

2. The King's Demand

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, let's turn to our reading for today. We're looking again at Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5, and today at verses 11 to 20. That's on page 810 in these Blue Visitors Bibles.
- Matthew, chapter 5, reading from verse 11. Jesus began his sermon back in verse 3 with his description of blessed kingdom people, beginning with the poor in spirit, verse 3, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- And ending his Beatitudes, verse 10, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- And he continues verse 11. 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 are before you. You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?
- [1 : 1 7] 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.
- I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished.
- Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.
- For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
- Well, let's ask for the Lord's help before we come to look at this challenge together. Father God, thank you for another chance to submit together to these words of your son.
- [2 : 5 0] We ask, Lord, that you would open our ears to his message and write it on our hearts today. Help us to understand and to live out his call that the world might come to praise our father in heaven.
- For we ask it in Jesus name. Amen. At a few minutes to midday, one wintery October morning, a signalman relayed the last orders to a nervous British fleet.
- England expects that every man shall do his duty. Words which began the most famous naval battle in history. And of course, had he been there, I'm sure William Wallace might have said a similar sort of thing.
- But I'm afraid in this story, the hero just happens to be an Englishman, Horatio Nelson. And that costly demand he made of his men was a demand he met himself.
- Victory came that day at the price of his own life. Well, I wonder how much you think the Lord Jesus has the right to demand of you and me.
- [4 : 1 0] And what is a Christian's duty anyway? Now is the moment in Christ's most radical sermon where he begins to answer those questions.

Having laid out the subversive character of his kingdom back in the Beatitudes, it's time for us to be faced with the king's demand.

And it's all heading towards one of the hardest verses to swallow in the New Testament. For I tell you, verse 20, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Well, what do you think? Is it an impossible demand? Is it too much to ask? The problem is, however radical it seems, Jesus says nothing to let us escape it.

There's nothing at all suggesting it's a deliberately impossible request meant just to show us our helplessness. No, Jesus seems to genuinely expect this of us.

[5 : 18] And I think the key is what we saw last week back in the Beatitudes. Jesus is aiming these words at his kingdom people, at Beatitude people.

And everything else which Jesus asks of us in this Sermon on the Mount rests on the foundation of grace he established there. He's talking to the poor in spirit, people who need grace and who've known grace.

So as we'll see today, their mission is to show that grace to others. It's what his subversive kingdom is all about.

So if you're a Christian, this is the passage which shows why the Lord has put you on this earth. To show his grace to a needy world.

And we're going to learn three things about that calling this afternoon. It's a demand, firstly, that costs the world. It's a demand that blesses the world.

[6 : 23] And thirdly, it's a demand until Christ wins the world. So let me ask you again, how much you think this king has the right to ask of you?

Because we need to be settled on that before we can respond to the challenge he lays down here. And I think our answer will depend entirely on how much we believe we've been forgiven.

That's what we saw last week, isn't it? Firstly, then, verses 11 to 12 show us that it's a demand that costs the world. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Now, what is so important about this blessing that it had to be said twice? Notice Jesus isn't just repeating his last beatitude here.

He's actually intensifying it. The language is stronger now, isn't it, than verse 10? You'll not only be persecuted, but reviled and ridiculed, slandered.

[7 : 36] And from now on, it's as if Jesus is looking his disciples right in the eye. Did he spot a little change in verse 11? It's not blessed are those anymore, is it?

From this point on, it's blessed are you. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Truly, verse 18, I say to you.

Well, surely the point he wants us to grasp is that this is every bit as normal a part of life in the kingdom as being poor in spirit.

Being a disciple of this king in a world in which he's despised will always draw scorn.

If you look anything like the countercultural disciple described in those beatitudes, then you'll stick out in man's kingdom like a rangers fan in a Celtic pub.

[8 : 37] Anyone who signs up to follow Jesus, if they're really following him, will pretty fast find out that they become too different to be tolerated.

And that is not because of all the extra trouble we bring upon ourselves by being awkward and provocative. There's plenty of that, isn't there? But this is the normal consequence, verse 11, of associating ourselves with Jesus.

If you're a young doctor or scientist and you're not ashamed of Christ, well, you'll just have to get used to the idea that some of your colleagues assume you're a bit stupid.

If you work in a very pressured business, you might just have to accept that your boss will see you hungering for righteousness and mark you down as a weakling.

But the strongest decision you could possibly take will be the meek and the merciful one. Because that is how it's always been, verse 12, for Jesus' people.

[9 : 52] And although it doesn't feel enjoyable, Christ says rejoice. Because it's a sign that you really belong to the king who was hated and persecuted.

