

Jesus: Liberator and King

Advance in Faith 1, Unit 2

Week 3 — Jesus' Teachings



Introduction

The kingdom of God means God's reign over humanity, and through us to the rest of the world. Humans have messed that up by grasping at God's power, and using it to oppress each other.

So, **a son of man** (a human) had to confront the powers that wreck the world through evil rule and death. Only then could earth be restored under the power of our true heavenly ruler.

Jesus was **the son of man restoring the kingdom of God**.

That is the **gospel**—the good news about Jesus!

Unfortunately, we tend to shrivel the gospel into a story about *me*. We think of the gospel as my need to “make a decision” to “accept Jesus into my heart” as my “personal Saviour” and pray “a sinner’s prayer” so I can know “I’m going to heaven.” That’s not the gospel Jesus proclaimed! He never used those words, or anything like them. The gospel isn’t a story about me. It’s an announcement about Jesus: that even though earth’s rulers killed him, he is back from the dead and installed as king! He commands the nations to live as God intended—loving God, loving people, managing God’s creation as his agents.

In short, the gospel is the announcement that earth is under new management—that the coup of evil and death is over, and the one who liberates humanity now reigns. The *good news* is the announcement that Jesus is now Lord! That’s the language the Bible uses! And yes, individuals are called to respond to the good news by quitting their rebellion, trusting Jesus’ leadership, and contributing to communal life under his governance (his kingdom).

Yes, there is a future dimension to his kingdom, and yes it matters. But when the King takes his throne to judge the peoples of the earth, he will not ask you about your doctrine. He won’t ask you whether you prayed a sinner’s prayer. He won’t ask if you made a decision. He will examine whether you lived as a citizen of his kingdom, loving him by loving his people. (See Mt 25:31-46).

The Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12)

We could spend the rest of this session right there, but we need to hear what Jesus taught. Turn to Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount. The traditional location of this sermon is the hills to the north of the Sea of Galilee. If you’re from New Zealand or New Guinea, you wouldn’t refer to these hills a mountain, but Matthew does so for a reason.

Remember Mount Sinai? When Israel was released from Egypt, Moses led them to Mt Sinai. He “went up on the mountain” to receive

the word from God (Deut 10:3). Matthew's phrase is identical: Jesus "went up on the mountain" to deliver God's word to the people. So:

King Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount as the Kingdom Torah for kingdom citizens.¹

Torah was the highest authority in Judaism—the words God spoke on the mount. Jesus claims the same authority: a new Torah, an update:

²¹ You have heard that it was said ... ²² But I say to you ...

²⁷ You have heard that it was said ... ²⁸ But I say to you ...

³¹ It was also said ... ³² But I say to you ...

³³ You have heard that it was said ... ³⁴ But I say to you

³⁸ You have heard that it was said ... ³⁹ But I say to you

⁴³ You have heard that it was said ... ⁴⁴ But I say to you

In the crowd listening to Jesus were some who knew Torah really well, and were concerned about what Jesus might say. They relaxed when they heard his first word: "Blessed ..." This is wisdom teaching, a very familiar path in Judaism, going all the way back to Deut 28.

After spelling out all the Torah obligations, Moses said:

Deut 28 ¹ If you faithfully obey ... ² all these blessings shall come upon you ...

¹⁵ But if you will not obey ... all these curses shall come upon you ...

Blessing comes to those who obey, but trouble to the disobedient. The Proverbs are like this. The prophets say this. The Psalm that introduces all the others says this:

Psa 1 ¹ Blessed is the one ... whose delight is in Torah ...

⁴ Not so the wicked! They are like chaff ...

But then Jesus confuses his listeners. He announces blessing on all the wrong people! He's supposed to say, "Blessed are the obedient," but he says, "Blessed are the poor" (5:3). That can't be right! The poor are the ones who don't have the blessings: they've missed out, so they must have been disobedient. It is clearly the rich who are blessed, so they must be the ones God is happy with. The poor are not happy! This Galilean teacher has it all wrong!

It gets worse. Jesus' second statement is, "Happy are the sad ..." (5:4). I can hear one of the religious people whispering, "This guy is clueless. He doesn't understand how the wisdom tradition works. He's

¹ Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 91.

making it up. He's totally muddled. 'Happy are the sad' makes no sense at all!"

But in my imagination I also see a Galilean farmer in the crowd. He is struggling with crippling debt. He had a tough year, and borrowed money for seed to plant the next year's crop, and now he can't pay it back, not to mention the Roman taxes he can't pay. He's depressed, and losing the motivation to push on. That's why he came to listen to Jesus today: there's no point going on. He is shocked: it's as if Jesus knows his very situation. To him it sounds like Jesus said this something like this (Matt 5:3-6 paraphrased):

You know those who feel poverty enslaving their spirit?

They are the ones who have it all when God's reigns.

