

The Sermon on the Mount (Part 1)...

Matthew 5

The Sermon on the Mount is sometimes thought of as Jesus' 'Declaration of the Kingdom'. The American revolutionaries had the Declaration of Independence; Karl Marx had his Communist Manifesto. Here Jesus declares what His Kingdom is all about – a radically different agenda than what the nation of Israel expected from the Messiah.

It does not present the political or material blessings of the Messiah's reign. Instead, it expresses the spiritual implications of Jesus' rule in our lives. The message tells us how to live when Jesus is our Lord. The Sermon on the Mount does not deal with salvation as such, but it lays out for Jesus' followers how regarding Jesus as King translates into ethics and daily living...

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5 v 1 to 12)

In the eight Beatitudes, Jesus sets forth both the nature and the aspirations of citizens of his kingdom. All of these character traits are marks and goals of all Christians; there is no escape from our responsibility to aspire to every one of these spiritual qualities. If you meet someone who claims to be a Christian but displays and desires none of these traits, you may rightly wonder about their salvation; but if they claim to have mastered these attributes, you may rightly question their honesty!

- What does it mean to be *poor in spirit*, to *mourn*, to be *meek*, to *hunger and thirst for righteousness*, to be *merciful*, to be *pure in heart*, to be *peacemakers*, and to be *persecuted* – in the 21st century?
- How are these qualities in contrast with the world's values? How are they perfectly shown in the character of Jesus? How are these qualities rewarded, and why?

Salt, light and the fulfilment of the Law (Matthew 5 v 13 to 20)

- What is the significance of the two metaphors which Jesus uses to describe our relationship to the world? How does he warn us of possible failure, and why do you think he gives these warnings?
- How does Jesus demonstrate his respect for the Law? "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v 20): what do you think this means?
- Note that the Law is not a means of gaining a righteous standing before God – see Galatians 2 v 21; we are talking about a different *kind* of righteousness – see Philippians 3 v 6 to 9.

Murder, adultery, divorce, oaths (Matthew 5 v 21 to 37)

- "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..." How does Jesus make the Law even more demanding, in the areas of anger, lust, divorce and swearing?
- Note that sin starts in hearts and minds, and in Jesus' books reconciliation is more important than religious duty (Romans 12 v 18). We may be unable to control *passing* thoughts, but we are responsible for where our hearts and minds dwell.
- What is Jesus' teaching on the sanctity of marriage? How is Jesus' teaching on oaths relevant today?

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Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, love your enemies (Matthew 5 v 38 to 48)

- When Jesus speaks about striking you on the right cheek, it was culturally understood as a deep insult rather than a physical attack. How do you react when you are insulted?
- In what ways can we find opportunities to ‘go the extra mile’?
- These verses teach us that all people are our neighbours, even our enemies.
- Who are your enemies?
- In practical terms, how do we love, bless, do good to and pray for our enemies?

“Be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v 48) – but how? Jesus demonstrates that we need a righteousness apart from the Law (Romans 3 v 21, 22). The culmination of Jesus’ teaching on the Law is this: to love God and to love our neighbour – see Matthew 22 v 37 to 40; 1 Timothy 1 v 5.

Further notes on the Beatitudes

The word ‘beatitude’ is not found in the Bible. It simply means ‘blessing’ and comes from the Latin word for ‘blessed’ (*beatus*). There is a definite progression in these verses. They show how a person begins with his or her own sense of sin, and becomes a child of God, and the results that then follow...

Note that these verses deal with *attitudes* – what we think in our hearts, our outlook on life – the attitudes that ought to be in our lives if we are true followers of Jesus Christ.

We can think of the eight Beatitudes as *Be-attitudes*:

- *Poor in spirit* (v 3): Our attitude toward ourselves, in which we feel our need and admit it
- *Mourn* (v 4): Our attitude toward sin, true sorrow for sin
- *Meek* (v 5): Our attitude toward others; being teachable; not defending ourselves when we are wrong
- *Hunger and thirst for righteousness* (v 6): Our attitude toward God is expressed; we receive God’s righteousness by faith because we ask him for it (“the righteousness from God that depends on faith”, Philippians 3 v 9)
- *Merciful* (v 7): We have a forgiving spirit, and we love others
- *Pure in heart* (v 8): We keep our lives and motives clean; holiness is happiness for us, and there are no substitutes
- *Peacemakers* (v 9): We should bring peace: between people and God, and between those who are at odds with each other
- *Persecuted* (v 10): But all who aspire to live godly lives will suffer persecution (see 2 Timothy 3 v 12) – why is this so?