



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Let Your Blessings Show

Matthew 5:1-16

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Serious About Following Jesus

“Repent, for heaven’s reign has come near” (Matt. 4.17, NRSV adapted).¹ I hope you are beginning to understand the importance and urgency of that statement.

1. The announcement of the arrival of heaven’s reign was huge! If God had begun his reign, there was hope against the likes of Roman oppressors, but more importantly hope that the glorious age to come had begun.
2. It’s also urgent! If God’s reign had begun, life could not be the same. Repentance was the only sensible course: if all life is now different, then all purposes, aims, attitudes, and behaviors must change; the old must go, for the new has come.

In two recent sermons, we highlighted the urgency of taking Jesus’ call seriously.

1. From Revelation 2.1-7, we studied Jesus’ later call to Ephesus to “remember”, “repent”, and “do” again the works to which they had been called.
2. We looked at Jesus’ mission statement, his call for a radical change of purpose and direction to live in a manner appropriate for living under God’s rule (Mt. 4.12-25).

Such a call to self-evaluation is valuable any time, but is especially so as the time approaches to think about resolutions for a new year. So, today we begin our look at Jesus’ Sermon to disciples (5.2); the body (5.17-7.12) calls us to submit and show God’s righteousness by:

¹ My translation, “heaven’s reign”, for ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (*hē basileia tōn ouranōn*) seeks to bring out the possessive or qualitative state of the genitive οὐρανῶν, “heaven,” to help correct a distortion about the phrase as used by Matthew. As N. T. Wright has said, “Millions of readers, when they hear Matthew’s Jesus talking about doing this or that ‘so that you may enter the kingdom of heaven,’ assume, without giving it a moment’s thought, that this means ‘so that you may go to heaven when you die.’ ¶But that is not at all what Matthew, or Jesus for that matter, had in mind.... The ‘kingdom of heaven’ is not about people going to heaven. It is about the rule of heaven coming to earth....” (N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* [New York: HarperOne, 2012], 42-43.)

1. Learning the Law's real nature and how to properly observe it (5.21-48).
2. Learning how to properly practice public acts of righteousness (6.1-18).
3. Learning what it means to live with single-minded devotion to God (6.19-7.11).²

But first, Jesus said God's reign had come because God *decided* it would; accordingly, those who submit and seek his righteousness are the ones who will be included (5.1-16).

Blessings from God

To state the obvious, the word used most in 5.1-12 is "blessed" (μακάριος, *makarios*).

1. Greeks used it of the gods, people favored by the gods, the dead who had transcended the world's griefs, or the rich presumed to be free from care.³
2. In OT and Jewish literature, it referred to those who were "to be congratulated because they are in the enviable position of having divine approval" (e.g., Psa. 84.12; 144.15), shown God's favor with rewards (e.g. Psa. 1.1-2; 41.2) (Garland, 78).
3. "Happy" is not a good translation since μακάριος is not the same as the current Western view of happiness. It's an objective state where one receives God's favor, regardless of circumstances.
4. Μακάριος is a word of *grace*: we don't earn blessings, we receive them.
 - a. The blessings in our text are defined by the receipt of heaven's reign (5.3, 10) – inaugurated by God, not brought into existence by an uprising, etc.
 - b. The attributes of the blessed are important, but the emphasis is on what people with these attributes *receive*: heaven's reign, comfort, the earth, mercy, satisfaction, seeing God, and being of the nature of God.⁴

"The Christian moral life . . . is a life lived in response to God's grace; it is a life made possible by the new life believers have received from God ... [I]t is only after he proclaims the salvation the kingdom brings that Jesus presents the demands of the new life that define the behavior of those who embrace God's rule over their lives" (Matera, 27-28)

² See the outline and development of the Sermon's major themes in Frank Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 12-25.

³ D. E. Garland, "Blessing and Woe," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 78.

⁴ These blessings are not tangible items the likes of which are the subject of songs like "Count Your Blessings."

Behavior of the Blessed Defined by Submission

Notice how the beatitudes revolve around a central theme.

1. The same blessing in 5.3, 10 shows that those character traits are, if not parallel, at least commentary on one another.
 - a. It was expected of God's reign that an exalted place (blessings) would be given to the poor, brokenhearted, captives, mournful – the kind of people who, because of their brokenness, are often persecuted (Isa. 61.1-3).
 - b. It should not surprise us, then, that the *first* behavior is one of complete submission: here is one who understands it's about letting God rule (5.3) – even to the point of enduring persecution (5.10).
2. This submission to God's rule undergirds "righteousness" (δικαιοσύνη, *dikaïosunē*), used in 5.6, 10 and a recurring theme throughout the Sermon (5.20; 6.1, 33; note the synonymous word "does" in 7.21-27).
 - a. Again, this was expected of God's reign: the broken people were favored as "oaks of righteousness" (Isa. 61.3).
 - b. Being submissive, the blessed seek righteousness above all (5.6; cf. 6.10).
3. The remaining behaviors of God-ruled people develop these ideas.
 - a. Mournful (5.4), best taken, because of the location of the beatitude, as a reference to those who are sorrowful that more do not submit (5.3, 5-6).
 - b. Meek (5.5), those who have surrendered to God's control.
 - c. Hunger and thirst (5.6), those passionate for righteousness will see it.
 - d. Merciful (5.7), receiving mercy because, letting God rule and appreciating their receipt of mercy, they imitate God and let others off the hook.
 - e. Pure in heart = sincere in motive (5.8) – they will see God because they are transparent, as honest (qualitatively) as he is, with nothing to hide (or "bring" as Augustus Toplady put it in the hymn, "Rock of Ages").
 - f. Peacemakers (5.9), sons of (sharing the character of) God because they have come to embody that divine trait.
4. Jesus then turned to his disciples (5.10-12, cf. 5.2), telling them a willingness to be persecuted put them in the company of the most righteous.⁵

These are the traits one will see grow in her life when submission to God's reign is exclusively her devotion (see 6.33, and note how similar it is to 5.6).

⁵ Notice that "on my account" in v. 11 is used in place and therefore equivalent to "righteousness' sake" in v. 10.

God-Ruled People Seek to Make a Difference

Jesus uses two metaphors to show aspects of the difference God-ruled people make.

1. Salt – in areas without refrigeration, the element that kept meat from going bad.
2. Light – a little makes a huge difference (which we forget in our well-lit settings).

Jesus says two things about disciples who are salt and light.

1. Only the God-ruled can influence the world toward God's reign: both vv. 13 and 14 are emphatic: "You, you are . . ." (Ἑμεῖς ἐστέ, *hymeis este*).
2. They are to do it purposefully.
 - a. Salt cannot lose its properties, but its effect can be nullified by mixing in with other substances that look like salt.⁶
 - b. The light must be put into a position where it can shine.

We are called to be proactive, not reactive.

1. Jesus is not just calling for indirect influence: if we happen to be where salt is needed, or light needs to shine, etc.
 - a. That is included, but the text calls for more: under the reign of God we are to *seek* his righteousness wherever and for as long we can (5.6; 6.10, 33).
 - b. Notice the purpose: "so that they may see . . . and glorify the Father . . ."
2. We thus follow King Jesus whose way was purposeful intervention on behalf of the poor, brokenhearted, captives, etc., not just being an available "good person."

Don't Just Say . . .

In his treatment of Jesus' Sermon, Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."⁷ That is the essence of God-ruled people, a submission that accepts God's grace and commits to reform and obey; such surrender spreads God's reign.

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⁶ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 60.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Touchstone, 1959, 1995), 89.