

PRIZE THE RIGHT VALUES (Part 1)**MATTHEW 5:1-5**

If you're ever tempted to complain about the length of my messages, it would be wise to consider what church life was like in New England back in the 1600s. People back then were fined monetarily for missing church! Now there's a thought! People back then expected two sermons on Sunday and another lecture/sermon on a weeknight service. These weeknight sermons were so popular in the 1630s that the General Court of Massachusetts tried to make every community hold them on the same night of the week so that people wouldn't go from one town to the next on different nights of the week just to listen to more sermons. The pastors protested the court's decision! They said people had come to New England in order to hear sermons, so the court backed off. Even condemned criminals were into sermons. On March 11, 1686 three sermons were preached to James Morgan and an assembled crowd before he was hung. Morgan himself delivered a stern warning from the scaffold to everyone present to learn from his terrible example. It's hard to overestimate the importance of sermons back in the 1600s. Hourglasses were set up near the pulpit in order to measure the sermon's length. An hour's length wasn't considered good enough. People brought paper and inkhorns to take copious notes. Many thick notebooks filled with closely written sermon summaries have been preserved. Oh, for the good old days!

One sermon, however, is more important than any other one. It's found in Matthew 5-7 and it's often referred to as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Starting today, I'd like to explore this great section of God's truth with you for several weeks. It might be the most concentrated expression of Jesus' heart and mind in the entire Bible. Just before we read and think about the first five verses, let's understand some important facts about the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus's overall focus in his sermon is something He called the Kingdom of God. What is that? The Kingdom of God refers to God's rule and reign over all things. It's primarily a spiritual reality. All those who have put their trust in Jesus for salvation past, present, and future anywhere and everywhere in the world are part of the Kingdom, but it's bigger than the sum total of all Christians. The Kingdom of God permeates the entire world – indeed the whole universe. The Kingdom began an important new phase when Jesus arrived on the scene some 2,000 years ago, but it's an eternal spiritual reality. The Kingdom of God is present and active today in and through the lives of Jesus' followers. One day in the future the Kingdom of God will be fully experienced when God's final victory over all evil, sin, and wrong is consummated.

So, the Sermon on the Mount describes the character, values, and lifestyle of those who are already Jesus' followers. It's as if Jesus says, "Now, people who follow me look just like this. This is what the Kingdom of God is like when it gets a hold of a person." Jesus never intended to imply, "Now, if you try really hard to live like this and do all these things, you might just earn your salvation. If you try really hard to follow all these rules, you might get into Heaven." You don't get right with God by following Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Instead, because you've already been made right with God, your life will begin to resemble what Jesus talks about here.

In other words, Jesus describes here what it means to be His disciple. One reason American Christianity is weak and flabby today is because we've told people that all you need to do is just believe in Jesus. Just believe He lived, He died on the cross for your sins, and that He rose from the dead. Walk down the aisle, say a little prayer, get baptized – that's all you need to do! No demands, no expectations, no insistence that believing in Jesus must lead to lifelong transformation by God's Spirit. Now, I've entitled this message series: "Jesus' Sermon the Mount: Gracious Demands, Not Optional Suggestions" for just that reason. I am as firm a believer in grace as any person can be. Of course, you are saved by grace alone. Of course, you can never earn or deserve a relationship with God through self-effort or by being a moral person.

But I believe the Bible teaches that grace now enables you to live a life that increasingly pleases God. Grace isn't an excuse to stay in the same hellhole that God delivered you out of! Grace gives the Holy Spirit the opportunity to transform you from top to bottom! And when you and I get fully transformed, we'll look like what Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount. On the one hand, no one but Jesus has ever lived out the Sermon on the Mount perfectly. On the other hand, these are not just impractical suggestions that we can just pick and choose to follow. These are gracious demands spoken into your life and mine by our Lord and Master. If you are truly a disciple of Jesus, you will want to live into everything Jesus describes here. This is the bullseye that you aim at; this is the goal you pursue; this is the blueprint you follow. If you don't have that attitude towards the Bible, generally, and the Sermon of the Mount, specifically, why do you even consider yourself a Christian? Because you "believe"? My friend, if you separate belief in Jesus from pursuing life change through the Holy Spirit, you've never understood the Christian faith.

