

1. Children of the Revolution

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Preacher: Rupert Hunt-Taylor

[0 : 00] Today we'll be beginning a series in Matthew's Gospel, looking at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the most famous sermon of all time. So if you turn with me to Matthew, chapter 5, we'll have two weeks to get started in this before a short break for Easter, and then coming back in May.

And today we'll be looking at the very first ten verses of Jesus' Sermon, often called the Beatitudes, which you'll find on page 809 in the Visitor's Bibles.

I'll read a little bit beyond, but our passage today is Matthew, chapter 5, verses 1 to 10. Seeing the crowds, he, that is Jesus, went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him, and he opened his mouth and taught them, saying, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

[1 : 37] Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?

It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill can't be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who's in heaven.

Well, let's have a moment of prayer before we look at this together. Father God, we thank you for these words of our King which you've set before us this afternoon.

[2 : 54] We thank you for a short while this lunchtime that you've called us away from our work or from our responsibilities to listen to your Son.

And we pray, Lord, that as we sit under his teaching together, you would make us more and more into gospel-shaped people who bring glory to our Father in heaven.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, at the heart of every great movement in the history of man, there's been a radical idea.

Revolution begins with one subversive thesis. Someone lays down a challenge to the establishment. So the Magna Carta planted those seeds of democracy.

Marxism has the Communist Manifesto. The Reformation was ignited by Luther's 95 theses. But what about Christianity?

[4 : 00] You see, when Jesus came to define his movement, something very strange happened. This Sermon on the Mount has come to be loved and admired by millions, even by people well beyond the bounds of his revolution.

It's almost as if we've lost sight of just what a subversive calls to arms this is. And yet, even Jesus' followers are slightly hesitant to commit to the program he lays out here for his kingdom.

You see, Matthew, above all, is the gospel which pictures Christ as the long-promised king come at last to claim his crown. And now is the point where the king lays down the constitution for his new

kingdom.

Back in chapter 4, verse 17, Jesus uttered those breathtaking words, Repent, repent, because this is it. The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And that's an odd phrase, isn't it? In fact, it's something of a declaration of war. The kingdom of heaven is Jesus' eternal, unresisted rule over this world, and especially over his redeemed people. [5 : 26] So in those words, Christ was planting a flag in enemy territory. And immediately, he called the very first citizens of his new kingdom, his first disciples.

And not surprisingly, as he went about proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, chapter 423, healing sickness and every sorrow, he began to draw an enormous crowd.

But what for? What was this revolution, Jesus' kingdom, all about? What would it mean, verse 1, to step out of that massive crowd and become a disciple of Jesus?

Well, this Sermon on the Mount is where he takes the trouble of setting a manifesto for his kingdom people. It's the first major teaching block of Matthew's gospel.

And right from verse 1, there's a hint as to how significant it is. It's as if Jesus is reminding us of Moses, the man who thousands of years before had climbed another mountain and been given the law of God's kingdom.

[6 : 40] So if you want to understand what it means to be a disciple of the king, it's to Matthew chapters 5 to 7 that you need to turn. And the most revolutionary thing of all comes right here at the start.

Before we learn anything at all about the kingdom purposes or the kingdom principles, Jesus teaches us about kingdom people, about what sort of people actually belong to his kingdom in the first place.

And what we'll find is that the children of Jesus' revolution are not at all the kind of people we might expect. Which brings us to the Beatitudes.

That's just a posh way of saying blessing because preachers never like to use simple English words when there's a fancy Latin one. So these eight verses are simply a portrait of the kind of people who receive the king's blessing.

You'll notice that the first and the last of these blessings, verses 3 and 10, end with the words, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And that gives us our biggest clue as to what Jesus actually means when he calls someone blessed.

[7 : 56] Fundamentally, it means the most wonderful thing of all. To be blessed by Jesus is to belong to the king, to live under his kingdom rule and knowing his love.

And with that blessing comes a whole stack of future promises. Just notice that all the blessings in the middle, God's comfort, his mercy, all of those are in the future.

So to be truly blessed as a human being doesn't stop with happiness now. It's our eternities that Jesus is concerned with here.

This is about the sort of people who belong to Christ both now and forever. And Jesus will teach us that everything revolves around grace.

His disciples are those who need grace, who know grace, and as we'll see next week, who show grace. Firstly then, above all, Jesus people, kingdom people, are those who need grace.

[9 : 07] That's the radical message of verses two to six. That the people this king blesses are the sorts of people who just don't look very blessed at all.

In fact, in the kingdom of Christ, poverty is treasure. And yet we live in a world, don't we, where it's pitied and despised.

So what are all these strange values that Christ's kingdom treasures so highly? We normally tend to praise people in terms of what they have, don't we? It's people's gifts or strength or wealth, which we tend to bless.

But Jesus here blesses his kingdom people in terms of what they lack. Here are the subversive values of his kingdom. Poverty of spirit, not triumphalism.

Mournfulness, not pride and joy. Meekness, not self-assertion. Hunger and thirst for righteousness, not bloated spiritual contentment.

