



series: [The Sermon on the Mount \(a continuation of There Has To Be a Better Way\)](#)
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THE BETTER WAY

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

By Danny Hall

“Why am I here?” That’s a question that all of us need to ask, both individually and corporately. It’s a very interesting phenomenon that we are together at this time and place, and that our lives are intersecting. We are joined together in this portion of the body of Christ, and it’s appropriate for us to ask why God has placed this unique mix of people, gifts, personalities, and backgrounds here at this time, what it is that God is doing among us.

The words of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) are particularly helpful as we consider these questions. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is laying out for the people of his day, as well as for us, a new idea about what it means to be a part of the kingdom of God. He’s challenging us to think in different ways about what it means to be the church. The audience to whom he was speaking had a very clear idea of what the kingdom of God was about: it was about being Jewish, about being a nation that possessed the Law, the Torah, through a long-standing covenant with God. But those things that had been gifts from God had begun to be more important to them than God himself. So Jesus spoke to that, reorienting their thinking toward what God’s kingdom was truly about, what their place in it was, and what God was doing in his world and for his people. The Sermon on the Mount was perhaps Jesus’ first great teaching about God’s kingdom.

As we conclude this series, we’re going to look back at some of the things we’ve been learning. I’ll divide our review into three areas: Jesus as the King, the kingdom of God, and how God has called us to respond to his message of the King and his kingdom.

Let’s begin by looking at what the Sermon on the Mount teaches us about Jesus the King.

King Jesus

There are many things we could say, but I want to highlight three key themes in what Jesus teaches us about himself. First of all, he is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets—in other words, all that the Old Testament is about. As Jesus opens the sermon with the Beatitudes, he talks about the characteristics that exemplify the people of the kingdom of God. Associated with each of those characteristics is a blessing or reward: theirs is the kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted, they will inherit the earth, the longings of their soul will be satisfied, they will receive mercy, they will see God, they will be called God’s sons and daughters, and again, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. These rewards are the things that the people of Jesus’ day longed for. Throughout their whole history they had felt that they were a nation of privilege, but at this time they wondered what God was doing, because they found themselves a rather insignificant province on the outskirts of the Roman Empire, dominated by foreign rule. They longed for restoration to the greatness that they felt was rightfully theirs as the people of God, the possessors of Torah, the keepers of the traditions that had been handed down.

But Jesus approaches the kingdom of God in a totally different way. In 5:17 he makes a radical statement that would have caused his audience to stop dead in their tracks: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.” In that one grand, sweeping statement Jesus calls those people

to reorient their thinking. What was central in their life was the Torah, the Law itself, but Jesus says to them, “All that the Law and the Prophets point to is summed up or fulfilled in *me*.” What an incredibly bold, even brash statement by Jesus! I can almost hear the murmuring of the crowd, even voices of protest that might have been raised. But Jesus proclaims himself as the rightful object of their loyalty and their worship, not Torah, the traditions of their nation, or their ethnic pride, all the things that united them at that point. Jesus is the One who deserves our loyalty because he is the One to whom God has been pointing all along, the fulfillment of all God’s promises and plans.

Second, Jesus proclaims himself to be the true interpreter of the Law. At the end of the sermon, the crowds react in amazement that he has taught with authority. We see this authority in his proclaiming himself to be the true interpreter of God’s intent in the Old-Testament Law. In 5:21ff there is a series of teachings that we call the Antitheses, in which Jesus says, “You have heard it said...but I say...” about a number of things. Again and again he demonstrates that he alone has the right and the ability to correctly interpret the Law. For as Jesus shows them, the Law was a gracious gift from God to reveal his heart for them, not something that was to be worshiped itself, or minutely scrutinized and applied in hundreds of legalistic ways.

In calling the people to understand the true nature of the Law, Jesus tells them that this is the description of the heart of kingdom people. For example, in 5:43-48 Jesus says, “You have heard it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles [pagans, or the people who are outside of the family of God] do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect [complete], as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The normal approach people have to relationships is to be self-protective. Everyone wants to be nice to their friends and close loved ones. But Jesus says kingdom living goes deeper. It calls us to sacrificial living, even in relation to those who are our enemies. To demonstrate the ethic of love from God’s heart to us, we in turn show that love to others, and in so doing embody the very heart of the Law. So our focus is not on all the minute ways we might manipulate our obedience to the Law and to Christ to serve our own purposes; it rather reflects the heart of God toward us and toward all people. We move from selfish living to sacrificial living. Jesus, as the sole interpreter and the Lord of the Law, opens our hearts to that.