Today, we're going to consider the opening section of Jesus' sermon – a portion known as the Beatitudes. Let's read it now. We're going to look at just the first three beatitudes today. They're "be-attitudes" indeed, because the whole emphasis in this opening section is on being rather than doing – what you value rather than how you act. The Beatitudes describe the attitudes or values of those who are already a part of the Kingdom of God. The Beatitudes describe the differences in values between people who follow Jesus and those who don't – between people who are in the Kingdom of God and those who aren't in the Kingdom of God. Each beatitude begins with the word "blessed." What does that mean? It's something God says about you. It describes what God thinks of you if you value what He values. Jesus isn't saying that you or I will always feel happy or blessed if these values show up in our lives. He is saying that God will consider you to be a spiritually blest person if these values are revealed in you. The Beatitudes are all about prizing the right values. Most of these values are exactly the opposite of what the world says you and I should value. The first beatitude is about...

HOW TO APPROACH GOD.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 5:3 NIV) Here's what that verse doesn't mean. It doesn't mean there's something great about being literally poor. In the Gospel of Luke, this same saying is a little different,

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” (Luke 6:20 NIV) Notice that the words “in spirit” aren’t in Luke’s version. So some folk say, “There you have it. If you’re poor economically, it’s proof that you’ve got an inside track to God. When you’re poor, you’re just closer to God.” Just think how absurd that would be if it was true! Life itself reveals the truth all too clearly: you can be a poor rascal just as easily as you can be a rich rascal. Being poor economically doesn’t somehow guarantee that you know God. You can be poor and greedy, poor and envious, poor and materialistic. Then again, if being poor was an automatic ticket to pleasing God, then feeding the hungry, sponsoring refuges, and providing free medical care would actually be a bad thing spiritually. If poverty is something good in and of itself, then taking people out of poverty would be a bad thing spiritually. That’s not what Jesus means here. Here’s something else this beatitude doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean that only people with a certain kind of personality get into the Kingdom of God – you know, “poor in spirit” types. Jesus isn’t saying that timid, shy people just please God more than those who have forceful, outgoing personalities. Nor does “poor in spirit” refer to lazy, unenthusiastic, no ambition in life people as if those were admirable qualities.

The “poor in spirit” in Jesus’ day were those who already knew they were failures before God – the losers, the rejects of Jewish society like prostitutes, tax collectors, and common fishermen – who knew they didn’t deserve mercy or blessing from God. This was the nucleus of Jesus’ first followers. To be “poor in spirit” is really the ultimate realism about yourself. You know that you’re absolutely nothing before God when it comes to being a good person. You know that you’re a moral failure before a God of infinite, absolute holiness no matter how good a life others might think you lead. You know there’s nothing you can do to impress God. Nobody has to convince you that you’re spiritually bankrupt. So, instead, you put your complete trust in God alone when it comes to His acceptance of you.

That’s the only way to approach God. That attitude is imperative if you ever want to get into God’s Kingdom. It’s quite different than the prevailing perspective, isn’t it? Our culture tells us that if we just believe in ourselves enough and in our own innate abilities, life will somehow just work out. We’re told that if you want to be successful in business or in your profession, you should give the impression of being competent and successful. You may not have it all together, but at least look like you do! That’s why in our culture it’s important where you live, what you drive, and what you wear. In those ways, we try to convince others that we are people of value – worthy of their business or their friendship. In other words, success in our culture is based on your own competence – real or imagined.

Right there is the difficulty we run into when it comes to relating to God and getting into His Kingdom. It’s all so different than the rest of life. When it comes to God, you have no personal competence. If you don’t acknowledge your own incredible moral poverty and spiritual unworthiness to even be in the presence of God, you’ve never really met Him. In the Bible, when people really met God, they became poor in spirit. Do you remember the story Jesus told about the religious professional and a tax collector going to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray to God? Ironically, the religious guy – a Pharisee –

was probably poor economically. But he had a rich spirit. He considered himself to be spiritually competent. In fact, he thanked God that he'd already done everything he needed to gain God's favor. The tax collector was probably well off economically. But he had a poor spirit. He expressed a deep need for God's mercy by praying, "O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner." (Luke 18:13 NLT) No claim of being spiritually competent whatsoever. What was Jesus' analysis? The tax collector went home right with God, not the Pharisee. What keeps people out of the Kingdom of God? It's not wealth or poverty; it's pride. It's the stubborn, proud belief that you're spiritually OK without God's intervention. It's the mistaken belief that you can earn God's favor. Let's move on to the second beatitude which is all about...

