



Matthew 4:23-5:6
“The Way Up Is The Way Down”

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(3rd Sunday After Epiphany)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIIB1: MATTHEW 4:23-5:6
"THE WAY UP IS THE WAY DOWN"

4:23-25 The Kingdom's Healing Precedes The Demands Of Sermon On The Mount: Jesus First Heals. No Requirement/Confession Before Healing
Kingdom Preview = Power To *Make Right* (Mt. 8-9), 9:35

²³And he went about all Galilee, TEACHING in their synagogues and PREACHING the gospel of the kingdom and HEALING every disease and every infirmity among the people. ²⁴So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. ²⁵And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. ¹Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. ²And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: (Ex. 19:3, 24:16-17, Dt. 9:9, 18:15)
Promise Of Disciples' Reward (Now & Later)
Who Is In The Kingdom? Those Who Receive & Give; Jesus Speaks/Acts For God!

IIIB1: 5:3-10 THE WAY OF THE KINGDOM: EMPTYING & FOLLOWING GOD'S RULE IN JESUS. 13:16-17, Kingdom Is Near, Is.61:1-11

How To Live *After* Discipleship/Healing Begins? Indicative = *What's It's Like*

1) vv.3-6 Focus On God: Passive Way Of Emptying (36 Words), **2) vv.7-10 Focus On Others: Active Way Of Following (36 Words).**

Blessing (Makarism)= Congratulations + Audience + Reason

Present Tense (1,8); Future (2-7), 8 Blessings: 3rd Plural

<i>Pi</i>	(vv. 3 , 10 Verb to be)		
v.3 (1) "Blessed are /	(Is. 61:1-3, Exiles)	v.10 (8) Blessed are/	Assumes 2 Ages, Kingdom Meets Resistance
<i>ptochoi</i> the poor <i>in spirit</i> (inner life before God),	(Jam. 2:5, Lk. 4:17-18)	those who are persecuted	<u>for righteousness sake</u> 5:11
<u>for theirs <u>is</u> the kingdom of heaven.</u>	(Beggars, needy before God)	<u>for theirs <u>is</u> the kingdom of heaven.</u>	4:23, I Pt. 3:14

(vv.4, 9 Future Divine Passive)

(*Shalom* = Wholeness

v.4 (2) "Blessed are/	(Is. 61:2-3, 11:4)	v.9 (7) Blessed are/	(Hos.1:10; Mt.5:23-24,17:24)
<i>penthountes</i> those who mourn,	(See this world clearly)	the peacemakers,	(Like Good Angels)
for they <u>shall</u> be comforted.	(Grief over sin, evil)	for they <u>shall</u> be called sons of God.	

(vv. 5, 8 Future Active With Object)

v.5 (3) "Blessed are/	(Is. 61:1, Ps. 37:11)	v.8 (6) Blessed are/	(Ps. 24:3-4, Heart = Center)
<i>praeis</i> the meek,	(Powerless/ Dependent)	the pure(clean) in heart,	(Single-Minded, Ps. 86:11)
for they <u>shall</u> inherit the earth (land)	(11:29, Gentle Honesty)	for they <u>shall</u> see God.	(Heart Determines Actions)

(vv. 6, 7 Future Divine Passive)

v.6 (4) "Blessed are/	(Is. 61:1 Ps. 107:5-9)	v.7 (5) Blessed are/	(Ps. 37:21, Prov. 14:21, 17:5)
<i>peinontes</i> those who hunger and thirst	(God's will, Amos 8:11)	the merciful,	(Hos. 6:6, Open Heart)
for they <u>shall</u> be satisfied.	(Craving for God)	for they <u>shall</u> obtain mercy.	No. 4, 8 Righteousness

The Poor, Plaintive, Powerless, Those Who Pine For Righteousness

Beatitudes Are Performative: They Enact Reality, Kingdom Reality Is Now (is) *And* Future (shall be)
What It's Like To Belong To God's People Awaiting The End, Out Of Step With This World
Vertical, Horizontal Love //Mt. 22:34-40

vv.3-6 Path Of Emptying Into Deep Desire For God.

