

3. What is a Christian? Sharing Christ's experience

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[0 : 00] Well, if you'd turn with me to Matthew chapter 5, it would be helpful to you, I think, to have that open in front of you. As we're speaking again this morning about the shape of real Christian discipleship.

And this morning I want to talk particularly about sharing Christ's experience. We've been thinking in these last couple of studies about going back to the basics, back to the very fundamentals of what real Christianity, real Christian discipleship is all about.

We're doing like Jack Nicklaus did. Even when he was at the very top of his game, every year we'd go back to his first teacher, Jack Grout, and would say to him, teach me how to play golf.

And we're going back in the same way, to the Lord Jesus Christ. But, whether we've been Christians for a very short time, or a very, very long time, we're going back to him and we're saying, Lord, teach me how to be a disciple.

Teach me what it means to love you, to serve you, to follow you. And we might think we've got beyond that stage, especially if we have been a Christian believer for a very long time.

[1 : 12] And yet, as every truly great one knows, the real secret of greatness is that you will make progress only if you keep going back, back, back to where it all began.

Back to the basics, back to what it's really all about. And so we're back with Jesus as he paints in the Beatitudes here this very comprehensive portrait of what it is to be a Christian, what it is to be a true follower of Jesus, a real citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven.

And we've seen already that there's really quite a shocking and surprising shape to the portrait that Jesus is painting. I don't mean shocking in the way that some portrait, some modern art is shocking. You know, Tracy Emin and Damien Hirst are these sort of people who put a dead horse upside down in a jar of pickle and sell it to Morris Satchie for five million pounds. That's not the kind of shocking portrait I mean.

But there is, in a sense, a kind of upside down-ness about the portrait Jesus paints of Christian discipleship.

[2 : 23] Certainly as far as the world is concerned, everything seems to be upside down and back to front. Because what Jesus tells us is that the way on and up in his kingdom is in fact the way down.

It's the way down into the dust. It's the way down into humility, into death. In other words, the shape of this portrait of a Christian life that Jesus paints for us is the shape of the cross.

And the shape and the shadow of the cross overshadows all of Jesus' teaching about his own ministry and also about the life and the discipleship of those who will follow him right from the very start of his gospel.

Some of you will know the famous painting by Rembrandt called The Adoration of the Shepherds. One of Rembrandt's marvellous paintings where you have the shepherds around the family in the stable, around the manger, and all the light in the picture is emanating.

Not from the lamps in the background, but actually from the Christ child himself. But in the background of the painting, there's a shadow cast by pieces of wood and a ladder in the stable.

[3 : 46] And the shadow cast is in the shape of the cross. And Rembrandt is simply making the same point that Matthew is making and that Jesus himself makes. Right from the very beginning of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ and right from the very beginning of discipleship with Jesus Christ.

The shadow of the shape of the cross is what lies over everything that is at the very heart of it. And it's a constant refrain in Jesus' teaching.

And it's a consistent theme, if you like, in this artist's work as he sketches out this portrait of what it means to be a disciple, a follower of the King. Jesus becomes clearer and clearer and sums it up later on in Matthew's Gospel where he says, You must take up your cross if you are to follow me. You must lose your life for my sake if you will find it. You must deny yourself if you are to be mine. Matthew 16 verse 21, we read these words.

From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and on the third day rise again.

[5 : 01] Then Jesus told his disciples, Anyone who would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. And that's the shape of Christian discipleship according to Jesus.

It's very different, isn't it, from the shape of the Christian life that you sometimes hear some preachers and evangelists proclaiming today. They come to Jesus and we will promise you health, we will promise you well-being, we promise you wealth and prosperity, we will promise you all the things that your life is presently lacking.

But Jesus proclaims discipleship of a very different shape. He turns that absolutely upside down. And that's very evident in the Beatitudes that we've been looking at these last couple of Sunday mornings. We've seen that there's a wonderful symmetry about them, a wonderful sense of progress too as you follow them through. The first four Beatitudes seem to mark out the way into Christ's kingdom, into the kingdom of heaven.

