

Finding Christ's Grace

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 January 2016

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to our Bible reading. You'll find it in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5, and that's page 809, if you have one of our visitors' Bibles.

We're beginning a study in the Sermon on the Mount, and a fortnight ago we introduced the section, reading in from the end of chapter 4, where we're told about the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Verse 17 of chapter 4 tells us, from that time Jesus began to preach, saying, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Matthew is just quoted there from the prophets, from the prophet Isaiah, speaking about the light dawning and the light shining in Galilee of the Gentiles.

And there Jesus begins his ministry. He calls his first disciples, you'll see at the end, saying, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And then we're going to read this morning, beginning at chapter 5, verse 1.

Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain. And when he had 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.

[1 : 22] Blessed are the poor in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers.

Blessed are the peacemakers. 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. And 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.

Amen. May God bless us this, his word. Amen. For you, well, do turn with me if you would, to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5, and to the passage that we read.

[2 : 38] A fortnight ago we introduced this new study in the Sermon on the Mount, as a trip back to the basics of the Christian faith.

faith. And like Jack Nicklaus, remember, the golfer who every year would go back to his first teacher and say, teach me how to play golf. Well, we're going back to our teacher, the Lord Jesus Christ. And we're saying, Lord, teach me how to be a true disciple, how to be a true Christian. And that is what the Sermon on the Mount is. Matthew 5 verse 1 makes clear, if you look, that it was to his disciples that Jesus was speaking directly.

He opened his mouth and taught them, says verse 2. And as I said, we saw last time at the end of chapter 4 that Jesus had already called them to follow him, to be his followers, to be fishers of men and to be servants of his kingdom mission. And so now, as chapter 4 verse 23 tells us, Jesus is going everywhere teaching and proclaiming the gospel of his kingdom. And between chapter 4 verse 23 and chapter 7 verse 28, these sections act like brackets. And in between is Jesus teaching the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew has gathered together all that teaching for us, for his readers, so that we can have it as Jesus gave it. And it's teaching that spells out what it means to follow Jesus, what a proper response to his kingdom call really is and really looks like. It's a manifesto, if you like, of kingdom life for kingdom people. It's a portrait of true discipleship that gives us the shape of true Christianity, showing what it really means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus. And we have it from the lips of Jesus himself. And it's so important, isn't it, that we have it with absolute authority from Jesus himself because there's still today a very great deal of confusion about what it

means to be a Christian, just as there was in Jesus' day. And people are so confused when they talk about what the kingdom of God really is all about. Then, as today, there were people who thought, well, it was all about social change. It was all about political liberation. It's all about economic change and so on. But no, no, no, says Jesus. He's absolutely clear. It's about the kingdom of heaven that he is talking. That's what he says in chapter 4 verse 17 is at hand. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. And that is what he is calling people into. And that is what he's calling people to live for here on this earth because he is the king of heaven come to bring his kingdom to this earth. And that we saw last time that the source of all true kingdom life, the life of discipleship, is the sovereign call of the king himself. And it's a call, isn't it, to exclusive loyalty, to live with Jesus alone as king and as commander. And so that loyalty must be manifest in submission to his kingdom command because he alone on earth has the power and the authority to call people to the kingdom of heaven. And he alone has authority to command us on earth in the way of the kingdom of heaven above every other authority on earth above even all of the true messengers of God's kingdom that throughout past history he had given to his people Israel to help them and to direct them. And it's that unique power and authority of Jesus as king of heaven on earth that's alluded to here in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 5 where we're told that Jesus went up onto the mountain and where we're told he sat down to teach the disciples. Now if you look at Bible commentaries and so on you'll find endless discussions about where this particular mountain is and so on. Some of you might have visited Israel and been to at least one of the traditional spots. There's a beautiful place just overlooking the Sea of Galilee with a lovely church which is the traditional site of all of this. But you see Matthew's not that interested in geography.

[7 : 19] If it was he would have told us exactly where it was. What he's interested in is theology. And that's the first thing that we need to grasp if we're going to understand the significance of this sermon on the mind. Indeed if we're going to get the significance of all of Jesus teaching.

