

Matthew 5:1-16

The Upside Down Kingdom

The “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5-7) is one of the most famous parts of the Bible. Jesus teaches about the nature of “the kingdom of heaven” that he announces and brings.

To begin, we need to appreciate the expectations people had about “the kingdom of heaven”. While God is king over the whole earth, his “kingdom” refers to those who submit to the rule, and enjoy the blessings of, his anointed king. In the Old Testament the kingdom was physically pictured by the people of Israel living under the rule of King David and his successors. After the fall of national Israel, the prophets promised a future king who would come as God’s Messiah, restore Jerusalem, gather the scattered people of Israel, and establish a worldwide rule that would last forever! Read Isaiah 9:1-7 to get a feel for the scope of what was promised. (If time permits you might also like to read Psalm 2, Isaiah 11:1-10 & Daniel 7:13-14).

1. Now read Matthew 4:12-5:1. Why do you think Jesus chose this moment to teach about the nature of the kingdom?
2. Jesus begins teaching his disciples with what we call “the beatitudes” (which comes from the Latin word for “blessings”). It is a description of who is truly blessed (by God)...

³ <i>“The poor in spirit are blessed,</i>	<i>for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.</i>
⁴ <i>Those who mourn are blessed,</i>	<i>for they will be comforted.</i>
⁵ <i>The gentle are blessed,</i>	<i>for they will inherit the earth.</i>
⁶ <i>Those who hunger and thirst</i> <i>for righteousness are blessed,</i>	<i>for they will be filled.</i>
⁷ <i>The merciful are blessed,</i>	<i>for they will be shown mercy.</i>
⁸ <i>The pure in heart are blessed,</i>	<i>for they will see God.</i>
⁹ <i>The peacemakers are blessed,</i>	<i>for they will be called sons of God.</i>
¹⁰ <i>Those who are persecuted</i> <i>for righteousness are blessed,</i>	<i>for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.</i>

- a) What impressions, observations or questions do you have from first reading these words?
 - b) Try and work out what each characteristic and promise means. (Some Old Testament background may help – Isaiah 66:2, Isaiah 61:1-3, Psalm 37:11, 22 & 29, Psalm 24:3-6).
 - c) Do you think Jesus main purpose here is to correct, to challenge or to comfort?
 - d) In light of the background we saw in questions 1 & 2, what do you think would have been surprising (or even shocking) for the first hearers – and for us?
3. According to Jesus (v11-12), why can Christians “be glad and rejoice” when we are insulted because of Jesus? To what extent do you find these words helpful?
 4. What does Jesus mean in his use of the images of salt and light? What does he commend for us?
 5. In what ways does Jesus’ teaching here most challenge or comfort you, our church and our culture? Pray together about this.

Matthew 5:17-37

The Kingdom and the OT

As Jesus announced and demonstrated the coming of the kingdom of heaven (4:17), and of a new covenant established by his blood (26:28) a key issue requires attention – what is the relationship between the Old Covenant and the New? Does Jesus' teaching simplify, reinterpret, replace or even dismiss God's Old Covenant law?

Read Matthew 5:17-37.

1. What is striking or even 'shocking' about Jesus' teaching here? How do you think it would have been first heard? How would you summarize the general thrust of what Jesus says?

2. Don Carson says "Matthew 5:17-20 are among the most difficult verses in all the Bible"! With this warning in mind, from what Jesus goes on to say, what do you think he means when he says "I did not come to destroy, but to fulfil" the law and the Prophets (v 17)? Do you think this means...
 - a. That Jesus himself will keep all the laws?
 - b. That Jesus will provide another way to be righteous so we don't need to keep them?
 - c. That Jesus so completes all that the Old Testament anticipated, that to obey Him is to keep the law?
 - d. That Jesus will reinforce and teach the true intention of the law?
 - e. Some combination of the above?
 - f. Something else?

3. Some people say that Jesus' intention in verses 21-37 is primarily to prove that it is impossible for us to keep God's law. Do you think Jesus intends that we actually do what he says? Why or why not?

4. For each of the examples Jesus gives: What law had people heard? How does Jesus apply it? What other instructions or incentives are given?
 - a. Murder
 - b. Adultery
 - c. Divorce
 - d. Oaths

5. Which of these do you personally find most challenging for your own life? What can you practically do to submit yourself to Jesus' kingly rule in this area? Be specific.

6. "Many Christians easily revert from living by grace and obedience of the heart, to living by law and external compliance with rules." Do you agree? Why do you think this might be true?

