

**A Month in Matthew
Upside Down
Matthew 5:1-6**

Is your personality such that you would rather be in front of a crowd, blend in with the crowd, or be by yourself? Are you passionate about what you believe, or are you chill with what the majority believe and practice? Americans have long suffered an identity crisis. We long to be rugged individuals and true to who we are, but we also long to be accepted by those who share our values. Some of us are even willing to go against the culture and stand for our beliefs. The problem with being radical these days is that the country is split 50/50 and it is hard to identify what is mainstream and what is opposition. Even with the current political scene so deeply divided, though, we want some, at least, to think we are good people with a modicum of ability to understand the times and live accordingly. If we must go against the stream, so be it.

Most counter-cultural groups require the same sort of conformity that they so readily denounce in others. Almost all groups that claim to be different than everyone else are prone to pride and a fair level of disdain for those who do not see the wisdom and benefit of their ways. Most would deny such a mindset, but if you look just below the surface, you may well find an ugliness that serves as a shaky foundation for the beautiful image that the group projects. Most people in subgroups are not much different than those in the mainstream. That shouldn't be surprising to believers who accept the doctrine of total depravity and who recognize that every part of our being is tainted with sin.

As Christians – that is, as followers of Jesus in faith and deed as well as word – we are unavoidably counter-cultural. Even so, we are not afforded the luxury of being prideful or of looking down on those who do not share our beliefs and values. In fact, the lengths to

which we are called to go in our response to those who despise and hurt us is astonishing. We are called to turn the other cheek when our enemies hit us in the face, and we are called to go the extra mile, which recalls the requirement for Jews to carry a Roman soldier's luggage for a mile when told to do so. Jews knew exactly how far a mile was, but Jesus told his followers to happily carry the bags a mile beyond what was required. You want to live a radical life? Live like that. Live a kingdom-focused life.

This year, we are going to spend a good bit of time in the book of Isaiah – and as we found when we went through Genesis and Hebrews, the book of Isaiah will take us all over the Bible. Before we get to Isaiah, though, we will spend a month in the book of Matthew. Don't you love the power point designs that Scott Shamblee prepares for us in these presentations? He perfectly captured the cross-centered life that we will find in Matthew. In truth, we will only spend time in the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5-7, and to be more specific, we are going to marinate in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12 for two weeks, and then the last two weeks of January will find us in the latter half of Matthew 6, where believer' priorities are delineated for them.

The Sermon on the Mount always presents a challenge for teachers. Matthew 5-7 is possibly the most discussed text in the Bible, and there is no little controversy associated with the discussion. Not only will you find commentary after commentary on the Sermon, but you will find what amounts to commentaries that dissect and interpret the commentaries. How should the Sermon be interpreted? Once again, the options are more numerous than you can imagine. Jonathan Pennington, author of *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, found Mark Twain's words about another subject to be appropriate for the mountains of material written about the Sermon on the Mount. Twain said, "The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this

subject, and it is probable that, if they continue, we shall soon know nothing at all about it.”

There is no doubt that in this sermon Jesus was instructing his followers about kingdom living, which begs the question, “Is the kingdom present or future?” The answer, of course, is “Yes.” We are already living in the kingdom of heaven, as the first beatitude will reveal, but the kingdom will not be fully revealed until Jesus returns to earth. Jesus taught with authority and, in fact, did what only God could do. Jesus gave the true spirit of the law when he said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.”

When you hear Jesus’ preach this Sermon, it is quickly evident that no human being can fulfill Jesus’ demands, but, surely, we do not think of the Sermon on the Mount as not applicable to us because the standard is too high. Indeed, we long to live kingdom lives – yet, to do so requires a shift away from the accepted ways of thinking, no matter where you find yourself on the cultural, political, or social scale. As we read through Matthew 5:1-12, determine whether Jesus’ teaching supports, or, conflicts with, so much of the advice that is given today, such as, “Be true to yourself. We need to take this country back for God. Be brave. You do your part and God will do the rest. Rise up. Fight for your rights.” I think you will find that the way Jesus calls us to think and live is Upside Down from the world’s accepted modes of thinking. Let’s read Matthew 5:1-12. Would you please stand for the reading of Scripture?

