

A NEW WAY TO LIVE

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 5:1-2

1st Message

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I brought a prop for my message this morning. It's a pair of sunglasses. You see, I almost always buy cheap sunglasses because I'm always losing them. But the problem with cheap sunglasses is that they are ... cheap.

These sunglasses have lots of scratches on them from being thrown in my backpack during summer. In the middle of the lens, on the left side, some of the coating has been scraped away.

This means that whenever I wear them, something is just a bit off. I can't see the problem when they're on my face, but nothing looks quite right. There's only one way to figure out what's going on---I need to take off the sunglasses and inspect them, and then I can see the problem.

We're starting a new preaching series this morning. At PBC, we believe that the Bible is God's clearest revelation to us. So the best thing I can do as a preacher is to help us understand God's words rather than come up with my own. Because this book connects together, the best way to understand it is to read it in large sections. So today we're starting to look at a section in the Gospel of Matthew that most people refer to as the Sermon on the Mount.

It's a message that Jesus delivered to a crowd of people early in his ministry on earth. What we have in the Bible is most likely a summary of the sermon; the author Matthew has collected what Jesus said and put it together for us so that we can receive it today.

Next week we'll look at the first part of the message in which Jesus talks about who is blessed. "Blessed are the poor in spirit;" "Blessed are the meek," etc. The first part of the message isn't the only part that has to do with blessing. The entire sermon is about how to receive the blessing of God. Or to put it in non-church terms: how to live the good life.

That's why we've entitled the series "Blessed Are." I like this title because it captures the sense of possibility.

"Blessed Are" is not a full sentence; you're invited to finish it. Blessed are... who? Could it be us? That's what we're going to explore together.

Let's get back to my sunglasses. I don't know if you're familiar with that sense that something is just off, that something isn't quite right. I suspect you are. In fact, I think that this is one of the first things that we become aware of as we grow up. Early on in childhood, I think we all start to realize that something in this world just isn't right. Things could be better than they are.

I think we have a general sense of this all the time. Life could be different. But there are times where we face challenges that bring this sense to the surface. Our health fails; something terrible happens; we struggle with our own feelings. Then we know that something is really wrong.

This past year has been that kind of a season for me. I shared more about it a few weeks ago during our Psalms series in the summer. I've been experiencing challenges related to anxiety and trauma, and they've forced me to look at how I live my life a bit differently. In this season, I've encountered Christ in a new way.

The Sermon on the Mount has been part of that. I'm learning to experience the kingdom of heaven in a new way. My walk with Jesus has grown to a new depth. That's partly why I'm so excited to be studying these words of Jesus.

I'm not the only one who has found this message powerful. Many people have commented on what a uniquely powerful passage this is.

Thomas Jefferson called it "the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered."¹ More studies have been done on this group of Jesus' sayings than any other.

Franklin D. Roosevelt claimed, "I doubt if there is any problem in the world today—social, political, or economic—that would not find happy solution if approached in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount."²

Even Mathama Gandhi said, “If I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, ‘O yes, I am a Christian.’”³

This sermon of Jesus has great power. For people who can tell that something in their lives isn’t working, these words offer an alternative. The Sermon on the Mount describes a new way to live.

Some of you have known Jesus for a very long time. Some of you are new to faith. Some of you believe but feel God is distant. Some of you don’t believe, but you’re here exploring what Jesus is about. I’m convinced God has something powerful for all of us through these words.

We’re only going to look at the first few sentences of the passage which set the stage for Jesus’ great sermon. We won’t explore the sermon itself yet, but it’s important that we set the context, so we’ll gain a sense of what God has in store for us through this sermon series.

A good message addresses a problem. People don’t go out into the wilderness to hear someone talk about interesting ideas. They go because it might change their life; it might solve their problems.

We’ll be asking three questions by way of introduction. What’s wrong? What problem is Jesus really addressing? Why did crowds in the first century listen to it? What’s right? What’s the solution that he is offering? What power could it have for us? And what’s next? Where are we supposed to go from here?

My earnest prayer is that we can hear these words of Jesus and that they can transform our lives.

What’s wrong

Sermons are never isolated events. This message came in a unique place, at a particular time to a specific group of people.

