

Ethics of the Kingdom: Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount

There is a logical connection between our last topic (the proclamation of the kingdom of God in Jesus' ministry) and the next topic, the Sermon on the Mount, because the Sermon on the Mount is the ethic of the kingdom. It describes the way we live if we are under the reign of God or living in God's kingdom.

The Sermon on the Mount is presented rather logically at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. According to Matthew, it takes place after Jesus returned to Galilee. That implies that Jesus was elsewhere before that time. He was having a quiet ministry before then—a few healings and a few encounters with people in the south and then He returned to Galilee, determined to begin His ministry there.

The Gospels have already identified two themes that connect with the ethic of the kingdom. One is the identity of Jesus. Jesus is the King of the Jews, the Son of David, Emmanuel, one greater than John, the beloved Son, and also the King. He is the one who comes proclaiming the rule of God. The second theme is conflict. Herod has attempted to kill Christ. According to Luke, Jesus gets a hostile reception at His first sermon and He's going to be cast off a cliff at the end of His message. So not everyone is listening with favor to what Jesus has to say.

When Jesus does speak, He speaks to those who are, one might say, the least likely. He begins with those who are in Galilee and who are probably highly Hellenized. The influence of Hellenism is quite evident in what we know of ancient Galilee. There was a synagogue there that looks like a Greek building. Everywhere you go, you see things that look Greek and look pagan. This was because it was a pagan land in many ways, not fully but largely. It was called "Galilee of the Gentiles."

Galilee was not only a place of spiritual poverty, but also a place of physical poverty. Jesus began His ministry among the poor. He came to announce the Gospel for the poor, release for the captives. It is important to realize that when Jesus healed people, when He healed the diseased, the paralyzed, the demonized, He was healing poor people. There was no health care system. If you were paralyzed, that almost always meant you were poor as a result. Maybe there were a very few exceptions. If you were born to an extremely wealthy family then disability might not bring poverty. But there were not many wealthy families. If you were demon possessed, gravely ill, or if you did not have much, then Jesus was for you. Jesus began His ministry, not with the upper middle class, nor in the safe suburbs. He began His ministry with the poor. That's where He turned first.

The people came to Him in throngs, drawn by His miracles. They also believed that His miracles showed that He was more than just a miracle worker. Even Nicodemus said, "We know you're a teacher from God because no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." They came to Jesus because He alleviated their pain but they also came because they thought He must be, or at least He might be, something much more. Jesus never intended to heal all the sick of Israel. In fact, on a number of occasions He left people who were sick without healing them. His goal was to introduce people to the reign of God. His healings garnered their attention, but then once He got it, He moved on to other things.

The Sermon on the Mount as a whole is a description of life in the kingdom. According to Matthew 5:1, when Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him and He began to teach them. Understanding that Jesus was teaching His disciples is crucial for understanding the Sermon on the Mount. He did not come just to teach absolutely anybody. He separated out those

who were His disciples—or those who were interested in becoming His disciples or in taking the first steps toward being a disciple—and He spoke to them.

There are a variety of ways of looking at the Sermon on the Mount, partly because the Sermon on the Mount is a difficult part of the Bible to read. In one way, it is the easiest thing in the world to read. You simply read it: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” That is perfectly clear. “You are the salt of the earth.” “Do not murder.” Not only don’t murder but don’t be angry with your brother. It is all easy to read and absolutely clear. “Don’t do these things. Do those other things.” Why, then, is it difficult to read? The difficulty is that it *is* so clear. There’s no mistaking what it says and no one can explain it away. There it all is and it’s impossible. What people wrestle with is not its content, nor its excellence, nor its clarity. They wrestle with its impossibility.

Everyone would be happy if Jesus had said simply, “Don’t murder,” and let it go at that. But He didn’t stop there. He said, “Don’t murder. Furthermore, don’t be angry with anybody. Furthermore, if somebody else is angry with you, you go be reconciled to him. Furthermore, if somebody is suing you, go be reconciled to him.” It just keeps getting worse and worse. In fact, it goes all the way to the point that He says, “You shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.” That’s when readers know they are in trouble and need a theologian, pastor, preacher, or book of Bible information to help them out. They take comfort when such a source reveals that the word “perfect” is the word *teleious*, which really means “mature” or “complete.” Nobody has to be perfect. But that only trades one problem for another because, if it doesn’t command us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect, it still requires us to be as mature and complete as He is. This doesn’t seem any easier than being just as perfect. The problem with the Sermon on the Mount is not that we can’t understand it but that we can’t do it—we can’t live according to what it commands.

People have tried to find ways to understand this very difficult body of teaching. In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church said the Sermon is a description of “the Councils of Perfection,” Jesus’ commands for those who aspire to a higher level of righteousness. Roman Catholic monks read the Sermon on the Mount as if it is aimed at them. They take vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. They remain celibate for the sake of the kingdom, sell all their possessions and give to the poor. Most people can’t handle that, but for those who can, the Sermon on the Mount gives guidance. The typical term for this sort of thinking is, “two tier ethics.” In this system there is one standard for ordinary Christians and another for super-Christians.

