



Weekly Study
Week 2: The Gospel of Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount –
An Upside-Down Kingdom

Read Matthew 5:1-20

This lesson is about

- 1) **The Gospel of Matthew**, and particularly about its audience as Jewish Christians, and an understanding of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and the fulfillment of the Law.
- 2) **The Kingdom of Heaven**: What does Jesus mean when he says, for example, “Thy Kingdom Come...?”
- 3) **The Sermon on the Mount**: How do things work in this new Kingdom?

Gospel of Matthew

We are looking in this study at the three “synoptic” gospels, those that tell the story of Jesus’ ministry in a sort of chronological order. Matthew was written after Mark. The author of Matthew almost surely had Mark in front of him as he wrote. Ninety percent of Mark is included in Matthew, with the words exactly or almost exactly the same. So when something is added, there is a reason. When you add something to the story, it is a way of saying “yes, but there is more to it than that.”

Note also that all of the gospels are actually **anonymous**. In other words, they don’t say within the writings themselves who wrote them. Instead, the early church attributed the authorship to someone, and gave the gospels a title by author. The early church said this was written by Matthew, and gave it the title “the Gospel of Matthew.” It may very well have been written by someone like Matthew and circulated in Matthew’s name, which was a very common practice in the first centuries. Some scholars believe it was written by a **Jewish Christian** living in Antioch of Syria. This was one of the hubs of Christianity in the early church, and it was the home base and home church for St. Paul, and the place from which Paul launched his missionary journeys. This was one place that Gentile Christianity and Jewish Christianity came into conflict. (Such a conflict is written about in Galatians 2:11-14, in what is called “the incident at

Antioch.) Unlike Mark, Matthew was one of the twelve disciples. He was a tax collector, and was sitting in Capernaum in his tax collector's station, and Jesus called him to "come and follow me." And Matthew did. In Mark and Luke they use the name Levi for the same person in the story, so almost all scholars believe Matthew and Levi are the same person.

Last week, we noted a few things about the Gospel of Mark – that it:

- focuses on immediacy and urgency
- describes Jesus as struggling against evil powers
- challenges disciples to remain faithful during a time of persecution
- characterizes the disciples as not really understanding, which makes us identify with them

Matthew points us to Jesus as the **Jewish Messiah**. The Jews believed that there would be a new king who would come that would be like King David, and would be their messiah, and would lead the Jewish people into a new time of justice and righteousness -- the "messianic age." Matthew points to Jesus as that messiah. For example, the Gospel of Matthew begins with the words, "*An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*" This would immediately tie Jesus to his Jewish roots, and "son of David" was a term that was often used to describe the coming messiah. Matthew talks about Jesus as God's son from the time of his birth, where Mark seems to focus on Jesus as God's son from the time of his baptism. It lifts up Jesus over and over again as a fulfillment of prophecies in the Old Testament. Turn to chapter 1 in Matthew and look at verse 22-23: *All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."* This is just one of dozens of examples of times Matthew speaks of him as a fulfillment of prophecy. He often uses the phrase "that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

Other ways Matthew focuses on the Jewish identity of Jesus include the following:

- Matthew pays a lot of attention to mountains as a place God touches humanity. Remember Moses went up on the mountain to receive the Law. Our teaching for today is part of "the sermon on the mount," whereas in Luke it is called "the sermon on the plain." Mountains show up over and over again in Matthew: Sermon on the Mount (5-7), temptation (4:8), transfiguration (17:1), Jesus' prayer before his death (26:30), appearance after the resurrection (28:16).
- Jesus goes down into Egypt in Matthew, and then comes back to Israel, just as Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Matthew has a motif of Jesus as "the new Moses."
- The structure of the Gospel of Matthew is in five "discourses" or speeches, giving a nod to the five books of Moses.

Now why does this matter? It mattered to those to whom Matthew was writing because they still were wrestling with whether Christianity was a different religion, or just a certain kind of Judaism. In the Roman Empire, there were only so many approved and accepted religions. Judaism was one of them.