Jesus delivered this message in the first century in a hilly area near the Sea of Galilee in what is now modern-day Israel. The people who lived there were Jewish. Those in the hills were shepherds and farmers. Those near the lake were fishermen.

The entire region, along with all of the land of Israel, was occupied by the Roman Empire. Soldiers were everywhere. Herod was the ruler. Herod’s building programs developed larger cities of over ten thousand people. The Jewish people near the Sea of Galilee were

rural people, surrounded by a political and financial empire. Their way of life always was under threat from Rome, and they lived with great stress and anxiety.

In spite of this, or maybe because of it, these Jews had an incredibly strong sense of identity. Their Law stood at the center of how they thought of themselves. What they called the Torah was a set of instructions that had been given by God to a prophet named Moses over two thousand years earlier.

This is one of the most famous scenes of the Bible. Moses had just led his people out of slavery in Egypt. Then he ascended a mountain for forty days and came down with the Law which would define the people of God for thousands of years.

These were the people that came to hear Jesus’ message. Why did they come? What did Jesus do before this which made them interested?

At the beginning of Matthew 3, we meet John the Baptist. He comes on the scene with a unique message. Then in the middle of chapter 4, Jesus begins his ministry, preaching the exact same message. This message is critical to understanding what Jesus was trying to do when he began this sermon.

Matthew 4:17:

(Jesus says)

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

If I tell you to “repent”, we think that what I want to you to do is to feel bad about something you’ve done. That’s pretty much what our word means. Oxford Dictionary defines it as “feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one’s wrongdoing or sin.”

That definition doesn’t capture very well what Jesus probably meant when he spoke these words. The Greek word used here literally means “to change one’s thinking.” It’s not just feeling bad about something; it’s also changing to something new. Real repentance includes both the turning away from something and turning toward something new.

What I love about these particular sunglasses is that they offer a guarantee. If I lose them or break them, I can replace them for free. Of course, I have to pay \$10 shipping and handling, which is probably about what they are worth.

When I can tell that something is off with my sunglasses, I take them off and examine them. I see the problem, and I order new ones. The new ones arrive, and finally, I can see clearly.

That's repentance—recognizing that something is off; examining the way you've been doing something; changing to a new way, and enjoying the benefits of a transformed life.

So when Jesus says "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near", this is what he's talking about. He's inviting the people of his day to examine their lives: stop; reflect; take off your glasses; see what's wrong, and find a new way to live.

Jesus describes that new way as the kingdom of heaven and says that it is near to them. This kingdom is something available to them to experience. The Sermon on the Mount paints a picture of what life in that kingdom looks like.

Jesus comes to a particular group of people in the first century with their problems and offers them this possibility. They come to him in huge numbers to hear what he has to say because they think he can solve their problems.

If we're going to receive this sermon for ourselves, then we need to start where they were starting. What are our problems? We need to explore that sense that something is just off and expect that God has something to say to address it.

So we start by asking the simple question, What's wrong?

Where are you? What's wrong? What has brought you here this morning?

This summer we heard a series of sermons on the Psalms. We asked people to share a Psalm that was particularly meaningful to them in their spiritual lives. I enjoyed hearing so many personal stories of how God worked deeply in people's lives.

Most of those stories were about how God met us in times of pain and hurt. We heard about loneliness, anxiety, depression, anger, overwhelmed by the pace of life, desire, and hopelessness.

I've noticed this about the way God works: he tends to meet us most powerfully in the parts of our lives where

we suffer. I know that it's challenging to walk into here with all your guards up for being out in public, but I'm asking you to invite the Holy Spirit into that place of hurt in your life.

You know where it is. Maybe only you know. Where is the scratch on your sunglasses? Where is life not working? Where is that place in your heart where only Jesus can speak into? Start there. Then you'll be ready to receive these words.

What's right

Now we get to the two verses we're looking at today. They're mostly an introduction to the sermon itself, but we're going to see that there is a lot of meaning in these two verses.

Matthew 5:1-2:

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

There are three simple phrases I'd like to look at here. We'll walk through them, and I'll point out a few things.

"Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain,"

Jesus was surrounded by a crowd, so he walks up a mountain. There is a purely practical aspect to this movement. It's easier to hear if you can stand above a crowd and project down to them.