Because Matthew is flagging up for us here that in the coming of Jesus we have the finality of God's authoritative word through Jesus Christ the son of God. We have the finality of God's authoritative word. Now remember from the very start of Matthew's gospel Matthew is keen to emphasize that this is not a new story. That this is a continuation of a very old story. And it's a story now at last coming to its climax in Jesus Christ. If you look back to Matthew 1 verse 1 back over the page you'll see that the first words are this is the book of the genealogy. Literally this is the book of the genesis of Jesus Christ. That's a deliberate allusion to the very beginning of the Bible. The beginning of God's story. And hence he tells us he is the son of Abraham and the son of David. And Matthew goes on to repeatedly tell us that everything in Jesus life and in Jesus ministry is a fulfillment of what was promised. Look at chapter 1 verse 22. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet. And that kind of phrase comes up again and again and again all through chapter 2 in verse 5 and verse 15 verse 17 verse 23 and so on and so on. And all through the gospel we saw it last time in chapter 4 verse 14 when Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee and the prophetic word is fulfilled.

We're told in chapter 4 verse 17 Jesus himself began to preach and to say the kingdom is now at hand. It's upon you. It's a new beginning. And so Jesus is saying that his word is the final climactic word that supersedes all other words about God's kingdom. Remember how the book of Hebrews begins. Long ago at many times and in many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days he has spoken to us by his son who is himself the radiance of God's glory and upholds the universe by the word of his power. No wonder that the voice from heaven said this is my beloved son. Listen to him. It's the climactic word of authority. Because all God's words about his great redemption of his people and his rule of his people for all their past history are now coming to a climax in Jesus the great redeemer the great ultimate ruler of his people.

And so in the past of course remember Moses was the authoritative teacher of Israel. He was the one who had led God's people Israel out of Egypt to become his redeemed people. And he was the true prophet. He was the one who taught God's people.

[10 : 43] Every prophet who came after Moses sat in Moses seat and they simply applied Moses words to their own particular generation. That's what all the prophets did. But now now here is one indeed the only one who has surpassed even Moses.

Here's the one who will be far greater even than Moses because he will bring about a far greater redemption. Moses redeemed the people out of the powers of Egypt.

Jesus will redeem his people from the very power of sin and death. And so now from Jesus' own lips will issue the final and the definitive word of absolute authority about what it means to be God's people here on earth.

The people who belong to the everlasting kingdom of heaven. And Moses, do you remember? Moses went up the mountain to receive from God the words that he was going to teach Israel as God's mediator with God's authority to teach the people.

But now, as Matthew indicates so many times to us, in fact in chapter 2 verse 15 he quotes Hosea the prophet about Jesus coming and he says, out of Egypt I have called my own son.

[12 : 10] Not Moses, but my own son. And Jesus is the one who leads his people out of the darkness and the shadow of death as Isaiah promised. And he leads them to the mountain.

Not to receive a word of authority from someone else to pass on and teach, but to speak with his own full and final authority. Through no mediator, but as the authoritative author of God's word here on earth.

In these last days, God has spoken to us by his son. And you see, Moses' seat has now been occupied and has been finally superseded by Jesus' seat.

The seat of final authoritative command from the Lord of heaven himself, speaking his own words, speaking unmediated here on earth. And I think that is why in verses 1 and 2 here, Matthew draws our attention to that.

To the mountain as the place of revelation. And also to the fact that Jesus sat down and began to teach. That's how the Jewish teachers, the rabbis, taught.

[13 : 28] They didn't stand, as I'm doing at a lectern. They sat in the seat of authority. I suppose as we would say, the judge sits in the place of authority. And as I've said, what's signified by that seat is of great importance.

I think it will help us to understand, if you turn with me just for a moment forward to Matthew chapter 23, and look at verses 1 to 3. Because you'll see there that Jesus explains for us all about this seat of authority.

Look at Matthew 23 verse 2. He says, the scribes and the Pharisees, that's the teachers of the law, they sit in Moses' seat.

And that is the seat of great authority. And that's why Jesus says, you must do what that seat declares and commands. But do you see what he says? He says, do what they tell you, but not what they do.

Isn't that extraordinary? What a terrible indictment of the teachers of Israel. They're hypocrites, is what Jesus is saying. There's nothing wrong with what Moses commanded must be taught to Israel.