Christianity was not. You were allowed to be Jewish, even though you were often persecuted because of it, depending on who was the emperor at the time. You were not allowed to be something else, and it was near the turn of the first century that Christianity became a religion separate from Judaism. Maybe more importantly, if you are trying to reach a Jewish audience with the good news of Jesus, as the Evangelist Matthew was, then you want them to understand that this is not a rejection of their faith but a **fulfillment** of it. You want them to believe that those who **reject** Jesus are the ones who have left the faith, not those who accept him. All along, the prophecies said the Messiah would come, and now here he is. Those who accept Jesus are the ones who hold to the true Judaism.

This matters to us today because there are those who would say “the Old Testament is not valid anymore. Jesus came to replace it with the New Testament.” One of the reasons the early church, led by the Holy Spirit, included the Gospel of Matthew was to remind us that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, not a replacement for it. Listen to what Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Sometimes, I hear Christians say “well, that is the Old Testament. That was a different God. Our God isn’t like that.” Or, on the other side of the coin, some Christians try to follow all the laws and teaching of the Old Testament, because, after all, it is a part of the Bible. So what is the right approach?

If you think of the Old Testament as a book of rules to be followed, then seeing Jesus as a fulfillment of those rules is hard to understand. But if we think of the Bible as a story of God’s ongoing relationship with humanity, with you and me, then it is important for us to know the whole story. If you were reading a marvelous novel, you would never say “you know, now that I have the end of the story, I don’t need the first part of it anymore.” It is hard to understand Jesus as the good news, God’s answer to the broken world, until you understand sin as the problem, and humanity’s ongoing inability to fix it ourselves.

In other words, the purpose of both the Old and New Testaments, the whole story of God’s relationship with the world, is to point us to Jesus, where the story is culminated, completed, fulfilled.

The Kingdom of Heaven

Matthew talks about the Kingdom of Heaven. As Jesus begins his ministry, he begins to preach “*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.*” (Matthew 4:17) This can also be translated “*the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*” He travels all about “*preaching the good news of the Kingdom.*” (Matthew 4:23) All of the gospels speak of this Kingdom of God, or the reign of God, but Matthew uses the term “the Kingdom of Heaven.” In the Biblical world, “the heavens” represented that place where all was well, where justice and righteousness, holiness and health and peace were the order of the day. This, of course, is in contrast

with the world of the Roman Empire, as well as the world in which we live today. Jesus' arrival as the Messiah suggests that the Kingdom of Heaven was beginning on the earth, and that God was stepping in to put everything the way God intended.

We think of heaven as somewhere far away, far apart from our world and our lives. But the picture we get in Scripture is of heaven as interrupting our world, and of God coming down to put creation right again. The healing of the sick, cleansing of lepers, casting out of demons – all of these were signs that the Kingdom was indeed springing up all over.

So, one might ask, why hasn't it happened yet? Once I was visiting with a Jewish friend, and asked him, "with all the prophecies Jesus fulfills, why do you not think he is the Messiah?" He responded very simply, "Because I don't see the Messianic age (the Kingdom of Heaven) happening around me yet." So why hasn't it happened? Because God isn't through yet. The Kingdom of Heaven is available, but it is not yet fully realized.

We see this over and over in Matthew. Consider what we say in the Lord's Prayer: "*Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" (Matthew 6:10) In his wonderful little book, The Lord and His Prayer, N.T. Wright says that when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are "signing on to the kingdom of God," and "signing up to be Jesus' apprentices." God isn't through yet, and in the meantime, you and I will be apprentices in making the reign of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, real here on earth. In Matthew 10, Jesus sees the crowds and has compassion on them, and sends the twelve apostles out with these instructions: "⁷As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The Kingdom of Heaven has come near.'⁸Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." Later in Matthew, when Jesus is getting ready to head toward Jerusalem and the cross, he empowers Peter and the other apostles to take up the charge of making it happen. "¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:18-19) This is the only gospel in which the word "church" (ecclesia) is actually used. **The church's job is to storm the gates of hell, on behalf of and under the authority of the Kingdom of Heaven.**

The Sermon on the Mount

Let's go back to our narrative. Last week, Jesus comes from Nazareth of Galilee, in the north, down to the Jordan River, and is baptized by John the Baptist. He is then led further south out into the desert to be tempted. He then goes back up to Galilee, to the sea there, and calls his first disciples, his key leadership team (James and John, Simon Peter and Andrew). He goes to Capernaum and begins his ministry there, moving about proclaiming and demonstrating that the Kingdom of God (or heaven) has begun.

