

Sermon on the Mount 1

What a wild time we're living in.

I struggled with what to preach about this month right after this insanely contentious election. With tensions so high and nerves frayed and anxiety in our congregation, I knew many topics would be a **potential landmine**.

I also knew simply **avoiding it** and doing a series about "The Top 5 Birds of the Bible" or "The Exegetical Foundation of the Book of Habakkuk" would feel like a missed opportunity to see what Scripture has to say to us as a congregation right now.

Ultimately, I knew there was one part of the Bible we couldn't go wrong with, and that is going **directly to the words of Jesus**. So that's what we're going to do.

All last month we focused in on the parables of Jesus - his provocative teachings about the "upside-down kingdom of God."

In these parables we saw depictions of a God who pours out **grace** on those who least deserve it, of a kingdom in which **humility** is the path to greatness, a kingdom which **elevates and honors** those the world considers nothing...

Jesus said in his kingdom the last are first and the first are last. But like we said, that's a message that not everyone is open to. You've got to have "**ears to hear**," because if you don't, then the kingdoms of this world - wealth, power, success - are going to be far more attractive.

So last month was all about what the kingdom of God *is*. This month, we're going to talk about **how then we should live** if we want to be a part of it. We're going to look at what Jesus had to say in his famous sermon on the mount.

We're going to talk about **loving your enemies**, about building a faith which actually weathers the storms of our life, and about how to pray when the world around us is so very, very broken.

And we'll see that even though Jesus is a bit more direct here than he is in his parables, his teachings are no less provocative.

Many of the things he says are actually pretty **outrageous** (that's where the name of the series comes from) and we still need "ears to hear" what he has to say.

So let's pray for those ears to hear as we open the Word of God.

[PRAY]

BLESSED

So let's see how Jesus begins his sermon on the mount. Please grab a Bible and open with me to the gospel of Matthew, chapter 5. [Greet online & campuses]

At this point in Matthew's narrative, Jesus is still pretty early on in his ministry, but word about him is starting to spread. Healings, miracles, radical teachings... He was drawing a crowd.

Matthew 5:1-10

One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them.

*"God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*

*God blesses those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

*God blesses those who are humble,
for they will inherit the whole earth.*

*God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice,
for they will be satisfied.*

*God blesses those who are merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.*

*God blesses those whose hearts are pure,
for they will see God.*

*God blesses those who work for peace,
for they will be called the children of God.*

*God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*

We'll stop there. Now, what we just read is often called

The Beatitudes: declarations of blessedness

No, I don't really know why they're called that. It's an old Middle English word. Regardless, it's Jesus describing those in the world who - according to him - are blessed.

And blessing in the Bible generally means those who have the favor of God.

Blessing = the favor of God

Those with God's presence and provision and wholeness defining their life. Those are the people who are blessed.

So right off the bat you can see why this is **a pretty outrageous thing for Jesus to say.**

The poor are the ones God favors? The ones who are in mourning, the persecuted... *they're* the ones God provides for?

I mean, **that's obviously not true, right?** It's the wealthy who are blessed. It's the strong and powerful and healthy who have God's presence. At least, that's what seems natural to us.

And it was definitely a natural assumption in the ancient world. If you were making it - if you were on the top of the heap - everybody knew you had the blessing of God. But if you suffering in some way, God had obviously abandoned you.

But that's not what Jesus says.

No. Verse 3. He says **the kingdom of Heaven** - the rule and reign of God in the world - belongs to those who have nothing.

Verse 5. He says **the humble** - the meek, the gentle ones - not the powerful or mighty - the humble who *don't* try and take over the land are the ones the whole earth belongs to.

Verse 7. **The merciful** - those who have compassion on others - will receive God's mercy. Not the ones who have "earned" it by doing the right religious rituals.

He goes on. Those with **pure hearts**, those who **try to bring peace** in this world, *they* are the ones God considers family.

And then Jesus says those **suffering** in our world are blessed too. Look at verse 4... People mourning the loss of loved ones... People going through the worst moments of their life - they're the ones God's favor rests on?