[14 : 38] There's nothing wrong, there's nothing burdensome at all about God's commands and instruction for his people. It's the way of joyous fellowship with God of grace, the Redeemer, the God who has blessed them.

But look what these hypocrites have done to God's wonderful commands of life. Verse 4, do you see? They've turned it into nothing but unbearable burdens.

They've loaded them onto men's shoulders and they've brought absolutely nothing to bring relief. In other words, they have utterly perverted the great gospel of God that he gave through Moses.

And this is the very root of it. What they've done is they've removed God's commands from a living relationship with God himself. And therefore, they've turned it into mere religion and religiosity.

They've turned it into something that is devoid of the spirit of God's own life. You see, and when mere religion steals Moses' seat, it utterly pushes out and displaces the grace of God in Christ.

[15 : 48] Which is what Jesus tells us that Moses himself and all the Old Testament prophets spoke about. And when you push that out, you leave only a yoke of unbearable burden.

Because if you remove God's call of grace, and if you pursue the law of God not as what it really is, a faithful and joyful response to God's call of grace.

If instead you pursue it, as Paul says, as if it were by works. As a means of merit, as a means of gaining some sort of standing with God. Well then, the commands of God do become killing.

The commands of God will lead you only either to despair, because you know your inability to be perfect. Or to self-deception, to sham and hypocrisy like the scribes and the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

But now, says Jesus, back to Matthew 5 verse 1. Now, I'm kicking those usurpers out of Moses' seat. They've never belonged there in the first place.

[16:55] But I'm taking the chair. In fact, it's always been my chair. Moses was a great man. Moses did his job very well. He was indeed a faithful servant in the house of God.

That's what Hebrews chapter 3 tells us. He was a prophet, says Jesus, who spoke of me. He's a prophet who spoke of my gospel grace and gave my gospel commands. But Moses was only ever keeping that seat warm for Jesus.

Moses pointed people to me, says Jesus, to me, to your God. Moses said, he, the Lord, is your life. His words are life to you.

But now Jesus doesn't point the people to another. Jesus says to them, as he does later on in Matthew chapter 11, Come to me, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, because only I can lead you to the fullness of God's rest, to the grace and the mercy that Moses told you to long for. Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened by the yoke of man's religion, the expectations of man in this world.

[18:12] Come to me, and I will give you rest, because my yoke, my command, is easy, and my burden is light. Now notice Jesus is not doing away with all God's commands to be freed from the heavy yoke of religion does not mean lawlessness for Jesus.

Of course not. But nor does he say what the scribes and the Pharisees were saying, that the only way to bridle lawlessness is through a stifling yoke of religion with all its hedges and all its multiplication of minuscule commandments.

No. Rather, Jesus is saying, Come to me and discover God's kingdom. and discover that it's not about getting religion. It's all about finding God's grace.

It begins with finding God's grace in the person of Jesus Christ, the God, God the Son. It begins not in what we give to God, or what we do for God, as the scribes and the Pharisees were teaching. It's about what God gives us, indeed, what God has done for us. And what God gives us is Jesus himself.

[19:29] So that real discipleship, being a Christian, simply means receiving him and following him and taking his yoke upon our lives forevermore, hearing his words and receiving what he gives and doing as he does, not just doing as he says.

Jesus, he's no hypocrite. He is utterly true and genuine and holy and is the ultimate occupier of the seat of God's commandment and God's promise.

And so, at the outset of his earthly ministry, Jesus sits down on the mountain and he says, listen to me. Listen to the one who has taken his seat of final authority and hear the final authority of God's word to man in Jesus Christ that reveals God himself, that reveals God's ways, that reveals God's kingdom to the world and that reveals the right response of human beings to God's grace from all the people of all the world.

And so, that's what we have, you see, in Jesus' words on the Sermon on the Mount. We see it writ large. We see both the fullness of God's grace offered to sinners and we see the fullness of the commandments of God to those that he has rescued from sin to be his saints.

How they are to love him and follow him and show that they do. In that hymn that we sang Amazing Grace, John Newton gets it absolutely right. He says, it was grace that first taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved.

