

The Sermon on the Mount – preliminary comments

Matthew 5-7 is known as “The Sermon on the Mount.” These chapters expand upon the first half of Matthew 4:23: “Jesus was going about in all of Galilee. . . proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom.” Chapters 8-9 expand on the latter half of verse 23: “Jesus was going about in all of Galilee. . . healing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

The Sermon on the Mount establishes the ethical standards for those who follow Jesus (Osborne, 16). In a sense, it is the law of the New Covenant, describing the conduct of the New Covenant community (Osborne, 160). “The sermon teaches Christian conduct, not by giving a full scheme of rules and detailed casuistry, to be followed with mechanical precision, but by indicating in a broad and general way the spirit, direction, and objectives, the guiding principles and ideals, by which the Christian must steer his course” (Packer, Knowing God, 191).

These principles lead to three key objectives:

- **We should imitate the Father.** The goal of the Sermon is be like the Father (5:43-48). Jesus said in Matthew 5:48, “you shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Although none of us can be perfect as God is perfect, and the ethics set forth by Jesus will always exceed our grasp, being like the Father should be the trajectory of our life.
- **We should glorify the Father.** In Matthew 5:16 Jesus said “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” We should act in such a way that brings praise to God.
- **We should please the Father.** In Matthew 6:1-18 Jesus dwells on the need of having only one Master and being a single-minded God pleaser.

Verses 3-11 are called the “Beatitudes.” The word “beatitude” is a rough transliteration of the Latin word *beatus* meaning “blessed.” Although some modern translations prefer the word “happy” over “blessed”, blessedness cannot be reduced to happiness. Happiness is a feeling; blessedness in the Bible is a state of being (Carson, 131). Blessedness is when someone is approved by God and in the position of receiving benefits conferred on him by God. Thus, even though people who mourn aren’t happy, Jesus can say they are blessed (Matt. 5:3).

We need to notice that both 5:3 and 5:10 promise the same reward - “the Kingdom of Heaven” (verse 11 expands on verse 10). These verses form “bookends” for the section indicating that everything in-between is included under the one theme of the Kingdom of Heaven (this is known as “*inclusio*”). Thus, the beatitudes do not describe eight different kinds of people- some who are meek, others who are merciful, and others still who are called upon to endure persecution, etc.; rather they set forth a single, yet multicolored picture of the character of anyone who desires to enter the Kingdom.

5:1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him.

5:2 And He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,

Many people followed Jesus. Matthew 4:24-25 says “the news about Him spread throughout Syria. . . [and] large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.” ***When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain, sat down, and began to teach them.***

Chapters 5-7 are called the Sermon *on the Mount* because Jesus gave this sermon “on the mountain” (ὄρος -5:1). In this case “mountain” is referring to the foothills around Lake Galilee. The NIV translates it “mountainside.” In Matthew 5:14 the same word (ὄρος) is translated as “hill”: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill (ὄρος) cannot be hidden.”

Sitting down was the normal posture a rabbi would take when teaching (Osborne, 165).

Some believe that “them” in verse 2 is the disciples (i.e. Jesus begin to teach the disciples). Although “disciples” is the nearest antecedent, it is much more likely that “them” refers back to the crowds mentioned in verse 1. Jesus saw the crowds so He went up into the hills and the crowds followed. His disciples came with Him. He then began to teach all who were there – both the crowds and the disciples.

5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

Because the parallel passage in Luke simply says, “Blessed are the poor,” (Lk. 6:20) some have concluded that Jesus is promising the poor that their present condition will not continue forever. Someday they will experience the outward riches of the Kingdom. Others see the poverty spoken of as that which came about by following Jesus. To follow Him meant to leave all, yet it also means to have a life of blessedness (Berkhower, *The Cost of Discipleship*). But it doesn’t seem that Jesus is speaking of poverty as such, since poverty does not qualify a person for salvation (Marshall, 249; Broadus, 89) nor is it a state of blessedness in itself (Marshall, 249); it can just as easily be a curse (Morris, 139). Jesus is not promising a simple reversal of worldly position - that the poor will become rich– He is describing a mindset that can be called “poor in spirit.”

To be poor in spirit is a concept that comes from the OT where physical poverty became associated with lowliness or humility (Carson, *Sermon*, 17). Poverty often came about through the oppression of God’s people. Thus, humility and poverty were concepts often associated together. For example, Proverbs 16:19 says “It is better to be humble in spirit with the needy (the “poor”) than to divide the spoils with the proud.” In Isaiah 57:15 God says, “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.” Again, in Isaiah 66:2 God said, “this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word ” (also see Ps. 34:18; 51:1-4, 17).