But something much bigger is going on. Remember how Moses received the Law from God? Remember how that Law defined these people? What made them unique and special and set apart was that they had the Law.

Now we have a scene that mirrors that famous scene in the Old Testament. Jesus, surrounded by a crowd, goes up on a mountain. It's as if Jesus is the new Moses and he is about to receive some kind of new revelation from God—a revelation that has the potential not only to be helpful to these people around the Sea of Galilee but could also define a group of people for thousands of years to come.

But then things take a different turn.

"When he sat down, his disciples came to him."

It doesn't make sense for Jesus to sit down. Moses didn't sit down. You can project your voice better if you're standing. People can see you better. It makes a lot more sense if you're talking to a group of people to be standing up.

Sitting down meant something in the ancient world. Normally, the very important people sat down—kings had thrones; judges had seats of judgment. Sitting meant that you spoke with authority. That's exactly what people noticed about Jesus' teaching. In the very last verses, we read that "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority" (Matt 7:28b-29a).

Then his disciples came to him. Why are they called out as separate from the crowds? The next phrase sheds some light on that question.

He opened his mouth and taught them,

This is a very strange phrase. If you're describing someone giving a message you don't normally say that they opened their mouth; this is assumed. So what's going on?

Back in chapter 4, Jesus was being tempted by the devil. Jesus hadn't eaten for several weeks, and Satan asked him to turn a stone into bread. He said this in Matthew 4:4, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

"Every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Now Jesus is up on the mountain like Moses, but he sits down, which is not like Moses. His disciples come to him, and he opens his mouth. The scene of Moses receiving the Law is being repeated. The surprise is that Jesus isn't Moses.

Jesus isn't receiving a new Law; he's the one giving it. His disciples are receiving it, along with the crowds. Jesus is the position of God and his disciples are in the position of Moses.

This is no ordinary sermon from an earthly teacher. This is God speaking a new kind of truth for a new kind of kingdom. This brilliant sermon stands at the center of Jesus' teaching. We get a glimpse into the kingdom of heaven to see what it's like. We put on brand new sunglasses and see clearly for the first time.

We come to Jesus with an awareness of what's wrong. In this sermon, Jesus shows us what's right.

When we first read the sermon, it doesn't always seem that way. At first, it seems this is just a new set of laws which are even harder to follow than the first set.

After all, many of the statements are in the form of something like this: "You've heard it said not to murder, but I tell you not even to be angry." It's as if Jesus is saying, "You've heard that you have to jump ten feet in the air, but I tell you that you actually have to jump one hundred feet in the air."

If we read the sermon that way, we are misunderstanding Jesus' intention. He's not telling us about a new set of expectations God has for us. He's giving us a new set of expectations that we can have for life.

What if we could live in a world without anger? What if we were satisfied with what we had and didn't lust for more? What if people treated each other the way they wanted to be treated? What if even the poor in spirit lived the good life? What if whenever anyone said "yes", they meant it? What if... What if...

Isn't this the kind of kingdom you'd like to live in? Wasn't Franklin Roosevelt correct? Without anger and lust and malice and envy and manipulation, what problems would remain?

Don't you long for this kind of life? I don't want to be angry. Anger is a miserable experience. I don't want to be full of lust because it makes me dissatisfied with the good things God has given me. I don't want to be materialistic. I know it's a trap that never fulfills me.

I desperately want to live like this. The picture that Jesus paints here is incredible. If I read this as an impossible law, I lose hope. But if I see it as the kind of life that is available to me and the type of world that I could live in, then I want it. I want to live in this kind of a world.

How do we get there? If this is what's right, how do our lives move in this direction? We've seen what's wrong in our hearts. Jesus shows us what's right through his words in the sermon. Our final question: what's next?

What's next

There is a verse in the middle of the sermon which helps to make that answer clearer.

Matthew 5:20:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Again, on a first reading this might sound like he's saying, You have to be better than the scribes and Pharisees to ever have a chance at making it into heaven. But Jesus isn't talking about the old way of doing things. He's not saying that you have to be better than the Pharisees according to the old rules.

He's saying that this kingdom has brand new rules. It's what theologians sometimes call the new covenant. That's a new kind of arrangement that God makes with his people. It's a new way to live.