[21:26] That's absolutely right because when Jesus, the great redeemer, takes the seat that Moses occupied only to pave the way for its true occupant, then Jesus' words both evoke greater fear and bring greater relief than Moses' words or any of the prophets ever did.

Because Jesus proclaims God's greater grace and he proclaims God's greatest commands and our responsibility in the light of that great grace.

Jesus' gospel both puts us face down in the dust like never before. and it fills us at the same time with the blessedness of heaven as never before.

Why is that? Well, it's because in Jesus and only in Jesus, in his person and in his work, do we find fully and finally the true shape of God's saving covenant of grace, of God's promise from the very beginning of history with his people.

because it's in Jesus that we see that the shape of God's salvation is the shape of the cross where life comes through death, where glory comes only through great humiliation.

[22:47] Matthew's gospel teaches us all the way through that the life of God's heavenly kingdom comes to people of earth only through the death of Jesus. And so the only way into that kingdom and the only way on within that kingdom is the way of life through death.

Or as Jesus calls it, the way of penitence and faith. And that's what the Sermon on the Mount is teaching us. It's teaching us about the shape of the life of Christ on the cross of Christ.

And it's teaching us that it's that, crucially, that shapes the life of Christian discipleship from beginning to end, from entrance to utter advancement.

In other words, it's describing for us and explaining for us the great paradox, the great surprise, the great scandal of the grace of God who calls people through grace and calls them on to walk in the way of grace.

So for the rest of the time this morning, I want us to focus and look just at the beginning of these beatitudes that we read because what we have is the final authoritative word of Jesus himself about the fullness of God's astonishing grace through Jesus Christ, the Son.

[24 : 05] It's all about the fullness of God's astonishing grace. And the whole of this sermon teaches us that the Christian life is shaped by the grace of God and that the grace of God is demonstrated for us ultimately in the cross of Jesus Christ.

that is, it's demonstrated for us in a life that is shaped by death, by abandonment to everything in this world, by abandonment to the approval and the esteem and the assessment of this world.

In other words, the death to all what we might call religion. Because that's what human religion is, isn't it? Human religion is all about coming up to a standard of performance.

Whether it's a standard of God or some other creed or some philosophy or some kind of virtue. That's why you can have very religious atheists, in fact.

People who set a very, very high standard for themselves, morally speaking, and so on. By which they judge their performance. They wouldn't call it religion, but actually it's just the same.

[25 : 15] It's all about coming up to some kind of human standard. But you see, Christian faith means death to all of that.

It's the opposite of all of that. Christian faith is about a humble grasping after the grace of God that is offered to us in Jesus Christ.

That comes through a real relationship with Jesus, the Savior. Real Christian faith begins and is all about finding God's grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's how Jesus himself constantly describes what being a Christian really is. It's about a relationship with him, but it's a relationship that is very, very foreign to our world.

Listen to what Jesus says. Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me, that is in the way of loss, is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it.

[26 : 18] Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Matthew 10, 38. If anyone would come after me, says Jesus, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me in the way of the cross.

Matthew 16, verse 24. See, that's the upside-down shape of real Christian discipleship. It's only the way of death that leads to life in Jesus Christ.

We hear a lot today, don't we, about the problem of low self-esteem. And certainly that can be a crippling problem, a crippling psychological issue for some people.

You see, what Jesus is saying is that actually our self-esteem is not nearly low enough. not therapy we need for that.

He says it's death. It's death to all in us that desires the approval of men, the approval of this world, the verdict of society, even the verdict that we have ourselves upon our own life.

[27 : 31] It's death to all of that. It's abandonment to all of that and seeking only the esteem and the approval of God himself.

Only his verdict and no other verdict whatsoever. That's the very essence of Christian discipleship. That's what Jesus is saying in all of these things.

It's a life shaped, do you see, by the cross of Christ. Christ. Because only that life is a life that is shaped by a true understanding of God's grace.

And that's why the Sermon on the Mount begins with these extraordinary beatitudes. There are many, many demands on Christ's disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. We'll come to those very tough demands.

But you see, it begins here, doesn't it, with sheer, sheer grace. Because that's where all true discipleship begins. Finding the fullness of God's astonishing grace in Jesus Christ.