- 1) v.3 Poor in Spirit (No riches, real need)
- 2) v.4 Mourn (Loss, grief, pain at what is against God)
- 3) v.5 Meek (Loss of power, status)
- 4) v.6 Crave righteousness (Physical desire for God)

vv.7-10 Path Of Identity With Christ

- 8) v.10 Persecuted For Goodness (Cross of Christ, confront evil)
- 7) v.9 Peacemakers (Reconciled to God, to one another)
- 6) v.8 Pure in heart (Eyes to see the hidden God everywhere)
- 5) v.7 Merciful (Wise and liberating love, not giving others what they deserve)

The Beatitudes Correlate With The Three Classical Stages Of Mystical Prayer: 1) Purgation/Emptying (1-4), 2) Illumination (Implied) 3) Union/Filling (5-8)

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 4:23-5:6

With three large preparatory thought units now behind us (3:1-17, 4:1-11, 4:12-25), Matthew now turns to the first of Jesus' five large teaching blocks, the so-called *Sermon on the Mount* (5:1-8:1). That the sermon is a cohesive unit is indicated by the inclusions that frame the whole in A. 5:1-2 // A' 7:28-8:1 (*teaching* [4:23//7:28], *great crowds* [4:25//8:1], *the crowds* [5:1//7:28], *went up on the mountain // came down from the mountain* [5:1//8:1], *taught* [5:2//7:29], *disciples, followed* [5:1//7:29, 8:1]). The detailed account of Jesus' travels and ministry of proclaiming and displaying the kingdom in healings and exorcisms in the villages of Galilee (4:23-25) is the immediate context for his then taking a seat as a rabbi and teaching what he has just demonstrated in his first tour. His model is not first lecture, then lab, but the reverse. People are first engaged by the kingdom's arrival as an announcement and in deeds of power; only then is there fulsome teaching. It is to the healed and graced that the kingdom is then unfolded in comprehensive instruction. The experience of loving power precedes its fuller understanding and implications. The geographical references to all quarters, the use of deliberate hyperbole (*all*: vv.23a, 24a, b), and the fact that Jesus heals the full range of maladies without requiring a confession of sin or other criterion demonstrates that in him the benefactions of God through the Spirit are for Israel, bypass the Jerusalem temple and its priests, and are already aimed beyond their borders towards the Gentile world: e.g. *Syria* (v.24a), *Decapolis* (v.25a), *beyond the Jordan* (v.25b). The Great Commission (28:16-20) is on the horizon. Jesus is the center of God's mission to the world. Life is put right when he is near.

After the introduction (A. 5:1-2), the next unit is B. 5:3-16 which consists of three parts: 1) eight third person plural beatitudes in vv.1-10, 2) two addition blessings in a second person plural in vv.11-12, 3) the communal metaphors of salt and light (vv.13-16). That there is an ordering of the eight initial beatitudes into two groups of four (vv.3-6, 7-10) is indicated by several observations. That the eight are a single unit meant to be read as a whole is indicated by the inclusion *for theirs is the kingdom of God* (v.3//v.10). That blessing 1 and 8 are present tense, that 2 and 7 are future divine passive, that 3 and 6 are future active with an object, and that 4 and 5 are divine passive is a deliberate ordering of tenses to tie the eight together across two panels. That blessings 4 (v.6) and 8 (v.10) both contain the Matthean phrase *for righteousness sake* divides the eight into two panels of four. But it is the fourfold echo of the Greek letter *pi* in *the poor* (*ptochoi*), *those who mourn* (*penthountes*), *the meek* (*praeis*), and *those who hunger* (*peinontes*) that ties the first four blessings into a tight group of four. Using assonance and echo, David Garland speaks of the poor, the plaintive, the powerless, and those who pine for righteousness. Another linking technique is that *the poor in spirit*, *those who mourn*, *the meek* are practically synonymous in Jewish thought of the time. That each group of four (1-4, 5-8) contains 36 Greek words seals the argument. Matthew gives us eight beatitudes in two panels of four in which the kingdom is present and future.

The blessing form (i.e. macarism) was common in the ancient world and consists of three parts: 1) congratulations, 2) statement of the recipient, 3) a reason normally beginning with *for* (Gk. *gar*). Jesus took a familiar form and filled it with new content. The first panel is not directed at four people, each of whom embodies a distinct quality, but to each and every disciple in Jesus' new community. They are four perspectives on a single reality, which is our life with Jesus before God. In line with Jesus teaching on the command to love God and neighbor (22:34-40), the first panel announced the humbling effects of knowing God in Jesus. The movement is downward. It exposes us as bankrupt with nothing but need to contribute (v.3). It give us new vision to see the world with clarity, and thus properly to grieve our current state (v.4). It renders us radically dependent on God (v.5), and it creates in us new hungers and thirsts only God can satisfy (v.6). In Jesus company the truth about us is finally told; this is blessing. But there is more!