1 Seeing the crowds, he (Jesus) 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.”

The best way to hear and believe and apply the Sermon on the Mount is to recognize that there is no way to live anything close to how Jesus commanded us to live until we focus first on the Beatitudes, or, the promised eschatological blessings for those whose lives are characterized by the attitudes described in the first twelve verses of Matthew 5. Eschatological blessing simply means that the promises of the future kingdom are partially realized for Jesus' disciples in the present kingdom. You have, no doubt, often heard that “blessing” in these verses is tantamount to happiness, which means that these verses could be translated with “Happy is the one

who is poor in spirit,” but, this misses the point. We could form a better understanding from several angles, the most important being that the word translated “blessed” is from the Greek *makarios*, which has strong connotations of salvation. Matthew uses this word several times in his gospel and it always refers to those who are saved. Matthew 13:16 is just one of several places where *makarios* is used. Jesus was explaining the parable of the sower to his disciples when he said, “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.” Jesus said this to the disciples just after he told them that he spoke in parables to hide the truth from those who would not believe, and that was based on the prophecy of Isaiah 6. You may not want to hear this, but the parables were often far more about identifying who was saved and not saved than they were about lessons and instructions for life. Back to Matthew 5.

In addition to the clues we get about meaning from the grammar, we would understand that the Christian life is not always a happy life. “Happy are those who mourn?” What am I missing, here? So, if we wanted to mess with the translation, it would be more accurate to say, “*Saved* are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

In addition to understanding the vocabulary, it is also helpful to know a bit about the structure. Most of the Beatitudes are written with a future tense verb, such as “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,” indicating that the blessings of those who mourn will be fully realized when they stand before Jesus. That does not mean there is no present comfort, as we will see in a few minutes, but it signifies an “already/not yet” aspect to the blessing.

The first and eighth Beatitudes, in verses 3 and 10, are written in the present tense. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for the kingdom of heaven is already theirs.*” In verse 10, the same blessing applies for “those who are persecuted for righteousness sake – theirs *is* the

kingdom of heaven.” We will get to verse 10 next week, but the grammar in verses 3 and 10 form an inclusio, tying this portion of the Sermon on the Mount together.

In verse 3, the blessing of the kingdom of heaven is present with those who are spiritually poor. Luke 6:20, Matthew 11:2-6, and Isaiah 61 are all part of the greater context of what Jesus meant when he proclaimed this blessing. In short, he was saying that those who come to him with no claim to spiritual resources of their own are members of the kingdom of heaven.

If we were writing Beatitudes on behalf of God, we would likely say something entirely different, such as, “Blessed are those who do good to their fellow man,” or, “Blessed are the religious, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” But Jesus did not put legal requirements on the blessing of heaven. In fact, a very short time later in the Sermon, Jesus will say, in Matthew 5:20, “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, we must come to the Lord with no claims of goodness, but, rather, a posture of humble repentance from the sin that has separated us from God.

To be poor in spirit is to bow before God without excuse or self-justification, as in, “Well, Lord – I might have been okay if it had not been for this person or that person,” or, “Maybe I am not perfect, but I am a whole lot better than most.” Poverty of spirit has nothing to do with comparisons, nor does it have anything to do with self-pity. There is an epidemic of self-pity in our land, is there not? Self-pity is not “poor in spirit.” To be poor in spirit is not a passive attitude of “I’m just no good,” but, rather one who is poor in spirit actively acknowledges his or her sin and need for God’s grace. This can only be done, though, by one who is saved.