[6 : 17] And it's very clear describing, isn't it, the pattern, if you like, of the cross as it's applied to the experience of human beings, men and women. To crush all our self-righteousness, to put to death all of this world's esteem and all of this world's approval.

We need all of our own self-esteem. Because Jesus says it's when you're crushed and empty, when you submit only to the approval of God, when you realize that you need something that he alone can give you, you need his declaration of blessing upon you, it's then that you can find your way into the kingdom of Jesus.

So in verse 3 he says it's not the spiritually rich who can be blessed, as we would think, but the poor, it's the bankrupt, it's those who have nothing to offer God and who know that they've got nothing to offer to God.

It's not the happy and carefree, verse 4, but it's those who mourn, who know the reality of their own sin and who take it seriously and therefore weep. It's not the mighty in the world's eyes, verse 5. It's not those who are self-assertive and force their way into the kingdom of heaven. No, it's the meek, says Jesus. Those who are humbled before God, who've buried all their pretensions and have simply bowed the knee to God's grace.

[7 : 47] It's therefore not, verse 6, those who are satisfied with their own performance and righteousness, but those who realize their own poverty and so they hunger, they thirst for God's righteousness.

They will be filled, says Jesus. That's the way into the kingdom of heaven. It's the only way. It's the way, as we saw, of finding God's grace. And of course, that baffles the world, doesn't it?

Because that's the very opposite to the whole way that our world thinks and lives. In our world, the way on is up. Just think about the language that we use in everyday life.

Well, I'm climbing up the ladder. You don't say, well, I'm climbing down the ladder in my organization, do you? Not with any pride. You're moving up the organization.

You're rising up the rankings in the league tables or in the football table or whatever it is. But here, the way on and the way up is the way down.

[8 : 52] And that's so foreign, isn't it, to our world? A football team doesn't get on unless it wins the league. If it's at the bottom of the league, it goes down. It's relegated. Rangers are going to be in the Champions League this year because they won the league, not because they lost it.

And Celtic very probably aren't going to be in it because they got smashed last week by Braga. If they don't pull it out, Terry, on Wednesday, nobody is going to say, well, they've been humiliated, they're in the dust, so we'll put them in the Champions League.

It's just not the way our world works. But in Jesus' kingdom, in the kingdom of heaven, it's only those who have gone down to rock bottom who can find their way in.

The doorway into the kingdom of God's grace has a very, very low lintel. You have to stoop to enter, to get in. And that is just as baffling to our world, isn't it?

And you see, Jesus also says that if that's the way into his kingdom, then the way on in his kingdom is just more of the same. And the second half, the second four Beatitudes, simply speak of living out the reality of that grace within that has come from outside of us altogether as the gift of God's blessing.

[10:11] But it can't come to us, says Jesus, without becoming part of us. And these things, if you like, are the outward badges of membership of God's kingdom. They prove to the outward world that what is real within is really real.

So as we saw last time, finding God's grace will always, always result in his people living God's mercy.

A real disciple, verse 7, a kingdom person, will be merciful. They must be, because of all the people on the earth, they love and they prize and they rejoice in mercy, because they know that they've received it in abundance.

And therefore it must overflow. They love their neighbour as themselves. That's the other half, as Jesus tells us, of loving the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.

The other side of that coin is loving your neighbour as yourself. And these fourth and fifth Beatitudes are rather like a hinge right at the middle that express exactly that reality.

[11:20] To love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, that is to hunger and thirst after his righteousness. And to be merciful is to love your neighbour as yourself.

And it's the same all the way through these Beatitudes. There's a wonderful symmetry about them, because verse 8, the sixth Beatitude, tells us, blessed are the pure in heart, that is those who are transparent and honest and sincere in the world of men and women.

That corresponds, doesn't it, to the third Beatitude, to meekness. Because the true disciple has buried all their pretensions towards God.

They've been open and honest with themselves before God in their hearts. And therefore, they are liberated to be honest and open and transparent and sincere, pure with all the world.

because they know that God has seen through all the spin and the deception and the self-deception in their own life. God knows the truth about them. And so they're liberated to not have to hide from anybody else either.