All of the Antitheses have this nature. The ones on sexual purity and immorality, for instance, are not designed to simply be restrictive; they show that God’s Law is designed to set us free from ourselves, from being caught in the web of pursuing our own selfish agendas at the expense of our spiritual and physical health, from using and abusing others. What Jesus is saying is that in the Law God has graciously opened up his heart to us, and let us know what kingdom life is all about. So when we follow Jesus and are loyal to him, our heart is transformed into a heart of love.

Third, Jesus reveals himself in this sermon as the Lord of all, who calls us to be part of a different kind of kingdom. Remember all those blessings that Israel longed for in the Beatitudes. Israel was trying to achieve them through military resistance or political organization in order to gain freedom from Rome and reestablish themselves as a national power. But Jesus’ kingdom is not a kingdom of political power; it is a kingdom of spiritual power that is designed to display God’s heart. Jesus’ description of kingdom people includes things like being poor in spirit (recognizing our absolute bankruptcy before God), mourning, being gentle, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, being merciful and pure in heart, and being peacemakers.

In another of Jesus’ very radical statements at the conclusion of this sermon, in 7:21-23 he says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is

in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’ In that closing warning Jesus claims for himself a place that would have radically shaken his hearers. Who was he to claim that he would be the One to whom they would answer someday? Jesus sets himself up as the final interpreter of the very heart of God, as the One who will stand in judgment over the hearts and intentions of all who have ever lived.

Jesus has portrayed himself in this sermon as the One who is the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament has pointed to, the true interpreter of God’s Law, and the Lord of God’s kingdom, over which he will one day preside as the final Judge of those who are in his kingdom and those who have missed it. This is a wonderful, powerful picture of King Jesus!

What kind of kingdom will this King have?

The kingdom of God

Obviously this kingdom will have its own set of values and its own agenda centered on the King. The problem you and I have as kingdom people is that we are most comfortable living out our lives according to our own agendas. From time to time we need to stop and think about how our lives are controlled by our own agendas, our own pursuits, and not those of King Jesus. We have ideas about what will make us prosperous, healthy, more comfortable, what will provide better for our families. Those agendas drive so much of what we are. But the question we need to ask is, what does a kingdom agenda look like?

The kingdom of God is simply the absolute, sovereign rule of God throughout his universe. He *is* God, and I am *not*. He is the One who is in control. King Jesus, his Son, is the Lord of his kingdom, and we owe our loyalty to him. Under this banner of the sovereignty of God, the Sermon on the Mount lays out two broad categories of calling for those who are part of his kingdom. First of all, we are to love God with our whole heart. The Sermon on the Mount talks about a relationship with God as what is important, not the performance of religious duties. That theme resounds throughout the whole teaching, perhaps most pointedly in chapter 6. In 6:1-18 Jesus reviews three of the most important spiritual disciplines of his day: giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. Note that Jesus doesn’t say that these are old, passé things that we need not participate in. He says, “*When you give to the poor,*” “*When you pray,*” “*When you fast.*” He assumes that part of the lifestyle of people who are serious about God will be attention to these things, because they draw us closer to God.

But he gives us a warning. He says, for example, “So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (6:2-4.)

Jesus says there are two ways to approach the spiritual activity that can build your faith. You can do it simply as performance of a duty, and hope that other people will think what a good Christian you are. And if you do that, you’re going to get exactly what you want—other people will take note of that. But that’s all you’re going to get. All of us fall into this trap from time to time. But what we barter away by doing that is important to see. Jesus says when we strip away that motivation, and enter into purely seeking after God for his glory, so that our acts of spiritual discipline—giving, praying, fasting, or anything else we do to grow our faith—are done from a heart of really wanting to honor God and seek him, then what we get is God himself! For he sees the nature of our heart, and he rewards those who practice those things in secret. So what’s at stake here is not some kind of conformity to a religious code, but the very presence of the living God himself in our lives, the possibility of living in fellowship with him, having intimacy with him. So our first great calling is to love God passionately, and that is reflected in our desire for intimacy with him, not caring about living up to someone else’s standards, but trying to honor him in all that we do, seeking his heart.

The other broad calling laid out in the Sermon on the Mount is to love others. That is Jesus' explanation of the Law. We express our love for God by sacrificially loving one another. So I am willing to deny my own needs, drives, cravings—my own agenda—that I might love you completely and passionately as God would have—and not just if I like you, but even if you're my enemy, and you have ill will toward me at heart.

