

Who Thrives in the Kingdom of God? (Part 1)

Matthew 5:1-6

This morning we begin to wade out into the deep waters of the Sermon on the Mount (SoM) as recorded in Matthew 5, 6 and 7. John Stott comments that the SoM is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus. I think he's probably right: love your enemies, the Lord's prayer, do not judge so that you won't be judged, the house built on the sand. The SoM is probably the best known of Jesus' teachings. But Stott also says of the SoM that "arguably it is the least understood, and certainly the least obeyed" (*The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 15). I think he's probably right there too.

The reason we are studying the Sermon on the Mount is because we are in the midst of a sermon series on discipleship exploring what it means to be apprenticed to Jesus. In Matthew 28 Jesus said that one aspect of "making disciples" involves "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." If you look back through the gospel of Matthew, and ask, "What has Jesus commanded us to obey?" an obvious answer would be, "The Sermon on the Mount." The SoM is a large block of teaching that explains how Jesus' disciples are supposed to live.

Our emphasis in teaching the SoM will be on learning to obey/keep/observe what Jesus has commanded. When it comes to discipleship, it's not enough to know how we are supposed to live. As disciples, we are apprenticed to Jesus so that we can actually live that way. So as we go through the SoM, Brian and I aren't merely going to teach *what* Jesus commanded. We are also going to talk about *learning to obey* what Jesus has commanded. This is a lofty objective for this best-known, least-obeyed.

In light of this objective, I'd like to ask you to do two things. First, please pray for us as we study and teach. We need to learn to obey Jesus' teaching in new and deeper ways if we're going to be used by God to teach you to obey these things. Second, please discuss what you hear in these messages. If you really want to learn to obey what we find here, you will need to talk with others about what you're hearing. Talk with others to get clarity on what Jesus is saying; talk with others to get clarity on the implications for your life. As always, the sermon is the first word, not the last word. Many of you will be discussing these things in your life groups; Brian prepares a study guide that will help you learn to obey what Jesus has commanded. The study guide will be posted on our web site on Mondays, so it's available to anybody who wants it.

Before we get to the text for today, let's consider the context. Specifically, I want us to notice who is actually listening to the SoM.

The audience of the Sermon on the Mount (then and now). (4:24-25, 5:1, 7:28-29) Notice how Jesus taught the SoM in response to His experience with "the crowds":

4:24 The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them.

The crowds came bringing those who were sick, demon possessed, and suffering from all sorts of diseases and paralysis. Jesus healed them both as an expression of compassion and as a sign that the kingdom of heaven had come near.

25 Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and *from* beyond the Jordan.

These geographic references indicate that these multitudes included both Jews and Gentiles (Decapolis was largely Gentile). This is a special emphasis in Matthew; the kingdom is as available to Gentiles as Jews, even though the Messiah would come through the Jews. As we study the SoM, it's important to remember that Jesus has just manifested the kingdom to a crowd of both Jews and Gentiles with overwhelming physical and spiritual needs. Notice how Jesus had these same crowds in mind when He taught the SoM:

5:1 And when He saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and began to teach them . . .

Jesus' apprentices came closest to Him as He taught, but the crowds apparently gathered around as well. We understand this because at the end of the SoM (in 7:28-29) we read this:

28 The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; 29 for He was teaching them as *one* having authority, and not as their scribes.

And so the SoM is addressed to those who have apprenticed themselves to Jesus, but it is also heard by a larger crowd that included people in all sorts of spiritual conditions.

And here today we also have people in all sorts of spiritual conditions. Some of you are apprenticed to Jesus; you are disciples who are following Him with everything you've got. Others of you would say that you believe in Jesus but you aren't really experiencing as much life and fullness as you should be. Others of you are interested (or you wouldn't be here on a Sunday morning) but you aren't really sure if this whole "Christian thing" is for you. Some of you are convinced that Christianity would never really "work" for you. You look around this room and you can spot others for whom it works. And you have a dozen reasons why it works for them and not for you. "They're disciplined and dedicated but I can't even pray for 5 minutes. . . . They are strong and I'm weak. . . They have their life together and my life is a disaster. . ."

If you think about Christianity in those terms, I can't tell you how glad I am that you're here because today we are going to look at the first four "beatitudes" (next week we'll look at the last four). The beatitudes are short statements about just who thrives in the kingdom of God. The name beatitudes comes from the Latin word for blessed. In the beatitudes Jesus shatters our preconceptions about who really thrives in the kingdom of God. Basically Jesus says that the kingdom is for people who have everything wrong with them, people who are so sad they could cry, people who are easily taken advantage of, and people who are starving spiritually. You may realize for the first time today that the kingdom of God is for YOU.

