

The Sermon on the Mount (1995) | Darrell Johnson

Right Side Up in an Upside Down World

Our text today is the opening lines of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In light of all that California has gone through this past week—indeed, in light of all that California has gone through this past year—perhaps our text ought to be the closing lines of Jesus' Sermon. The closing lines are where he speaks of the rain descending and the floods rising and the winds blowing and bursting against houses. The houses built on sand fall big time; houses built on the rock stand.

In other places in the Bible, the rock is Jesus Christ himself. But interestingly, here Jesus makes the rock our hearing and doing his word.

Our text today is Matthew 5:3–12, the well-known and much-loved Beatitudes. If you are able, will you please stand for the reading of the Word?

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people cast insults against you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of me. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Lord Jesus, we pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would take these words off the page and make them come alive in us as never before. Amen. Please be seated.

Now, before we grapple with the Beatitudes, I want to make two more preliminary remarks as we launch into this half-year journey in Jesus' brilliant sermon.

First preliminary remark: you will get a whole lot more out of the journey if you have a handful of partners traveling with you. You will find the sermon taking a deeper hold on us if we are part of a home group where we can wrestle with the meaning and implications of Jesus' words with other believers.

Therefore, beginning the week of January 22, we are calling all of us to join in a six-week small group experience. Home groups that are already meeting are going to be shifting their study to the Beatitudes. New groups are already being formed, and there will be a group for every day of the week. If you have never been part of a small group, or if you were part of one and then dropped out, please give this six-week experience a try.

Jesus gospelizes us as individuals, but also, and more importantly, empowers us in community. Jim Stockle is available at a table out on the porch afterwards. You can go by, and he will help you connect to a handful of journey partners.

The second preliminary remark has to do with the place of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. How did Matthew intend the church to use this sermon in its life and mission?

As you know, Matthew concludes his gospel with Jesus' Great Commission: *Go, make disciples of all the nations*. That is Jesus' great agenda for his church: make disciples—not just converts with their ticket to heaven in hand, but disciples. *Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. That is initiating people into relationship with the God who is triune, immersing them in the fullness of Trinitarian life. *Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*.

It is what many people are calling the “great omission” in the Great Commission: a job of teaching which we simply have not done well enough yet. Teaching all that Jesus commanded. Where can we find that “all”?

At least, where can we find the essence of that all? Matthew.

Matthew was a tax collector—that is, Matthew was an accountant who was always organizing things. And Matthew has gathered Jesus' teachings together in five sections. Five times in Matthew's gospel we find a big chunk of instruction followed by the phrase, “*And when Jesus finished saying these things ...*” Five times.

Why five sections? Many scholars argue: in order to portray Jesus as the new and greater Moses. Moses' teaching is collected in five books—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. And so, Jesus' teaching is collected in five books. But behold, something much greater than Moses is here: the one who Moses met on the mountaintop, now in our flesh.

These five sections of Jesus' teaching constitute a sort of discipleship manual. I think Matthew is saying to the church: teach these five sections. Build these five sets of Jesus' teachings into believers—disciples who can make other disciples.

The five sections are (and you might want to write these down):

1. The Sermon on the End Times – Matthew 24–25
2. The Sermon on the Church – Matthew 18
3. The Sermon on the Mystery of the Kingdom – Matthew 13
4. The Sermon on Mission – Matthew 10
5. The Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5–7

Book 1: Matthew 5–7, Gospelized Humanity.

Book 2: Matthew 10, Gospelized Mission.

Book 3: Matthew 13, Gospelized Interpretation of History.

Book 4: Matthew 18, Gospelized Ecclesiology. (I couldn't come up with a better term.)

Book 5: Matthew 24–25, Gospelized Hope.

Make disciples, teaching them at least these five sections of Jesus' sayings.

Okay, now back to the opening lines of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I said last Sunday that we must always hear the Sermon in its original context. Jesus preached this Sermon right after he first preached the gospel, which means that this Sermon must always be heard in its gospel context. The question then is: what is the gospel? More specifically, what is the gospel according to Jesus?

I ask the question again, and I will ask it again and again, because it is so easy to lose touch with his good news.

Mark tells us that Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God. And then Mark tells us that this is what Jesus said: *"Listen! The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near."*

Will you repeat those words with me out loud, please? *The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near.*

This is the announcement of a great fact which impacts every other fact. The gospel according to Jesus is that in him history has reached a crisis point. The gospel according to Jesus is that in him that glorious future rule of God is now breaking in upon the world.

Jesus understandably couples this announcement of the great fact with a call to conversion. Mark 1:15: *"Repent and believe this good news."*

Repent and believe this good news. Will you repeat those words with me, please? *Repent and believe this good news.*

Time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near. Repent—make a U-turn in the road. Believe—embrace, put your weight upon this good news.

Are you repenting? Are you turning? Am I? Are we, as a community of believers, in the process of turning around and embracing this great fact?