THE WAY UP IS THE WAY DOWN

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness....”

Nothing is more valuable or promising than that keen spiritual desire.

MATTHEW 5 : 6

Potato chips, cheese curls, and candy may be some of your favorites, but for twenty-four mule deer in the Grand Canyon National Park, indulgences proved deadly. Park rangers were forced to shoot more than two dozen mule deer who became hooked on junk food left by visitors. It was death by Cheetos and suicide by Snicker bar! Why eat twigs or chew bark if Twinkies are nearby? Once deer taste the sugar and salt of snack foods, they develop an addiction and go to any lengths to eat only junk food. They ignore the food they need, leaving them in bad health and edging towards starvation. With these new cravings, deer even lose their natural ability to digest vegetation. Rangers call it “the crack cocaine of the deer world.”¹

In Georgetown, 7:00am usually found me a hundred and ten paces from my front door at the hospital for a jolt of Starbucks and a round of visits. Over time I developed a friendship with the vending machine lady, me with New Testament in hand, her with a cartload of weight enhancement products! Upstairs the cardiologists were performing catherizations to unblock clogged arteries and just down the hall machines full of non-food that put concrete in your veins. It’s the insanity of our world; we live amid glaring contradictions and mixed messages. She called me *Pastor Caffeine*; I dubbed her *The Junk Food Goddess*! From time to time I took a poll on which items sold best. Always the same, Cheetos and Snickers, same as mule deer. She called it *comfort food* for hospital anxiety; I call it *the diabetes waiting room*. Once, after taking a poll, a thought came. I know it’s His voice because it always startles me, “Phil, do not do that to my church. Feed them the milk and meat of my Word, not empty substitutes.” I prayed, “Save me from being a vending machine and killing your people by giving them what they want.”

¹ PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 5:1-12.

The church is in danger from bad nutrition. Spiritual junk food, and by that I mean an intellectual life of slogans instead of study, of quick-fix and self-help techniques instead of deep character formation,² entertainments instead of spiritual disciplines. *Chicken Soup For The Soul* is killing our appetite. I offer people a book that addresses a problem in their life, and they respond, “Can I get it on video?” When I tell them a person who won’t read is no better off than the person who can’t, they’re offended. Souls grow flabby without exercise. They want quick relief from Pastor Feel-Good, not informed repentance which is the only path to spiritual freedom. No wonder lives are out of control. No wonder the devil has an easy time keeping God’s people stalled in destructive habits and tied up in besetting sins. And when we pastors stand at the judgment- which according to Jesus’ brother will be stricter than what is required of laity,³ I suspect there will be two lines: the *milk and meat line* where the question is, “Did you practice what you preached? Did you eat what you fed others?” and the *junk food line* where the question is, “Why did you corrupt your call for popularity? Why so much junk food on the church menu?”

I do not want to be found in the second line, though it’s what people often clamor for: easy, quick, positive, clever and undemanding, pragmatic and entertaining; it’s the afternoon TV model with a bit of Jesus as decorative sprinkles. One reason the culture is rolling over us like a steamroller is that we are nearly incapable of principled resistance. We’ve said *Yes* so long we’ve forgotten how to say *No*. Entertainment and self-help are not discipleship, convenience not the same as conviction. I’m not concerned about the few zealots who are in danger of going off the deep end; I’m concerned about the masses who never seem to get out of the shallow end. I’m on a crusade against the dumbing down of the church and the proliferation of spiritual junk food, and guess what? I’m losing. Big time. It is hard to watch the crumbling of the mainline Protestant experiment. It’s where I’ve lived; it’s my family; I was schooled in its elite institutions and signed on for the implicit chaplaincy project of being the conscience of the nation, but the neighborhood is in decline. When you minimize the salvation only Jesus offers, and when ignore doctrine and discipline as a side effect, you lose the internal strength to resist the pressures of the culture which are pervasive and increasing.

² On the virtue ethic, see Charles Talbert *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2004), Chapter 4, “The Functions of the Sermon: Character Formation and Decision Making,” 27-31.

³ James 3:1.

I share with you a letter that demonstrates what Jesus is after. It was written by a young Baptist missionary to Iraq, Karen Watson, just prior to her departure, dated March 7, 2003. Karen was killed with four others on March 15, 2004. This is a letter from one who lived into the eighth blessing, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” and even if you factor out youthful zeal, the impact remains.

