

## Kingdom Character Part One

This morning we are going to be joining a crowd on a small mountain somewhere near the Sea of Galilee, to sit at Jesus' feet as he teaches what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount.

### **Matt. 5:1-12**

You have probably heard that our eyes actually see everything upside down. The process of refraction through a convex lens causes the images we see to be flipped, so when the image hits your retina it's completely inverted. Right now your eyes are wondering how it is that I can preach standing on my head, and my eyes are wondering why you are all sitting on the ceiling! But an amazing thing happens when our eyes send that upside down signal to our brains - our brains are smart enough to say, "hold up! I know that ain't right." And so our brains actually takes the sensory information it receives and makes it fit with what it already knows, in essence, turning the images we see rightside up again.

In 1950 two researchers, Ivo Kohler and Theodor Erismann conducted an experiment. Erismann made Kohler a specially designed pair of goggles that inverted the light reaching Kohler's eyes so that the world looked upside down to Kohler. At first Kohler stumbled wildly, unable to navigate the upside down world around him. In a simple fencing game with sticks, Kohler would raise his stick high when attacked low, and low when attacked high. When he held a teacup out to be filled, he turned the cup upside down the instant he saw the water being poured upward. Within 10 days, Kohler everything seemed normal and rightside up and he could do everyday activities perfectly well.

The Sermon on the Mount isn't a collection of random teachings or quaint sayings about life. The Sermon on the Mount is all about the values and principles and ethics that rule the kingdom of God. You could say it's the Christian manifesto of the kingdom of God. And to be honest, in the natural there seems to be a lot in it that is flipped upside down from what we think of as normal. We're happy when we're sad, we blessed when we're cursed, and we're supposed to love our enemies. When someone attacks us low, we're supposed to parry high by praying for them. It seems upside down! But the truth is, sin has inverted our spiritual eyesight and our moral compass so that we see things flipped and upside down. We've gotten used to seeing things the way we see them, so they seem normal and right. But when a person comes to Jesus in faith, the Lord starts to working on our spiritual eyesight and renewing our minds so that we can begin to see things right side up – to see things the way his kingdom sees things. To follow Jesus requires a different way of life, a different set of ethics, a radically different perspective of everything in life.

At this point in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus' ministry is at the very beginning and chapter 4 ends with this description of the growing momentum in Jesus' ministry:

*And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.*  
(Matthew 4:23-25 ESV)

His fame is spreading and his crowds are growing, and in Matt. 5:1 Jesus, seeing the crowds, goes up on a mountain and begins to teach them. And we need to understand an important parallel that's going on here. Jesus is the new Moses, and just as Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive the law from God, Jesus goes up on the mountain to receive from the Father and then transmit to God's people the law of the kingdom. This new law of the kingdom doesn't abolish the law of Moses, it amplifies it. And so Jesus says, "you have heard it said (in the law), but I say to you..." and then he raises the standard given by the law by the power of ten.

And so one of the first questions that come to mind is, what did Jesus intend for us to do with this new kingdom law? Does he expect us to keep it? Some people think that the Sermon on the Mount is a set of ethical standards that all religions have in common and it's easy to keep. It reminds me of a time when I was 12 years old and found a book on how to teach yourself karate in the privacy of your home, complete with pictures. I had visions of being the toughest guy in the 7th grade so I grabbed a pillow off the couch and began practicing karate chops and kicks and flips. Now I know why they call them throw pillows. But I realized something from those karate lessons: learning karate is really, really easy! Unless there was something I was missing...

Some might read a few lines in the sermon on the mount and throw a few ethical throw pillows and think they're living by the sermon on the mount, but if we take what Jesus is saying here seriously, we realize that this new law is anything but easy to keep! In fact it is impossibly difficult. So others teach that Jesus gave us this new law to emphasize our complete inability to keep it, driving us to God's mercy. So which is it? Is this new law a throw pillow that we can easily master? Or is it a standard that we can't keep, and Jesus never meant us to attempt to?