7. (Stretch question!) How is obedience in the kingdom of heaven under the rule of Jesus similar or different to obedience in the kingdom of Israel under the law of Moses? (See also Deuteronomy 6:1-6)

8. What would be good to pray after hearing these words of Jesus?

Matthew 5:38-48

The Kingdom and the Other

In Matthew 5 Jesus is teaching about life in the kingdom of heaven. From verse 21 he has been pushing beyond 'legalistic' limitations of God's law, to its true intent - from the letter of the law to the spirit of the law. Having already dealt with murder, adultery, divorce and oaths, in verses 38-48 Jesus words are very famous and profoundly challenging.

1. If someone insults, attacks or abuses you, what is your most natural 'instinctive' response?

2. Read Matthew 5:38-42.
 - a. The principle of "an eye for an eye" can sound barbaric to us, but it was actually part of God's Law for Israel (see Exodus 21:22-25, Leviticus 24:19-22 & Deuteronomy 19:16-21). What good purpose(s) did this law serve?

 - b. Given what Jesus says, what kind of misuse or limitation of the principle does it seem that Jesus is correcting? Can you think of real life situations where you are tempted to apply the strict justice of "an eye for an eye" to justify 'pay back' or 'holding back'? (Ideas – How might this play out in marriage, at work, in church, etc?)

 - c. What does it really look like to live by Jesus' teaching here – showing people grace, mercy & compassion? Is he promoting an attitude where we simply allow others to "run all over us" – to insult, use and even abuse us?

3. Read Matthew 5:43-48
 - a. Jesus corrects an attitude where the command to "love your neighbour" (Leviticus 19:17-18) is taken to imply a further command to "hate your enemies". Where do you see this kind of thinking in your own heart, or in our society? (Note that 'enemies' can be big (eg. Islamic State) or small (eg. your fellow shopper who takes your spot in the queue)).

 - b. What reasons does Jesus give for us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?

4. Jesus teaching is deeply challenging to most people. Why do you think this is?

5. Do you think Jesus' teaching is also attractive? Why or why not? (How would life be different if you and others lived this way?)

6. To many Jesus teaching here seems impossible. What would you say to them (or to yourself) in response?

7. Pray together about what you have heard from God's Word.

Matthew 6:1-18

Don't be like the Hypocrites

1. Some people say that Christians are “hypocrites”. In our culture, what does it mean to be a ‘hypocrite’ and why is it considered to be a bad thing?

In Matthew 6 Jesus continues to teach his disciples (and also the crowd) about life in the Kingdom of heaven. After describing the kind of righteousness demanded by God’s kingdom (fulfilling the true intention of the law), Jesus warns of another danger. Read Matthew 6:1-18.

2. According to Jesus, what is the problem with the “hypocrites”? Who are they trying to please? What is their reward? How is this seen in the ways they give, pray and fast?
3. In what ways might we be tempted to practice ‘acts of righteousness’ for the applause of people? Why is this always a challenge for us?
4. What repeated principle does Jesus commend to avoid being hypocrites? What reward will follow?
5. Considering the specific examples Jesus mentions...
 - a. When giving, what does Jesus mean by ‘don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing’ (v3)? What might this look like for us?
 - b. Do you think Jesus means that we should only pray in private (v 6)? Why or why not? If not, what then does he mean? How might those who pray in public guard against being like the hypocrites?
 - c. In addition to fasting, what other ‘spiritual disciplines’ might we be tempted to make obvious to people?
6. What can we do in our church and group life to help guard ourselves, and each other, from religious hypocrisy?
7. Spend time praying about what you have discussed. Confess your hypocrisy to God. Ask Him to give you right motives, and to guard you from the dangers of acting to impress people, rather than God.

Matthew 6:7-15

Kingdom Prayer

1. What is your personal experience of hearing and praying “The Lord’s Prayer”? Is it something you hear or pray regularly? Why or why not?
2. Read Matthew 6:5-15. What does the context of the Lord’s Prayer (in its chapter and book) tell us about Jesus’ purpose in giving it to us?
3. As early as the 2nd Century a writing called the “Didache” (or ‘teaching’) prescribed that Christians should repeat this Lord’s Prayer 3 times a day. Do you think Jesus had in mind that we should repeat his words ‘verbatim’?
4. What does the address ‘Our Father in heaven’ teach us about how to pray? (What implications might flow from noticing Jesus’ use of the word “our” instead of “my”?)
5. The first 3 ‘petitions’ concern God – His name, kingdom and will.
 - a. What do each of these requests mean?
 - b. To what extent do these ‘prayer points’ align with our usual prayer points (as a church, group and individual)?
6. The second 3 requests concern us – our daily bread, debts (sins) and temptations. Most people understand these as requests concerning God’s physical, spiritual and moral provisions. However, we must also read them in the context of Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven.
 - a. What might result from failing to keep asking God for the provision of our daily bread?
 - b. Forgiveness of debts (what is owed to God because of our sin) is a precious thing, the basis of entry into the Kingdom. Why do you think Jesus adds “as we have forgiven our debtors” and the extension in verse 14? (What danger is he addressing?)
 - c. The final request is that God would preserve us from the dangers of temptation and the power of the evil one while we live as disciples in this world. Is this our constant prayer? If not, why not?