“Dear Pastor Phil and Pastor Roger: You should only be opening this letter in the event of my death. When God calls there are no regrets. I tried to share my heart with you as much as possible, my heart for the nations. I wasn't called to a place. *I was called to him*. To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected, his glory my reward. ... I thank you all so much for your prayers and support.... Keep sending missionaries out. Keep raising up fine young pastors. Be bold and preach the life-saving, life-changing, forever-eternal gospel. Give glory and honor to our Father.” Her letter continues with a section headed *The Missionary Heart*: “Care more than some think is wise. Risk more than some think is safe. Dream more than some think is practical. Expect more than some think is possible. I was called not to comfort or success but to obedience.... There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving him. I love you and my church family. In his care, Salaam, Karen.”⁴

Karen fulfilled what Fred Smith said we should seek, “It is important,” he counseled, “as we go along in life, *to create thirsts that death will satisfy*.”⁵ Or, as someone else once said on a hilltop, “Blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness; they shall be satisfied.” Should God use this message, the effect will be to create new and deeper cravings and make us increasingly intolerant of the junk food substitutes that are so popular. An appetite for the Bible and prayer is a sign of life, as are the impulses to worship and serve and bear witness; boredom is a sign of pathology, a slow wasting of soul, the debilitating effects of long malnutrition.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

If Jesus had started with *The Sermon on the Mount*, he may not have had many

⁴ PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 5:1-12.

⁵ Idem.

takers.⁶ It's not easy; it's the Magna Carta of spiritual freedom and Constitution of the kingdom of God.⁷ In his initial preaching Jesus announced a fresh opportunity and a newly-available divine resource, "Repent," he said, "for the kingdom of heaven is *at hand*. Turn around because you can; turn around because you may; God is now near enough to be touched!" In the material which followed that abrupt announcement, Jesus lays out what the kingdom looks like, and the reward in every case is the same, though stated in different ways. The reward of living with Jesus and others within the force field of his kingdom is first that *we get to know God*, and secondly to be partners in God's work in our messed up world. We follow Jesus to know him and to learn his ways and means; in the process we are changed as his life is slowly reproduced in us. This is really good news, because we and our world are in really bad shape.⁸ We are together called to become a new kind of human being.

There is an *is* and a *shall be* to everything about Jesus, a present and a future. A glimpse of the kingdom now, the full view later; appetizers now, full feast later; partial healing now, resurrection body later; biblical truth now, seeing God face to face later. Scholars call it *the already* and *the not yet*, and this is the tension we live in.⁹ It's why Jesus said in alternating sentences that "theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven" and "they *shall be* comforted." Whatever healing comes is temporary; all blessings need to be resupplied; we have glimpses from mountain tops and much time in the shadow of the valleys between peaks. We are not yet home, but we are living on heaven's resources behind enemy lines. Casualties are real, and the kingdom we serve is resisted everywhere it breaks out. In case you haven't noticed, this world and

⁶ I take the Sermon on the Mount to be a faithful collection and careful rhetorical organization of Jesus' core message by Matthew and based on sources, some of which he shared with Luke (David Garland, *Matthew* [New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993], 50).

⁷ For a summary of the kingdom and its work at the center of the human person (the heart), see Ben Witherington, III, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 98-103; also Robert W. Yarbrough, "The Kingdom of God in the New Testament," in Christopher Morgan, ed., *The Kingdom of God* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2012), 95-124.

⁸ On the good news of Jesus over against the reduced gospel of "pray this formula; accept Jesus; avoid hell; go to heaven," see N.T Wright, *Simply Good News* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2015), "Distorted and Competing Gospels," 57-88.

⁹ On the tension, see Scott McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2014), 39-42, Appendix II, "Kingdom Today," 225-256.

its obsessions are opposed to God's rule. The big issue, and the one from which all others precipitate, is this: Which kingdom are you loyal to? How would we know?

What we have in the Sermon on the Mount is not so much *an ought* and a moral obligation but *an is*, a new opportunity.¹⁰ Our world is wrong side up; in Jesus we see the world flipped back over; in him we get a preview of what's ahead when the prayer *thy kingdom come* is finally answered. Jesus offers us the map of a new world in which his followers are called to live; we live by new loyalties in the midst of an old world, which is where there is so much tension.

