

**The Kingdom of God and the
Validity of
Contemporary Judaism**

We begin a brief series this morning on a portion of Holy Scriptures, with a message from Jesus that is often quoted for its moral insights (“...where your treasure is there will be your heart also [Matt. 6:21],” “... whatever you want others to do for you, do so for them.... [Matt. 7:12],” “Do not judge, lest you be judged [Matt. 7:4]”).

How did the synoptic (the word means “similar”) gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) function for believers in the early church?

They were written to present a record of the person and claims of Jesus, the Christ. They were purposed to encourage and instruct believers in their witness of Christ and their personal conduct as faithful witnesses of Him. The apostles were appointed church-planters in the first century, the authoritative connection between the person of Christ and His life procuring message to the world.

What was Matthew’s particular audience?

Matthew sought to craft his polemical narrative of Jesus to demonstrate that He is the fulfillment of the prophets of the coming deliverer. The audience originally was the ancient people of God in a particular cultural and religious setting, though His teachings transcend the centuries.

When Jesus commenced His itinerant ministry throughout the over two hundred villages in the Galilee, what was the question foremost in the mind of the people as they listened to Him and pondered the implication of His extraordinary performance of miracles?

“Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and *the* Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and *from* beyond the Jordan (Matt. 4:23-25).”

1. What was evident to the people is that Jesus claimed to be David's greater son, a king, and that He was offering a kingdom, a realm that demanded righteousness to enter.
 "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? "He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully (Ps. 24:3-4)."
2. The question foremost in the people's minds is the prerequisite righteousness for entrance into the kingdom? Is it through serious self-effort resulting in moral rectitude? Are our religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisee, correct in their teaching on the cause of prerequisite righteousness? Are you and the Pharisees saying the same thing?

What is the central idea of the message of that Galilean hillside? What was Jesus' answer to their question?

"For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:20)."

What was the structure of Jesus' message that day on the mountainside?

In many ways the structure varies little from what we hear from our pastor.

The Setting, 5:1-2

The Introduction, 5:3-16

The character of those already in the kingdom of God (The Beatitudes), vv. 3-12

The function of those already in the kingdom of God (The Similitudes), vv. 13-16

The Clarifications and Thesis, 5:17-20

The Argument, 5:21-7:5

The Pharisees do not interpret the Law correctly, vv. 21-48

The Pharisees do not practice religion correctly, 6:1-18

The Pharisees do not practice life correctly, 6:19-7:5

The Application, 7:6-29

The Sermon on the Mountain

- I. The Setting, 5:1-2
 - A. While Jesus gathered His disciples about Him (5:1), the crowds heard Him also (7:28). His disciples gathered nearest to Him while others listened from a distance. Clearly the primary audience was the disciples.
 - B. No specific mountain is envisioned here; the article "the" does not suggest a well-known place. The NIV renders the phrase "on a mountainside." See

14:23; 15:29. It may simply mean “the hills” or “the mountain region.” Ascending a mountain would remind the people of Moses; however, Moses ascended to receive revelation in stone; Jesus, to give revelation, writing it on our hearts. Jesus reveals truth as the “new Moses” for His new people. Moses gave the ancient people the law; Jesus filled it with meaning! According to Hebrews (3:3-4), Moses was a servant in the house, Jesus the Lord (“the Son of God”) of the house.

C. Jesus sat while he taught, the posture of a rabbi; it symbolized authority.

II. The Introduction, 5:3-16

The introduction to the sermon is generally divided into two segments: the beatitudes and the similitudes, the beatitudes describing the character of those already in the kingdom and the similitudes the activity of those in it.

A. An overview of those already in the kingdom (the Beatitudes).

1. The sermon begins with eight descriptions of those already in the kingdom. The first and last are in the future tense, two through seven the present tense (the future tenses frame the section; they are like bookends). The eighth beatitude is repeated beatitude and personalized (“you”).
2. Jesus is describing those who are already in His kingdom (“blessed,” happy, fortunate). A phrase that may capture the concept of happy or fortunate is this: “divine approval rests upon.” To hear these words would have been shocking. Another way to translate the word is “those to be congratulated” because of God mercy toward them in granting a repentant heart.
3. Each beatitude is divided in two parts: a condition and a promise that comes with the blessed state. The eighth is repeated and elongated.
4. It seems that the five beatitudes (1-4, 6) emphasize dependence on God (poor, mourn, meek, and hunger) or personal spiritual inward qualities. Beatitudes 5 and 7 seem to emphasize outward consequences of the initial four (merciful, peacemakers). The final beatitudes (8) stress the consequences of a person’s reception of his kingdom (i.e., persecution).

B. The interpretation of those already in the Kingdom, vv. 3-12

1. “Poor” suggests a feeling of impoverishment; it is a condition that engenders humility rooted in the perception of helplessness. It is the recognition of spiritual bankruptcy and utter dependency (v. 3). It can be translated, “How fortunate are those who know their need of God.” The “fortune” rests in that fact that they are God’s children. The promise is a present reality for the impoverished of soul (John proclaimed, “The kingdom of God is at hand [3:2].”