[28 : 38] And friends, if you don't grasp that, you will never, ever grasp anything about what Christianity is really all about. It's said that somebody once asked C.S.

Lewis what was distinctive about Christianity among all other creeds and religions. And in a flash, he answered, oh, that's absolutely simple. It's just in one word, grace. Well, look at the very first beatitude here in verse 3.

Because it's all there, you see. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. That's the first color, that's the first brush stroke, if you like, in this portrait of true Christianity according to the Lord Jesus.

The people who belong to his kingdom, he says, are people who are both bankrupt and blessed. Think about that first word, blessed.

It's repeated here nine times, isn't it? But what does it actually mean? Well, it means more than just happy, as some people translate it. That's too subjective. That's just about how we feel about ourselves.

[29 : 44] No, this is a much more objective word than that. What it means is God's pronouncement upon us. It's God's verdict. It's God's commendation. It's God's acceptance.

Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven against whom the Lord counts no iniquity. Psalm 32. Blessed is the man who stands not in the way of sinners, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord.

You see, it's God's verdict, not just how we feel about ourselves. And that's what it means to be blessed by God. I think the best way I can put it is to remind those of you who are old enough of the television advert that used to be in the 1980s for Del Monte fruit juice.

Anybody remember that? The man from Del Monte. Remember? Only made from the very, very best oranges in the whole world. And you had that picture of the limousine driving into some estate of orange groves in Mexico or wherever it was.

And out of this great limousine steps the man in the white suit and the white Stetson. Remember? And he goes off into the fields and all the workers are waiting, waiting with bated breath to see what happens.

[30 : 54] And then you see the man come back and get in the car and drive away. And little Pedro the farmer comes in and throws his hat in the air and says, the man from Del Monte. He says, yes.

Well, that's blessed. It's not what we feel or think. It's what God says. It's what God declares. It's accepted.

God says, yes. his verdict is pronounced. And so we experience the wonderful gift of his salvation and a place in his kingdom.

But who is it who gets that verdict from the Lord of the best of the very best? Who are the blessed ones in this world who have that extraordinary privilege of that pronouncement?

Well, surely, surely we'd expect it to be the high born. It would be the kings and the queens and the princes and the dukes and so on. Surely, as we look around our world today, we would see, well, it must be the wealthy and the successful.

[31 : 59] It must be all of those people who were in Davos last week flying in in their gas-guzzling jets talking about climate change and things like that. Surely, it must be the beautiful and the talented and the successful and those who are up for Oscars and that sort of thing.

Or at the very least, it must be the very religious, those who hold high positions of honor and wear flowing robes and have degrees and chaplaincies and all kinds of things. That's the world's estimate, isn't it?

That's what it would be. And very often, that is the way that we think too. But what does Jesus say here? It's not the successful, it's not the admired, it's not the wealthy, it's not the very religious and pious, it's not those who think themselves very theologically superior in their doctrine.

Who is it? It's the bankrupt, according to Jesus. It's those who are truly poor in spirit, he says. That's an Old Testament word and it really does convey that sense of bankrupt, of being humbled, of being destitute, of being utterly dependent, afflicted, unable to help yourself and knowing you're unable to do anything.

It's those who know they have nothing and know that they deserve nothing. And yet, says Jesus, they are the ones who are blessed of God, who are commended by God, accepted by God, upon whom God has said yes.

[33 : 34] Now that's extraordinary, isn't it? How can that possibly be? Bankruptcy is a terrible thing. I guess we're going to see a lot more of it, perhaps in this coming year, especially if the oil price stays as low as it's going to be in the North Sea and in the Middle East, despite Mr.

Cameron's flying visit to Aberdeen this week. Maybe we'll even see bankruptcies of very long-established companies. Is it possible BP or Shell could go under? Maybe. By the way, it'll be bad for all of us if they do, because you probably don't know this, but it probably makes up about a third of your pension fund.

So don't laugh if BP goes bust. You'll have a poor retirement. But when bankruptcy happens, it's terrible. The administrators are called in, people lose their jobs, lose their livelihoods.