There is a third, and I think better, option that is best captured in an old quote by the Puritans: *the law sends us to Christ to be justified, and then Christ sends us back to the law to be sanctified*. Jesus gave us the moral and ethical law of the kingdom as a way of life, but not the way to life. We can't live this in our own power, but after experiencing the new birth, God gives us new hearts that albeit imperfectly, want to, and are able to, keep the law of the kingdom. God works an inner righteousness in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Sermon on the Mount is all about ethics and values of the kingdom of God, and the first thing we come to in what we call the "beatitudes" is what kingdom character looks like.

### **Kingdom Character - the Beatitudes**

Before we start to look at each of the eight beatitudes, let me say two things that we see from them when we look at them from a wide angle lens:

The first is that the beatitudes aren't an ala carte menu. We can't pick and choose character qualities from the beatitudes and say, "I'm ok with hungering and thirsting for righteousness, but being merciful just isn't my thing. I'll take the pure heart, but hold the peacemaking!" The beatitudes, and the entire sermon on the mount for that matter, is a golden chain that paints the image of a follower of Christ, a subject of the kingdom of God. Jesus calls us to grow in each of these kingdom character qualities.

The other thing we see is that Jesus isn't against us living a happy life. In fact, just the opposite: the word "beatitude" or blessedness means intense happiness - bliss. Jesus is against the shallow, temporary happiness that sin promises - short-lived happiness followed by long lasting misery, but the values of the

kingdom of God leads to a happy life. So this week let's start walking through the beatitudes - kingdom character - one verse at a time.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...(vs. 3)*

Poor in spirit doesn't mean material poverty, Jesus is talking about a poverty that has nothing to do with money or bank accounts or IRAs. And it is inverted from what we normally think: being poor isn't normally what we think of when we think of happiness. A couple enjoying a lavish vacation in the Bahamas doesn't look at a homeless person begging for change in the street and think, "the lucky bum!" But Jesus says when our spirits are poor before God, we are happy, we are blessed. What's up with that? Because there is no illusion that we are able to pay our way with God. Let's say someone who makes \$13,000 a year (just above the poverty line for one person) looks to buy a home for \$1,000,000. They have no money to put down on it, so their monthly mortgage payment for a 30 year fixed would be approx. \$7400mo. Their mortgage is 7x what their income is. It's not possible. The gap between their income and the purchase is way to big.

The gap between our righteousness and the righteousness needed to enter the kingdom of heaven is even bigger. Translating it into dollars, as Jesus does in the parable of the wicked servant, if we make \$13,000 a year in our righteousness bank account, we fall \$2 billion short or 160,000 years of income short. At the heart of the gospel is the truth that we can never pay what we owe to God. At the heart of religious arrogance is the illusion that we're doing a pretty good job keeping up our end of the bargain.

Like the Pharisee who prays to thank God for making him such an upstanding, impressive man, not at all like that poor slob of a tax collector over there. He approaches God as if he were rich in spirit. The tax collector, on the other hand, has nothing to boast to God about, he doesn't feel like he measures up in any way, and so all he can do is humbly ask God for mercy. He is poor in spirit, dependent completely on God providing what he needs, and Jesus says he, not the other man, walked away justified. Cause God paid the mortgage. Jesus paid the price.

Happy are those who come to God poor, knowing they cannot pay down their debt, knowing they have nothing with which to earn their entrance into heaven, for theirs is the kingdom of God. What we would expect, what we would think intuitively, is flipped on its head. But that's what grace is. That's what Jesus died on the cross to achieve for us.

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted...(vs. 4)*

Again the kingdom of God flips what we perceive as normal on its head. We think that those who are happy are happy, but Jesus says those who mourn are happy. When we think of mourning we think of grieving the death of a loved one, but mourning comes in many different forms. We live in a beautiful world, and enjoy many blessings, but there is a deep underlying current of sadness in the world because sin has turned the world upside down. People hurt other people, exploit one another, judge, hate, and abuse one another. We have to be careful where we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and who we allow ourselves to be vulnerable with. And maybe sadder than that, for some of us, people have to be careful being vulnerable with us. We might not be a safe place for others to be vulnerable with. Some of us might sinfully leverage other people for our own advantage, or belittle their ideas or attempts, or feel superior when we learn of their weaknesses. Or mislead them for our own selfish purposes. We've all

gotten used to the stench of our own sin and it doesn't seem that bad to us, but all sin works the work of its master, Satan, who came to rob, kill, and destroy. Sin robs, kills, and destroys, leaving a wake of sorrow and mourning in its path.