HOW TO ACQUIRE JOY.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Mt 5:4 NIV) At first glance, it almost seems that Jesus is saying, "How happy are the unhappy!" Jesus is not talking about feelings of grief you might have because a loved one has died. Nor is Jesus advocating that you should walk through life being overwhelmed by sadness or the blues. There's nothing inherently spiritual about being sad or somber. No, instead, this statement is about your inner reaction to the fact that you're poor in spirit. It's one thing to acknowledge that you're not spiritually competent – that you're poor in spirit. But it's quite another to mourn or grieve over that fact. "Oh, yeah, I know I'm not perfect. So what? Big deal!" Real Kingdom people don't react that way. Jesus is saying that His followers – His disciples - not only own their spiritual incompetence, but that they also feel badly about it. You mourn the fact that you're frequently impatient, often unloving, weak in the face of certain temptations, and that you so often fall short of God's standard of spiritual health. Kingdom people have a deep yearning – a burning desire – to be made spiritually whole and complete. The knowledge that you fall short is painful to you because you're more and more aware of the damage sin does – how it degrades, how it imprisons, what it cost Jesus, and how it offends God. The closer you get to God, the more you mourn the places where sin keeps on showing up in your life.

Jesus implies that we're blessed if sin increasingly bothers you. That sense of grief pushes you toward a God who cleanses, forgives, and restores. If it's your own sin, you move quickly to ask God to forgive you. If it's someone else's sin, you move quickly to ask God to give that person the gift of repentance. A few years ago, we had one of those stoves where the electric burners are shaped like a kind of coil. Once, I forgot that I had just turned one of those burners on. It was sticking up in the air a bit and hadn't started to turn red yet. So, I foolishly used two fingers to press it back down into place. Those fingers sent me a signal very quickly that I had a problem. The pain caused me grief. I mourned! I went and sought a remedy quickly. Physical pain in any form indicates that we have a problem that needs correction.

It's the same principle in the spiritual arena of life. When you do something wrong – something selfish, something unloving, something greedy, does it bother you? If so, that's good! When you see someone else treated unjustly, harshly, or unfairly, does it sadden or anger you? If so, that's good! It would be bad if you felt nothing. So, blest

indeed is the person who feels genuine sorrow over sin and its effects, who can be truly heartbroken over how sin offends God, how sin harms people, and what sin does to oneself. Blessed is that person because he or she will discover the comfort of God's forgiveness personally. He or she will become a channel of God's grace to others. Do you see how opposite this value is from what we hear so often? We hear that you can hold on to happiness if you find a way to forget about your sin, or deny its existence, or avoid its consequences. "Don't be so morbidly introspective! Nobody's perfect!"

After three decades of ministry in churches, I have yet to meet any follower of Jesus with an ounce of real spirituality that wasn't profoundly aware of how far short he or she fell from God's standards and who didn't mourn that fact at some level. It bothers them that they're not more like Jesus. Ironically, however, they're the happiest, most joyful people I have known. They're anything but morose, sad, and self-absorbed. They don't go around saying, "Oh, I'm such a terrible person! How can God love me?" No, they're fundamentally joyful because they're honest about their sin before God and they keep finding Jesus to be the ultimate answer. He heals them when their hearts get sick. He fixes the places that get broken. He corrects the things that are wrong in them. And so even while they're mourning, they're also rejoicing!

But this kind of mourning is more than just personal. It's also about developing an awareness of how and where sin pervades our culture and doing what you can to stand against it and alleviate the suffering it causes. For example, every Kingdom person hurts when a child is abused or sexually molested. You mourn when a baby is aborted for the "sin" of being inconvenient. Every child of God feels grief in the face of racial prejudice, injustice, or when poor people get exploited or oppressed. Kingdom people mourn when we see children with bloated stomachs from famine or maimed by war. It's a good thing when you feel that way! Watch out when you no longer feel pain over what's wrong about this world. Be very concerned when you get callous and shrug it off as of no consequence to you personally. God wants to use your sense of grief or mourning to motivate you to step out and make a difference in your corner of the world.

