

Studies in the Sermon on the Mount: Lesson 1

I. Introducing the Sermon:

A. What we commonly refer to as “The Sermon on the Mount” is perhaps one of the best known portions of scripture:

1. It has had a wide range of reception with the world, ranging from very hostile to very popular:

a) It has, as a rule of thumb, not gone over well with great thinkers, who while they may be very wise in the sight of the world, have not based their philosophy on God’s wisdom:

(1) George Bernard Shaw in writing about the Sermon on the Mount called it an “impractical outburst of anarchism and sentimentality”

(2) Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that “Christian morality is the most malignant form of all falsehood:

(3) Those who have looked on it with any favorable light have admitted that there are great moral statements, but have viewed it with skepticism, stating what many of Jesus’ critics said then: that a simple carpenter from Galilee is hardly the moral authority:

2. Even among those in more religious circles, it is often misunderstood, taken out of context, and put to uses that Jesus never had in mind:

a) For those that see it as applying to the now, it is not so much a description of the deep changes that occur when one converts to the Kingdom, but rather a much more general plan for societal or political change:

b) Some see it as a set of teachings that are impossible to apply in a world that is affected by sin, and so they wait for a time in the future when people will live by this code of conduct:

3. There are a whole host of ways in which the Lord’s words in these chapters have been made into something they are not; but they generally all have this in common:

a) Whether seen in a negative or positive light, they turn the gospel into something that is “tame and inconsequential”

- b) This is sadly true of the Bible as a whole: For many today, its real power has been taken away:
 - (i) There are for certain great crowds of people who will talk about the “power” of God’s Word: But it is not the one that Jesus speaks of: It is a message that has been changed, trimmed, and doctored to fit the lifestyle of men and women today:
- 4. This is not very far removed from the context that these words were preached in Jesus’ day:
 - a) The religious world of the 1st century was for many, a very drab and dreary place: What we mean by that is this: God’s Law, which was a very powerful and moving “document” that revealed God’s nature and taught men to be holy, had fallen victim to the Pharisees:
 - (i) They had sucked the life right out of what it meant to serve God:
 - b) As we’ve just stated, we live in a world that has lost touch with what it really means to serve God: We are surrounded by people that see the gospel as nothing more than general guidelines for good living
 - (i) This is just one of many reasons that it is important for us to take the time to frequently study this sermon that teaches us what it means to serve the Lord:

II. What it is, is the Gospel:

- A. Matthew describes what this sermon was in a few words: In chapter 4:23, he states that Jesus was teaching them “the Gospel of the Kingdom of God”
 - i. This lets us know couple of things up front:
 - a) This message is for us today: It is the *gospel of the Kingdom*: It is not just Jesus explaining a few things out of the law of Moses:
 - b) Because it is a sermon for citizens of the Kingdom, the blessings and principles that it speaks of are not obtainable by those who stay outside of the kingdom:
 - c) Jesus’ message was one of spiritual salvation, not social and political change; this means that those who persist in thinking with worldly wisdom will not understand His message:

B. The parallel account of Luke 6, puts these events as happening in the second year of Jesus' ministry. This was the peak of his popularity:

1. But this popularity was never grounded in truth, and Jesus never trusted it: (John 2:24)
2. The great crowds that followed him by and large were carried away with a great amount of religious zeal, but it was without knowledge, very superficial, and was very short lived:
3. This sermon then, can also be seen in the light of corrective instruction:
 - a) To a crowd that was completely lost as to the nature of God's Kingdom, explains what its true nature is:
 - b) It would answer the questions that many had when they heard that the "kingdom of Heaven was at hand"
 - c) Jesus words are really more than a simple sermon: They are for the mature and the new: Taken as a whole, they make up a complete description of what it means to be a citizen of God's Kingdom:

III. Introducing The Beatitudes:

A. Jesus begins with a series of eight short but powerful statements that we refer to as the beatitudes:

1. While we are familiar with them, and many of us know them by heart, for those hearing them for the first time they were shocking and surprising words!
 - a) If we were to chart out a pathway to success, none of these statements would seem to make any sense: They would all point to failure:
 - b) They certainly would have challenged conventional wisdom and left many scratching their heads: But in this way, Jesus gets the attention of those in the audience and begins by showing the character of kingdom citizens

