. If this describes you, spend a few moments in prayer, asking God to help you taste and see His goodness in the midst of your condition.

Read Matthew 5:10-12. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Blessed are - What it Means

The Persecuted for Being Righteous - These are the people who are attacked for their stand for what is right. They are the whistle-blowers and those unwilling to compromise or cut corners to succeed. They are often made fun of, excluded, or punished for the stand they take. In God's kingdom, they

experience unshakeable security and confidence because righteousness is the norm. And when they do, they are blessed.

The Reviled, Persecuted, and Spoken poorly of for taking up with Jesus - These are the Jesus freaks, people who have surrendered everything to be part of what he's doing. To the world, they look weird, foolish, maybe even dangerous. In God's kingdom, they join a good company with the prophets of old and with Jesus himself. And when they do, they are blessed.

Questions:

1. Who do you know who has shown mercy, struggles with perfectionism, and makes peace?
2. Knowing that they are included in God's kingdom, that He sees them and can satisfy their deep longings, how can you show up for them today in a way that does the same?
3. If this describes you, spend a few moments in prayer, asking God to help you taste and see His goodness in the midst of your condition.

Here's what Dallas Willard says: The Beatitudes, in particular, are not teachings on how to be blessed. They are not instructions to do anything. They do not indicate conditions that are especially pleasing to God or good for human beings. No one is actually being told that they are better off for being poor, for mourning, for being persecuted, and so on, or the conditions listed are recommended ways to well-being before God or man. Nor are the Beatitudes indications of who will be on top "after the revolution." They are explanations and illustrations, drawn from the immediate setting, of the present availability of the kingdom through personal relationship with Jesus. They single out cases that provide proof that, in him, the rule of God from the heavens truly is available in life circumstances that are beyond all human hope. (*The Divine Conspiracy*, 106)

The gospel is good news, not good advice. The list is not exhaustive or exclusive, but it is expansive. It blows up our categories of who is "in" and who is "out" with God, and it forces us to look around the community and wonder: Does this look and feel like the kingdom of God is here, now?

Jesus continues his teaching: You are the salt of the earth...

Read Matthew 5:13–16 slowly, as though Jesus is telling you this across from a table, nestled in the corner of Starbucks. This is who you are, in his kingdom —seasoning to add flavor to the rest of the

bland, flavorless world. As his son or daughter, you glow and radiate light to the darkened, shadowy world. Be salty. Glow.

Questions:

1. How does this week's reading of the Beatitudes compare to your previous understanding of this passage?
2. Who do you know who adds flavor and radiates light to the world? How do you see Jesus in them?
3. How do you add flavor and radiate light to the world? How is Jesus coming alive in you and shining through you?

Matthew 5:13-16 builds on what we've read so far. Jesus is going to get specific about what it looks like to be salt and light in the world. WARNING: this isn't easy stuff. Life would be easier if we all behaved in the way he describes, but it's not easy to harness our hearts to be holy like him. In fact, it may be the hardest (but most rewarding) work we ever do.

Notice these points:

1. Jesus is so insightful about the human heart. He knows us so well.
2. Jesus doesn't soften the blow. He doesn't shy away from hard topics.

You may be tempted to feel weighed down by a bunch of rules, thinking Jesus is introducing a new form of legalism. That is *not* what's happening here. NT Wright has this to say: *The Sermon on the Mount isn't just about us. If it was, we might admire it as a fine bit of idealism, but then we'd return to our normal lives. It's about Jesus himself. This was the blueprint for his own life. He asks nothing of his followers that he hasn't faced himself...The Sermon on the Mount isn't just about how to behave. It's about discovering the living God in the loving, and dying, Jesus, and learning to reflect that love ourselves into the world that needs it so badly.*

Read Matthew 5:17-26. Jesus has just announced that the kingdom of God is *here*. He's declared a whole bunch of misfits and outsiders welcome in God's family and blessed for it. It's only natural for onlookers to wonder, "Wow, has this guy lowered *all* his standards?" Reading the room, Jesus replies: *Do not think I've come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.* (5:17-18)

He says, "I'll see you and raise you one."

This king is not *rejecting* the establishment; he's *resurrecting* God's vision for humanity. The Law had been given by God (back in Exodus) to mold and shape Israel into a community of men and women and teenagers and kids who would look and feel and sound like God to the rest of the world. Now Jesus will elevate and illustrate what it looks like to live in God's government (or kingdom).

Before we continue, consider this: *Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* (5:20)

Are you thinking, "Uhh, we're toast. Aren't the Scribes and Pharisees super righteous?! How can we compete with that?"

Some scholars argue Jesus is doing that on purpose, he's setting a standard so impossibly high that we just can't reach it. Then we'll recognize our need for his mercy and repent.

Maybe. But if you look at how he deals with the Scribes and Pharisees over and over in the gospels, his primary critique of their righteousness is that they're clean on the outside, but their hearts are still corrupt and bent. Check out this scathing critique from [Matthew 23:27-28](#).

The vision he is casting for the kingdom is of people whose lives are transformed from the inside *out*. Jesus is offering a renovation of the heart. It's so much more than they—or we—imagine.

Now read 5:21-26.

The Laws Jesus lays down are structured like this:

- You've heard it said: (insert original command).
- But *I* say: (insert deeper condition of the heart).
- So do this: (insert radical practice to renovate the heart).

Here's the command on anger:

- You've heard it said, "Don't murder."
- But *I* say, "Even if you're *angry* you're at risk."
- So, *before* you even worship, go and make it right with the one with whom you're angry.

He's taking the original command, "Don't kill people," and excavating it to the root issue: anger. Jesus recognizes what we'd like to forget that anger, when allowed to fester, infects the soul. In God's kingdom, we're asked to repent and repair quickly. Otherwise, we're "liable to the hell of fire."

What's *that*? "Hell of fire" is how we've translated the word *Gehenna*. It was a literal place, a valley just south of Jerusalem, where the trash and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned. Jesus is challenging us to see the destructive power of anger. If we nurse our anger, and it leads us to gossip, insult, or curse others, we will be consumed by its fire. Tamp it out while it's small.

Questions:

- How does Jesus challenge your understanding of "the Law?"
- Who are you angry with?
- Who might be angry with you?
- How have you experienced the destructive power of anger in your life?

- How can you make moves toward reconciliation today?

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Read verses 27-30; they are spicy. Here's what Jesus says:

- You've heard it said, "Don't commit adultery."
- But I say, "If you even look at a woman with lust, you're already there."
- So, gouge out your right eye, and throw it away.

Whoa. The original command prohibited sex with another man's wife (because women were viewed as property, so this was technically stealing.) Jesus is saying the problem is so much deeper than that. It's in the way we *look at* and *view* one another. In God's kingdom, other people are not *objects* for our sexual gratification.

Ladies, we're not off the hook here. You know we are perfectly capable of objectifying men for our personal pleasure. How many times have you imagined being desired by a man who is not your husband?

But are we really supposed to gouge out our eyes and cut off our right hands if they cause us to stumble? (Origen, one of the early church fathers, took this literally and castrated himself. Poor