This is why the Sermon on the Mount is so disorienting when taken as a program for what it means to live in the company of Jesus. It's not the way the world operates. In our world as currently governed, the poor in spirit are invisible; the mourning are labeled depressed; the meek are dismissed as non-assertive, and those who claim physical hunger and thirst for God are branded fanatical. Jesus describes another world planted in the midst of this one, an alternative way of seeing by a new light, then of believing in community, then of acting together, then of suffering because you rub the world at its sore points. If we are not in some sense strange, like people from another planet, we've missed our calling. This word of Jesus is for disciples; it's insider instruction. The Sermon on the Mount is not about something

¹⁰ On patristic materials, see Manlio Simonetti, editor, *Matthew 1-13, The Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament 1a* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2001), 77-160. Specialty studies include Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2004), Warren Carter, *What are they saying about Matthew's Sermon on the Mount?* (New York, NY: Paulist, 1994), Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon On The Mount* (New York, NY: Herder & Herder, 1999), David Dockery & David Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom* (Wheaton, ILL: Shaw, 1992), Georg Strecker, *The Sermon On The Mount* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1988), Jan Lambrecht, S.J., *The Sermon On The Mount* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1985), Robert Guelich, *The Sermon On The Mount* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982). On the history of interpretation, Jeffrey Grenman, *The Sermon on the Mount Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007). For a spiritual formation angle, Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1998); on community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996). For essays on discipleship, Alan Andrews, *The Kingdom Life* (Colorado Spring, CO: NavPress, 2010); on preaching, D. Fleer, D. Bland, editors, *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007); on ethics, Glen H. Stassen, *Living The Sermon On The Mount* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006)

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so small as making this-ole-world a little better place, nothing so manageable as that. Jesus' teaching is subversive of this world's agenda and conventional wisdom at every point. It's not good advice to be a success. The eight blessings start in spiritual poverty and end in persecution.

It may have been delivered on a high place of revelation,¹¹ but the first four declarations of the kind of person who is to be congratulated are not a call to ascend but to descend, to move into the low places of honesty before God and humility before people. They are a stripping process that empties us of much of what our world values, things like self-confidence and self-sufficiency, perpetual good feelings, the power to make things happen and the gusto of the good life. It ends by reducing us to appetites and cravings none but God can satisfy. It is voluntary downward mobility in the company of Jesus because you can't find what you long for anywhere else. Look where we end up! Spiritually bankrupt, mourning, unable to make things happen, hungry for the bread of heaven and thirsty for living water. Are these the fortunate ones? You could have fooled me. These are not people the world thinks important or worth emulating, and that's the point. The first four kingdom blessings don't look so good. They look like death to this world as currently governed, and are. They unmask us and ask, "Do you really want to get close to this God because this is what he does to people who follow Jesus?"

If Jesus had started with this material, he may not have had any takers. The call to the first four was, "Follow me, and I will make you into fishers of men." Leave your boats and all they mean, become rookies with me, and I will give you influence. By the illumination of the Holy Spirit the lights came on; they took up the challenge to see what Jesus and his message were about. John Ruskin was right:

"The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, all in one."¹²

Jesus was that visionary, one who painted before ordinary men and women a picture of God's future and their place in it. In the Sermon on the Mount, and

¹¹ The first of five such mountains in Matthew.

¹² PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 5:1-12.

particularly in the two panels of four beatitudes each, we see not some grand ideal or massive program for social renewal. We are, instead, invited to see the world through the eyes of the One who best understands both it and us. To follow Jesus is to enroll in a training tougher than Parris Island and more intellectually demanding than any Ph.D. program. It's about sight and character and risk and obedience and community more than about new information. The goal of Jesus is to change us.

Most of my formal education, particularly college and graduate school, was about buying and selling information.¹³ What Jesus gave was different; it was *life learning* aimed at changed habits. Before he delivered the kingdom agenda in the Sermon on the Mount he immersed his first followers in the disruptive powers of the kingdom, as if to say, "Stick with me, guys, and hold on tight! You're in for a ride."

Imagine what their first weeks away from Capernaum were like: explaining to your wife and kids what's happened, showing up in villages unbidden, speaking to the elders, hearing Jesus announce the kingdom, watching him heal the sick and deal with pesky demons, trusting God for supper and a place to sleep, watching the will of the Father and the powers of the Spirit on display through Jesus, seeing people changed by the power of love getting close enough to touch their flesh. And in the process they were changed. It was like living in a dream world; they never imagined such things were possible. Maybe with Elijah and Elisha of old, maybe with Moses, but not here and not now! This was the curriculum: travel with Jesus, listen to him, watch him *do the stuff*, do crowd control, keep asking questions and wake up the next day wondering what's next. They were blessedly out of control. It was not lecture and then lab but first lab, then lecture. It was highly experiential and always messy. Get your hands greasy, *then* learn about the physics of internal combustion. Drive around the track at a hundred and sixty miles per hour, *then* learn about what the roll bar in a race car is for. Doing what you could not do in order to understand what you could not otherwise know. This was Jesus' pedagogical method.