It's right then that you can be most sure that you belong in his family. When, like every prophet and disciple before you, you stick by his ways, even if it costs you the world.

And you'll know that one day the king will look you right in the eye and say, well done, my good and faithful servant. So here's the truth that is so hard to believe, he tells us twice.

It's the laughed at, spat at, simpletons of Jesus' kingdom who can rejoice. And of course, that doesn't take away the fact that most of us find it very hard.

When people are sneering, I find it so hard not to run and hide. And of course, Jesus knows that perfectly well. But if you and I get used to keeping our heads down and always live to fight another day, well, this subversive kingdom will become about as radical as the Women's Institute.

[11 : 17] And that is why he goes straight on to remind us what his people are all about. Yes, that call to show his grace might be one that costs the world.

But it's also a demand that blesses the world. And that's our second point from verses 13 to 16. We've got two parallel pictures here, haven't we? Pictures which show the impossibility of a Christian just blending in with the world.

Picture one, you are the salt of the earth. Not your gospel witnesses, salt. Not your words in standing up for Jesus are like salt, but you are salt.

Your whole radical gospel-shaped life affects society a little like salt. Now, what does that mean?

Well, salt had 1,001 uses then and now, but mainly it stops rot and it adds flavor. Nothing's changed. So take a look around the room.

[12 : 30] And perhaps what you see is a rather tired bunch of discouraged, aging, wearied Christians. Is that what you see in church?

Jesus would say that this is his antidote to a decaying, tasteless society. You and the person sitting right next to you.

You are who bring life and flavor to your unique network of friends and colleagues and family. And the real question isn't how salt is used, but whether it's any use at all.

What if salt loses its taste? Can it lose its taste? Surely all you've got left then is dust and impurity, not salt at all.

Well, perhaps that's the point. Look at picture two. A city beaming its light from a dark hillside cannot be hidden. You just can't miss it. And nor would you go to the trouble of lighting up a lamp and then tucking it away to stumble around in the dark.

[13 : 42] It's ridiculous. So do you see the point of these two pictures? He isn't really saying, be more salty, shine more brightly. He's saying, this is what you disciples are.

So a hiding Christian isn't being what she was put in the kingdom to be. Salt that loses its taste isn't salt.

A city that doesn't look like a city isn't a city. A Christian who fits in with a Christ-hating world.

Well, which king are you following? You and I were put in the kingdom for the world to see and take notice of our father.

In the same way, verse 16, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who's in heaven. That's what God's people are for.

[14 : 48] And I think it's the most unnatural and subversive thing of all. Normally when we do good, we want praise, don't we? The chief end of man's kingdom is man's glory.

But when the world sees a Christian's goodness, Jesus says they'll glorify not us, but our father. What a thrilling thing that is.

It's what God has always wanted from his people, isn't it? To be a blessing to the world. It's why Abraham was called right back in the beginning. It's why the law was given, says Deuteronomy, so that Israel's distinctive, salty lives would make the nations ask about her God.

In fact, I reckon this very picture of a city set on a hill is borrowed from Isaiah 2, where the world flocks to Zion to learn the law of her amazing God.

It's what we're for. So we're left with a very odd picture of the Christian, aren't we? Simply by being Jesus' beatitude people, the world will find us simultaneously repellent and fascinating.

[16 : 06] They'll want to recoil from you in horror, verse 11, but some will be drawn in. Simply by the way you light up a dark, putrefying world.

It seems like a complete contradiction, doesn't it? But it's how Jesus means it to be. Most of us have grown up in a Britain where to talk about Jesus is considered pretty effeminate.

We're all a bit like Blair these days, aren't we? We just don't do God. So before we move on, let me tell you about the most subversive Englishman I ever met.

It wasn't long after going to university, a world drowning in people, desperately trying to stand out. But the most subversive of them all wasn't one of the Marxists or the thespians.

He was a Christian. Just someone who lived differently and one day invited me to church. You see, he was willing to talk about Jesus without looking remotely squeamish.

[17 : 18] And that was radical. And yes, the truth is, he was terrified. But what struck me wasn't remotely girly.

In fact, I thought it was the most manly and courageous thing I'd ever seen. And that's the taste of gospel salt, isn't it? Well, with verse 16, Jesus has laid the groundwork for his revolutionary kingdom.

It's a little like our debate here in Scotland, isn't it? Until we settle our national identity, the character of the land, we can't decide anything else.

But by verse 16, Christ has set the vision for his disciples. His kingdom people, verses 1 to 10, are those set apart by grace.

And our kingdom purpose is to be distinctive, attractive witnesses, bearing light for a dark and rebellious world.