“Poor in spirit” is a picturesque way of describing someone who woefully recognizes that they are without spiritual resources and need God’s mercy.

The word 'poor' (πτωχοί) in 5:3 originally meant 'to cower' or 'cringe'. It was used of a beggar who was totally destitute. As he held out his hand for alms he often hid his face with his other hand because he was ashamed. Lazarus was described as a poor person (Lk. 16:19-31). He was so poor he could offer

nothing, nor did he even try. All he could do was cry for mercy. To be poor in spirit has the same implications as anyone who is poor, yet on a spiritual level. Those who are poor in spirit are humble for they recognize that they are spiritually destitute; they are lacking inwardly in spiritual matters; they see themselves in a state of spiritual bankruptcy. They feel their spiritual need. The reason they inherit the kingdom of heaven is because they turn to God for mercy (Broadus, 89) instead of depending upon their own spiritual credentials or their own personal righteousness. This is the positive spiritual orientation of a person who depends solely upon God; it is the opposite of being arrogant and self-sufficient or treating God as irrelevant.

The Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of heaven is Matthew's customary expression for what other writers prefer to call the Kingdom of God. Matthew, like other Jews in his day, avoided using the word "God" for he felt that it was too holy and too exalted a name to be uttered. In place of it they used other expressions like "heaven." In meaning, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of heaven are identical (Carson, Sermon, 11).

When Jesus or John the Baptist proclaimed the Kingdom, they offered no explanation as to what they meant since they felt that what they said would be understood by any Jew who heard them. It is inconceivable that if they were preaching about a different Kingdom (one that was not found in the OT) that they would do nothing to correct the thinking of those who heard them.

The Kingdom of God as prophesied in the OT was not a place called "heaven" where people go to when they die. The word "kingdom" had primarily a dynamic force referring to a king's active rule more than a reference to a realm or territory over which he rules. As France says, this dynamic sense is better conveyed by "kingship" (France, 102).

Although the kingdom of God can refer to His rule over all creation, this cannot be the meaning here, for conditions are given to be part of the kingdom of God. If this was a reference to God's universal rule, then by definition, all mankind would be part of it. Rather the kingdom of God is the exercise of God's sovereign rule in relation to His saving purposes. Entering the kingdom is synonymous with entering into eternal life. As Carson says, "The kingdom of God speaks of God's authority mediated through Christ; therefore, it speaks equally of our whole-hearted allegiance to that authority" (Carson, Sermon, 15).

A present Kingdom / a future Kingdom.

Jesus taught that the Kingdom was present when He came. In Matthew 12:28, when driving out demons, Jesus declared that the Kingdom "has come upon you." Colossians 1:13 says, "He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son."

Nevertheless, the Scriptures also teach that the Kingdom of God is still future. In Matthew 6:10 Jesus told His disciples to pray that the Kingdom *would come*. In Luke 22:18 Jesus said at the Last Supper, "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes."

In the Sermon on the Mount most of the promises are for the future. "They shall be comforted . . . They shall inherit the earth . . . They shall be satisfied . . ." And so on. But the promise of the first and last beatitude in verses 3 and 10 are present: the disciples are assured that "theirs *is* the Kingdom of heaven."

How do we explain the Kingdom being present and future?

"Fundamentally, the kingdom of God is God's sovereign reign; but God's reign expresses itself in different stages through redemptive history. Therefore, men may enter into the realm of God's reign in its several stages of manifestation and experience the blessings of His reign in differing degrees" (Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, 22).

When we come to faith in Christ, we share in the blessings of God's reign so far as it has been inaugurated; but the full experience of the life under God's rule will have to wait for a future date when Christ is physically present and ruling over the earth.

CONCLUSION:

At the very outset of the Sermon we learn that we do not have the spiritual resources to put the Sermon's precepts into practice. We cannot fulfill God's standards ourselves. We must come to Him, acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy, empty ourselves of self-righteousness and false conceptions of our worth, and He will fill us. The genuineness and depth of repentance is a prime requirement for entering into life (Carson, *Sermon*, 18).

Much of the rest of the Sermon is designed to remove our self-delusions from us and foster genuine poverty of spirit. The genuineness and depth of repentance is a prime requirement for entering into life (Carson, *Sermon*, 18).

All who look forward to the coming Kingdom will embrace His message with whole hearted allegiance. In fact, the message itself will drive one to Christ, for only in Him is there any hope of living up to the rigid standards presented here.