Martin Luther taught that the Sermon on the Mount applies to Christians in their private lives, but not in their public lives. It is aimed at us as individuals, in the realm of personal piety. In our private lives, we turn the other cheek. But some Christians are magistrates and in that role a Christian must not turn the other cheek. In that case one must slap the other cheek. In our personal and spiritual lives, we obey the Sermon, but in our secular lives we don’t turn the other cheek because we may have to lift up a sword. (I am simplifying Luther’s thought greatly here, because of time.)

The Anabaptists of the Reformation (and others who take the Bible very literally) claimed that the directions of the Sermon on the Mount are just something you must do. If this means you have to leave the world in order to follow the Sermon on the Mount, then leave the world. If it means radical pacifism, never entering military service, never entering the judicial branch of your society, or never taking an oath, then you must be willing to do those things. If you become a Christian while holding office, or as a soldier, then you just have to leave your position. Some people would label this understanding of the Sermon, “flight from the world.”

Some later Lutherans, and a lot of people since then, believe that the goal of the Sermon on the Mount is to drive us to despair, and hence to the Gospel. The reader of the Sermon is supposed to say, as Isaiah says, "Woe is me, I am undone." Then at the end of the Gospel story the reader discovers that Christ, who has told us to do all these things, dies for our sins and then rises. The work of Christ in His death and resurrection is the solution to our inability to live according to the Sermon on the Mount.

There is a lot of truth in that last perspective but it is not the whole truth. Some people take the opposite view and think of the Sermon on the Mount as an attainable moral standard. The American president, Harry Truman, said he was a Christian in the sense that he followed the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Such people are perhaps being presumptuous, but what they mean is that they try to do those parts of it that are accessible, that they can accomplish. They try to follow the rules like, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." They don't hate other people, don't resist an evil person if they can help it, and are peaceable.

There is some truth to the Lutheran view that the Sermon drives us to Christ, but there are also clues in the text that point to a different understanding. The chief clue is in Matthew 5:1-2, which reveals that the Sermon on the Mount is given to the disciples. Thus, the view that the Sermon on the Mount is only for super-Christians cannot be true, because it is given to everyone who is listening as one of Jesus' disciples. This also rules out the view that the Sermon is simply a moral standard all people should try to obey, because it is given to people who already know they can't obey. The Sermon on the Mount is for people who acknowledge Christ as their Lord and King. It's not for people who hope to get in. It is for people who are already in.

I must make one important qualification. The Sermon is *primarily* for disciples. Matthew 7: 28, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, says the crowds were amazed at Jesus' teaching because He taught as one who had authority and not as their scribes. The Sermon on the Mount was probably taught by the Sea of Galilee on a sloping hill. If that is where Jesus called His disciples and He was speaking widely to thousands of people, others probably began to filter in. They listened in, but the Sermon on the Mount was not really for them. Jesus was not going to say that they couldn't listen. It was a little bit like a pastor who preaches on the life of discipleship and he might say to the congregation, "If there's anybody here who's not a Christian, some of this won't make sense, but if you want to listen to hear what it's like to be a Christian, by all means listen in." A non-believer can listen in, and it is fine if he does, but properly speaking, it is not for him.

Properly speaking, the Sermon is for disciples. Matthew 5:1-2 is one piece of evidence for this, but there are many other clues. The Sermon begins by addressing people who know their need of grace: "Blessed are the poor." The first beatitude makes no sense to a secular person. The second beatitude, "Blessed are those who mourn" also makes no sense. Happy are those who cry? That makes no sense to a secular person. The Christian would understand: happy are those who mourn about the right things; happy are those who mourn about sin and mourn about injustice. Christians understand that it is better to mourn over sin in one's own life and sin in the world than to be indifferent to it. There is a blessedness in grieving over your sin. It is far better, far more blessed to grieve over your sin, than to gloat over your sin. It is far more blessed to grieve over your sin than to be indifferent to your sin. It is far better to grieve over abortion, than it is to be indifferent to abortion. "Blessed are those who mourn." But it takes spiritual discernment to understand that, so the Sermon on the Mount makes sense to those who are spiritually discerning.

The Sermon on the Mount is also for those who know God as their King and Father. When we pray we say "Our Father." Only believers can address God that way in prayer. This sermon is not about how

to become a disciple—it assumes you are a disciple. The Sermon on the Mount is given to those who fast and pray and give alms to the poor. It doesn't say, "if you fast," but, "when you fast." It doesn't say, "if you pray," but, "when you pray." Nor do we read, "if you give to the poor," but "when you give to the poor." These are the marks of a believer. They are not the only marks, but in the culture of Jesus' day, they were the three marks of a pious person. Jesus is interacting with their conception of a pious person.

Only a believer is interested in the command that Jesus gives, "Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees." To exceed the righteous of the scribes and the Pharisees would be to exceed the righteousness of the most holy people around. Only those that are interested in the reign of Christ would wish to strive for such a thing. Only a disciple would fit this description.