Now he takes his disciples away from the crowds, up onto the mountain, and teaches them. This Sermon on the Mount is a sort of training retreat. It is probably a series of teachings, rather than one long sermon. It is contained completely in Matthew 5-7. Its purpose is to explain how the rules and processes, the way things work, in the Kingdom of Heaven are different than how things work in the kingdoms of the earth. He teaches them about an upside-down kingdom, one that runs dramatically against the grain of the

culture of which it is a part. Note that it is not for everyone, not for the crowds, who haven't signed up for the kingdom of God. When you sign up for the kingdom, you now operate on a different set of principles and laws.

My daughters use Apple computers, and I have always used a PC. I know how my PC works, and I kind of like it. But when I get on my daughter's computer, it works a whole different way. Different buttons do different things. It can be frustrating. It has a whole different operating system, with different principles at work altogether.

Such is true in the contrast between the Kingdom of Heaven and the kingdoms of this earth. When you have signed up for the Kingdom of Heaven, it is a good thing when you are persecuted. When you sign up for the Kingdom of Heaven, you are called to a higher righteousness, and you are accountable for not just your actions but your thoughts and words. When you sign up for the Kingdom of Heaven, you don't hit back, but turn the other cheek. When you sign up for the Kingdom of Heaven, you give people more than they ask for. When you sign up for the Kingdom of Heaven, you don't put on shows to gain the approval of others. When you sign up for the Kingdom of Heaven, you lose your life to gain it. When you sign up for the Kingdom of Heaven, the tools you use to overcome earthly kingdoms are not weapons of war but lifestyles that are "salt and light," witnesses to the transforming power of God. The Sermon on the Mount gives us a whole new operating system.

Yeah, but... Lots of "yeah, buts" follow in my mind. Yeah, but I live in the world. How can I possibly live according to Kingdom principles when I have to be a part this practical world? We are called to live "as if." We live as much as possible as if the Kingdom were already fully realized.

When we sign up for the kingdom of God, that which constitutes "happiness" looks very different. The Sermon on the Mount begins with what are called "the Beatitudes," which is a Latin term for "blessed." The word here in Greek, *makarios*, means "happy, fortunate, or celebrated." It constitutes what the community thinks about you, whether you are lifted up, whether you are valued or devalued. Again, we are describing here a new operating system. In the Kingdom of Heaven, those who are described in the Beatitudes are the people who are celebrated. There are two categories of blessings listed. The first is something that happens to you, or a state you are in. The first three and last two statements fall into this category -- poor, powerless, grieving, persecuted, reviled. The second category has to do with ethical behaviors -- hungering and thirsting for righteousness and justice, making peace, being pure in heart.

One other interesting note is that in Matthew, the Beatitudes are spiritualized more than in the Gospel of Luke. For example, Luke says "*blessed are the poor*," while Matthew says "*blessed are the poor in spirit*." The Gospel of Luke says "*blessed are those who hunger*" while Matthew adds "*and thirst for righteousness*."

The Sermon on the Mount, and the entire Gospel of Matthew, calls us to an ethic that is:

- higher than the rules of the law: *unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees...* (Matthew 5:20)

- internal as well as external: *I tell you, if you are angry with your brother or sister, you are subject to judgment* (Matthew 5:22)
- expanded, for all nations, and not just for Israel: *Make disciples of all nations...* (Matthew 28:15)

So let me summarize again:

Matthew is written to Jewish audiences, and focuses on Jesus as a fulfillment of the law and the prophets, a continuation and fulfillment of the Jewish faith.

Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, and so he is inaugurating the Kingdom of Heaven, a place of holiness, righteousness and justice. We in the church sign up for that kingdom as his apprentices, working to make that happen, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

The way we do that is to live even now according to the operating system of the Kingdom of Heaven, with a higher ethic, a righteousness that is internal as well as external.