Or verse 6. People who **hunger and thirst for justice**... Think about what that means. If you are hungry or thirsty for something you don't *have* that thing. These are people who don't *have* justice. In other words, they're victims of injustice... and Jesus says they're blessed.

Or verse 10. The **persecuted**... In Greek, the word persecution conveys the idea of being pursued - hunted down. Jesus is saying those being chased down and punished for doing right are being blessed by God.

How could any of this be true?

JESUS

The answer, I believe, lies in the person of Jesus himself. Remember, Jesus is God in the flesh - the incarnation of the divine on earth. When we look at Jesus, we see a perfect representation of God's character. Because he *is* God.

So what does he reveal about God? What do we see when we look at Jesus?

- We see a God who chose to be **born as a helpless baby to a family of nobodies**.
- We see a God who chose to **spend his time with sinful, disreputable people**.
- We see a God who didn't have land or property or wealth, but chose a life of **voluntary poverty and simplicity**.

- We see a God who **played with children and spoke with women and touched the untouchable** - people the world back then considered worthless.
- And we see a God who didn't dominate the world and blast evil people with laser beams from his eyes, but who willingly **went to the cross for evil people**, who allowed the sin and brokenness of this world to do its worst to him, who willingly *died* in his love for imperfect people.

When we look at Jesus we see God's character. It's a character of incredible grace.

So why are humble and merciful and peaceful people blessed? Because they're **living out the character of God**. His favor rests on them because they're doing what he does. They're working shoulder to shoulder with him.

Why are the poor and persecuted and victimized blessed? Because they're **the ones God spends his time with**. They're the ones Jesus pursued. And they wanted to be close to him because they had nowhere else to turn. God was with them.

Ultimately **when we look at Jesus and see the character of God, we see the king of a kingdom which looks nothing like the values of this world.**

We call it an "**upside-down kingdom**" because, as Jesus says, those who are last in this world are the ones on whom God's favor rests.

The kingdom of heaven - God's blessing - is theirs.

That is how Jesus begins his sermon on the mount. And I don't care how many times I've heard those words; they still blow my mind.

It is an *outrageous* worldview to have. And yet it's the worldview Jesus lived into. These weren't just words for him. This was his life.

Ok. With all of that said, there's still a question we need to ask right now. **What are we supposed to do with all of this?**

Especially right now, in the wake of this election as our country

continues to face deep division and hatred and as the pandemic is getting worse again and all of it. What do we do?

Well, let's keep reading a bit further in the sermon and see if we can find an answer.

SALT AND LIGHT

Let's pick up where we left off in verse 11. If you look at the grammar, Jesus switches from describing people generally, and starts talking directly to his disciples. He goes from "they" to "you."

Matthew 5:11

"God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.

"You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.

"You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

Most of the time, when I read or hear about this passage, it always starts in verse 13, as if Jesus has started an entirely **new section** of his sermon. A lot of Bibles even have a new section heading there.

But it's important to remember that the original manuscripts of the Bible didn't have section headings or chapters or verse numbers. It was all **continuous text**. Which is why I believe this teaching about salt and light is directly connected to what he just said about who is blessed.

Look back at verse 11. Again, he's talking to his disciples. "God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you... *because you are my followers.*" Literally, persecuted "on account of me."

Now, it is tempting to think of this **in terms of association** - the disciples believing something which got them labeled as a Christian - and then being persecuted for that label.

But that's not what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. **It wasn't about labels.**

Jesus was a **Jewish rabbi** - a teacher - being followed by disciples. The job of a disciple was not to learn and believe all the same theological *facts* of your rabbi. Your job was to **model your entire life** on your rabbi's life - like an apprentice. To go where he went. To do what he did.

And what did he do? He brought love and life and healing to those very people we just talked about. The ones rejected by the world, the poor, the marginalized, the victims of injustice. **He brought God's blessing to those on the bottom of the barrel.** *That's* the life they were to model.