Before Jesus taught the content of the kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount, he created a space in which it made sense. Before he gave answers, he created the right questions and curiosities. He won their initial allegiance, got their bodies into the act, dazzled them with power that restored body and soul, and only then told them the full cost of the package. "Whew!" they said, "That's high! But we still want in." If this is what the love of God looks like in action, would you men and women like

¹³ An insight of Dr. Charles Kraft of Fuller Seminary.

to understand it? Obedience is the path to insight; action is the doorway to understanding when it comes to the kingdom. Doing what God told you to do is the path to further divine revelation. As the hymn teaches, “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”¹⁴ Outsiders do not and cannot understand because they have not yet obeyed, and Christians lose their understanding when they quit obeying. Use it or lose it.

This much is clear; first Jesus called them to *follow him*. And they did, at considerable cost. Life as it was stopped. He then launched out on an initial ministry tour- his first as well by the way- which was an extended field trip with him in the lead from village to village, first announcing the nearness of the kingdom- “a new game is in town,” then doing the works that showed hurting people what it means for God to show up in loving power to make things right. When Dudley Do-right shows up to save Nell, Snidley Whiplash has to leave town. The kingdom of light from above displaces the kingdom of darkness down below. God injects new energy into a declining system; entropy is reversed. Chapter 4, verse 23 is the summary of a longer process, perhaps lasting a month to six weeks and all on foot, “And Jesus went about all Galilee (with disciples in tow), teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and infirmity among the people.” You had to be in shape to follow this guy around; maybe it’s why he chose lean fishermen instead of plump scholars like me sitting well fed in front of Torah manuscripts! His was a three part, mutually reinforcing agenda: 1) Announcement: preaching the kingdom; 2) Interpretation: teaching the kingdom; 3) Demonstration of the kingdom: healings and exorcisms. Word and deed illumining one another, sight and sound making it real. It was the spiritual equivalent of D-Day; a beach head of human liberation and hope established across the villages of Galilee. Elvis is now in the building, and the show’s about to start! If anything, I’m being less dramatic that it was. In Jesus a new world of new possibilities had opened in the midst of the old! Reality cracked open; the invasion of planet earth was on. The impossible was the new normal, and I suspect it took Peter and his buddies a while to adjust to the strange new world of Jesus. Academics call it *a shift of paradigm*.

It does not surprise us people came from all quarters once word got out. If it happened in Greenwood, we’d have traffic problems. Revivals in which Jesus is featured and the power of the Spirit is present draw crowds and create controversy. You trade one set of problems, which in their case was religion grown powerless, for

¹⁴ *U.M. Hymnal*, No. 467, “Trust And Obey.”

another set, which is an energized new movement on the edges of respectability, which is precisely that the Holy Spirit did through the Wesleys in eighteenth century England and through the Pentecostals and Charismatics in the twentieth. Out of Protestant liberalism and educated unbelief arose a new populist movement, one which claimed God was still doing what we read about in the book. And the question then and now is the same: Which set of problems do you prefer? Church as normal is safe; nothing much happens, but revival from the God whose kingdom is looking for new openings is unpredictable. I frankly don't have trouble believing the stuff about the miracles; I am not a naturalistic skeptic; what I have enormous trouble with is *getting in on it!* I wake up wondering: Is this the day God shows up?¹⁵

It was only then, when circumstances were in place, that Jesus pulled back for a full disclosure of what he was about. Atop the mountain there is one center, Jesus, and two audiences, one after the other in layers. Jesus is seated as a Jewish sage; the disciples are gathered around as an inner layer. But beyond them is a third group, the crowds, people who have already been touched and freshly arrived ones who are hearing incredible stories and waiting for their audience with the new prophet. Three layers: 1) Jesus who embodies the kingdom, 2) the disciples who are being formed in the kingdom, and 3) the world that needs the kingdom.