The beatitudes don't tell us how to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus isn't saying that you are worthy to enter the kingdom of heaven *if* you are poor in spirit or if you mourn or are gentle, etc. None of those qualities qualify a person to enter the kingdom of heaven. We enter the kingdom of heaven – we come under the reign of God – through faith in Jesus alone. We trust that His death on the cross paid for our sins.

The beatitudes tell us who is in a position to enter into and thrive in the kingdom of heaven. The term “blessed” has the connotation of favored or approved. Those who are pronounced blessed in the beatitudes are in a favored position with God in the sense they He is inclined toward them. Those described by the beatitudes are poised to experience God’s generosity as they enter the kingdom through faith in Jesus and as they live by faith in the kingdom. Jesus is describing those who are really “well off” (as Willard describes it). .

Who thrives in the kingdom? Notice again that Jesus had “the crowds” in his mind’s eye when He taught what He did about the kingdom. He had in mind those who came to Him with their diseases and demon possession and other problems.

1 And when He saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying, 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Poor in spirit” is often taken to mean humility. I would say that being poor in spirit certainly leads to humility, but I think the core idea is ***spiritual poverty***. If you are poor in spirit, you are impoverished spiritually. Think about it this way. If you’re poor materially you have a scarcity of resources to meet your needs. Whereas others might have more money than you can imagine, you have very little; it’s a challenge just to survive, and there’s never anything left over.

If you are poor in spirit, you are bankrupt when it comes to spiritual resources. Whether it’s actually the case or not, you look around at others and see a wealth of spiritual knowledge, spiritual power, and spiritual insight. But when you look at yourself, you see none of those things. If there were a spiritual garage sale, you would have nothing to sell. You are absolutely empty-handed when it comes to spiritual things.

The presupposition in Jesus’ day (and in our day) is that you therefore are disqualified from the kingdom of heaven. You may be thinking that until you clean up your act spiritually – get rid of all your sins and prove that you’ve got something to offer (something to bring to the garage sale) – God wants nothing to do with you. Is that how you think about yourself?

Jesus thinks about you very differently. Jesus says, “Blessed are the spiritually impoverished, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” That’s why Jesus befriended tax gatherers and sinners – because they were spiritually bankrupt and they knew it. Many spiritually impoverished people took Jesus’ offer, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The Pharisees, on the other hand, never would have described themselves as spiritually impoverished; they would be able to bring truckloads of stuff to the spiritual garage sale. They had knowledge, tradition, robes, spiritual disciplines such as fasting and tithing (Matthew 23), etc. That’s why so very few of them entered the kingdom of God.

Nobody deserves to experience the kingdom of God. If you are spiritually impoverished – if you have nothing in your hands to bring to God – you are in a great place. All you have to do is receive. Yours is the kingdom of heaven.

In verse 4 Jesus pronounces the favor of God upon another unlikely group of people:

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

To mourn is to grieve over some circumstance or some loss. When you mourn, you enter into your pain and allow your loss to wash over you. You don't keep a stiff upper lip and you don't pretend that everything is okay. When you mourn you grieve over the fact that things are **not** okay and over the possibility that things **won't** be okay this side of heaven. Jesus pronounces blessing on those who mourn in the kingdom because they will be comforted. In Luke 4 Jesus said that He came in fulfillment of Isaiah 61 – He came to bind up the broken-hearted.

Some of you here today are absolutely brokenhearted. Your heart is broken over a relationship that should be full of life and love, but it brings you nothing but pain. Maybe it's a relationship with a parent, with a child, with your husband or wife, or with a friend. Maybe your heart is broken over a divorce; the pain is deeper than anybody knows. Maybe your heart is broken over the reality that children all over the world go to bed hungry every night. Maybe your heart is broken over your own sin. Maybe it's a sin that has plagued you for a decade, a sin that stunts your growth and keeps you from experiencing God like you should.

If you are brokenhearted, Jesus says that in the kingdom you are blessed if you mourn. This may be news to you. You might have thought that your pain and loss disqualified you from experiencing God's favor. You might have even thought that your pain and grief were evidence of God's disfavor, that He wants you to be miserable. Here Jesus turns the tables and says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Some cultures excel at mourning. We've probably all seen news reports of people in other cultures that were out in the streets wailing in their grief over some loss – a natural disaster, a terrorist attack, etc. There's no shame in falling on the ground and crying at a funeral. By contrast, I saw an interview with a man whose house had burned in the wildfires in California. As he talked about building the house 20+ years ago and about all the memories, he got choked up, said "I'm sorry," and turned away from the camera. There was no way he was going to stand there and sob because of his loss.