For all these reasons, it seems the Sermon on the Mount is essentially for believers. Crowds can listen in, but essentially it is for those who know God and know the life of the kingdom.

One more reason should be considered. The Sermon on the Mount invites listeners to pattern their lives after Christ. The Gospels are clear as to who is truly able to pattern their life after Christ. In Matthew 10:24-25, Jesus says, "It is enough for a servant to be like his master." A servant here is one who is a disciple. Jesus says quite plainly that the way of the kingdom is to imitate Him. The Sermon on the Mount, with the Beatitudes, provides a general description of the blessed person and it is largely a description of Christ.

Consider the Beatitudes: "Blessed are those who mourn." Jesus mourned over Israel. He mourned that they were like sheep without a shepherd. He mourned, saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I've longed to gather you under my wings like a hen gathers its chicks, but you would not have it and now your desolation is upon you."

"Blessed are the meek." Jesus was meek and humble. Jesus offered, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy, my burden is light," and He continued, "for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls." The word for "humble" is the same word as "meek" in the Greek text.

The fourth beatitude: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Christ hungered and thirsted for righteousness. He was perfectly righteous and He not only hungered for Himself, but He hungered for us that we should be righteous. He was so hungry that He was baptized even though there was no ground for Him to be baptized, but in order to "fulfill all righteousness," that is, to make it clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that He would do everything a righteous person would do.

The next beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful." Surely this is a description of Christ. The Gospels tell us at least a half-dozen times that Jesus performed miracles because He was filled with compassion. When He saw the blind man, the crippled man, He was moved with compassion and healed them. Blessed are the merciful because they participate in the life of Christ, the Master.

"Blessed are the pure in heart," is the next beatitude. Christ is pure in heart. According to John's Gospel He was able to make the bold statement to His enemies, "Who of you convicts me of any sin?" In fact, He was so pure that, when He said that, there was no answer to His claim. In Matthew 26:59-60, when Jesus was on trial and His enemies were trying to find some cause to execute Him, they couldn't even find any false evidence, though they brought many false witnesses forward. In this situation Jesus' accusers were not interested in the truth. As one wise theologian said, "They only wanted to stay just

inside the tortured bounds of legality.” They wanted to achieve just the veneer of legality—just enough to plausibly claim they were doing the right thing. All they needed was to come up with some charge that was plausible. They were willing to bring anybody in as a witness, so long as their testimony sounded credible. But they couldn’t find one person who could even make a plausible charge. They themselves had to throw out all the evidence. Obviously Jesus had a pure heart. No one could convict Him of sin.

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” In one sense, Christ came to bring not peace but a sword because He did not come to bring peace at any price. Although peace is a wonderful thing, we don’t pursue peace at any price; there is a time to fight. Yet, essentially, Christ was a peacemaker. Above all, He brought peace between mankind and God. He certainly also brought peace to people’s souls, to people’s hearts. There has been testimony throughout the ages of Him making peace between former enemies and between alienated members of families, as well as people of different backgrounds separated by all sorts of prejudices and stresses that Christ has overcome.

Finally, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” This is obviously a description of Christ.

The only thing that’s not quite clear, perhaps, is whether the very first beatitude describes Jesus: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.” To be poor in spirit means to know your own spiritual poverty, your own spiritual deficit, and Jesus was not impoverished spiritually. However, Jesus understood that He ought to come to the poor first. He didn’t start with the wealthy and the prominent in Judea. Rather, He started with the poor, the blind, and the crippled in Galilee. He gave Himself to the nobodies and the outcasts of this world. He was not prejudiced against the rich, wanting nothing to do with them. But He gave Himself first to others. In this way He identified with the poor. Also, if one defines poverty of spirit as an absence of self-assertion, dependence on God rather than demanding one’s own way, then Jesus was indeed poor in spirit. One might say that Jesus had most, if not all sides of poverty in spirit.

The Beatitudes are an odd list. “Happy are those who are poor...Happy are those who mourn.” These are not traits you would normally consider worth pursuing. If you list the traits that you wish you had, or list the traits you wish you had in a friend, or a neighbor, or in your co-worker, or your children you would not ask for the traits we find in the Sermon on the Mount. I’ve asked many people, “What do you hope for your children?” Nobody has ever said, “I hope they know how to mourn.” Most parents, if you ask them, would say, “I would hope they would mourn (that is, cry and whine) less.”

Typically, Christians want things like the fruit of the Spirit. Or they value traits like honesty, humility, reliability, tolerance, or willingness to forgive. Jesus gives us a very different list in the Sermon on the Mount. This should lead us to ask, what is Jesus really saying here in this list? Is Jesus saying, the blessed person has these eight traits: they’re poor, they mourn, they’re meek, they don’t assert themselves, they hunger and thirst for righteousness, they’re a peacemaker, they’re pure in heart, they’re merciful, and they’re persecuted? Are these traits that Christians are supposed to develop within themselves? Asking these questions should provoke us to think more about what Jesus is trying to accomplish in the Beatitudes. We will return to this issue next time.