[10 : 21] What sort of people belong in his kingdom? Well, it's the destitute. Those of us who need to be given what we neither have nor deserve.

Those who need grace. Now that shouldn't be a surprise, should it? It's how it's always been with God. So the place to look to understand what these values actually mean is to the Bible itself and

the Old Testament.

And the clue is verse five. That one's almost a direct quote from Psalm 37. And in fact, all of the countercultural ways that Jesus blesses here are the ones God has looked for in his people all along.

And the most fundamental of them all, the door to the kingdom of God, is a poor, humble spirit. To be poor in spirit doesn't mean that you've got an angry bank manager or an empty wallet.

It means you have an empty pride. You think poor. Because it's the destitutes who are forced upon God. Isn't that right?

[11 : 35] There's nowhere else they can turn. And that's why right through Israel's story, it's the poor who God has always been specially concerned for. To be poor in spirit is to acknowledge that you have no claim on God whatsoever.

However big your pension fund might be, you have nothing which earns his blessing and you've done nothing worthy of his respect. But it's people like that to whom Jesus hands over the keys of his eternal kingdom.

And that need for grace is what flows over into every other one of Jesus' blessings here. It's the poor in spirit, for example, who mourn over their sin.

He's not talking there about morose misery guts, but people who genuinely grieve over their unfaithfulness. It's a picture borrowed from places like Isaiah 61 where the captives and prisoners are mourning over Israel's failure and longing for the Christ to come and wipe away every tear.

It's they who are meek, verse 5, who trust God rather than simply blasting ahead insisting that they know best. It's they who, in the end, will inherit everything.

[13 : 01] What a challenge that is to the world's way of thinking. It won't get you very far in a job interview, will it, meekness? But to the bankrupt and the hungry and the broken, this king promises everything he has.

What a relief that is to those who grieve over their shortcomings, who hunger and thirst for what they know they lack. What a relief for every Christian who day after day finds himself praying, Lord, your will be done.

And yet, day after day, finds himself confessing, Lord, what a wretched man I am because I still keep on mucking it up. That's hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

The problem is, though, often I'm too full to care much about righteousness. And as much as this is a massive reassurance to every Christian who knows how badly they need help, it also stings those of us who've lost our appetite, doesn't it?

Why is it that we don't always find ourselves hungering for holiness? There's something pretty grotesque and ridiculous about a bloated, self-satisfied Christian, isn't there?

[14 : 30] Well, I think the logic of these beatitudes gives away what it is that so often spoils our hunger because it all begins with that poverty of spirit.

The moment we forget the truth about our empty pockets, we lose sight of just how much we need. pride is the junk food which soothes away our hunger and starts to clog up our arteries until eventually our heart itself becomes starved and sclerotic.

In Jesus' kingdom, it's poverty which is treasured. So I think now's the time to get a pretty important disclaimer out of the way because verse 3 is the foundation on which the entire Sermon on the Mount depends.

Jesus has his disciples around him, verse 1, with a large crowd of interested onlookers in the background and he knows that both groups are listening but it's a destitute spirit, a poor spirit that separates the two, the crowd from the disciple.

And if that doesn't describe you, well in a sense, what Jesus has to say in this sermon isn't really for you either. Of course, we'd love you to listen in with the crowds, we really would.

[16 : 04] But let me suggest that the worst possible thing you could do is nod politely to Jesus' ethics over the next few weeks and try harder.

If you come to his sermon with empty hands, trusting him, then you'll find it full of seemingly impossible promises, impossible demands, which by hook, crook, and a whole lot of grace, he promises to achieve in you.

These aren't blessings, they're promises. Those who hunger and thirst for his kind of righteousness, verse 6, they will be satisfied. But if you approach Jesus' teaching without the mindset of his kingdom, without crying for his grace, well then no matter how admirable you find his ethics, they'll

hold nothing but condemnation.

It's grace the disciple of Jesus needs first. So if you're listening in from the crowds, let me welcome you in the warmest possible terms, but also warn you earnestly.

I think we'll find that Christ is a dangerous teacher of morality if we won't first have his forgiveness. Well that's the fundamental mark of a Christian, someone who recognizes his need of the Lord's grace.

[17 : 35] And the second half of these beatitudes goes on to show how that attitude works itself out in the life of a true disciple. Because a Christian not only sees their need of forgiveness, but they've actually received it from Christ's hands and tasted its sweetness.

Not only do they need grace, but verses 7 to 10, they know grace. They know what it is to be treated far, far better than they could ever deserve.

And you can spot a person like that a mile off, can't you? I wonder if you can remember what you made of other Christians when you first found your way into a gospel church.

I have to try hard now to remember what that was like. And I think what I expected when I first walked through the doors was to meet prim, censorious, grim-faced people.

That's what I expected. Because I knew that my whole life screamed outsider. I knew that within 10 seconds of conversation, anyone would spot that I didn't really belong amongst Christ's people.

[18 : 53] But when I think back, I struggle to remember anyone with that attitude at all. Instead, I was greeted by loving smiles on the door.

