

Get Real!

Beatitudes: The Ethics of Grace

Matthew 5:1-12

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Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Today we begin a new and important series on Jesus' longest recorded sermon called the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7. Our plan is to make our way through these hard-hitting chapters through most of the summer. However, we will take a break for a mini-series in August on biblical relationships called, "How to Kill Relationships and Irritate People." The plan is to wrap up this study just prior to the Missions Conference in October.

The Sermon on the Mount is a powerful and impactful portion of scripture for a number of reasons:

1. It is the first message that we hear from Jesus – like an inaugural address
2. It touches on a number of timely and sensitive topics: anger, lust, divorce, getting even, giving, prayer, worry, judging, and good deeds
3. It takes the superficial religion that marked Jesus' day head-on

This sermon is a hard-hitting, in-your-face, shocking, and (at times) disturbing message. And it was meant to be that way. The sermon is a call to wake-up or get real. It is meant to challenge spiritual shallowness.

Every pastor has their spiritual hero. Mine is Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the pastor Westminster Chapel in London from 1943-1968. His sixty sermons are recorded in a fabulous book called Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, and I commend it you. Lloyd-Jones captures the value of

this sermon very well. I'm struck with how little has changed in the church in the last fifty years:

*"I do not think it is a harsh judgment to say that the most obvious feature of the life of the Christian Church today is, alas, its superficiality. That judgment is based not only on contemporary observation, but...in light of previous epochs and eras in the life of the Church."*¹

Lloyd-Jones continues with what he sees as part of the cause, and I think here is where we can really see the value of the Sermon on the Mount: *"...I would suggest that one main cause is our attitude to the Bible, our failure to take it seriously, our failure to take it as it is and to all it to speak to us."*²

The Sermon on the Mount is a message on being real, and I hope and pray that this summer will be a great season of spiritual renewal as we seek to discover what Matthew 5-7 says and how it applies to our lives. I'm assuming that every person here has areas of superficial religion. And I'm praying that this summer will be the turning point for many – some to receive Christ and for others to get serious about following Jesus.

Understanding this Sermon

Before we get into the Beatitudes, I need to set the overall stage as to how this fits into our study of Matthew. You could divide the book of Matthew into five sections that include stories and sermons. They can be found in Matthew 3-7, 8-10, 11-13, 14-18, and 19-25. Each of them, interestingly enough, ends with "...and when Jesus finished these sayings..." or something very similar to that (see 7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1). Matthew's intent is to blend, through the book, the words and deeds of Jesus in order to show that he was indeed the Messiah, fulfilling the Old Testament law and the prophets. The Sermon on the Mount is first of five sections of sermons or discourses that Matthew highlights.

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of the five, and there are a variety of views as to how we should take the sermon. This is an important issue because it relates to the level of applicability of the words of Jesus. There are four basic views:³

- The traditional dispensational view has been to treat the sermon as Jewish law for the future kingdom and not as applicable teaching for the church.
- The Lutheran view (and some Reformed) is to treat the sermon as an expansion of the law with high legal demands meant to bring people to their knees and turn to the cross.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 9

² Lloyd-Jones, 10

³ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing, 2008), 143-144.

- There is a social gospel view that takes this sermon to be the defining ethic for people and cultures.
- My view is called the correct view (just kidding!). I hold that the sermon shows us the ethics of grace, the outworking of the invasion of God's kingdom into our lives. The sermon should not be taken as new law, but rather as a description of the character produced by God in the lives the followers of Jesus. Therefore, it is about the character of kingdom that the gospel creates. This is important because the demands of the sermon are impossible to fully keep; yet there is a level of obedience that real followers of Jesus should strive for. So I see this text through a lens of "already and not yet." In other words there is a sense where God's saving work produces real righteousness, expressed in the sermon, but there is a longing for the day when the sermon will be fully realized on the earth (see 6:10).

Therefore, the theme for this sermon is how to live in light of the saving rule of God or the kingdom. In terms of its organization, the sermon can be outlined like this:

1. Setting (5:1-2)
2. Introduction (5:3-16) – living and manifesting the rule of God
3. Practical Living (5:17-7:12) – identifying the radical difference of kingdom living
4. Conclusion (7:13-27) – choosing between two ways
5. Response (7:28-29)

Finally, it is important to understand how Jesus teaches through the Sermon on the Mount and the other discourses. Knowing Jesus' style and method will really help you make sense of what he is saying (and what he is not saying).

The challenge is that Jesus often makes strong, paradoxical statements without all the qualifications that might be necessary.⁴ In other words, his teaching is bold, and he doesn't spend time working out all the potential issues or the conflicts. Like any speaker, he knows he cannot spend time on all the side issues or it will detract from his main point. So Jesus highlights a particular side of truth without fully dealing with the potential conflicts or exceptions.

For example, he says in 5:16 that we are to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works." Yet in 6:1 he says "beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them." These statements seem to be contradictory. Further, in 5:29 he commands gouging out your eye if it causes you to lust. However, Jesus is not literally suggesting that maiming the body is the solution; he is using strong and shocking language to make his point.

Jesus often says hard things. The reason he does this is to try to break through the hardened, superficial, hypocritical religion of his day. Often the best and most effective way to do that is with shocking, provocative, and conflicting statements.

There is so much about this sermon that is shockingly opposite to how we normally think and live. For example:

- The sad are blessed and comforted (5:4)
- Persecution should make you rejoice (5:11)
- Keeping rules doesn't make you religious (5:20)
- Giving money away is a good investment (6:20)
- Doing great ministry (even miracles) doesn't mean you know Jesus (7:21)

Superficiality is always a problem for people who claim to be religious. And the Sermon on the Mount is essentially an assault on the status quo. Therefore direct, shocking and even provocative words are not only appropriate, they are helpful.

