

## Let's Just Follow Jesus

Matthew 5:2-16

Mark Vroegop

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*And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "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. "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. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' 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. "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, 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 who is in heaven (Matt. 5:2–16).*

I want you to think of the last scenario in which you uttered these words: "Okay. Where are we? Where do we go from here?"

Maybe you were traveling somewhere, and your phone wasn't working properly. Maybe you were on a hike and you came to a trail crossing and you weren't sure if you should go left or right. Maybe you were in a sales meeting, and you just learned that your new product line was way behind the plan.

Maybe you learned some disappointing news about a friend or family member, and you are burdened about what to do next. Maybe you experienced a huge loss in your life, and you are wondering how to rebuild. Maybe you watched the news this week, and you're troubled and uncertain as to where do we go as a nation from here.

I'm sure that you, like me, felt a profound sense of disorientation watching the events unfold on Wednesday. I will not soon forget the "sick-in-my-stomach" feeling as I watched a protest turn into an invasion of the Capitol building during the certification of the 2020 national election.

We should be clear that violence associated with a protest is wrong—always. It was wrong this summer and fall when there were protests for racial injustice. And it was wrong on Wednesday.

But there was another issue that troubled me as a pastor.

It was an intermingling of Christian symbols like flags and crosses, along with signs that said “Jesus Saves” with a political protest. This mixture of Christianity and political identity is a ditch that I mentioned in my sermon on December 23:

*Nations and leaders rise and fall based upon the power of a sovereign God. Every election cycle reveals something about who we are as a nation. It's also revealing how the church responds. God's rule over all things means that we can avoid the ditch of “elections don't matter” or “this election is everything!” We can avoid the ditch of secular systems like Critical Theory and we can avoid the ditch of Christian Nationalism by being reminded that nations and rulers matter, but they're not everything. It means we can work to bring change without acting as if everything depended upon it. It means we can be patriotic and love this country without loving it more than the Kingdom of God.*

Some of you may not be familiar with the term Christian Nationalism. A helpful definition from Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry is, “A cultural framework that blurs distinctions between Christian identity and American identity; political idolatry dressed up as religious orthodoxy.” It's when the symbols and language of Christian identity are mixed with political identity. When any rally or any party does that, especially when it leads to violence, we should do our part to say, “That's not right.” We should be clear: It's using Christianity as a political tool. It's idolatrous.

Nuance is important. You need to know that not everyone at the rally was guilty of Christian Nationalism. I'm only warning about it. I am not saying that political engagement or a protest is wrong. “I'm saying to confuse/conflate a political movement with the church's mission is wrong.” I'm not saying that elections are unimportant. I'm saying, as Chuck Colson did, that the Kingdom of God doesn't arrive on Air Force One. It's not wrong for people to be patriotic. I'm saying that we need to understand the difference between pledging allegiance to our country and to our Savior. I'm not saying that issues of morality are unimportant. I am saying we have to be careful not to be sinful or idolatrous as we address them.

These are scary times. These are days of unrest, division, and conflict. I hope that you'll join me in prayer for every person in authority and for our own hearts. I hope that you join me keeping your eyes on Jesus, our true King. And I hope you'll work to make our church a place where we preach and live out the gospel.

To be disoriented means that you are confused because something that has guided you, something you've planned on, or something familiar has changed or been obscured.

Part of the challenge of the previous year and even the events of the last few days has been the way that life has become increasingly disorienting. I'm sure you've found yourself saying, “Wait...What?” or “What in the world!?!?”

When that happens, it's important to return to some basics. It's why reading your Bible over the next thirty days is really important. It's why thinking theologically and biblically is critical right now. And it's why we are going to start 2021 with a few reminders about what it means to follow Jesus with passion together.

This week, I want for us to consider some important, fundamental truths about what it means to follow Jesus and who we are as a church. We'll spend some time in Matthew 5, and we'll consider some high-level themes for our church as we move into 2021.

There's a lot we don't know about the next year. But there are a number of things we do know. And it's good to be reminded about of them.

The title of my message is simple: "Let's Just Follow Jesus." And I'm going to suggest to you that you do that by knowing who you are and what you're called to do. Or you could think of it as answering two critical questions: (1) What is my identity? and (2) What is important?

As we examine Matthew 5 today, you need to know that this is the first recorded sermon by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. It's traditionally called the Sermon on the Mount. A few things you need to know about this sermon:

- It was given to great crowds as they followed Jesus
- It is the first message that we hear from Jesus—like an inaugural address
- It touches on a number of timely and sensitive topics: anger, lust, divorce, getting even, giving, prayer, worry, judging, and good deeds
- It takes the superficial religion that marked Jesus's day head-on

Jesus wanted to identify a vision for what it means to follow him. That's an important thing for us to consider today both individually and as a church.

### **What's My Identity?<sup>1</sup>**

The word "identity" relates to the sum total of who you are. And the first twelve verses lay out a summary of what righteousness and obedience truly are. Now there's much more than what we have here. The rest of the sermon will demonstrate this. But this is the ethic of God's people.