I was able to talk through my sin with merciful Christians, verse 7, people who'd clearly known mercy themselves. And somehow, I could just tell that their whole attitude, not just to God, but to people, had been radically changed.

And that's what it means to have known grace. It's a sure sign, isn't it, of a truly broken and humbled spirit. You see, mercy in the Bible is a characteristic used almost exclusively of God himself.

And in fact, that goes for everything in these last four Beatitudes. The thing they have in common is God-likeness. The picture they paint is of a kingdom utterly captivated by her king.

It's his grace which sets the culture for the whole kingdom. So to be pure in heart, verse 8, is to have a heart which is unmixed, undiluted, just like God himself, whose every action is totally sincere and truthful.

[20 : 21] The idea isn't so much cleanness, but wholeness, undivided loyalty. Think perhaps of Psalm 24.

Who can ascend the hill of the Lord? Only the one whose heart is pure, which means he doesn't lift up his soul to what is false. He doesn't divide his loyalty.

And although that seems here like a little detail, tucked away in the Beatitudes, I think we'll find this idea of sincere, undivided love is one of the big ideas of this whole Sermon on the Mount.

Kingdom people like God himself are single-hearted, single-hearted in worship. They're not divided like the hypocrites and the Pharisees, because kingdom people know grace.

They know that it claims absolutely everything they have. And of course, they're people whose instinct is to make peace, because they're like their father, like the prince of peace himself, who reconciled us.

[21 : 35] So don't just think they're of peace between far-off nations and warring tribes. These are people interested in peace right here, in the down-to-earth church.

Those people will be called sons of God, won't they? Because they share his likeness. They look like him. I think my daughter was only about a year old when worrying, obsessive tendencies began to emerge.

She couldn't go to sleep unless everything was right. All of her toys had to be in the box. Her toes had to be tucked in. In fact, he had to give each little toe a squeeze just to show her that it was tucked in properly.

How do you know she's my daughter? Well, because by the time she was two, she was every bit as strange and compulsive as me. Like father, like daughter.

And if you've known grace, you share your father's gospel mission of bringing God's peace to others and between others. Even, verse 10, when that mission brings you into hostility with everyone whose approval you so badly want.

[22 : 50] Blessed is the one who's tasted God's grace and just like Christ himself is willing to suffer because of it. What a disappointing way to end the Beatitudes.

This kingdom, captivated by her wonderful king, lives amid a world which utterly despises him. But Jesus insists that this is the good life, the blessed life, the life lived on the lonely, narrow road that he himself trod.

And he has to insist upon that point, doesn't he? Because otherwise, you and me just would not believe it. It's about as subversive and alien to our way of thinking as you could possibly get. Which one of us would honestly look at a broken, mourning, meek, hungry, endlessly forgiving, gospel-driven, peace-loving, victim of persecution, and say that is the blessed life. This is a subversive kingdom, isn't it? It values everything which man's kingdom thinks of as weak and pitiful.

[24 : 18] So I wonder if these are blessings that we really want. As we close, let me tell you how I try to escape them. I try to pick the ones I measure up well against so that I can let myself off the hook when it comes to the rest.

I know I don't have much of an appetite for righteousness, I'll say to myself, but at least I try to be a merciful person. I might never be satisfied, but at least I'll be shown mercy.

The problem is, that's just not how Jesus' kingdom works. All of this is how Christ describes his disciple.

So to be poor in spirit, but not merciful to others, just doesn't work, does it? It's a little like saying, well, so-and-so is a brilliant doctor, but he's got no bedside manner at all.

What on earth is he used to that? She's a great mum, she's just terribly irresponsible. Yeah, yeah, he's a bright accountant, he got a first-class degree, just don't trust him around your money.

[25 : 30] You can't do it, can you? The values of Christ's kingdom are all or nothing. To be a disciple is to sign up to the whole manifesto, beginning with repentance and holding out your hands for grace.

But just look at what that means. It means that every blessing of the kingdom belongs to you as well. You don't just get either comfort or satisfaction or closeness to God.

Jesus' people get the lot. And his disciples absolutely need to know that. It's why Christ began the greatest sermon of all time like this.

Because he knew that frankly, the true Christian life just doesn't look all that blessed from the outside. That's something no human revolution will ever admit to, isn't it?

We love to promise victory right away and every blessing now. So how subversive Jesus' kingdom is. He doesn't spin the truth.

[26 : 48] It's hard and slow and we don't get it all right away. But these are blessings. Things. They aren't here to tell us just to do better at being merciful.

The point is to reassure broken Christians that they will receive God's mercy. It's a promise to each citizen right from the lips of the king.

A promise that even though in the world's sight, the ways of his kingdom might look utterly pathetic, these are the ways he blesses.

And so however unlikely it looks, however much you might stick out here, you'll fit right in and be welcome forever in the only kingdom which counts.

Let's pray together. Heavenly father, help us to believe that what you bless is truly blessed.

[27 : 58] Thank you that spiritual poverty, the one thing we have, is the one thing you value in human beings. So help us father as children of the king to recognize our need for your grace and to live before the world as those who know your grace.

To the glory of your name. Amen.