A Kingdom person is serious – not sad. A Kingdom citizen is concerned – not filled with despair. You can be serious and joyful. And when you mourn what's still wrong in yourself, in others, and in this world, God comes alongside of you and assures you that one day His Kingdom will triumph. He will have the last word! That's His comfort. Every tear will be dried up. Every injustice will be made right. Every war will end. Every kind of suffering and pain will cease. Let's move to the final beatitude today. It's all about...

HOW TO ACHIEVE GREATNESS.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (Mt 5:5 NIV) What's your first impression when you hear that word "meek"? I imagine a mousy kind of person full of inferiority and weakness. Or maybe someone who's just very nice, very easy going, and who doesn't expect much of himself or others. But that's a kind of personality, and what Jesus means by meekness here is only ever produced by the Holy Spirit. So what's Jesus' definition of meekness? The original word described an

animal that had been domesticated and trained to obey its master and was now useful. So a meek person is someone who has been tamed by God. You now submit to Him, you're eager to follow His instructions, and you're now useful to Him.

Moses was described as meek in the Bible. Moses was anything but a pushover by nature. Moses had anger issues that plagued him his whole life. Early in his life, he killed an Egyptian for beating up a fellow Israelite. Moses stood up to Pharaoh and led the people of Israel out of Egypt. But Moses became meek, because he eventually surrendered fully to God and was at God's disposal at all times. Jesus is called meek in the Bible. And yet we know He threw the buyers and sellers out of the Temple. He called the religious leaders of his day snakes and whitewashed graves right to their faces. But Jesus was completely surrendered to God His Father. Nothing brought Jesus greater joy than to do His Father's will. He was useful to God at all times.

Once again, this is a value Kingdom people prize highly, but not the culture we live in. You're great when others serve you. You're great when you're in charge or in control. You're great when you're your own person and achieve big results because of your abilities and skills. But in the Kingdom of God, the greatest people are the ones who are most fully surrendered to God and His will. You've been tamed by God. You love to be obedient to Him. You love to be useful to Him. Nicholas Copernicus was a great man even by the world's standards. Born in Poland in 1473, he became a mathematician whose writings and accomplishments forever changed people's ideas about the universe. He was also a citizen of the Kingdom of God. At the end of his life, he didn't think of himself as a great astronomer or a great scientist, but only as a great sinner in need of a savior. He asked that this prayer be written on his tombstone, "Lord, I do not ask for the kindness Thou didst show to Peter. I do not dare to ask for the grace Thou didst grant to Paul; but Lord, the mercy Thou didst show to the dying robber, that mercy show to me. That earnestly I pray." That's spiritual greatness.

And what does it mean to "inherit the earth" then? It means that when you turn away from trying to become great on your own, ironically, you get everything worth having. When you're fully surrendered to God and His will – meekness – you get everything that means anything. The more you surrender to God, the more you will have. The more you resist God, the less you will have. When you possess God, you truly possess all that's worth having in this life and the next.

I read about an unusual bicycle race held over in India. The object of the race was to go the shortest distance possible within a specified time. Huh? Let me explain further. At the start of the race, everyone cued up at the line. When the gun sounded, all the bicycles stayed put as best they could. Racers were disqualified if they tipped over or one of their feet touched the ground. And so they would inch forward just enough to keep the bike balanced. When the time was up and another gun sounded, the person who had gone the farthest was the loser and the person closest to the starting line was the winner. Imagine turning up for that race and not understanding the point of it. When the race started, you'd pedal off as hard and fast as you possibly could, right? You'd get out of breath. You'd sweat. You'd be delighted because all of your other

competitors were back at the starting line. You'd fantasize about breaking a record. You'd think, "This is fantastic. Don't let up. Push harder, faster, longer, stronger." At last you hear the gun that ends the race. You're delighted because you can question that you've won the race. But the fact is that you're unquestionably the loser, because you've misunderstood how the race was run. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes God's rules to the eternal race of life. That finish line is painted on the other side of your death – right in front of the throne of God Himself. The winning strategy for this life and for all eternity is putting God first, not yourself. It's about making God central, not yourself. It's about being poor in spirit, mourning, and being meek. That's how you approach God, acquire joy, and achieve greatness.