The structure of the church and our place in the world is here. We are placed between the Lord we worship and a world that needs him. We are hands and feet, his living extensions, the *body of Christ* to use Paul's favorite word picture. Our privilege is to be near Jesus and over our shoulders to hear the clamor of the crowds. We receive from him in order to be used by him for the mission he shares with us. Is this not the image of verses 1 and 2? "Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them saying...." Not so much now, but later on they will be the official custodians of this teaching which they now receive. They've met the man; they've taken his challenge; they've now seen his traveling road show in action, and they are now invited to explore its inner workings. Jesus has set them up.

Jesus was not the first to use beatitudes. Jewish Scripture and contemporary

¹⁵ For a treatment of world view issues which inhibit the church getting the whole package, see Zeb Long and Douglas McMurry, *The Collapse of the Brass Heaven: Rebuilding Our Worldview To Embrace the Power of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 1994), Chapter 5, "The Western Worldview," 50-62.

philosophers use the form of an announced blessing to indicate what kind of folk are in favor with God, or with the gods in the case of polytheism. It was a official congratulations in three parts: 1) An announcement of favor, “Blessed are....” then 2) the recipients, “the poor in spirit,” and finally 3) the reward that justifies the new status, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The blessing form was used for all sorts of purposes, one of which was to pass on wisdom. One of my favorites is from the pagan teacher Menander who sounds like Benjamin Franklin in *Sir Richard’s Almanac*, “Blessed,” he wrote, “is the man who has both mind and money, for he employs the later for what he should.”¹⁶ And for every blessing there is an implied curse, which is the opposite of the blessing. The dark side might read like this:

“Cursed are the rich in spirit; they are so full of themselves they have no need of God. Cursed are the ones who are always laughing; they’ve made a cruel joke out of a badly broken world. Cursed are the pushy and demanding; in the end they drive away their friends, even God, and are left with nothing. Cursed are those who crave everything but God and his ways; they will never get enough to be satisfied.”¹⁷

If the curses sound harsh, they’re meant to be. A blessing is an invitation; a curse- either stated or implied- a wake up call to rouse a morally sleepy world. Blessing and curses mark who is in and who is out from God’s view, who is to be cheered and who booed, who wins and who loses. The question is always the same, Which group are you in? Jesus understood the form and filled it with his own content.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” For the Hebrews to be *long in spirit* was to be patient, and to be *high in spirit* was to be proud.¹⁸ So to be *poor in spirit* is to use a financial image for a spiritual condition. These first followers were no longer earning an income. When fishing stops, cash flow stops. They were learning something new, something most men truly hate, and that is to depend on other people for what you once supplied for yourself. They did not know where their next meal was coming from; they only knew they were *with Jesus* and that he and a few rich women he healed and delivered were picking up the

¹⁶ PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 5:1-12.

¹⁷ My own best guesses.

¹⁸ Dockery and Garland, *Seeking The Kingdom*, 20.

tab.¹⁹ Each day was a day their needs were met and their net worth declined. Boat payment, house payment, taxes, family to support, who knows what? I wish we knew more details, but we don't. To watch Jesus deal with broken people in radical dependence on God for every word and every deed was to see just how deep his trust was. Jesus could say *blessed are the poor in spirit* because it was a self-description. Apart from the guidance of the Father and the revelation that came freely from the Holy Spirit's presence, he could do nothing; he was powerless. Until the Father spoke and the Spirit energized, Jesus stood silent and refused to take action on his own. His deity was bracketed out in his commitment to perfect human obedience. In other words, "Blessed are those who know their need of God, who refuse to fake anything and wait empty-handed before a generous God, asking for some gift from the Great King to pass on to others." When the Spirit stopped, Jesus stopped.

At no time am I more aware I have nothing than when I pray for the sick and the emotionally crushed. I feel foolish and small and empty and stupid, and that's just what God desires. Only when our hands are empty can we catch a blessing. In one of his cartoons Charles Schultz of Snoopy fame has two characters standing outside at night, staring at a field of stars. "Let's go inside and watch television," Charlie Brown says, "I'm beginning to feel insignificant." No, Jesus says, stay outside; feel it deeper than ever. It is truth, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, even right here." To feel spiritually empty is good; to know my life is fragile and that I am sinful and needy is good because it's true. We are all little people with a very big God, and sometimes we tell a big God about our problems, and sometimes we tell our problems about a very big God.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Mourning is a response to loss, grief a deep wound in the soul. What was it like for Jesus to look into a face and to see the devastation human rebellion and diabolical evil had brought to bear. He wept at Lazarus' grave and over Jerusalem. He was grieved by the religious leaders. Jesus felt the pain of our world and on his cross welcomed into his body the piercing fangs of our hatred and the venom of our accumulated poison. So if there is nothing that disturbs you deeply, nothing that regularly moves you to sadness, if your heart has grown calloused at the pain of others, then be warned; you are no longer near the kingdom but numb. If you can weep at the pain and evil of this world, or the disease of your own soul, then you are not far from the kingdom.