The clearest sign that we are is that we are becoming Beatitude people. In his Beatitudes, Jesus is simply describing people in whom his gospel is taking hold. In his Beatitudes, Jesus is giving us a profile of those who are turning and welcoming his rule. He is drawing a character sketch, if you will, of those in whom the new world order is emerging, those upon whom the light of grace is dawning.

In his Beatitudes, Jesus is painting a picture of those who, in the language of the apostle John, are being born again from above; of those who, in the language of the apostle Paul, are being filled with the Holy Spirit.

In his Beatitudes, Jesus has put together a portrait of repenting, believing, gospelized humanity.

Over the next eight weeks, we will work with each of the eight Beatitudes one at a time. But today I want to work with the eight Beatitudes as a whole. Before we look at each one separately, I want to lift up a number of observations about the whole package. And I have five such observations.

First observation: notice how the Beatitudes are packaged. They are enveloped by “*for theirs is the kingdom.*” Notice that the first and the eighth Beatitudes end with “*for theirs is the kingdom.*”

- The first: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom.*” Not “*theirs will be the kingdom,*” but “*theirs is the kingdom.*”
- The eighth: “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom.*” Again, not “*theirs will be,*” but “*theirs is.*”

Because all eight are bracketed by “*theirs is the kingdom,*” it is exegetically sound to read that clause with each Beatitude:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for theirs is the kingdom.
- Blessed are the meek, for theirs is the kingdom.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom.
- Blessed are the merciful, for theirs is the kingdom.
- And so on.

Which means that the specific blessings promised in the second through the seventh Beatitude are different descriptions of the in-breaking kingdom of God. Looking at the whole package, we discover what God's new world order is all about:

- It's about being comforted.
- It's about inheriting the earth.
- It's about having hunger for righteousness and justice satisfied.
- It's about receiving mercy.
- It's about seeing God, the greatest imaginable blessing of all.
- It's about being called and treated as children of God.

The whole package is wrapped up in "*theirs is the kingdom.*" Are you with me?

Second observation: notice the position of the pronouns *theirs* and *they*.

In the original, the pronoun stands at the beginning of the clause for emphasis:

- Not "*the kingdom is theirs,*" but "*theirs is the kingdom.*"
- Not "*they shall see,*" but "*they shall see God.*"

The implication: *theirs and only theirs; of them and only of them; they and only they.* Reading the Beatitudes with this emphasis, we can hear the radicalness Jesus intends:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs and only theirs is the kingdom.
- Blessed are the meek, for they and only they shall inherit the earth.
- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they and only they shall see God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they and only they shall be called the children of God.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs and only theirs is the kingdom.

To make the point more boldly, Jesus is saying that those who are **not** poor in spirit have not yet received the kingdom. Those who are not meek will not inherit the earth. Those who are not peacemakers are not the children of God. Those who are not persecuted in some way are not yet living the kingdom life. *Theirs and only theirs. They and only they.* Are you with me?

Third observation: Jesus is not describing eight different people here, but eight different qualities of the same person.

Say that again: He's not describing eight different people. He's describing eight different qualities of the same person. He's not describing eight different kinds of

kingdom people. Rather, he's describing eight interrelated qualities which emerge in every kingdomized person.

Jesus is not saying that when his gospel grabs hold of us, one of us will be poor in spirit, another meek, another hungry and thirsty for righteousness. He's saying that each person grabbed hold of by the gospel becomes poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart. Or, to come at it from a different angle:

- The poor in spirit are also meek.
- The meek are also pure in heart.
- The pure in heart are also merciful.
- The merciful also hunger and thirst for righteousness.

One Beatitude flows into the other. Poverty of spirit results in mourning over the sinful condition of the world and the sinful condition of one's own heart. Mourning gives birth to gentleness, and meekness creates a hunger and thirst for right relationships, which in turn produces a merciful heart, which in turn issues in a pure heart. Are you with me?

Each Beatitude, therefore, is interpreted by the other seven. This is especially important with the seventh Beatitude: *Blessed are the peacemakers*. That's the one you see on Hallmark cards the most. Blessed are the peacemakers. I think what this is saying is that Beatitudes one through six describe the qualities of the persons who can make peace in the world, and Beatitude eight describes what usually happens to those who try to make peace.

Jesus is saying that those who are able to make peace in the world are:

- Those who know and admit their spiritual poverty.
- Those who mourn over the violence in the world and the violence in their own hearts.
- Those who are meek, recognizing their own powerlessness and throwing their weight on the power of God.
- Those who hunger and thirst for right relationships—for moral, economic, social, spiritual wholeness.
- Those who are merciful, both to their enemies and their friends.
- Those who are pure in heart.

They're the ones who can make peace. And Jesus is saying that those who try to make peace get in trouble with the status quo. They meet opposition. They get hurt. So, Martin Luther King Jr. understood this. The point is: all eight Beatitudes are true of all upon whom the kingdom comes. The eight are interrelated and inseparable.

Fourth observation: the meaning of the word *blessed*.

It's a word crammed full of meaning. The word is *makarios*—M-A-K-A-R-I-O-S.