What happens if we live sacrificially for others? Jesus tells us one thing that might happen—we might die for our faith. But we ought to rejoice when we're persecuted for living a life of radical love for people, because we're in good company! That's the way the prophets and all the great men and women of God throughout history have lived. They were willing to pay that price. So we ought to rejoice and be glad, for our reward in heaven is great! God calls us to live on the edge, sacrificially, to give ourselves completely to the good of others, to love people passionately, to put ourselves outside of our comfort zone, to look for that kingdom way of living that isn't driven by our own agenda, but is driven by a love for God and a love for others. It's when we do this that the wonderful description Jesus gives of kingdom people as the salt of the earth and the light of the world comes to fruition. The world can see us living by a different agenda, not one of selfishness, but one of selfless, radical love for others in response to God's love for us.

We have many wonderful examples of people in our own body who live sacrificially for others. Ginger and I recently attended a fundraising banquet for New Creation Home, a beautiful ministry in East Palo Alto that ministers to young mothers. We heard stories of people who were willing to give up their own comforts, and in some ways their own privacy, to sacrificially love people who aren't normally loved by the world, to care for them, to extend themselves for that purpose.

I want to highlight two other special groups in our body that are demonstrating the kingdom value of loving others in Christ's name. Some of the leaders are going to share their experiences as part of this message. One group is made up of various ministries at Stanford University. God is doing something new and wonderful at Stanford, and these leaders are going to tell you about it. The other group is about to go on a medical mission trip to Mexico. They're leaving their comfort zone to love people in the name of Christ as part of this body.

First our college pastor, Mike Benkert, is going to tell you about what's happening at Stanford.

Mike Benkert:

“A couple of years ago when I first started working with college students, I was surprised to learn that there were more than twenty-five different Christian groups at Stanford, and yet these groups rarely if ever did anything together. But last year, it was a great joy for me to work together with some other people God has placed on that campus, for the sake of the gospel. Among these is Steve Stenstrom, who has been working with athletes at Stanford for the last few years, and now he and his wife Laurie run Kingdom First Ministries there. Also among these is Ron, a.k.a. Spud, Sanders, who for five years now has been the director of Campus Crusade for Christ. He and his wife Bonnie also attend church here at PBC. And finally, there is Bruce Huber, who for the last three years has been the minister to university students from Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. Lately our partnership has taken an amazing turn, and Steve will tell you how that all got started.”

Steve Stenstrom:

“It was just about a year ago that I found myself first pursuing a passion that the Lord had given me to reach the Stanford community by bringing guest speakers to the campus, to help the students engage with the secular thought that's all around them. So I decided to talk with Mike and Spud and Bruce about the possibility of their ministries being involved as well. We all agreed that this was a need, and we wanted to work together, so we began to meet on a regular basis. We would pray and dream and strategize together. Ultimately that project came to a close, but we looked at each other and said, ‘We've got to do things like this together more frequently.’ Our students were absolutely loving the experience of being together, and we were really enjoying pursuing God's work on campus together.”

Mike Benkert:

“Then sometime last winter, God began to open our eyes to something even bigger than just partnering on specific events on campus. The recognition came when we were having a meeting in the Student Union Building, and we were asking if we were being effective with our ministries on campus. We realized that we had the same heart, the same vision and passion to see God work on campus, yet all four of our groups were meeting on the same night on campus, and actually three of our groups were meeting at the exact same time, within a hundred yards of each other. So we began to pursue how God might have us work together.”

Steve Stenstrom:

“Over the course of the spring, we continued to pray and try to decide if it might be feasible for us to bring our groups completely together. In the end we came to the conclusion that what we had in common was much bigger and more important than anything that might keep us apart. So we’re thrilled to announce that starting this week, when the students return to campus, our groups are going to be meeting together every Thursday night on campus under the new name Mosaic. We feel that this name captures the fact that our God is uniquely able to take a diverse set of individual pieces and put them together in a way that is beautiful.”

Mike Benkert:

“We are tremendously encouraged by the enthusiasm of this body, and we’re so excited to see what God will do through Mosaic. It’s our heart that God would transform not only our community as we grow in him, but also the wider community around us as we serve and reach out with the love of Christ. We would love to have your prayers for us as we begin this year, and we’re so grateful for PBC’s support of this. After all, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, and we hope that our partnership will be a vivid example on the Stanford campus of the richness of God’s family.”

Now Mike Forster, one of the leaders of the team that is headed out to Mexico, is going to share briefly. They’re going to minister to some of the poorest of the poor, who get little opportunity to have medical treatment, or even love.