[18 : 22] And so now, at last, the sermon can turn from the kingdom people and the kingdom purpose to the kingdom principles. Every word of this sermon from now on will unpack verse 16.

And Jesus will show us what sorts of good works he'll use through us, rusty, ragtag, moth-eaten bunch of Christians, to win the world for Christ.

So finally, that demand which costs the world and blesses the world is also a demand right up until Christ wins the world.

And that, perhaps surprisingly, is the key point to the final paragraph, verses 17 to 20, a demand till Christ wins the world. I suppose by this point in his sermon, some of Jesus' listeners would have been looking pretty uneasy, wouldn't they?

I wonder if you can imagine the religious man listening in, someone admired by everyone for his standard of holiness. And here is Jesus who says that it's the poor in spirit he welcomes to his kingdom.

[19 : 36] In fact, it's being hated not patted on the back, which marks out a true believer. So what exactly is Jesus saying about the place of holiness and obedience to the Bible?

Does none of that matter anymore? Well, don't misunderstand me, says Jesus, verse 17. I've told you what my kingdom is all about. It's about distinctive lives which point the world to my Father.

So how could I possibly be saying that holiness matters any less now? I have to admit that until recently I only really thought of this final paragraph a little like a textbook on the place of the Old Testament law.

But actually, Jesus' point is much bigger than that. Notice for a start, it's the whole Bible he's talking about. It's the law and the prophets. It's the whole story which Jesus came to fulfill.

So here's how I think it's best to sum up this paragraph. Now that Christ has come to bring the whole Bible story to its climax, that salty, light-bearing obedience that he's been talking about to the missionary commands of his kingdom matters more than ever.

[20 : 56] because until this heaven and earth pass away, it is through our good works bringing glory to the Father that the kingdom itself grows.

So you see, the king isn't able to ask any less of his people now, is he? He still expects every Christian to do his duty.

But he's not asking anything that he wasn't willing to do himself. And in coming into the world, in fulfillment of everything promised by Moses and the prophets, Jesus has actually helped us to see what his law was all about.

Just like he fulfills the prophets, he fulfills the law. He shows us where it was always pointing. He lived it out in front of us, didn't he? He's shown us what distinctive missionary obedience looks like.

And particularly in his teaching. Here in the Sermon on the Mount, he's explained the law for us. Jesus fulfills God's law by showing us what it's all about.

[22 : 10] An obedient heart bent on God's glory. He's not interested in dead, pretend shows of obedience, is he? Verse 20 makes that pretty clear.

That was how the scribes and the Pharisees saw the law, wasn't it? But that dead religion isn't righteousness at all. You can never earn his blessing.

It's never been what his kingdom, his law, has been about. And so as Jesus lays out the principles of his kingdom over the rest of his sermon, he's going to fill up, fill full, a real grace-driven attitude to holiness and obedience.

Now if this is going to be a lunchtime Bible talk and not a tea-time theology lecture, then it's not going to be the time to answer every question we have on the role of the law, is it?

You'll be relieved to hear that. But we do need to take seriously what Jesus is actually teaching here. Not one dot or one iota abolished.

[23 : 17] No. Not one dot of the i or cross of the t. Every little bit of God's word is still to be obeyed by kingdom people.

Not out of slavish religious tradition like the Pharisees, but out of a real love for what it's all about. And yes, of course, obeying the heart of some commands will look different this side of the cross.

But the real question is our attitude to the king. Do we care about what he loves? Or just about negotiating the rules?

Now how that works out will become a little clearer after Easter when Jesus gives us six examples of fulfilling the law. He takes six areas of life and shows us how full and searching real obedience to his law is.

and yes, the demands of our king will cost us. Make no mistake about that. But these are demands for kingdom people shaped and given missionary gospel purpose by the grace of our king.

[24 : 33] God So as we close, let's ask ourselves one last time how far the Lord Jesus is entitled to lay claim on our lives.

Is he entitled to expect real righteousness, heart righteousness from you and me? The righteousness of the poor in spirit.

Righteousness which shines his grace into a dark world. Perhaps for a moment, you'd imagine that in your family or your workplace, there are just two people who call themselves Christians.

One of them is a man desperately counting on his own goodness to get him into heaven. and the other one is you. Which life do you think ought to shout louder about the goodness and grace of our king?

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, as Christ's people, we love your gospel and the extravagant grace you've shown to each one of us.

[25 : 49] but we confess to Father that we're often tempted to run and hide on account of your son. Not just that, but we compromise with the world and hide from your costly call to obedience.

So forgive us Father and help us to shine your grace before others that the world might come to glorify you for Jesus sake. Amen.