The final verses (7:28-29) show us the ultimate result of this sermon:

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

Jesus' teaching was shocking, authoritative, and different. It pierced the veil of superficial religion. It was designed to call people to radical, God-centered change.

Shocking information is often motivating. I was recently at the dentist for my 6-month check-up which I had not had in nearly 2 years. And as part of the check-up, my very nice dental hygienist asked me the dooms-day question: "How often do you floss?" My answer was not nearly as disappointing as the pictures she pulled out showing the effects of gum disease. She said, "Now, I'm not trying to lecture you or scare you but..." And the reality was that was **exactly** what she was doing, and it worked! It got my attention. It changed how I viewed flossing and brushing – at least for the last two weeks.

This is the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount – to show us the ethics of grace in a shocking and startling manner. Now let's look at verses 3-12.

Living the Beatitudes

The first twelve verses are often called the Beatitudes, and they received that title from the Latin word for blessing – beatitudo. 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." What does this mean?

"Blessed" – to receive God's approval

The concept of being blessed means, in a spiritual sense, that one receives God's approval, favor, endorsement or congratulations.⁵ Sometimes people connect "blessed" with "happy." It is true that the 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. You cannot separate them. Here is how it works:

"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."⁶

Therefore, blessing is a present reality, not just something in the future. It is a unique way of living in light of something that is going to be even more fully developed in the future. For example, it is the beautiful emotion of a recently engaged couple who is experiencing the advancing joy of their relationship while anticipating even more joy in marriage. But what makes this list even more stunning is the fact that God was the one who made it all happen. Our being blessed is entirely dependent upon him. And that is very important lest you take the Sermon on the Mount and make it a new law which you are to carry out. Rather, 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".⁷ It is the ethics of grace

Now that we know how to understand what it means by "blessed," let's look at a few of Beatitudes to learn what Jesus is saying.

Relating to God

Verses 3-6 are specifically directed toward how blessed people (those who've received God's approval) relate to God. More specifically, the first four beatitudes capture what non-superficial spirituality looks like. In other words we have, in these verses, a great summary of what real, grace-invaded people look like.

1. Completely dependent – "poor in spirit" (v 3). Authentic spirituality begins here with a deep understanding of how much God is needed. To be poor in this context is not just below the poverty line; the idea is one of spiritual bankruptcy. It is to acknowledge an absolute inadequacy and utter dependence upon God. This is the exact opposite of the spiritual pride that the Pharisees constantly expressed. It is the heart of Isaiah 66:2 – "this is the one to

⁵ Turner, 149.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lloyd-Jones, 28.

whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." And it is the poor in spirit that possess the kingdom of heaven.

2. Take sin seriously – "mourn" (v 4). This statement is a strange one until you understand the use of the word for mourning in the Bible. 1 Corinthians 5:2 and James 4:9 both use the word in the context of mourning over sin, which includes our own sin and the sin of others. Psalm 119:136 says, "My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law." The sense of this word's use indicates that Jesus is calling his people to a view of life that shuns the light-hearted attitude regarding the serious issues in life.⁸ The text indicates that there is divine comfort given to those who genuinely take sin seriously. There is comfort in genuine repentance.

3. Power under control – "meek" (v 5). Jesus is commending the humble refusal to insist on one's rights. Meekness is not a sign of weakness; it is deep understanding of a greater power that triumphs over everything else, freeing a person to forgo their needs, desires, or rights. The greater power is dependency upon God. It is a choice that even though you could assert yourself, you choose not to. Meekness is only possible because of the fact that God owns it all. And that is why the meek inherit the earth.

4. Right desires – "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (v 6). Jesus uses hunger and thirst so that we get the sense of intense desire. 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.⁹ The single, consuming passion and the longing in the heart of the person who has been invaded by grace, is for righteousness. And the beautiful thing is that God fills them, satisfies them. It is those who are famished for righteousness that are really satisfied.

All four of these address how true followers of Jesus relate to God. It shows us that the ethics of grace begin by considering carefully our response to the invasion of God's grace in our lives.

Ethics of Grace and the Lord's Table

In a few moments we are going to move into a time around the Lord's table, and I can think of no better application from today's message. But before we move into our celebration can I ask you a few questions?

- Does superficial religion describe you? Are you really a follower of Jesus? Do you really know what it means to have turned from your sin and trusted fully in Christ? Do you know today that you are real?
- Has shallowness taken over your walk with Christ? Has grace become too normal? Has the beauty of the gospel faded for you?

⁸ Morris, 97.

⁹ Morris, 99.

- Do you strive to cultivate humility? Is pride, especially spiritual pride, in check?
- Are you taking sin seriously? Does it still bother you, make you feel guilty, or, at times, make you weep?
- Are you controlled by the Spirit? Do you relinquish your rights? Do you ask forgiveness quickly? Are you a God-pleaser, not a man-pleaser?
- Are you spiritually hungry? Do you long for righteousness? Do you want more of Jesus?

Jesus preached this message for a reason, and oh how we need to hear it again. Superficial spirituality was not just a problem in Jesus' time or in Martyn Lloyd-Jones' day; it is always a problem. It is a human problem.

Spirituality tends toward the path of least resistance. And every once in a while we need a shocking message to wake us up to the reality of what is really happening. The Sermon on the Mount does that.

It shows us what happens when God's grace invades the heart. It gives us the ethics of grace.

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