

Radical Attitudes

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[0 : 00] Well, could I welcome everyone to this Lunchtime Bible Talk. Over the next three weeks, we are going to be looking at a chapter in Matthew, part of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 5 specifically, and in a moment or two we are going to read that.

Let me just say a word about this little series. I'm calling it Jesus' Radical Kingdom. Radical is an unfortunate word nowadays. It's been hijacked by suicide bombers and so on.

But radical effectively means going to the root. John the Baptist had said in the previous chapter, when he comes, when the Messiah comes, he will lay the axe to the root of the tree.

That's exactly what he's doing here in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. We're going to begin by reading our passage, which is on page 809.

And we're going to read verses 1 to 12, the best known part of it, the Beatitudes, as they're usually called. So Matthew chapter 5, page 809.

[1 : 08] Seeing the crowds, 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. 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. Blessed are the people of heaven, for they shall be called sons of God.

[2 : 42] And the unexpected, we come, we pause for those moments in the middle of the day and the middle of the week to listen to your voice. We know that these words spoken long ago on a Galilean hillside are still powerfully relevant to us today.

And so we pray that as we read them, we may face up to their powerful and radical implications, and that we may indeed be changed and become more and more the kind of people whom Jesus calls blessed in this passage we've just read.

And we ask that in his name. Amen. Amen. That great theologian Mark Twain once said, There are two things in the Bible which I don't find particularly congenial.

One is the bits I don't understand, and the other is the bits I do understand, but don't want to do.

Now, I suspect this passage we've read belongs in the second category.

It's perfectly straightforward what Jesus is saying. There are difficulties, but it's perfectly straightforward. But trying to carry it out has proved over the generations, over the centuries since he's spoken, incredibly difficult.

[4 : 09] And there are two ways, of course, in which people have tried to avoid this. One is to say what Jesus really meant, and then water down his radical statements into some kind of platitude.

Almost as if Jesus said, Blessed are those who are nice, for people will be nice to them. That's one way of evading it. The other is saying that it's totally idealistic.

It was never actually meant to be carried out. It's simply a kind of pointer to what could be, but not a pointer to what can ever happen. Now, we've really got to avoid both of these ways of looking at this, not just the Beatitudes, but the other passages we'll look at.

And the theme is the radical kingdom. The previous chapter on the same page says, chapter 4, verse 17, From that time, Jesus began to preach, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And repent is a radical word. Not patch up your life, but change it completely. Make a decision to go in a totally different direction.

[5 : 19] The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Jesus, son of David, comes to preach the kingdom of God, and indeed to embody the kingdom of God. And these are not platitudes.

These are instead possibilities. This is what the redeemed life could look like. Now, we all know very well it doesn't always look like this. Nevertheless, these are the standards that Jesus is setting down.

And one important thing to notice in verse 1, When he sat down, his disciples came to him. In other words, this isn't a general talk to the crowds. He does some of that.

This is a talk to those who are already seriously interested. It doesn't mean the 12 here, although it would include some of them, obviously, because they haven't been appointed as apostles until chapter 10.

Jesus is speaking to those who already want to follow him. In other words, he's not saying, Do this and you can become my follower. What he is saying is, If you are my follower, this is what it will look like.

[6 : 28] Matthew's gospel is distinguished by the amount of teaching of Jesus. We've got five big blocks of teaching. This is the first of them, chapters 5 to 7, the Sermon on the Mount.

Now, these chapters can be read fairly unhurriedly in just over 10 minutes. So it's very likely that here we have a kind of distilled essence of Jesus preaching.

One thing that people often don't realize is that many of the disciples would take notes while Jesus preached. That was a common thing at the time. The rabbis, when they preached, their pupils, their disciples, their students would take notes.

And also, Jesus is an itinerant preacher. He's probably saying things here that he said many times elsewhere. All who wanted to learn.

People are always at different stages. Being a disciple is not just a momentary decision, but a life choice. And blessed means more than happy.

[7 : 34] Happiness is a feeling which comes and goes. But blessed means God is pronouncing a verdict of salvation. This is what the saved life looks like.

And here we have the basic attitudes. I'm going to call this first off radical attitudes. The so-called beatitudes. And first of all, in verses 3 to 5, Jesus addresses people's inner lives from which everything else comes.

Dresses our people's hearts. Now, they're all about people's hearts. They're all about attitudes. But particularly here, he's thinking about the kind of engine that drives our lives, our actions, and so on.

The poor in spirit. Now, the poor in spirit doesn't mean blessed are the wimps. Blessed are the doormats. That's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is pointing to the most basic truth of all.

That we are all spiritually bankrupt. That we can earn nothing. That we cannot buy our way into the kingdom. And until we recognize that, we cannot enter the kingdom.

[8 : 46] If we come to the kingdom with our wallets or with our aptitudes, with our talents and our gifts and say, wouldn't it be great if I were a recruit for the kingdom?

Then it's not going to work. And if we try to live this way without the Holy Spirit in us, this is going to lead either to despair when we realize we can't make it, or else the pride when we think we are going to make it on our own.

The gate is low, said one of the church fathers. The gate into the kingdom of heaven is low, and we need to kneel in order to get in.