Personal bankruptcy is a terrible humiliation. Or at least it used to be, certainly a cause of great shame, very especially in cultures like Japan. Do you remember these stories of Japanese businessmen throwing themselves off buildings because their companies go under?

But you see, Jesus is saying that that kind of humbling, that kind of swallowing a bitter, bitter pill, of acknowledging utter helplessness, that is what Jesus says is the first step to finding God's blessing and being pronounced blessed by him.

[35 : 02] And in fact, it's the way of ongoing blessing in the kingdom of Christ too. The reformer Martin Luther once said that God made the world out of nothing.

And only when he brings us to an end of ourselves, can he begin to make something out of us. Remember the context that Jesus is speaking in here.

He's speaking to a people who are oppressed and downtrodden, subjugated by the Romans.

They've been subjects of other kingdoms for hundreds and hundreds of years. And they know because their own Bible tells them that the reason for that is so much to do with their own sins, so much to do with their own rejection of God's rule as a nation and as a people.

And so the exile and all the subsequent subjugation was God's judgment for their sin. And they knew it. It's a terribly devastating thing, isn't it, to know that your misfortune is all your own fault, to know that it's all your own doing.

The alcoholic who's lost everything and he knows it's his own fault. Or the gambler who's lost his family, lost his job, lost his friends, lost everything, and knows it's all his own doing.

[36 : 20] Or the adulterer who's wrecked his marriage and lost the affection of not only his wife but all his children and knows it's his own doing. It's a terrible, terrible place to be, isn't it?

But Jesus says it's the one who's faced up to the truth about themselves and the reality of their own sin.

It's the one who's stopped pretending, who knows they've got absolutely nothing to boast of before God, nothing at all to commend themselves to God, nothing to offer God.

It's the one who is bankrupt and empty and broken and knows it. It's he alone, says Jesus, who can be blessed.

He's just saying, isn't he, what God had always said through his prophets. This is the one to whom I look, the one who is humble and contrite in heart. Not those with lavish religiosity and moral rectitude and so on.

[37 : 31] They're the ones, says Jesus, who are blessed, who are blessed now. Do you notice, by the way, how all the rest of the Beatitudes are in the future tense, but this one is present. Theirs is now already the blessing of the kingdom of heaven.

They can find in Jesus the bounty and the beauty of his rest for their souls. And they can do so because only people like that will come humbly to Jesus to find rest, to find God's grace in Christ.

They come as bankrupts. They know they come deserving nothing. And yet, they are the ones who gain everything, the kingdom of heaven itself. They come, verse 4, mourning for their sins.

And yet, although they weep real tears, Jesus says, they find real joy. They shall be comforted.

They come meekly, verse 5, renouncing all self-assertion.

They come just in humble submission to God. And yet, they will inherit abundantly the whole earth, says Jesus. How upside down is that?

[38 : 39] They come hungry, verse 6, with an insatiable desire for things to be right with God, knowing that they're the ones who have made it all wrong with God. And yet, it's they, says Jesus, who will know the deep satisfaction of God himself.

They shall be satisfied. See that sequence? Admitting your spiritual poverty to God, weeping over your sin, submitting meekly to God, and longing for things to be made right with God.

Well, that's the way, says Jesus. That's the way into the kingdom of heaven. And that's the way on in my kingdom of heaven. It's the way of finding God's grace in answer to our poverty, in answer to our sin, to our pride, to our emptiness.

It's a grace that fills, that humbles, that forgives, that satisfies, and that gives and gives and gives again utterly to those who are bankrupt and broken and even bereft of any hope.

It gives the keys of the kingdom of heaven itself and the blessing, the smile of acceptance and commendation of God the Father and all his generous, loving kindness.

[40 : 01] Well, let me conclude with just two implications, two things for us to think about. First, is this not a word of wonderful comfort? comfort for those who are troubled and distressed in heart.

What Jesus offers us here is the very opposite of religion, the very opposite of striving for a standard. That's what so poisons people. That is what shuts the door of salvation in many faces. That was the scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Oh, he mixes with sinners, they said of him. They scorned him. They condemned him. Because religion, you see, man's religion sets the bar so very high and people can't attain the mark.