So, as Jesus draws his disciples away for a leadership training event, he explains to them that they are going to operate with different values and different principles than the earthly kingdom and culture of which they are a part. I wonder, do most of us operate on different values than the culture that surrounds us? Is our ethic, and lifestyle, and operating system really any different? I hope you talk about that in your group discussion today.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. Do you believe that the Kingdom of Heaven is on its way in even now, overcoming the kingdom of this world? Do you believe it will? What signs do you see?
2. Paraphrase the beatitudes in your own words.
3. What does it mean to live in an upside-down kingdom? In what way do you live according to those principles, and in what way do you fall short of that?
4. How does Jesus’ description of those who are blessed (5:3-10) compare to what our culture tells us about being blessed?
5. Why is spiritual poverty (5:3 “poor in spirit”) necessary for receiving the Kingdom of Heaven?
6. What are some things you are hungering and thirsting for right now that are not leaving you satisfied? How do these compare with the hunger and thirst for righteousness/justice (5:6)?
7. Often we imagine that peace is just the absence of conflict. But Jesus calls us to be *peacemakers*. What does it mean to *make* peace? What are some ways you can do that in your own life?
8. What might cause you to lose your saltiness? What are some ways you can be salty to the world?
9. Look up the definition for “Pharisees” and “scribes.” What kind of righteousness did they practice? How is it different than what Jesus is calling his followers to do. (5:20)?



Daily Readings

Week 2: The Gospel of Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount – An Upside-Down Kingdom

Week 2, Day 1, Matthew 5:1-20

Commentary:

Being meek, hungry, and in mourning seem really contrary to our view of what it means to be blessed. For many of us, we count blessings by how much money we make, or what kind of material comforts we are able to accumulate, or how much power we have. In this sermon, Jesus' words call us to reconsider what it means to be blessed. One of the ways in which God blesses us is through God's very presence with us. When Jesus showed up for the people on the margins – bringing them into the fold and offering his love and acceptance – he blessed them.

Reflection Question:

Where are you being called to be a blessing – to give your love and presence to someone that is hurt, poor, or mourning – right now?

Week 2, Day 2, Matthew 5:21-48

Commentary:

These six “You have heard it said... but I say to you” passages are referred to as antithesis because they seem to call for a 180 degree turn from the law. But Jesus is not telling his followers that the law is no longer valid. Rather, he is interpreting the full meaning of the original law in a way that expands the hearers' understanding. It is not enough to obey the letter of the law if one's heart is in opposition. For example, if we took to heart the scriptural instruction to tell the truth, we wouldn't need to swear a vow. Taking an eye for an eye was not intended to promote retaliation, but to limit its escalation. Rather, we should respond with grace when we are hurt or offended.

Reflection Question:

How is the common thread of grace seen throughout these six antitheses?

Week 2, Day 3, Matthew 6:1-21

Commentary:

As we've read over the past few days, the Sermon on the Mount calls believers to a transformed life. This change in pattern is sustained by a relationship with the Holy Spirit, which is developed through a life of prayer. Prayer keeps our hearts fixated on God; it reminds us of our dependence on God. Prayer also changes our hearts so that we are more open and responsive to the leading of God.

Reflection Question:

Immediately following the Lord's Prayer, Jesus repeats one of the points introduced in the prayer, which is that God will forgive our trespasses if we forgive others their trespasses against us. Why do you think this is the point that Jesus chose to reiterate?

Week 2, Day 4, Matthew 6:25-34

Commentary:

The fact is, worry is sin, but we don't seem to take it seriously. It is a spiritual problem, which ultimately cannot be overcome with sheer willpower—its solution is rooted entirely in who God is to us. Why was Jesus serious about telling us not to worry? Because worry is a symptom of a larger issue — which is a lack of faith. When we worry, we are willfully rejecting God. The Greek word for worry used in the New Testament is *meridzo*, which actually translates “to choke” — so worry chokes us because it focuses us on our situation instead of God. The key question, then, is not whether world events and personal troubles make us anxious or afraid, but whether we turn to God in faith in the midst of such things.

Reflection Question:

How does knowing that nothing can separate you from the love of God help you to live with the unknown variables in your future that cause worry?

Week 2, Day 5, Matthew 7

Commentary:

The passages on judgment at the beginning of chapter 7 reiterate a familiar theme from the Sermon on the Mount. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says those who extend mercy will be blessed with mercy. In the Lord's Prayer, he teaches followers that they will be forgiven as they forgive others. This command not to judge others is reinforced by the instruction about the log and the speck. We are reminded that our appraisal of others is affected by our brokenness, which renders us unable to pass judgment on others.

Reflection Question:

Proverbs 14:1 says, “The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands.” Jesus echoes a similar concept when he talks about building one's house on rocks or sand. How are you “tearing your own house down” when you do not act on Jesus' words?