The poor in spirit. Those who recognize they cannot work for their salvation. Who recognize they cannot buy their salvation. But come with empty hands to Jesus, the king, and ask to be admitted.

Ask to be welcomed. So that's the first thing then. The most basic point of all. We have to come with a humble heart and a repentant heart.

[9 : 52] Secondly, it says, let out of those who mourn. Jesus is referring here to Isaiah 61. But Isaiah prophesies that the Messiah, when he comes, will give joy for mourning.

And there were occasions when Jesus literally did that. When he raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. When he raised the unnamed young man, the son of a widow, from the dead.

And when he raised Lazarus from the dead. That was literally turning joy into mourning. Three people raised, but the cemeteries didn't empty. These were token miracles.

Miracles of the new creation, as C.S. Lewis calls them. Miracles that point to what it will be like in the new creation. He gives joy for mourning.

And on the last day, all mourning will be gone. All mourning will be over. And God, we are told, will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Now, that's another way, of course, of trying to evade the Beatitudes.

[10:59] We say, oh, they belong to the future. Well, they do belong to the future, of course. And they'll only fully be realized in the future. But the Bible is always concerned how it affects attitudes in the present.

And in particular, I think, Jesus here is talking about another type of mourning. Mourning for our sins. Mourning that we are so sinful and fallen.

See, it's really development of poor in spirit. And not mourning because we don't believe they can be forgiven, but because we recognize that we are never going to enter the kingdom or be sustained on the journey except by grace.

There's that kind of mourning. Mourning the kind of people where Peter is later to say to Jesus, leave me, Lord. I am a sinful man. So that is the kind of attitude that's being talked about here. Poor in spirit, recognizing that the gate is low and we need to kneel to get in. Mourning, realizing that what will happen on the last day happens partially now, but particularly mourning for our sinfulness.

[12:15] Blessed are the meek. Now, the Greeks considered meekness to be a vice. They basically regarded meekness as wimpishness.

Now, clearly that's not what Jesus is saying. We're told in the Old Testament that Moses was the meekest man in all the earth.

And yet we know, of course, Moses had a violent temper which led him to kill a man. Meekness is really disciplined strength, basically not giving way to emotions.

And also it springs from a true understanding of ourselves and others. You see, if we are full of gratitude to God, if we are poor in spirit, if we mourn for our sins, then the attitude that's produced is going to be meekness, full of gratitude to God, and humble and sensitive towards others.

So you see how these first three Beatitudes belong. What does our inner life look like? Now, I don't know about you, but as I talk about this, I realize how unlike my inner life that looks.

[13:27] Which means that this is not just a sudden decision, not just a sudden experience. This is a lifelong experience as Jesus makes us more and more into the people he wants us to be.

This is where we begin, but this is also how we continue. Only by grace can we enter. That's true, but only by grace can we stand.

Now, in the next set of Beatitudes, Jesus goes on to the expression of these attitudes. Once again, we're still in verses 6 to 9. We're still talking about inner life, but more now how it's expressed.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Now, hunger and thirst is a common phrase for enjoying God and the gospel.

Get it throughout the Psalms and often in the prophets. Hungering and thirsting for God. Now, I don't know about you, but this is not my regular experience, I have to say.

[14:32] Hungering and thirsting for God. And part of the reason, of course, that's not my genuine experience is my inner attitude is so often different from poor in spirit, mourning, and meekness.

In other words, the hungering and the thirsting spring from the first three Beatitudes. It's not just a random collection of things that Jesus decided to talk about.

He's talking about it all springs from the heart. Everything springs from the heart. And remember, in the Bible, the heart is a bigger thing than in English. It's not just our emotions.

It does include our emotions. It also includes the whole of us. When you worship God with your heart, it's the whole of you who is worshipping him. Hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Now, first of all, righteousness is a right relationship with God through grace by faith. Coming into the kingdom and that attitude which characterizes the kingdom.

[15:36] And then the character which flows from that. Righteousness in relationships. Right ordering of society. And justice in society. An appetite for God will lead to these things.

Now, we know that we live in a fallen world. And in a fallen world, sometimes our physical appetites dwindle, don't they? And when we lose our appetite, we know there's something wrong with us internally.

And similarly, our appetite for God will sometimes dwindle. But like our appetite for food, if it's a genuine appetite, it will return. So, you see what I'm getting at? I'm not trying to water it down and say what Jesus really said was if you occasionally hunger after God. What I'm saying is recognize there will be times when we are not hungering and thirsting after God.

Recognize there are times when we will be spiritually unhealthy. And because of that, we need to return to the Lord. They shall be satisfied, ultimately, of course, in the new creation.

[16 : 45] It's no accident that one of the pictures of the new creation is for the banquet, the feast, the celebration. Isaiah talks about that in chapter 25, a feast on Mount Zion.

And that's behind all this. So, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. They shall be satisfied, partly in this world, but fully in the world to come.

Now, blessed are the merciful. Now, we have received mercy. And the Lord's Prayer says, forgive as we are forgiven.