Certainly, crippled people can't ever attain the mark. And so many of us are crippled in this world, aren't we? Are things in the past that terrorize us, that haunt us?

For some people, it's terrible guilt. That is the great curse of religion. That's what you find among people who have been brought up as Roman Catholics. Or perhaps in the Muslim religion. Or perhaps in strict, strict homes that are called Christian and dressed up in Christian language but are utterly empty and devoid of the real grace of Jesus Christ.

[41 : 23] For others, it's crippling by a sense of failure. Often that's the problem I find with folk of no religious background at all. Failure in a relationship, perhaps.

Perhaps their own failure of faithfulness sexually or in some way. There might just be a whole host of other things in the past that have left scars, made us cripples, touched our personalities in all kinds of ways.

What a wonderful comfort if that is you to know that you can crawl into the kingdom of heaven with the Lord Jesus Christ. There's no bar that you have to scale over to reach Him.

There's no contortions that you have to perform to find His grace. In fact, crawling is the only way in because Jesus says only the poor in spirit can find it.

Well, I can tell you that is a wonderful comfort to me and I'm sure to many who are here this morning. But also, it is a word of comfort but also a word of great challenge, isn't it?

[42 : 28] To challenge and to disturb those who are comfortable because the truth is that there are many according to Jesus who are too tall to enter His way because you can only enter His kingdom on your knees.

You can only enter acknowledging your own poverty of spirit says Jesus that you have no spiritual riches to plead. See, religion or a sense of your own spiritual pedigree, your own spiritual pride, that can never get you into the kingdom of heaven but friends, it can keep you out and it does keep people out because the door is very low to enter Christ's kingdom of grace and you've got to stoop. You've got to put away your pride in order to enter. Some of you may have been to Israel and visited Bethlehem and the church of the nativity there and it's one of the striking things about that church and you'll note if you've been there that the door height is so very low the only way you can get into that building is bowing and stooping.

Now there's no other way to find the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It means death to your pride, to your self-sufficiency, to your self-importance.

Even death to your good qualities and your good achievements. Those are the things, aren't they, that have such a capacity to deceive us so often. And it can be very hard for lovely people, for personable people, for good people.

[44 : 04] Very, very hard to accept this because it's so offensive. In a way it is offensive. Because you must be humble enough to receive from God as a sheer gift, by sheer grace, what you cannot have any other way.

And we find that so hard, don't we, as human beings? It's such a blow to our pride and our self-esteem to say truly, nothing in my hand I bring.

simply to the cross I cling. Naked, come to thee for dress. Helpless, look to thee for grace. Foul, I to the fountain fly.

Wash me, Savior, or I die. It's so hard, isn't it, to truly say that. And only a man who's poor in spirit, only a man who knows he's bankrupt before God can say that and will say that.

But Jesus says the one who will say that from the heart is truly blessed because he'll find God's grace in Christ and he'll possess now the blessing, the joy, the wonder of the kingdom of heaven.

[45 : 25] So let me ask you this morning as we close, which are you? Which are you? I don't mean are you bankrupt or blessed? Because Jesus says it's both together or it's neither.

Isn't that right? Either you know that you are bankrupt in God's eyes and therefore you can be blessed by the grace of God in Christ or you're proud and you're confident in your own spiritual caliber.

But if that is so then you are someone who is insisting, insisting on remaining without the blessing of God.

Because Jesus says whoever would save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life by declaring himself bankrupt in God's sight he's the one who will find it.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Friends, that's the way and that's the only way to find God's grace in Jesus Christ.

[46 : 31] It's the way to begin and it's the way to go on in his heavenly kingdom. And just like Jack Nicklaus we need to go back to our teacher again and again and again and learn from Jesus what it means to be a Christian.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, your grace does truly humble us and as we look to the Lord Jesus Christ and listen to what he says and look at what he did humbling himself even from the glory of heaven to death on a cross for our sake so the wonder of your grace does lay us in the dust and yet the wonder of your saving grace is to find us in that dust and to raise us up to the glory of heaven as we find your grace in Jesus Christ your son.

so Lord may every one of us be unafraid and unashamed to kneel at the cross of Jesus and there to find the great verdict of heaven upon us and upon our lives and upon our future blessed blessed for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Amen.