Greatest of all, sin has separated us from our Creator - and even though we've gotten used to it in some degree, all the grief and sorrow and sadness and mourning in all the world through all history traces its origins to that, our separation from God. And that's the mourning Jesus has in mind here: when we mourn our sin and the sin around us, and the devastation it has done to others, to ourselves, and to our relationship with God. When our hearts are torn and broken over our sin, and we repent with tears and sincerity, then we are happy. Because Jesus says, in that condition, we will be comforted by God.

The Bible says that Jesus was a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief", which means he entered our grief and sorrows, and in fact bore them in a way that no other person ever could, embracing sadness and grief intimately and deeply - to the rending of his heart. Jesus knew sadness intimately - he was well acquainted with grief. When we come to Jesus broken and grieving over our sin, we find deep comfort in knowing that Jesus removed our sins as far as the east is from the west. Not by some abracadabra magic trick, but by bearing our sins and our grief as his own. And that brings amazing comfort to our souls.

Let's close with two thoughts about the subject of happiness and mourning:

1. *The Christian life isn't all laughter and smiles.* Sometimes Christians can live under the impression that we need to display a perpetual smile to the world to demonstrate that we have joy. Joy is strong enough to survive through all sorts of emotional ranges, including deep and intense sorrow. I remember back in the 80's I had a friend who worked for a Christian radio station as a dj, and at some point an outside consultant firm, and they did away with all of the songs that didn't fit a certain "feel good formula". Churches can sometimes try to be a place of constant, positive, feel good messages and vibes. That feels phony cause it is phony. And it misses a precious aspect of the Christian message: we live in a sad, broken, hurting world, but there in the midst of that sadness, there is comfort. I grew up in a home where classical music was played a lot so to this day I love some classical music, but the funny thing is I don't enjoy the happy, oompapa type of classical music. I love the haunting, moody, sometimes even sad, classical pieces. The kind that stir some sense of sadness and, I don't know, longing deep in the heart. It feels more real and more emotionally satisfying to me than the happy timpani banging, cannons-firing, 1812 Overture kind of pieces. That, of course, is personal preference - so if you love the 1812 Overture don't email me on this, although Tchaikovsky himself loathed it and assessed it as "very loud and noisy and completely without artistic merit..." even though he is the one who composed it. The point is, there is a universal sense of sadness that the Bible, rather than denying, embraces, especially in the Person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying we should be a bunch of "Debby Downers". There is a kind of melancholy, sadness that is fueled by self-centeredness and introspection, and that isn't healthy or Christ-like. But to empathize with sadness, to be honest when we're sad or grieving, is a part of the beauty of the Christian faith. We don't have to find the words to make everything better and fix everything. Sometimes we can acknowledge the sadness but point to the greater truth: Christ

brings comfort in that sadness. The Bible has a deep theology of suffering, and we can embrace that and display a type of joy that is honest and real, and allows for sadness.

2. *For the Christian, the deepest reality in their lives is a happy comfort, not sadness.* There is a behavioral phenomenon that I have observed more than once over the years: meet someone who is a real jokester, life-of-the-party, happy-go-lucky kind of person. Always joking, always laughing. So your first impression is that they are really happy people. But as you get to know them better, you learn that under that laughing exterior is a deeper undercurrent of sadness. They aren't really happy people, they are really sad people, and the jokey, laughy exterior is a way of coping with the sadness and hiding it from people. The opposite can also be true Jesus says. Christians can be sad and mourn and grieve; grieve the sin in their own lives, grieve the sin that is hurting the lives of people they love, grieve the brokenness and pain that is all around them, and yet underneath that sadness is a deeper undercurrent of happiness and joy because they have experienced the comfort of the Lord. Jesus meets us in our brokenness and sadness and comforts us with hope, love, and compassion. We feel Jesus' presence drawing near and that brings us inexpressible joy.

It's ok to be sad. It's ok to grieve and mourn. Jesus was a man of sorrows. Draw near to Jesus, bring your sadness and mourning to him, and he promises that you will be comforted. He brings sweet comfort to us in our sadness, and one day he will wipe away every tear and comfort us with everlasting joy. Revelation 21:4 says,

*He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. Rev. 21:4*

What a day that will be!