Let's bring it to today. If we are followers of Jesus - if we are *also* his disciples - then we are called to the exact same thing. **Our lives should look like his.**

But guess what? The world doesn't look too kindly on that. Think back to the beatitudes.

If you give your life to **serve the poor**, you're going to be mocked for being a bleeding heart.

If you choose **the path of humility and gentleness**, you'll be labeled as weak and soft.

If you have **mercy and compassion** on those from a different political party or ideology than you, you'll be looked at as a traitor to your kind.

If you **call for peace** you'll be trampled over by those calling for power.

If you want a **pure heart**, the world around you is going to try to defile it.

If you **work to bring justice** to those who have been victimized, you're going to face the wrath of the victimizers.

On and on and on. If you spend your time and energy and money on those the world has rejected, **the world will reject you too.**

If the kingdom of God is upside-down, then following our king, Jesus, means **going downward**, giving of ourselves... it means death to our own desires and fully surrendering to his.

And in a world built on success, **that way of living sure seems awfully foolish.** Outrageous even.

So what are we tempted to do? When our friends or family start mocking us or criticizing our choices, how do we respond?

We draw back, don't we? We start toning down the Jesus-stuff. We don't want the hostility, so we keep our faith a bit more private. A bit more internal.

Sure, we still do a few random acts of kindness for Jesus. We're still *nice* to people (well, *most* people). But we don't dedicate our *lives* to loving like Jesus. We don't pour ourselves out for those the world has rejected.

Our faith becomes a label and nothing more. It's a declaration on our **Instagram profiles**, but it's not a way of living. It's some **Hobby Lobby home decor**, but it's not a whole-life sacrifice.

Why is that a problem?

It's a problem because **we are the salt of the earth.** Verse 13.

Do you know what salt did in the ancient world? Yes, it seasoned food, but more importantly, **it preserved good things.** Meat and fish and grain. People would pack it all in salt to preserve it.

It's osmosis! The salt draws water out of bacteria cells and they shrivel up so food doesn't rot.

Well guys, our world is rotten with sin. It's rotten with injustice. It's rotten with pain and hate and violence. And we, as disciples of Jesus, are here to dry up the rot in his name.

We are here to preserve the good things of this world.

What good are we if we're salt just scattered on the path?

We are also the light of the world. Verse 14.

Imagine living in a world with no electricity. At night the only light you'd have would be the moon or a lamp or some kind of fire. Light meant safety, and comfort, and hope.

Well, **it's nighttime out there.** Our world is covered in darkness. People are lost and confused and terrified and anxious, longing for the hope that light can bring. As disciples of Jesus **we are here to shine a light onto the way of salvation.** The way of renewal. The way of life.

What good are we if we're hiding the light of Christ under a basket?

We are the light of the world. We are the salt of the earth. So shine your light for the world to see. Get a little bit salty!

Surrender your life to the purposes of Jesus. **Don't just say you're his disciple; Be his disciple.** Do what he did in this world. Spend time with who he spent time with.

You may be mocked. You may be hated! But you will be blessed.

You will experience the presence and provision of God. Because when you do these things you're standing shoulder to shoulder with him.

Matthew 5:10

God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

CONCLUSION

Grace Church, can I call us to something right now?

I know our world is crazy these days. I know it's **tempting to just draw into ourselves and hunker down.** But that's not what we're called to do.

Can we be the kind of church that **works shoulder to shoulder with Jesus?**
Pursuing those rejected by the world. Giving of our lives for those at the
bottom of the barrel? Loving others regardless of whether they deserve it?
Can we do that?

Grace Church, can we be humble? Can we be merciful? Can we work for peace?

Look. Just because election day is behind us does not mean our cultural
divisions are magically healed. In fact, I think **there's a lot more hatred
to come.**

But not here. Please not here. **Let us be salt. Let us be light.**

As Jesus said, "let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone
will praise your heavenly Father."

Let us be disciples of Jesus, who showed us how to be blessed. Who showed us
a way of living that leads to the healing of our world.

[PRAY]