B. The entire world of the 1st century, just as it is now, spent their lives pursuing happiness: And just as today, most people had very little idea how to get it:

1. It would not have been a surprise to say that happiness or blessedness came to those in the kingdom: What would have been a shock is who Jesus said would receive it:

2. The focus of the beatitudes is spiritual in nature:
 - a) What men often pursue, wealth, status, & knowledge, receive absolutely no attention at all:
 - b) In this Jesus is clearly pointing to a kingdom not of this world:
3. It is also worth pointing out that these qualities are not just spiritual in nature, but are qualities that do not come to us naturally or easily:
 - a) These are character traits that we must choose to have, we will not accidentally fall into them:
4. Of great importance is that we recognize that these are not describing 8 different kinds of people: They are not selective: Together they make up what a citizen of God's kingdom will look like:
 - a) They are all connected: they cannot be separated: But this is a good thing:
 - (i) As we must strive to possess all of these qualities, it also means that we will receive all of the blessings which are connected to them
5. In short, the beatitudes are not a picture of a "super Christian": they are the markers of what make Christians different from those around them:

IV. "The Failures"

- A. G. K. Chesterton is attributed with having said: "Nothing Succeeds like failure"
 1. Some have taken this up as a good way of describing the beatitudes: Not that Jesus was describing Christians as failures in a literal sense, but in the way that the world generally views failure:
 2. We don't have to look any further than the Cross for an example of this: For most of the 1st century, It was the symbol that Jesus had failed: We only view it as a victory because of nearly 2000 years of hindsight:
 3. Jesus states that it is only those who are "failures" by the world's standards of success that would enter into the Kingdom: Not those who came to Him already full, but those who considered themselves to be empty: *and so the first statement is:*

B. Blessed are the Poor in Spirit:

1. The first statement Jesus makes addresses what our attitude must be in the presence of God:

- a) Jesus would read from Isaiah while preaching in Nazareth and state that the gospel was being preached to the Poor: He would state that it is easier for a poor man to enter into the kingdom of heaven than the rich: But this is not the sort of poor that Jesus is speaking of:
 - (i) The poor can be arrogant, and the rich can be humble: These are those who regardless of how much they have, whether wealthy or destitute, realize what their true state is spiritually apart from God:
- b) It is a word that comes from the Greek for crouching or cringing: Someone who is reduced to the worst sort of begging because they have nothing (Lazarus in Luke 16)
 - (i) But here it is used to speak of one who realizes they are spiritually bankrupt, and must come to beg before God, the only place they can obtain life: for something they do not deserve!
- c) Begging is hard! It is not something that we want to do: It brings us shame and we seek to avoid it at all costs: This is especially true for us in America: We are proud, we are self-reliant: we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps!
 - (i) But we cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven until we face reality of where we are without God:

V. Blessed are those who Mourn:

- A. For many, happiness would mean a life that is lived where there are no tears or crying: And yet Jesus states that this isn't true: He says that there is some sorrow that we accept and even embrace, not because we have no other choice, but because it brings true happiness:
 - i. Grief that cannot be avoided can still bring positives in our lives
 - a) Solomon would say in Ecc. 7 that they bring our lives into focus, and let us think on what is really important:
 - b) David would write in PS 119 it is good for me that I have been afflicted that I may learn your statutes: Hard times always teach more than peaceful
- B. But Jesus is speaking to something more than sorrow that cannot be escaped:
 - i. This is a mourning, a grief of choice: It is often a mourning of repentance:

(1) Isaiah would right in Isaiah 61 that the Lord's anointed was coming to comfort all who mourn:

(2) Ezekiel 9:4 states that only those who cried over all the abominations done in Jerusalem would be spared:

(3) These and other prophetic passages state that this mourning is the grief experienced by those who are moved by their sins against God, and repent because of that grief:

(a) It is the "Godly sorrow" that Paul says leads to repentance in 2 Corinthians 7:10

2. The comfort that Jesus speaks of is one that is extended to those who have replaced their pride with tears of repentance:

Conclusion:

- These are powerful statements: They show us what we must become in order to be a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven:
- They show us not only how to have a pleasing relationship with God, but it is something that will lead us to lead a more pleasing life

(This sermon series adapted from "Invitation to a Spiritual Revolution")