2. "Mourn" suggests contriteness over personal sin (v. 4). These initial beatitudes allude to the messianic blessings of Isaiah 61:1-2. The reason for such a good thing as sorrow is that those who understand their circumstance possess the promise of divine comfort (I take mourning to be caused by a recognition of their spiritual state, it can be translated "to cringe"). The future tense of the verb after "for" may indicate that comfort will finally come in the fullest manifestation of kingdom rule. The verb, "shall be comforted," is passive meaning that God alone will do this for those alone who understand their helplessness.
3. "Meek" suggests gentleness and the self-control it engenders (v. 5). "Inherit" often means, "enter," such as entrance into the "promised land." Those who think highly of themselves, the religiously assertive, do not inhabit God's kingdom. However, non-aggressiveness was respected neither in the Roman world nor presently in ours. Nevertheless, the "meek" inherit the earth, not the bullies.
4. "Hunger and thirst" suggest an inward desire, in this case for personal righteousness (v. 6). The concept of personal righteousness in Matthew implies right moral conduct, living the way God requires.
5. "Merciful" embraces forgiveness for the guilty, as well as compassion for the needy (v. 7). It means a generous attitude toward others, not willing to take offense or gloat over the misdeeds of others.
6. "Pure in heart" suggests a single-minded devotion to the things of God and moral purity (v. 8). The issue is not outward appearances, but inward attitudes.
7. "Peacemakers" suggest a spirit of reconciliation, the opposite of divisiveness, bitterness, and strife (v. 9). Those who possess this characteristic possess the character of God and are thus "sons of God."

It has been estimated that in mankind's four thousand years of recorded history there have been less than 300 years of peace. Between 1481 and World War II, Great Britain endured seventy-eight, France seventy-one, Spain sixty-four, Austria fifty-two, and Germany twenty-three. The world has seen peacekeepers (remember Neville Chamberlain, prime minister in the 1930s), but only one real peacemaker!

8. "The persecuted" is the only beatitude that is repeated, amplified, and personalized ("you," vv. 10-12). The reward of the persecuted is the same

as that of the “poor.” The term, persecute, involves both physical and economic abuse. Notice that the persecution does not arise from mere human misdeeds, but “because of me.” The blessing is not in the pain, but in the outcome.

Jesus notes three positive consequences of suffering denunciation for his sake: suffering for the Lord provides assurance that we are among the people of God; suffering causes us to focus on God with rejoicing that we are the people of God; and the suffering can take solace in the fact that those who came before them received similar treatment. Criticism, insults, and upbraiding are to be expected in a non-ideal world, a world that does not accept our values or priorities.

What is the reward that is “great?” The answer is heaven itself, eternal life, not some distinguishingly distinctive status in the life to come. All of God’s children will face persecution though the degree may differ! All will receive the greatest crown of all, eternal life.

C. The influence of those in the kingdom (the two Similitudes), vv. 13-16

Here the emphasis is not on the character and experience of those in the divine kingdom, but upon the conduct of those in it. It tells us what we are to be about in our Christian profession.

1. Here is a description of what those who are God’s children are to do and be. Each similitude contains an exhortation. Jesus does not call us to separate from the world around us, nor its cares, but to live in it actively. We are not to live a monastic lifestyle!
2. “You *are* the salt” and “you *are* the light” are present tense verbs. Jesus is talking to those who embrace Him.
Salt was a preservative, as well as a flavor additive, in the ancient world. Roman soldiers were paid in salt (“salary” is the English translation of the Latin “sal”) and hence the popular phrase, “You are not worth your salt.” Further, it gives savor to food, promotes preservation, and stimulates thirst (v.13). Obviously, Jesus is using the concept of salt and earth metaphorically. We are like salt in some way; “earth” means where you live and the witness we reveal. The hearers of these words would have interpreted the metaphor for preservation, promoting that which is good and wholesome in society.
3. Light is used metaphorically; it means visibility. Light dispels darkness so that people can see (vv. 14-16). It is about the good they do evidence by their conduct toward others. This is not contradicted by Jesus’ comment in 6:1 (the issue there is a poor motive for public behavior).
 - a. The affirmation, v. 14a

“Let” is a command, not an option.

b. The illustration, vv. 14b-15

Light is not to be hidden. As a city in an open place is visible so our candles are not to be put under a basket.

c. The method, v. 16a

“Thus” indicates a deduction. The way to be light in a darkened world is through lives lived as an expression of obedience to God (Not by our words alone, but by our conduct toward others).

d. The ultimate reason, v. 16b

That Jesus refers to God as “your Father” must have been shocking to those who heard Him. Jews thought of God as mighty, powerful, lofty, and holy, but not in personal and familiar terms.

Thoughts

1. The eight beatitudes are a portrait of the true Christian just as the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.
2. The approval of God rests on the dependent, not the independent of Him. The Christian is one who has been humbled by God to see spiritual impoverishment, the inadequacy of his/her life, apart from Him.
3. We are not immune from persecution; it is our lot if we would follow Christ. The road to the crown is the path of suffering. We should expect difficulties in life.
4. We are to create a thirst, a taste, for the Savior by the manner of living our lives. Writes Lenski, “If the light is not wanted, the lamp is not lit, or the light is blown out. If the light is wanted, the lamp is lit and placed upon its stand. For what do you suppose Christ lighted us? To have us hidden from sight? No, but to act as a lamp to all in the house”
6. The end of our efforts to witness for Christ in deed and word is that they might grasp that there is something more important than what we see and feel, that there is something greater to live for that brings meaning to our existence.