We know something is wrong, and we want to live rightly. What we get from Jesus is an entirely new kind of “right” than what the Pharisees meant by being right.

Jesus thinks we can live differently. So how do we get there? What's next?

We have an advantage that the people sitting with Jesus didn't have. We know that Jesus died and rose back to life so that we can live this way. When that happened, the kingdom of heavens invaded earth.

We don't live this way by trying harder. We live this way because we have the author of these words living within us. There's explanations of this throughout the Bible, but one of the best spoken by Paul in Galatians.

Galatians 2:20:

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

This is the new agreement that makes this kind of life possible. It's possible through the presence of Christ in us; however, it's not automatic.

Like anything in life, we learn to do this. Living by faith in the Son of God is something we grow into. Disciples are learners. Learning takes time and practice. This is the Christian life. Learning is a process, but there are also turning points—times when we see something new.

Let's be honest. Most of the time, we don't live in the kingdom of heavens, not in church; not in Christian families, or in our own hearts. But the way to live in this kingdom is not to aim at the standards.

Remember, the Sermon on the Mount is not a new set of laws to live up to. It's a description of what life in the kingdom of the heavens looks like. The way to live in that kingdom is simply to live with Jesus as our king. We choose to live in his kingdom even as we continue to take part of the kingdom on earth. That's why later in the sermon he will teach us to pray that his will would be done on earth just like it is already being done in heaven.

Dallas Willard puts it this way, “The eternal life of which Jesus speaks is not knowledge about God but an intimately interactive relationship with him.”⁴

Simply put, we walk every day with Jesus, and the words of this sermon help us to do that.

We were trying to think of a way to help these words of Jesus impact us more, so we came up with a challenge for us.

We'll be studying this Sermon for the next five months. The Sermon is a little over one hundred verses. Each week we're studying only 3-8 verses at a time. So the pastors thought, “What if we tried to memorize the passage together each week?”

If we did, by the end of our series, we'd have the entire Sermon on the Mount memorized.

If you were here last week, you heard Dan Westman recite Psalm 103 from memory. His speaking of that Psalm was remarkable; it was unlike most of the times we read from the Bible because he had memorized it. He knew the words and he could speak them from his heart.

That's what we're hoping for. So every Monday, we'll be sending out each passage on our Facebook and Instagram channels. That's a great reason to follow us on Instagram or join our Facebook group. We are @peninsulabilechurch for both channels. Or you can find the links on the bottom of our website.

My suggestion is that you read the passage out loud at least once every day by Sunday. If you do that, you'll probably have it memorized by Sunday morning. Each week when we gather, we'll stand and recite the passage. If you forgot, or decided not to memorize it, or are new—that's fine; we'll have the passage projected on the screens as well.

I'm eager to see what this does for us. I think these words will change us. I'm eager to see God transform me and us through this sermon. These words can help us walk every day with Jesus.

Conclusion

All of us walked in to this room this morning wearing glasses that skew the way we see the world. It's time we take those glasses off, examine them, and see the world through a new lens.

That's what this sermon from Jesus offers us. It's a new picture of the kingdom of heavens. And Jesus can use it to speak to us no matter where we are or what the state of our faith is. This really is a new way for all of us to live.

The kingdom of heaven is near because the king has arrived. We have hope because we want to live in the kind of world that he describes. And that is made possible because of Christ and the Spirit in my life.

We'll never entirely get there. We studied the book of Revelation last year to see how God finally brings the kingdom of heaven down to earth. But we can live a transformed life as we wait. That's the invitation to us this morning. Jesus concludes his sermon with an invitation to take his words seriously

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

May we hear his words and do them. May we read them and recite them. May his words lodge themselves deep within our hearts. And may we experience the kingdom of heaven on earth. Our father, who are in heaven, may you transform our lives by the power of your Spirit and the presence of your Son. Amen.

Endnotes

- 1 Thomas Jefferson, Letter: Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 12 October 1813, *Founders Online*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-06-02-0431>.
- 2 Franklin Roosevelt, *AZ Quotes*, <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/881974?ref=sermon-on-the-mount>.
- 3 Mahatma Gandhi, *AZ Quotes*, <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1290091?ref=sermon-on-the-mount>.
- 4 Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (HarperOne e-Books, 2009).