[12:30] That's why the real disciple, verse 9, is a peacemaker. Because he knows what it means to have peace with God. And therefore, he's a true son of God. He shares the character of God and he loves to bring peace.

He loves to bring peace to a broken world full of ruptured relationships, full of the very opposite of peace. I think that corresponds really to the second Beatitude because it's mourning for sin.

It's seeking to deal with the awful consequences of sin. Knowing that that has been dealt with in your own life that makes you want to deal with the awful consequences of sin in the world. And bring that kind of peace to others.

But then you come to this last Beatitude, verse 10. And there's an extraordinary paradox, don't you think? Real disciples, we're told, are merciful.

They're pure. They're peacemakers. Peacemakers. But they're also persecuted. Peacemakers find themselves in the middle of a war.

[13:43] And you think to yourself, well, that can't be right. That's a jar to the rhythm here. Surely, in this portrait that you're painting, Jesus, of the life of discipleship, that's a great blot on your canvas.

Purity, mercy, peace, persecution. You need to wipe that off. You need to clean that up. And again, there are a lot of preachers, a lot of evangelists, who like to wipe off that blot, don't they?

Or that Christian discipleship. Lots of us as Christians want to wipe away that nasty blot. Surely, we say, if we all lived like that, if we all lived with the character that's expressed in these beatitudes, surely, it would be heaven.

But no, says Jesus, for disciples who truly are like that, it'll be conflict. Always. Why is that?

Well, it's because, as Jesus teaches again and again through the Gospels, it's because although the kingdom has come and has begun with his coming, with his presence on the earth and with his wonderful work and with his rising from the dead to reign in heaven, and though his kingdom is ours now, belongs to those who come to Jesus, nevertheless, we know that Jesus is just as plain, isn't

he?

[15:14] That there is still a not yet about his kingdom. I wonder if you notice that verse 3 and verse 10, the first and the last beatitude, are in the present tense.

Did you notice that? Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. But do you also notice that all the ones in between are in the future tense? They shall be comforted.

They shall inherit the earth. And so on. You see, all these promised blessings that Jesus is speaking about, although they are real now, what he's saying is that these things will only be completely fulfilled in the future.

Only when Christ's kingdom is complete. Only when Jesus comes again, finally, to reign. Only when Jesus establishes forever the new heavens and the new earth.

That's when there will be an end to all mourning. That's when there will be a full inheritance of the earth. That's when we will, with our own eyes, see the Lord.

[16:14] That's when we will be true sons of our Father sharing in his heavenly dwelling. But meanwhile, well, Jesus allows us absolutely no room for romantic naivety, does he?

He's quite clear and open. People who hunger and thirst, people who love righteousness, verse 10, will be persecuted for righteousness' sake. Why?

Why? Well, he tells us, doesn't he, in John 15, if the world hates you, it hated me first. If it persecuted me, it will persecute you.

And what Jesus is telling us here at the end of these Beatitudes is that to be a real Christian, to be a real follower of Jesus, yes, is to find God's mercy in Christ.

Yes, it's to live out God's mercy in Christ. But also, it is to share Christ's experience.

[17:19] The experience of God on earth in Christ. And Jesus is absolutely straight and honest about what it means to follow him. There's no spin with Jesus. He doesn't need Peter Mandelson.

There's no soft sell. There's no hiding it in a small print, like in your insurance policy. He's straight.

There's a great paradox at the heart of discipleship, Jesus says.

The disciple is blessed, he says. There is real rejoicing even now, not just in the future, even now, for everyone who's in Christ. But, every true disciple will also have scars.

You will be reviled on my account, says Jesus. Now, notice again the symmetry of these beatitudes.

This last beatitude takes us right back to the first one.

They're both in the present tense. They both say theirs is now the kingdom of heaven. In fact, what Jesus is telling us is that the eighth beatitude in a way is the evidence of the first one.

[18:27] The truly poor in spirit, those who have been humbled in the dust by God, they are blessed now even if they are in the meantime humiliated by men.

How on earth can that be? That really does seem upside down, doesn't it? The world just laughs at that sort of thinking. Who wants to be reviled? Who wants to be persecuted?