Mike Forster:

“Thirteen of us will be leaving next week. It will actually be our second trip to two villages outside of Cuernavaca, which is just outside of Mexico City. We’ll run a medical clinic for five days at these two villages, seeing probably four to five hundred patients. We would ask you to pray for a few things: for travel mercies, that God will help us to get all the medicines and supplies through customs and successfully into Mexico, then for us individually and as a team, that the Lord will be with us during this time, and also with the Mexican team we’ll be working with from the Amistad church, for our teamwork all together, and finally, for those people that we will see and minister to during that time, that we could share God’s love with them and serve them.”

These are great examples of the kingdom values we’re talking about!

The Kingdom of God exists under the lordship of King Jesus, and it has distinct values that call us to love God fully and to love people in his name. How is Jesus calling us as his people to respond to the message of the Sermon on the Mount?

How do we respond?

There are many things we could say. I want to suggest to you four things that we need to choose in response. First of all, we need to choose wisely how we live. Jesus gives us all kinds of warnings. We are faced with choices about whom we’ll be loyal to and how we’ll live. Jesus warns us that the world itself is going to offer us all kinds of things that will entice us. The world can sometimes be very, very appealing, and sometimes the way

of following Christ is very difficult. Jesus describes those as a broad way and a narrow way, respectively. The broad, easy way of the world looks very beautiful and productive and rewarding, and the way of the kingdom looks very narrow. But the broad way leads to destruction, and the narrow way leads to life in the King, forever and ever. Jesus also says there are going to be different voices offering all kinds of new ideas about spirituality, religion, philosophy, and ways to approach life. We must listen for the voice of God, the voice of truth, recognizing that the fruit of all those other ideas again leads to destruction. Jesus finally says that we're going to be caught up in the distraction of our own flesh, our own self-righteousness, trying merely to feel good about ourselves through religious activity, but doing that may cause us to miss the very heart of God. So we need to choose wisely to follow the King, to love him passionately; and when we choose to listen to his words and act on what he's teaching us, we're building on the firm foundation that is Jesus Christ himself.

Second, we need to choose to pursue intimacy with God. God opens the door for us to draw near to him. As James 4:8 says, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." What do we need to do to cultivate the intimacy with God that he offers us? How can we alter the way we live and prioritize the things of our lives so that we have a "space" where we can actually live in intimacy with him? Are we willing to set aside some of our busy-ness, to carve out the quiet moments that we need in prayer and in his word? Are we going to seek the heart of God in order that we might have a life of godliness?

Third, we need to choose to radically commit ourselves to each other. One of the more pointed passages in the Sermon on the Mount is found in the beginning of chapter 7, where Jesus says, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged." It's often interpreted to mean we should never make moral distinctions. But what he is saying is, "Stop the old judgmental, critical spirit. Stop going after each other and backbiting." We need to be so radically committed to each other that we're willing to be vulnerable to one another, so that you can take the speck out of my eye so that I can see clearly to take it out of yours. Nothing hinders that like a judgmental, critical spirit that allows me simply to focus on your problems without addressing my own. Again, we have to ask the question, what will we do to alter our lives and priorities so that we can have that deep connection with each other, so that we can truly encourage each other in our spiritual growth? We have to choose to live our lives at such a pace and in such a direction that we can connect intimately and deeply with other Christians, so that we might be nurtured as the body of Christ to be the kind of people God wants us to be.

Finally, and perhaps most foundationally, we need to choose to simply trust God, to believe that he will supply all that we need in order to do what he calls us to do; and to believe that his way is best. "But seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (6:33). "All these things" are the things that we worry about—how we're going to take care of ourselves, how we're going to pay our bills, how we're going to get along in this life. Jesus says, "Lay all your worries aside and focus on me and my kingdom, and I'll supply all that." Do we believe that God is good and that we can trust him? Do we find the very idea of following him and being kingdom people overwhelming? Jesus reminds us in 7:7, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." Everything we need, God stands ready and willing to give to us. He asks us to trust him as a loving Father who will supply not just our physical sustenance, but our spiritual sustenance. He's given us new life in Christ and placed his Holy Spirit within us, and he empowers us to live to his glory. So we need to walk out in faith.

This is the wonderful, beautiful calling and promise of God. May we choose wisely to follow Christ our King, to develop that relationship with him, to develop our relationships with each other, and to trust him for everything we need. If we can be that kind of people, we can make a powerful difference in our world.

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