You know those who are crushed by grief?

They will be comforted.

You know those who are powerless?

Father will entrust the whole farm to them.

You know those who are starving for justice?

Their case will be set right.

That's right: when God sets things right, those who've missed out will be the ones who are blessed.

Imagine how this farmer feels! He can scarcely believe his ears. If this is for real, it's the best news he has ever heard! Could it really be?

Now here's the rub. Jesus is announcing good news for the poor, the grieving, the crushed, the desperate, those treated unjustly. But that's not good news for the rich, the well-to-do, those who currently have power, those with the money to buy justice. Announcing a blessing on one group implies that the opposite group misses out!

There were always two sides to Jewish wisdom teaching: blessing and curse. Matthew omits the implied curse on the opposite group. Luke doesn't: the "woe" is explicit in Luke 6:20-26:

²⁰ Blessed are you who are **poor**,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ Blessed are you who **hunger**
now, for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who **weep** now,
for you will laugh.

²² Blessed are you when people
hate you ...

²⁴ But woe to you who are **rich**,
for you have received your comfort.

²⁵ Woe to you who are **well fed**
now, for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who **laugh** now,
for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ Woe to you when everyone
speaks well of you ...

Jesus is intentionally offending those who think they are the blessed. It is the poor who benefit when God reigns:

- The ones who are currently rich will lose out: they have more than their fair share, so they must relinquish some.
- Those who currently enjoy fine dining will miss out when God reigns: their food will be given to those who are hungry.
- Those who are laughing at present will mourn their losses when God takes what they have and gives it to those who are weeping because they have nothing.
- Those who have all the social capital will be dishonoured when God exposes their selfishness and runs society as he intends.

The Beatitudes are not things to aim for! Jesus did not say, “Try to be poor. Try to be hungry. Try to be sad. Try to make people hate you.”

Jesus was describing a **reversal of fortunes**. Do you find this encouraging, or confronting? We who live in the Western world today are the wealthy, the full, the laughing, the socially elite. Jesus envisions a world where we relinquish our wealth to the poor, share our food with the hungry, stop laughing long enough to care about those who weep, and stand up for people who cannot stand up for themselves.

How does this make you feel? “Hurray!” or, “Oh, no!” Discuss.

Israel's vocation (Matt 5:13–48)

God is seen in people. If God is not very visible, the problem is that people are not revealing God. Jesus' sermon called Israel to be the revelation of God.

They were to be *the salt of the earth* (5:13), the flavour of God among the nations, his blessing to the nations (Gen 12:3). If Israel lost her distinctiveness, the nations would tread her underfoot (compare Deut 29:24-28).²

They were to be a *light to the world* (5:14, Isa 42:6; 49:6; 51:4; 60:3). Jerusalem was literally *a city set on a hill* – a place where the nations should come to learn about God (Isa 2:3). But what was the point if that light was not shining? The nations would never understand God if all they saw in Israel was animosity, violence and rebellion.

² God regularly described his judgement on the nations as “trampling underfoot” (e.g. Isa 14:19, 25; 16:6; 41:2). The prophets point out that when Israel is disobedient, this same judgement falls on her (e.g. Isa 28:3)

Jesus had not come to tell Israel that obedience to Torah didn't matter (5:17–20). Jesus redefined what it would look like for them to embody God's Law in their lifestyle.

If the heavenly sovereign prohibited **murder**, he is not pleased when you wish someone dead or destroy them with your words (5:21-26). If he prohibited **adultery**, he doesn't want you fantasising about sleeping with someone else or leaving your partner (5:27-32). If he prohibited bearing **false witness**, he expects integrity in what you say (5:33-37).

Quite literally, Israel was **not to resist** their evil rulers (5:39). A Roman soldier could compel a civilian to carry his pack for a mile. Jesus calls them to respond to oppression by extending friendship: cheerfully carrying the pack for a **second mile!** (5:41) Jesus insists they must **love** the **enemies** who treat them so unfairly (5:44). God's people must be the perfect picture of God (5:48). It's the only way their enemies can see God.

Jesus' teaching was radical! This was not how Joshua led Israel. Nor how Gideon led. Or Samson. Or King David. Or Judas Maccabeus. Others (zealots) called for a rebellion by more traditional means. Jesus' view of God's kingdom was revolutionary, but non-violent.

Jesus' vocation

Jesus lived what he taught. He did what he called Israel to do.

By the end of Matthew's gospel:

- Jesus will be the *salt of the earth*: showing God's righteousness to the nations, but trodden under foot because of Israel's disobedience (5:13-14).
- Jesus will be the *light of the world*. He will be *set on a hill* (Golgotha), for all to see his *good works* and *glorify his Father* (5:14-16).
- Jesus will *fulfil the law in righteousness* for Israel, ushering in *heaven's rule* on earth (5:17-20).