Who wants to be slandered? Anybody here? There are few things so stressful, so painful, are there, as false and scurrilous accusations. You know that nursery rhyme that says, sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never harm me.

That is not true, is it? It's certainly not true when you're a grown-up. I don't think it's true for children either. You ask a teacher who's had a malicious accusation against them of abusing a child in their care and they've been suspended and been laid off and there's been years and years gone past and ultimately they're exonerated.

But their life has been ruined in the process, hasn't it? Or any other profession in a similar situation. Never recover from that experience of slander.

[19:46] And yet Jesus says to his disciples, to his followers who are committed to him and to his kingdom that that road is the road that they must walk if they're to follow him. And yet he says that it will be nevertheless even now in the present, not just in the future, but in the present, it will prove to be the way of blessing.

He says that the way of real Christian discipleship means to be both reviled and rejoicing at the same time. Because that's what it means, friends, to be united by faith with the Lord Jesus Christ. It means that we share the experience of our Lord Jesus Christ. here on this earth. Just think for a moment about these two words that dominate in verses 11 and 12.

Reviled. Jesus is quite open, isn't he, about the scars of real discipleship. In fact, so important is that message that it's this last beatitude, not any of the others, but this last one, verse 10, that he takes up and expands and presses home in verses 11 and 12.

Notice as well how in verse 11 he turns, doesn't he, from the third person to the second person. It's been, blessed are they, blessed are they, blessed are they.

[21 : 12] But now he turns and he looks them right in the eye and he says, listen, you who are already following me, blessed are you. You must grasp this.

You must understand this. Jesus is just actually exhibiting there a great truth, isn't he, that gospel preaching isn't about theory. It's not about passing on abstract ideas.

It's about passing on personal truth that must be received. It's a word to us, to me. Jesus says, you, you, you people of the kingdom, you followers of me today, you will have scars.

And you can't have blessing without bearing scars. And friends, if you're a follower of Jesus today, or if you're not yet a follower of Jesus and wondering about whether you should become a follower of Jesus, you need to hear that too.

There will be scars. And that's because real discipleship, real faith into real Jesus is cross-shaped.

[22 : 30] You can't have the blessings of God's grace without the implications. And there will be scars. There will be scars because the world hates Jesus Christ.

It must do because the world can't stand grace. Grace, you see, is so utterly destructive of all the world's most cherished values. Think about it. What does our world say?

Blessed are the achievers. Blessed are the self-fulfilled. Blessed are the assertive, the powerful, those who can satisfy themselves, who can find what they want.

blessed are the manipulators, who can move the markets and make a fortune. Blessed are the clever wheeler dealers. Blessed are the expedient.

But Jesus' grace is the great humbler. It denies every aspect of all of that. It wounds to the very heart everything that would be human pride.

[23 : 31] Jesus' grace is the great humbler. And the world will not be humbled. It does not want to accept that message. And therefore, the world will hate you if that is your message.

If you are somebody who rejoices in the grace of God to be received by empty-handed people, then the world will hate you.

But you also need to know, says Jesus, that when you are, verse 11, reviled, insulted, when you are persecuted, when you are slandered for Jesus' sake, you are, even now, blessed.

Not in the future, right now. Because scars like that, you see, are evidence that you are truly a beloved disciple of Jesus.

Notice he does say, of course, it's persecution and slander on Jesus' account, not on our own account, on our own stupidity. It's false accusations, not true accusations, so this is not a license to think that the world is out to get me all the time when half the time it's our own fault.

[24 : 44] Listen to what John Stott says. Being despised and rejected, slandered and persecuted is as much a normal mark of Christian discipleship as being pure in heart and merciful.

See that? Scars are just as much a true mark of the grace of God at work in your life as poverty of spirit. Both are essential for those who belong truly to the Lord Jesus.

Scars for Jesus are just another outward visible sign of a heart that has been truly transformed by the grace of God in Christ. A changed heart that has changed the whole future.

You'll spare me another illustration from the cardiac clinic. It's not my fault. I've had a very sheltered life. But if a patient comes in to see you and the last time you saw them they were huffing and puffing, they were shuffling along, they were breathless, they were holding their chest and taking their nitroglycerin spray, they walk into your clinic today and they fling open the door and they come striding in, they're looking pink and healthy.