Verse 3 flows naturally into verse 4: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Jeffrey Gibbs points out that Jesus now promises to fill human emptiness. In this first stage of kingdom living, we will mourn, primarily over sin – our own sin, sin in the church, and sin in the world. One day, we will be comforted in ways that are, frankly, unimaginable to us in our present state. My Uncle Jerry recently lost his wife, Kathy, to cancer – six months ago, in fact. When I see him, as I did a few days ago, I want to tell him that time will help to ease his pain. It will – I know from experience. But I also know better than to say that to him. Even though the pain eases, do we ever fully get over the sorrows of this life? Not really. But the day will come when all tears will be dried and unspeakable joy will be the only sense we ever know. In our present state, we cannot sustain intense joy for very long. I am not sure if we will live in a state of continuous joy in the new heavens and new earth, but I do know one thought that will never cross our minds – “I wonder when this is going to go bad, when the wheels will run off, when I will wake up from this dream?” No, we will be fully comforted.

In the meantime, mourn over sin as followers of Jesus and he will comfort you with his forgiveness and acceptance. That is the promise, but I fear that we are prone to turn to sinful and meaningless pursuits to help mitigate the pain in this phase of kingdom life. Do you entertain and even glorify sin? Do you seek and accept glory that belongs to the Lord? Do you applaud efforts that are entirely self-centered? Not that you should refuse to recognize and encourage achievement in others, but, is your mindset one that exalts human effort over a heart that appreciates the beautiful gifts that God has given others – even unbelievers?

Remember, though, that the Beatitudes are not primarily intended to challenge us to godly repentance, but, rather, to identify those who follow Jesus. Even though the Beatitudes are more statements of fact than admonition, Jesus’ sermon surely challenge us to live in

godly lives. Jesus was saying, “Men, women – this is characteristic of my followers: Saved are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Verse 5: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” “Meek” is better translated “lowly.” “Blessed are the lowly, for they shall inherit the earth.” With apologies to Hamilton lovers of “Rise Up,” we must acknowledge that while our lowly state that is referenced in verse 5 is akin to the spiritual poverty of verse 3, this future blessing is for those who are often oppressed in this life. Furthermore, our responsibility is more often to trust God than it is resist the visible forces that are against us. Resist Satan, but trust God when people oppose you. The blessing that is promised to believers is more future than present. This third Beatitude is closely connected with Psalm 37:10-11:

10 In just a little while, the wicked will be no more;
though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.
11 But the meek (lowly) shall inherit the land
and delight themselves in abundant peace.

While it is right and good that we seek justice on this earth since Scripture is replete with calls for us to do so, even so, the promise is that one day the lowly will inherit the earth. In the meantime, the third Beatitude flows right into the fourth.

Verse 6: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Those who seek to be justified by the law care very much about appearances. The humble who are saved by grace care about what is right, and so there is, indeed, a desire for social justice in the hearts of believers. But, there is an even greater desire than for wrongs to be made right. Jesus’ followers long for God’s kingdom to fully come in righteousness and power. And though his disciples would not have been able to fully

understand it when Jesus preached this sermon, God *had* come to earth – and, he was pronouncing blessing on those who were saved. Who are the saved? Those who put no trust in their own goodness, but rely solely on the merits of Christ. In other words, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied – in Jesus.”

It is impossible for believers to read these Beatitudes and find that they have no desire to be more like the blessed men and women that Jesus described. Should believers work to improve their lives? As Shaun Cross said last Sunday, “Do this, no Jesus does this for you, but, do this, Jesus does it” – that is what Scripture gives us. So, should we seek to hunger and thirst after righteousness? Absolutely. But the best way to do that is to spend time with Jesus in God’s word and in prayer rather than trying to work it up. You will be blessed when you do.

God has beautifully designed that we should commune with Jesus and with one another in the most profound way at the Lord’s Table where we partake of the Supper. As we come to the Table, know that we are saved as we acknowledge our sin and depend only on Jesus’ sacrificial death as our hope of salvation. Let’s pray.