It's what we are supposed to be like through the power of God's grace.

The first twelve verses are often called the Beatitudes, and they received that title from the Latin word for blessing—beatitudes. The Beatitudes are a series of statements connected to the concept of blessing. And as you look at the verses, you will see that the thing that connects the entire passage is the word "blessed."

The concept of being blessed means, in a spiritual sense, that one receives God's approval, favor, endorsement, or congratulations.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes people connect "blessed" with "happy." It is true that the

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<sup>1</sup> Edited content from two previous sermons: 1) <https://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/beatitudes-the-ethics-of-grace/> and 2) <https://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/grace-for-people-and-persecution/>

<sup>2</sup> David Turner, *Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing, 2008), 149.

blessed are happy, but that is not deep enough since happiness can often mean something rather shallow or insignificant. The blessedness of Matthew 5 is connected to receiving God's grace.

Who am I? I'm someone who has received God's grace.

*God initiates blessing by graciously condescending to save people. They respond to God's initiative by blessing God with praise and obedient living. Their present experience of God's reign in Jesus motivates them to live in light of its future intensification. The pattern is to highlight the character of the blessed person and then to explain the promise of God to such a person.*<sup>3</sup>

The Sermon on the Mount is as if Jesus says, "Because you are what you are and because the future is what it is—this is how you should live".<sup>4</sup> It is the ethics of grace.

**1. Humbly dependent – "poor in spirit" (v 3).** Authentic spirituality begins here with a deep understanding of how much we need God. It is the heart of Isaiah 66:2 – "...this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word."

**2. Taking sin seriously – "mourn" (v 4).** Jesus is calling his people to a view of life that shuns the lighthearted attitude regarding the serious issues in life.<sup>5</sup> The text indicates that there is divine comfort given to those who genuinely take sin seriously (see 1 Cor. 5:2 and James 4:9).

**3. Power under control – "meek" (v 5).** Jesus is commending the humble refusal to insist on one's rights. It is deeply understanding a grace that triumphs over everything else, freeing a person to forgo their needs, desires, or rights.

**4. Right desires – "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (v 6).** The single, consuming passion and the longing in the heart of the person who has been invaded by grace, is for righteousness. He is driving home the point that kingdom-minded people do not just do good things once in a while; they have a passionate desire for righteousness.<sup>6</sup>

**5. Godly graciousness – "merciful" (v 7).** To be merciful means that one takes active steps to treat someone with kindness that they do not deserve. It is a generous attitude toward others that includes an unwillingness to quickly take offense or to gloat over the shortcoming of others.<sup>7</sup>

**6. Striving for Peace – "Peacemakers" (v 8).** Peace is a hallmark of the reign of the Messiah. Therefore, followers of Jesus should be *peacemakers*—not peace-keepers, peace-breakers, or peace-fakers. Those who know the powerful, transformative work of Jesus should be effective agents of peace in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd-Jones, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, 97.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, 99.

<sup>7</sup> R.T. Frances, New International Commentary on the New Testament – Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 168.

**7. Expect Opposition – “Persecuted” (v 10).** Because righteous people make unrighteous people uncomfortable, and often they are treated with contempt, resisted, or outright persecuted. Jesus tells us to expect this.

*If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (John 15:19).*

Now, remember that Jesus identifies these beatitudes at the beginning of his ministry. He has great crowds that are following him, and he offers this description of his followers. These qualities are in response to the invasion of God’s grace. This is what those who follow Jesus are to be like.

It really is astonishing teaching. It runs in the opposite direction of the values of the world.

*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes (Matt. 7:28-29).*

Part of the reason why Jesus’s words were so surprising was because they cut across all other identities. Beyond the division of Pharisees and Sadducees, the ruling class and the working class, the Zealots who wanted to overthrow Rome by force, or those who worked for Rome; Jesus identifies another identity characterized by humility, meekness, passion for righteousness, mercy, and peacemaking.

And when the early church is born, we see this new identity transcend ethnic and societal boundaries. Remember Paul’s words in Colossians 3?

*...and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:10–11).*

This is important lest we allow the cultural identity markers to become more important than our biblical identity and the behavior that goes with it.

In 2014, we spent a month talking about our identity<sup>8</sup>, and in the context of that sermon a staff member said, “Mark, I’m not sure you’ve fully explained our gospel identity.” The following Sunday, I gave four statements which have become an identity statement:

- God is holy
- I am not
- Jesus saves
- Christ is my life

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.yourchurch.com/sermons/series/live14-mistaken-identity/campus/undefined/>

As we move into uncertain and challenging times, there's a lot we don't know. There's a lot of things coming at us. There are some dynamics involved that are out of our control. But you and I (and we) can still decide to follow Jesus.

Ask yourself, "Who am I?" When you read your Bible, ask yourself, "Who am I?" When you watch the news, ask yourself, "Who am I?" When you engage in conversation, ask yourself, "Who am I?"

And as we navigate another challenging year, the mission of our church is to help all of us to be reminded what it looks like to follow Jesus. That's our identity.

