

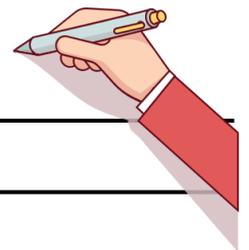


This year we are studying the book of Matthew. Matthew’s Gospel is the most instructive of the Gospels. Five meaningful blocks comprise the book. Some say that Matthew’s Gospel is the “New Pentateuch,” the first five books of Moses, the new rule of life, for the Christian community. Matthew provided a convenient, well-organized collection of Jesus’ instruction, and it became the most used and useful Gospel for instructing new believers on what it means to follow Jesus.

Last week we heard about Jesus selecting his first disciples. Jesus broke with tradition in how he chose them. Most rabbis let students come to them. Then the rabbi selects the best and the brightest. As is his habit, Jesus turns the process of discipleship on its head. He goes out and chooses his students. Jesus doesn’t select them because of what they know; Jesus selects them because he knows what they can become. We talked about how the disciple's choice to follow Jesus was a miracle in and of itself. God is always calling us towards himself. It is an invisible force, like how a magnet attracts metal. The disciples drop everything and follow Jesus like paperclips are drawn to a magnet.

This week we learn how Jesus begins to teach the disciples. Their education begins with a new type of lesson. It isn’t a list of laws or commandments. This list doesn’t tell them what to do or even what not to do. This list teaches the disciples and us how to be. Following Jesus is not just about believing the right things; it is also about living according to his example and teaching. Jesus, James, Paul, and other New Testament voices all emphasize this point: discipleship means the pursuit of a just and holy life that is fully pleasing to God.

My Sermon Notes



The first of these five books of teaching is known as the “Sermon on the Mount.”



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Matthew 5:1-12
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The Sermon on the Mount is considered a summary of Jesus' ethical philosophy. It is a collection of sayings that provides "snapshots" of what genuinely righteous living looks like, that "righteousness" without which we "will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Math 5:20) Just like an overture at the beginning of a musical highlights music from all of the pieces, this beginning Sermon on the Mount gives a big picture view of what it looks like to follow Jesus.

Jesus' teaching is so challenging, however, and his standards so high that interpreters had a difficult time believing that Jesus meant for his followers to live this way. Some have suggested that the real purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is to drive people to despair of ever being sufficiently righteous to gain entrance into God's kingdom, leading them to abandon their "own righteousness" in favor of God's righteousness. Others suggest that Jesus taught this radical way of living as an "interim ethic," meant for a supposedly brief period between Jesus' ministry and the Second Coming, believing it would be a short time.

Both of these suggestions dilute the challenge of the Sermon on the Mount and rob it of its power. They also fail to recognize Jesus' perspective that his "yoke," the instruction he lays upon his disciples, is truly "light" and "easy." What makes his yoke light and easy isn't the ease of the task ahead; it is that we are not acting alone. Just like the disciples submitted to the magnetic pull of Jesus, that same force is with us when we are following the will of God. We must have faith that living by Jesus' teachings – "Doing what he says" – will genuinely lead to a freer and less oppressive way of life than our human inclinations or rationalized ethics provide.

Jesus meant for his followers to live according to his teaching – even such challenging ethical ideals as we find in the Sermon on the Mount. Early Christian leaders used the Sermon on the Mount as a resource for shaping Christian conduct. James, Jesus' brother and leader of the Jerusalem church wrote his Epistle from beginning to end as if Jesus' words should guide the disciples' attitudes and responses in a wide variety of situations. James echoes Jesus' claim that his followers must put into practice what they heard taught by him: "be doers of the word,



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and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” In the end, it is not the beliefs one professes, but the deeds one does that reveal the heart and have value before God (Jas2:14, Matt 7:21)

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

“Righteousness” is a particularly important term for Matthew, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. In each of those contexts, it refers to right conduct in the eyes of God. So here it means hungering and thirsting for doing what is right before God. For they will be filled – God will satisfy their spiritual need.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

God blesses the pure in heart: They love God with all their heart, soul, and mind and serve him with all their strength. It is both an attitude of sincere loyalty to God and the action that results namely, a wholehearted service of God.

There are three principles for living into the spirit of the Beatitudes: simplicity, hopefulness, and compassion. These three principles allow us to be in the world, while not being totally shaped by it. We offer an alternative to what the world seems to be pursuing. Hearing Jesus’ words, simply spoken, is the first principle for living into the spirit of the Beatitudes.

The distinguished theologian Jürgen Moltmann stated that the death knell of the church is when the overall attitude moves from anger to cynicism. Cynicism differs from anger. Cynicism has decided to accept whatever is, regardless of the consequences. Cynicism offers little hope that things will get better. The mantra is “Do not worry about it. That is just the way things are. You will get used to it.” The Beatitudes invite us to the opposite point of view, which is hopefulness. We place our hope on Christ, who offered hope to the hopeless. Thus we are able to approach the world with a spirit of hope, even when the outward signs indicate otherwise. When we are hopeful, we stand in the world sure of the possibility that the day will come when mercy, humility, peace, and love are the descriptions of what it means to live.



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The third principle of Beatitude living is compassion. Compassion is not associated with either pity or sympathy. It goes deeper. To have pity on another person means that you feel sorry for them. Sympathy means that you understand what another person is experiencing, and so you offer some advice. The late Henri Nouwen offers an insightful description: compassion “grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate. Across all barriers of land and language, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, we are one, created from the same dust, subject to the same laws, destined for the same end.” We are distinct, but more importantly, we share that gift of being created in God’s image; thus, we belong to one another as family. Compassion requires not walking the same path with a companion but walking in his or her shoes.

There are so many things happening in our country and our world that are not in line with God’s will. It makes us angry, and that anger is appropriate. We hunger and thirst for righteousness. We can look to Jesus for our hope. We do not need to become cynical and accept a status quo that is unacceptable. With Jesus as our strength, we can have compassion for the suffering and can work for their well being, and we will be filled.