He sits down and he tells you, I've just walked two miles today to the clinic instead of taking the bus. You say to yourself, what has happened? Well, he throws his shirt off, jumps up onto the couch and you begin to examine him and suddenly you see it, it's plain as day.

[26 : 11] There's a great, big, ugly scar all the way down the front of his chest. looks rather savage in fact, it's very tender when you poke it and prod it.

You do have to poke and prod as a doctor. But the scar is what explains that total transformation from an invalid to somebody of fighting fitness because his heart has been rescued by coronary artery bypass surgery.

He's had a bypass. The scar is the inevitable consequence of that life-saving and transforming operation. And so it is in the heart rescue mission of my kingdom, says Jesus.

There will be scars. There must be scars because if your heart is to become mine, possessed with a transforming life that only my blood can give you, then it means that my life is going to become a real part of you, forever.

And you'll become so closely identified with me that the attitude that this world has to me, well, it will have that attitude to you as well, inevitably.

[27 : 26] The disciple is like his teacher, said Jesus. The servant like his master. Matthew 10, verse 24. If they call the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household?

If we are true disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we will share the experience of the Lord Jesus Christ. There will be reviling and persecution and all kinds of slander, all kinds of false accusation against us on his account.

From the world, from the scorn of the new atheists like Richard Dawkins to whom we're all just deluded, to the violence of the Muslim extremists that we've been praying about who killed those believers in Pakistan last week.

Christians. And as well, just as Jesus found, we will find it too from the religious establishment. Loves their institutions, their temples, their denominations, but hates the real Jesus.

And his words that challenge everything that they hold so dear, that in fact is just spiritually bankrupt and dead. There will be real scars, friends, for everyone, everyone who follows the real Lord Jesus Christ.

[28 : 43] And just as if we're not living Christ's mercy, we must question whether we really grasp the gospel of God's grace in Christ, so the same truth is this, that if we are not ever facing reviling, persecution, scorn for the sake of Jesus, we also have to question whether our faith is true and real.

Because Paul says very plainly, doesn't it? It's the mark of real Christianity.

Amy Carmichael, that great missionary of Donovan, knew that, didn't she? You know her eloquent poem that expresses it so well. It's the words of the Lord speaking to somebody who purports to be a follower of his.

Hast thou no scar? Says the Lord. No hidden scar on foot or side or hand? I hear thee sung as mighty in the land.

I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star. Hast thou no scar? Hast thou no wound? Yet I was wounded by the archer, spent.

[29 : 58] Leaned me against the tree to die and rent by ravening beasts that encompassed me. I swooned. Hast thou no wound? No wound?

No scar? Yet as the master shall the servant be. And pierced are the feet that follow me, but thine are whole.

Can he have followed fire who has no wound or scar? You see, to have no wounds, no scars from the reviling and persecution and slander that is always part of true discipleship, that is a cause of soul searching.

It ought to be. If we're not sharing Christ's experience, then though we prophesy in his name, though we cast out demons in his name, though we do mighty works in his name, the likelihood is that we don't really know him at all.

And he doesn't know us. And he'll have to say as he warns in Matthew 7 on the last day, I'm sorry, I never knew you. And friends, that's why scars, that's why wounds, from all that we may face in our walk with Jesus in this world, that's why scars and wounds are a cause for our rejoicing, even now.

[31 : 26] We're reviled, but also, even now, in the midst of these things, we're rejoicing. We can rejoice and be glad. Why? Well, because of what verse 12 says. Because in sharing in Christ's experience, we are confirmed in our place in the great unfolding story of God's wonderful salvation for his people.

people. In our suffering, we are assured that we are not out of place, we're not out of step with his purposes of grace. We're not abnormal. We're not suffering and struggling because we've been abandoned by God.

These things are happening to us because God is at work in us in Christ and we're genuine. We stand, says Jesus, four square in line with all the faithful ones from the past.

For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you, he says. And we stand four square in the company of those to whom belongs the inheritance of the future.