¹⁹ See Luke 8:1-3 for a neglected insight.

Let me tell you a story about our world. A *Los Angeles Times* poll once found that most women choosing abortion, at least 70 percent, say they believe it is immoral. In David Reardon's book *Aborted Women: Silent No More*, one woman shares why she had an abortion even though she felt it was wrong:

“My family would not support my decision.... My boyfriend said he would give me no emotional or financial help whatsoever.... When I said I didn't want to, they started listing reasons why I should. I started feeling like maybe I was crazy to want to keep it? I finally told everyone I would have the abortion just to get them off my back. But inside I still didn't want to.... Unfortunately, when the day came I shut off my feelings. I was scared to not do it because of how my family and boyfriend felt. I'm so angry at myself for giving in to the pressure of others. I just felt so alone in my feelings to have my baby.”²⁰

What a cruel society. We worship gods of convenience and take innocent life.²¹ We turn off our feelings and go numb in order to cooperate with death. Is this not worth feeling sad about? If we cannot name and mourn what is wrong with us and our world, have we not become less human instead of more? The kingdom of Jesus is not about making us into angels or turning us into supermen and superwomen; it's about restoring us to full humanity and tenderizing our hearts so we begin to respond to life as he does. So if you pray, “Lord, share your heart with me,” get ready to be plunged into grief and mourning. Agony and ecstasy are both in Jesus, and he will share them both abundantly with us. How's that for the first two beatitudes? Absolutely nothing to offer and full of pain at my place in a broken world. The first two leave us empty and in tears. Is this blessing? Jesus says so.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land.” If you hear *meek* as *weak*, then you miss what Jesus is after. Synonyms are *gentle*, *non-demanding*, *gracious*, and *easy to be around*. Not pushy or demanding, willing to wait on God before driving ahead with some project. This is rooted in the experience of Jesus. His confidence was in God, not in what he could make happen. A.W. Tozer said this:

²⁰ PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 5:1-12.

²¹ For a Methodist theologian's spiritual and political repentance from being an advocate of permissive sexuality and convenience abortion to a pro-life stance, see the memoir of Thom Oden, *A Change Of Heart* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2014), 157-160.

“The meek man (or woman) is not a human mouse afflicted with a sense of inferiority. Rather, he may be in his moral life as bold as a lion and as strong as Samson; but he has stopped being fooled about himself. He has accepted God's estimate of his own life. He knows he is as weak and helpless as God has declared him to be, but paradoxically, he knows at the same time that he is, in the sight of God, more important than angels.... He knows well that the world will never see him as God sees him and he has stopped caring.”²²

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Hunger and thirst hurt if they last long enough. Jesus went through this in forty days of desert fasting; his words are not theoretical but experiential. He uses a physical experience to point to one that includes the body and goes beyond it. He indicates the object of our desire as a hunger and thirst *for righteousness*, which means not just right human conduct but the action of God that breaks in to make things right again. He speaks about deep yearnings of the soul that come out in our prayers and in our dreams. This is the craving for God that underlies and gives dignity and guidance to all our bodily appetites and desires. God’s best gift is to make you ravenous for God. A hungry believer is easy to feed.

CONCLUSION

How’s your appetite for God? Keen? Or has it grown dull, satisfied by other things, perhaps spiritual junk food? In Jesus’ presence we discover we have nothing to offer but vulnerability, that the tears we stifle are an indicator of true insight, that pushy self-starters people miss God’s gifts because they can’t wait, and that our great friend is that gnawing in our soul nothing but God can satisfy. This is not the way the world operates or what it values, which is why it continues under the curse. Only where the kingdom goes is the blessing of Jesus bestowed. God will have a people who follow his Son or he will have none at all.

Welcome to Jesus’ teaching on following him in the ways and means of God’s present and future kingdom. This is classic Christian discipleship, and it is time we engaged it at full strength, not watered down. Are you ready for a downward journey into pure desire for God? The blessed are first bankrupt, sad, impotent, and famished. But what treasures lie on the other side? Jesus answers that question next week!

²² PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 5:1-12.