He will **embody** the beatitudes. He will *be* the blessing on the poor, the grieving, the powerless, and those who receive no justice. The great reversal arrives in him, as he faces the rebellious powers.

He will be:

- v.3 *Poor in spirit* (rejected), so establishing God's kingdom.
- v.4 *Mourning* (our grief), so the source of comfort/deliverance.
- v.5 *Meek* (led to a cross), so inheriting the whole earth.
- v.6 *Hungering* for God's justice, and satisfying it for us.

- v.7 *Merciful*, and so receiving mercy for us.
- v.8 *Pure of heart* (rejecting violence), so seeing God raise him.
- v.9 The *peacemaker* (Eph 2:15-16) who shows us the Father.
- v.10 *Persecuted*, and by his death introducing God's reign.

He will **love his enemies**, go the **second mile**, turn the **other cheek**.

Jesus teaching is deadly! Facing the powers unarmed is likely to get you killed, for evil powers will do whatever it takes to retain their power. The cross is a nasty, blood-stained weapon of execution. The Romans used it on thousands of Jewish rebels: there were even two others on the same day Jesus was crucified.

Can love overcome violence? Can there be justice in a world where injustice has ruled for thousands of years? Jesus believed **God would bring justice out of love**, not out of violence. He was prepared to face injustice head-on, unarmed. He staked his life on it.

Conclusion

What relevance do these verses have for us today?

Jesus not only called Israel to be faithful to God but laid out the agenda for his own life, establishing God's rule. We are his body on earth today, the expression of his kingdom. We must live like this too.

What will this look like in your street? In your house? In your Connect Group? In your school? In your business?

How will you live with emotional honesty ("poor in spirit" and identifying with "those who mourn")?

How will your hunger for justice find satisfaction?

Group Questions:

1. How does this first-century reading of the Beatitudes sit with you? Is the historical dimension of Jesus' words important? Discuss how his life embodied what he preached.
2. Christians are called to care for the poor and identify with those who are downtrodden and unfairly treated. How can we do this? Should we take up arms to fight for them (as some "liberationists" have done)? In light of the Sermon on the Mount, how should we go about these tasks?
3. In light of what Jesus was saying to Israel, how does his teaching challenge you personally in the world where you live? Which of the verses we read from Matthew 5 are the most challenging for you? What can you do in your family and community?

Memory Work:

Matthew 5:16 (NIV)

In the same way, let your light shine before men,
that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Take Home Exercise:

In *Dissident Discipleship*, David Augsburger talks of “peditation”— meditation and walking. Try walking it as he suggests:

Peditation is meditation and reflection while walking. Walking and following are Jesus’s metaphors for discipleship. As a spiritual exercise, walk the Sermon on the Mount in meditation. Follow the rhythm of a couplet until you have thoroughly absorbed its meanings for you in your walk with Jesus as it speaks to the issues of this particular day. When you feel finished with each couplet, move on to the next. Do not skip couplets. Let the lines lead you back to the original words of the Sermon on the Mount for further study and the discovery of many alternate interpretations to the ones these couplets offer. (Walking rhythm: 1–2–3–4–5 rest-rest-rest 1–2–3–4–5 rest-rest-rest, etc.)

Matthew 5

5:3 Bless you, poor, down-trod.

Claim the reign of God.

(God sees things reversed.

The last will be first.)

5:4 Bless you, friends in grief.

You shall find relief.

(Now your sorrow's deep.

You shall dance and leap.)

5:5 Bless you, meek. In truth,

you'll inherit earth.

(Meek folks scorned in mirth

will possess the earth.)

5:6 Bless you, all who thirst

for what's true and just.

(Hunger for what's right,

thirst for truth and light.)

5:7 Bless you, merciful,

You'll be paid in full.

(Mercy has this knack.

Give, and you get back.)

- 5:8 Bless you, truly good,
for you shall see God.
(All those pure in heart,
are God's work of art.)
- 5:9 Bless you, go-between.
You're God's special kin.
(Peacemakers, stand tall;
you're God's children, all.)
- 5:10 Bless you, when reviled.
You are heaven's child.
- 5:11 (Stand firm, resolute,
when some persecute.)
- 5:12 Sufferer, do not fret.
God will not forget.
(Laugh at pain, dear folk,
you have got the joke.)
- 5:13 You are the earth's salts.
Cleanse and heal its faults.
(Like dung spread on field,
go increase the yield.)
- 5:14 When the world is black,
be the light we lack.
- 5:15 Like a candle lit,
do your humble bit.
- 5:16 Let the good you do
point to God, not you.³

Don't forget to read Mark 9–12 in preparation for next week.

For the right balance on the thorny question of how we should respond to violence, see:
Preston Sprinkle, *Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence*. (David C Cook, 2013).

³ David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship: a Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006)