Now, we mustn't misread that. It's easy to misread that as if God is saying, if you don't forgive, I jolly well am not going to forgive you. That would be quite a wrong way to read it. What that is saying is that if we don't forgive, if we keep a persistently unforgiving spirit, we'll be too shriveled to receive forgiveness.

After all, revenge is delicious. Revenge is far more delicious than mercy. They'll get what's coming to them. Or they deserve it. Now, that may well be true, of course.

[17 : 55] But the point is that if we don't forgive, even if we are right in what we did and the person who insulted us is wrong, then we'll find it difficult to receive forgiveness.

Another point there, of course, as well, is that even God can only forgive people if they repent. But, even if we don't forgive, we'll be too shriveled to receive forgiveness.

We'll be too shriveled to receive forgiveness. We'll be too shriveled to receive forgiveness. One day someone said to John Wesley, Wesley, I never forgive. And Wesley replied, well, I hope you never sin.

That's very important. I never forgive. He replied, well, I hope you never sin. And that's so important here. Blessed are the pure in heart.

Taken from the words of David in Psalm 51. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Now, that's the great psalm, penitential psalm, where he asked God's forgiveness for the Uriah Bathsheba episode.

[19 : 05] And the interesting thing is, create in me a clean heart. That's the word that's used in Genesis for the creation of the world. In other words, God needs to remake him completely.

You see, that fits in with the way that the Beatrice have gone. We need to be remade. It's radical.

We need to be poor in spirit and so on. And create in me a clean heart, O God.

Blessed are the pure in heart. Now, Jesus says all these things, of course, because for a very good reason. We're not naturally pure in heart. We're not naturally peacemakers. We're not naturally humble.

We're not naturally meek. And seeing God now with the eye of faith and fully in the future. It is safe to say, said C.S. Lewis, that the pure in heart will see God.

For only the pure in heart would want to see him. See, once again, it's all about basic attitudes.

Blessed are the peacemakers. First of all, the reconciling gospel.

[20 : 12] Justified by faith, we have peace with God, as Paul says. Now, this springs, of course, from the other things.

Blessed are the peacemakers. It's very easy to be a troublemaker, isn't it? Troublemaking is very, very deeply rooted in fallen human nature.

And Jesus is saying, first of all, well, bring the reconciling gospel. Bring other people into the peace of God through the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the first thing. Then live in peace and harmony.

Try to build up people, not to tear them down. It springs from openness and sincerity. It's a pretty vigorous and daunting task, is it not?

And what we've not to do, of course, is regard this as a checklist. We're not to tick off things. I'm not terribly pure in heart. I'm a great peacemaker.

[21 : 17] You know, as if they all ultimately amount to the basic attitude that sees ourselves as sinful, in need of forgiveness, and upheld by grace.

They're all particular expressions of what it means to be blessed. And in the final section, verses 10 to 12, we have the results, if you like. And this clearly relates to the peacemakers.

Blessed are you when others of value and persecute you. Because peacemakers frequently are unpopular. It is not in the Bible, this next beatitude. Blessed are those who try to separate a fight, for they'll be shot at from both sides.

Now, if you've ever tried to separate a fight or reconcile opposing parties, you'll know that's very true. You may have had the experience of trying to reconcile two parties, who then discover they disliked you more than they disliked each other.

In that sense, you've reconciled them. You've been a peacemaker. The fire is then directed on you. And here, of course, related to persecuting, to what the American call bad-mouthing.

[22 : 27] Now, this can be physical persecution, violence, death. Nor it can be lies and slander here. But notice what Jesus says, on my account.

Jesus is not saying, if everybody criticizes you, you are blessed. Because some of that criticism may well be justified. He says, if you're doing this on my account, or better, as the NIV says, for my sake.

For loyalty to Jesus. This is what will show the radical attitudes of the kingdom. Many years ago, the late John Stott preached a series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, which were later published.

And he entitled this Christian Counterculture. Because every, and that's still valid, because everything here goes against the way that we naturally want to behave, doesn't it?

Goes against the way society naturally wants to behave. We want to indulge in one-upmanship. We want to be top dog, and so on.

[23 : 36] This is definitely, as I say, counterculture. And it's not something that will happen in a moment. It's a lifetime. And finally, it's not a checklist.

We must never fall into this error of saying, these are the tests, these are the signs, and if we take them off, not doing too badly, not three out of five or something. Now, that's not the way to do it. This is the response to grace. It begins, as I say, with being poor in spirit, with entering the kingdom by the door which causes us to stoop.

It continues with attitudes that will reflect the grace of God. And it ends in the, your reward is great in heaven. And a reminder that this is not a persecution.

Opposition is not unusual. Indeed, it's natural. And as we go through the rest of the chapter, we'll see how Jesus develops these radical attitudes.

[24 : 36] Jesus says, Jesus essentially is saying, come to me, and I will not only change you at the moment, I'll transform your life and lead you to glory.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, as we read this, as we read this sermon on the Mount, these Beatitudes, we realize that these are not natural.

These do not come naturally to us. It's not easy for us to be meek, to be pure in heart. Indeed, it is impossible if we try it on our own efforts.

So let's open our hearts to grace. Let's let us be the kind of people and make us the kind of people you created us to be. We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.