For your reward will be great in heaven. That's the message of grace and glory that the wounds and scars of the Christian lives shout to us all the time.

[32 : 38] Every time we're stung by their present pain. Just as every time the heart bypass patient gets a twinge of pain in their sternum. It's sore.

But it reminds them that everything inside is alright. That their heart's been rescued. That they can stride out and walk. And their muscles aren't going to collapse from lack of oxygen.

And that's why to be reviled for Jesus should make us rejoice. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Rejoice and be glad now. Rejoice and be glad now when your friends at school call your names. Call your Bible basher. Call your part of the God squad because you go to SU at school or because you won't get involved in some of the things that they're doing.

Rejoice! Because it's genuine faith that's at work in your heart. It's the hallmark of real Jesus people. And be sure of the wonderful things that he promises to you.

[33 : 49] Rejoice and be glad when your family perhaps resent your newfound Christian faith.

When they accuse you quite falsely of neglecting them in favour of your church and your newfound Christian friends and so on.

Rejoice and be glad. Rejoice and be glad even when you are hurt badly by colleagues, even by family, by what they say or by what they do because of your walk with Jesus Christ.

Even if you do lose out in earthly and tangible ways, perhaps the career that you might have had, perhaps the spouse that you would have had but for your faith in Jesus, perhaps the future prospects that you could have had but that you would not indulge in certain things.

Only you hadn't committed everything to Jesus Christ. But rejoice and be glad, says Jesus, for great is your reward in heaven. These things, these things that bring these painful scars have always been the genuine marks of the real believer, the real people of faith.

In a sense, this last beatitude and its expansion here in these verses is the real test of everything. It's the real test of whether you've really grasped the truth of Jesus' kingdom or not, about what it means to be a real disciple of Jesus or not.

[35 : 16] You really are focused in your life on everything in this world, on material things, on present happiness and prosperity and fulfilment.

If that is you, then everything that I've been saying this morning must sound like utter madness to you. You can't rejoice in persecution. That's absolute masochistic lunacy.

If that's what you're saying, then you haven't grasped it yet. You've still got Jesus all wrong. Very likely that you couldn't stomach any of the rest of the Beatitudes either for that matter.

You might have thought once upon a time they were lovely and good, but not now. Because being humbled by grace, you see, costs everything. Maybe you'll be like the rich young ruler who will see that and go away sadly.

But maybe over these last couple of weeks you've seen, you've grasped Jesus' teaching. Perhaps you're like one of those who's been listening in in the crowd as Jesus talked directly to his disciples, but in your hearing.

[36 : 26] And maybe you've heard him speaking to you. And you know, you know that you want him. You want his righteousness. You're even willing to suffer like that for him because you thirst for him and you long to know the blessing of his presence.

But then you listen again to these Beatitudes and you think, and that's not me. I am proud. I haven't mourned for sin.

I'm not meek. I'm not pure. I'm just not worthy of Jesus Christ. But that's where we began, isn't it?

That's the only place you can begin. That is how you feel then. You're in just the right place. Indeed, you're in the only place you can be to receive the blessing of God in Christ.

To find God's grace. We're right back at verse 3. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. That's you, friend.

[37 : 36] The kingdom can be yours and it will be yours if you come to Jesus with that attitude of heart to receive from him what you can never render to him. There will be scars of persecution and slander and falsehood.

There will be because the world has hated the Lord Jesus Christ and it will hate you if you follow him. But there will be great reward because the Lord Jesus Christ has loved you and has overcome the world.

And there will be, even now, in the midst of that, there will be rejoicing, great rejoicing, great gladness of heart for everybody who shares Christ's experience as a true disciple. Everyone who does that shares unceasingly in the blessing and the peace of his kingdom. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Let's pray. Lord, how we thank you that your word is true and straight, pure and trustworthy. [39 : 01] We thank you that we can come to you knowing that all that you say will be. So help us, Lord. Help us to be people who find your grace in Jesus Christ, who live out your mercy so manifestly poured into our lives through him, and who rejoice in us, even as we share in his experience.

Because we know that he is ours, and we are his, both now and forever and ever. Amen.