Now, although *makarios* can be—and often is—translated as “happy,” to do so is misleading. Yes, Jesus uses this word to bless us, but happy is too weak. Happy is related to happenings, which means that happiness comes and goes as happenings come and go. The primary reason “happy” is misleading is that it puts the emphasis in the wrong place.

Makarios does not turn on how you and I feel about ourselves or our circumstances. *Makarios* turns on how God feels about us. Say that again: it's so crucial. Whether or not we feel happy is not the point. The point of this word is whether or not God is happy.

Now, when I realize that God is happy about me and my condition, I might then feel happy—but my feeling happy is not the point. We need, therefore, a better synonym for *blessed*. Some suggest “fortunate.” That's good. Others suggest “approved.” Better. Still others suggest “congratulations.” I think that's getting there.

It does put the emphasis in the right place:

- Congratulations to those who mourn.
- Congratulations to the persecuted.

Even that word can be misleading because it can suggest that the mourners and persecuted did something to achieve this blessedness. Karl Barth suggests we render *makarios* as: “*You lucky bums!*” That's getting real close.

- You lucky bums!
- Right on! Right on are the poor in spirit.
- Right on are those who mourn.
- Right on are the meek.
- Right on are the peacemakers.

Now, when I hear God's “*right on*,” I might feel happy—but the point lies where it should: with what God feels about me. And I think we can improve one more notch: I suggest we use the phrase “*right side up*.”

- Right side up are the poor in spirit.
- Right side up are those who mourn.
- Right side up are the meek.
- Right side up are the peacemakers.

From the perspective of our ungospelized value system, the qualities Jesus blesses are upside down, right? The meek inherit the earth. You've got to be kidding, Jesus!

Those who mourn are to be congratulated. Upside down, Jesus! No, says Jesus: *Makarios—right side up.*

The qualities he blesses only seem upside down because we live in an upside-down world. Jesus comes into the world and turns everything right side up again:

- Right side up are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
- Right side up are the peacemakers.

Imagine vandals breaking into Mervyn's or Target or Nordstrom this evening—not to steal anything but to switch all the price tags. Tomorrow morning, television sets will go for \$6.95 and socks for \$1.25, microwaves for \$3.50, while dishrags will go for \$1.50. That is what happens when Jesus' gospel grabs hold of us—a switch in the price tags.

Helmut Tillich says that Jesus' words initiate a transvaluation of values.

- Right side up are the pure in heart.
- Right side up are the persecuted.

Now, how you or I feel about these qualities or circumstances is not the point; the point is how God feels about it. And in his Beatitudes, Jesus is announcing the divine blessedness, the divine congratulations, the divine *"you lucky bums,"* the divine *right on, right side up.*

Now, when I realize that divine assessment, I just might turn out to be happy.

Fifth observation: qualities that Jesus blesses here are not natural human qualities; none of us can produce these.

Jesus did not come into the world looking for Beatitude people—people to whom he could give the kingdom. Weren't any? No. He first calls people to himself, and as a result of contact with him, as a result of submission to his saving lordship, the qualities he blesses begin to emerge in people's lives. Do you see the difference?

The first line of the Sermon on the Mount is not:
"Blessed are the poor in spirit; therefore theirs is the kingdom."

The first line is:
"Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom."

It's not: *"Congratulations to the poor in spirit; now you win."* It's: *"Congratulations to the poor in spirit; you're poor in spirit because the kingdom broke into your life."*
Big difference!

See, if it were “*therefore*,” we would try to make ourselves poor in spirit in order to get the kingdom. Which means we would end up being proud that we were humble enough to become poor in spirit.

Poor in spirit, mourning, gentleness, hunger and thirst for righteousness—these are the product of the kingdom. They are the consequence of submission to the reign of Jesus Christ.

This is especially important to know about purity of heart. Jesus promises to those who are pure in heart that they shall see God. That’s my favorite Beatitude. I would give anything to see God.

Is this purity of heart? Whatever it is, it is not the result of my self-effort. It is nothing I achieve. It is the result of continual encounter. It is the result of an ever-deepening relationship with the gospelizer. It is the result of the infusion of grace. It is the result of the infusion of the kingdom of God.

Does this mean we are to be totally passive in this process? Not at all. Jesus continually calls us to repent and believe, to keep turning around at ever deeper levels, and to embrace him and his kingship at ever deeper levels. As we do this day after day, week after week, we are slowly but surely turned right side up in an upside-down world.

Are you repenting? Are you turning? Am I?
Are you believing? Are you really embracing him? Am I?

The answer is clear: in those who are, the Beatitudes are emerging.

Let’s do this in response to the Word today. Let’s just be still for a moment. Just be still. And in the silence, examine ourselves. I don’t know if that’s exactly the word; I couldn’t find a better one. Let’s let the text examine us. That’s better.

In the silence, ask yourself these questions:

1. What one quality on this list do I find most attractive?
2. Which of those qualities do I shy away from, and why?

Which one of those qualities is very attractive to you, and which do you shy away from, and why?