### **What's Important?**

The second question is equally as critical. Getting our identity right is the first step, but that's not all. Our identity in Christ was meant to lead us toward a mission. It's important to get these in the right order. Identity informs your mission. Who you are fuels what you feel called to do.

There are images that Jesus gives: salt and light.

They are not designed to be all-encompassing. This is not ALL that Christians are to do. But being salt and light is an essential part of what it means to follow Jesus and live on mission.

Salt was to be an additive, a preservative that prevented decay. Take away the saltiness, and it no longer has any value. Jesus is referring here to the way in which real righteousness serves as a preservative in life, culture, and society. Jesus is commending the way in which believers can be a kind of moral antiseptic.<sup>9</sup> Jesus envisioned his followers to bring a measure of the kingdom with them into every arena in which they entered. But the cultural transformation comes through Jesus-followers bringing the power of the gospel to bear on their community.

Secondly, Jesus says that his disciples are "the light of the world," implying that the world is in darkness. Jesus himself is called the light (John 1:5), and now he is calling his disciples to be like him. By their righteousness and kingdom values, they are to be broadcast to the world.

To make this point clearer, Jesus addresses the value of light. No one puts a light under a basket. Rather lights were meant to be held up, put on a stand, or set on a hill (like a city) that cannot be hidden. The implication should be obvious: Jesus wants the reality of the gospel to be seen in the world so that people will know that the followers of Jesus are different. Jesus envisions people saying, "There is no way that you could be like that on your own. God must be helping you because you could never be that by yourself."

This our role individually and our calling collectively. We must know who we are, but we also must remember that God placed us in the world to live on mission. We must preach the gospel, and we have to live out the gospel.

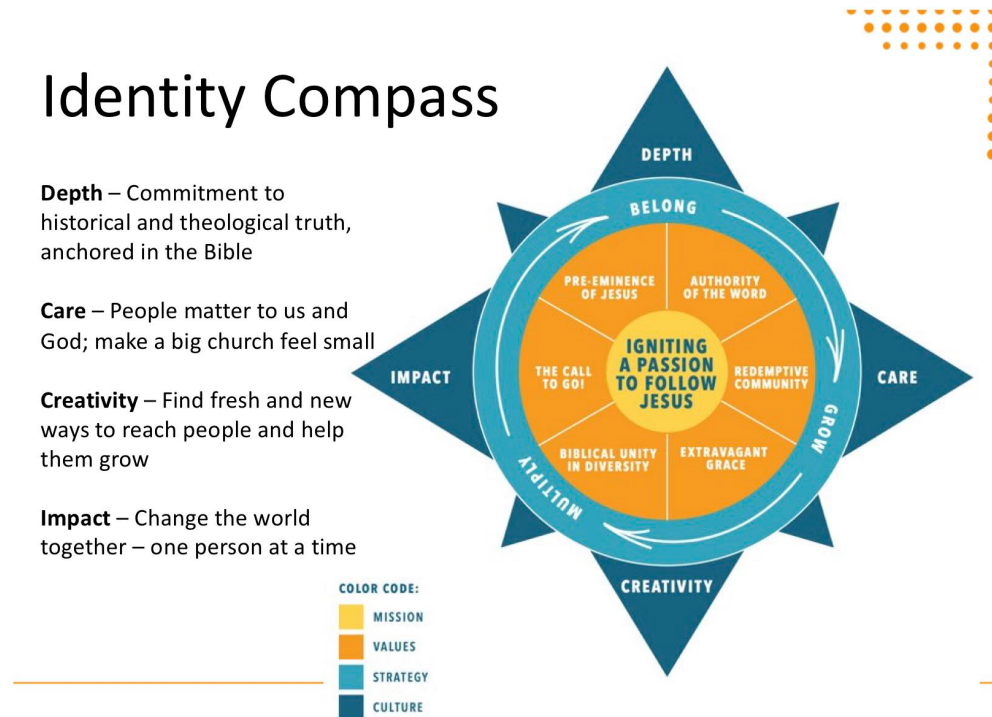
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<sup>9</sup> Turner, 104.

So, my calling for you today is simple: Let's just follow Jesus together. There's a lot that we don't know about the next few months. But we do know who we are and what Jesus has called us to do.

## Identity Compass

Last year our staff and elders developed an image that we've called our "Identity Compass." This was an attempt to visually summarize our mission, values, strategy, and what is the unique culture of our church.



Now there are lots of things that we have planned to do together over the next year. We're going to continue going deep in the Word and heralding the gospel. We'll start back into James next week. We're working hard to further deploy our parish model to care for our people and find ways to help you care for one another. We are committed to following the Holy Spirit's leadership into new ways of living out our mission. And we are passionate about making an impact with unreached people groups, within the urban core, and within our five-mile radius.

Two-thousand-twenty-one is a year of great opportunity. It may be a bit disorienting. But God will help us as we re-engage with our mission of knowing who we are and what's important as we ignite a passion to follow Jesus together.

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