(Note: The words “For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever, amen” (although helpful and true) were probably not part of Jesus original words.)

7. How might this teaching from Jesus help us (practically) in our own prayers – individually and as a group?

Matthew 6:19-34

Kingdom Outlook

1. Think back to your childhood. In what ways have society's expectations for our 'standard of living' changed?

Read Matthew 6:19-34.

2. In reading verses 19-21 people tend to notice the positive instruction to collect treasures in heaven, but Jesus also says **not** to collect treasures on earth.
 - a. Why do you think we might tend to focus more on the positive and less on the negative?
 - b. What do you think it means to collect treasures in heaven?
 - c. Apart from simple possessions, what other earthly treasures might we attempt to collect?
 - d. What reasons does Jesus give for both instructions?
3. How does what Jesus says about the eye in verses 22-23 fit into the flow of the passage?
4. What might look like to try and be a slave of both God and money (v 24)? What might it look like to be a slave of God, and not money?
5. What things might hold us back from following Jesus teaching here?
6. In verses 25-34 Jesus presents a series of arguments to persuade us to trust God, and not to worry about even basic things (for most of us) like food and clothes. What different arguments does he use?
 - a. v 25
 - b. v 26
 - c. v 27
 - d. v 28-30
 - e. v 31-33
 - f. v34
7. What do you think it really looks like in practice for people like us to "seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness"? How might this make us stand out as different to our neighbours?
8. Pray together for hearts that are directed towards treasures in heaven.

Matthew 7:1-6 Kingdom Correction

1. Do you think that we Christians are generally too reticent or too keen to correct others? Why?

Read Matthew 7:1-6.

2. Jesus says "Do not judge, so that you won't be judged" (v1-2). Some people take this to mean you should never make a 'judgment' about a person or what they do (or at least never say anything to them about it!). Do you think this is what Jesus means? Why or why not? (See also Matthew 18:15-17)

If not, what does he mean?

3. What according to verses 3-5 is the big danger in seeking to correct someone?
4. In practice what can we do to notice a log in our own eye, and what might it mean to 'take it out'?
5. Considering the context of 'judging' others, what do you think Jesus means in verse 6?
6. In what situations can you imagine that a Christian might feel that it is important to point out / correct a fault or error to a Christian brother or sister? Try and think of some specific examples from your own experience.
7. Instead of lovingly raising a matter with the person who is responsible, what alternative strategies do people commonly adopt? Which of these can be good, and which destructive?
8. In what contexts of life do you think that following Jesus' teaching here might make the most difference/?
9. Pray together for forgiveness, for humility, for love and for wisdom in our relationships.

Matthew 7:7-29 Responding to the Kingdom

Through the “Sermon on the Mount” Jesus has been teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven. As he closes, he calls for a right response.

1. Read Matthew 7:7-12. What do you think Jesus is urging us to ask for and seek? What reason does he give for continuing to ask and seek?
2. Verse 12 is very famous – ‘the golden rule’.
 - a. Why do you think Jesus ‘drops this in’ here after verse 11? What is the connection? Or could it be the conclusion to a larger section of the Sermon on the Mount? (see for example 5:17-20)
 - b. To what extent does the ‘golden rule’ sum up what Jesus has been saying? (Or is it a new idea?)
 - c. Do you think verse 12 is an adequate principle to live by?
3. Read Matthew 7:13-29. Jesus puts forward a series of alternatives, calling on his hearers to choose. For each set of alternatives
 - What contrast does Jesus present?
 - How might we be ‘tricked’ and find ourselves outside the kingdom or ‘destroyed’?
 - How can we respond rightly and enter the kingdom of heaven?
 - a. Two Paths (v13-14)
 - b. Two Trees (v 15-20)
 - c. Two Claims (v 21-23)
 - d. Two Houses (v 24-27)
4. What have been the main things that have ‘struck you’ from reading the Sermon on the Mount?
5. What response do you need to make? Do you need to enter the kingdom? Do you need to put something specific right in your heart, or in your actions? How can you do this?
6. Pray together for each other to hear Jesus’ words and act on them – and build our houses on the rock!