I'm not saying that's wrong; that's exactly what I would do. It's fine for us to mourn privately - - as long as we know that **mourning is good**. It is good to allow the pain and loss of this world to wash over us. It is good for us to take into our souls that things are not always as they should be. We are running from God and from reality when we pretend that things are fine when they're not.

In the kingdom, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Unless you mourn, you won't be comforted. If you mourn in the presence of God He will meet you in the midst of your grief and loss. You will be comforted; Jesus will bind up the brokenhearted.

Jesus makes another counter-intuitive pronouncement in verse 5:

5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

The term "gentle" is sometimes translated meek (KJV, NIV). We resist the word meek because it rhymes with weak. If this is a virtue that we are supposed to pursue, Jesus surely can't be advocating weakness; Jesus Himself was anything but weak. Gentleness is a virtue that is commended in other places (such as 1 Timothy 3:3 – although a different word is used there).

But I don't think Jesus is commanding us to be gentle here. He is pronouncing blessing on those who are already gentle.

The gentle would be contrasted with the aggressive or the assertive. Let's say that you buy \$100 worth of groceries and you realize that you were overcharged 50 cents. Some people would interpret this as a declaration of war: they took advantage of me; I will stand in line for an hour if need be to get a refund and an apology. But if you're gentle, you probably think, "It was only 50 cents and was an honest mistake. If it were five dollars I'd go back and make it right. But I think I'll just let this slide. . ." The gentle are those who are reluctant to assert their own rights or take a harsh stance against others.

Normally gentle people get overlooked and left out. In this world, the aggressive are the ones who usually get the biggest piece of pie. Imagine that a wealthy person has died without a will and a room full of people has gathered to decide how the estate will be divided up. You would expect that the aggressive and the assertive would inherit the most. The gentle might not even speak up and might be completely overlooked.

If you are naturally a gentle person, you might think that God will probably overlook you as well. He may let you into the kingdom, but you'll probably be a second-class citizen. You will probably have to watch everybody else get all the spiritual gifts and bear all the spiritual fruit. Have you ever thought that? Jesus says here that in the kingdom of God, being gentle is no disadvantage. Like everyone in the kingdom, the gentle will inherit the earth. If you enter the kingdom through faith in Jesus, you will get to be a joint-heir with Jesus Himself and you will inherit the earth.

I will again resist turning the next beatitude into a command so that we can hear the blessing that Jesus pronounces on those who want righteousness so badly they can almost taste it.

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

In the physical realm, there is no blessing associated with being hungry and thirsty. People die without food and drink. In the kingdom of God, however, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are blessed!

The term righteousness has several different connotations that each have to do with things being made "right" in the sense of being "right with God." Paul would later use the term to denote "right standing before God": through faith in Jesus you are declared righteous; you have a right standing before God. Jesus, however, used the term righteousness in the sense of "right behavior," a pattern of life that conforms to God's will. We now understand that this lifestyle of righteousness is only possible through faith in Christ: only those who are declared righteous can live righteous lives. But it seems clear that Jesus is using the term righteous in the sense of right behavior – a pattern of life that conforms to God's will.

Just like hungry people long for something to eat and thirsty people long for something to drink, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness long for their lives to conform to the will of God. They would never be content with things getting a little bit better; they hunger and thirst for righteousness. Nothing else will alleviate their hunger and quench their thirst except for true righteousness. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness want it that badly.

Jesus says that such people are blessed in the kingdom of God “for they shall be satisfied.” Like a hungry man who sits down to a feast, you will be filled. Like a thirsty woman who finds a cool, clear glass of water, your thirst will be quenched. God’s will is just that satisfying. If you enter into the kingdom through faith in Jesus, you will find a type of satisfaction and fullness that you won’t find anywhere else. It’s not that everything will suddenly be fixed; but the Spirit of God Himself will fill your life with good things.

Response Time. We’re now going to have a time of response. Respond in whatever way God puts on your heart.

If you realize for the first time that Jesus offers the kingdom to spiritually impoverished people, perhaps today is the day you will trust in Jesus. As the old hymn says, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.” You may want to sit there and express to God that you are bankrupt spiritually and that you accept the offer of the kingdom through faith in Jesus. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Or maybe you are brokenhearted and just need to sit there and cry. Maybe your response is to realize that mourning is a good thing in the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Or maybe you are among the gentle and you have always felt overlooked and left out. Your response may be to realize that in the kingdom being gentle is no disadvantage whatsoever. Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth.

Or maybe you’re starving for things to be right in your life and in circumstances around you. Maybe you’ve tried unrighteousness and experienced the heartache and pain it brings. Your response may be to express to God your spiritual hunger and receive the fullness that God offers.

If you’d like somebody to pray with you, I’d remind you that after the service is over people will be at the front who are available to pray with you.