

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Sermon on the Mount: A New Call to God's Kingdom

by Dan Trygg

“When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the hill; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And opening His mouth, He was teaching them...”

Matthew 5:1,2

Matthew 5-7, commonly known as the sermon on the mount, is the first of five major teaching interludes in the gospel of Matthew (5:1-7:29; 10:1-42; 13:1-53; 18:1-35; 23:1-25:46). Matthew was writing to Jews, either new Christians or people interested in finding out more about Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Christians called the Christ (anointed-king = Messiah) from God. Thus, **in presenting his story of Jesus, Matthew is very careful to emphasize and highlight those aspects that would have special meaning to his audience.** For example, he already carefully established Jesus' lineage as being from David (1:1-17; cf. 2 Sam. 7:12,16; Isa. 11:1-10), the greatest king of Israel's past. He also used instances of fulfilled prophecy in the circumstances of Jesus' life (1:23; 2:6,15,18,23; 4:14-16) as evidence to support the possibility that Jesus could be the promised Messiah.

Matthew also designed the structure of his gospel to appeal to his Jewish audience. The fact that there are five “discourses” or extended teaching sections, is reminiscent of the Pentateuch, i.e., the first five books of the Old Testament which make up the Torah. Another signal, which would have been obvious to the first century Jew, has to do with the setting of this first discourse, “...He went up on the mountain...”. This Greek phrase Matthew used is the *exact phrase* as in the Greek Septuagint translation of the OT in Exodus 19:3; 24:18; and 34:4. All three of these passages refer to Moses going up on Mount Sinai. The first two occurrences sandwich in the giving of the Law by God, and the third occurrence took place when Moses went up the mountain again to get a copy of the Law, having broken the original set which God had given. This parallel would have been too direct to miss. **Just as Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive the Law of God, and God spoke on the mountain, ...now, some 1500 years later, Jesus, ...“God-with-us” (Matt. 1:23)..., went up on the mountain to speak out the words of His kingdom and to show how He had come to fulfill the Law.** Furthermore, just as the Mount Sinai experience was *the offer of God's covenant* with Israel to become His own people, a people who were to be a set-apart nation, a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:3-6), in the same way **Jesus was calling out people anew to walk in the power and reality of the kingdom of heaven.**

The parallelism becomes even more clear when you compare the content of what Jesus was saying. He was clearly establishing a new kingdom, ...or, more accurately, renewing the kingdom-call to a new generation. **He was calling His followers to a very different kind of walk than what they had come to expect, in order to truly fulfill God's plan for His people.** Up until now, Jesus had been telling the crowds to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”. Now, **He begins to speak more directly about that kingdom, and what it would mean for those who would dare to identify with it and really pursue living it out.**

Unlike the Sinai declaration, Jesus begins *not* with ten commandments, but with *eight declarations of happiness*, “...blessed, happy, fortunate are...”. These are promises for those who would be kingdom-people, focusing on the upside-down nature of God's kingdom compared with the expectations of the world. **There is significance to the number eight. While the number seven was a number of completion,** the fulfillment or end of something, **the number eight was a number of new beginnings.** Eight persons were saved through the flood, and started a new population of the earth. A Jewish boy was circumcised on the eighth day, which was an initiation into the covenant of Abraham and his identification with the people of God. (Even Jesus' resurrection happened on the eighth day, the first day *after* the sabbath or seventh day. It could be viewed simultaneously as the eighth day of one week, and the first day of a new week, a new beginning.) **For Jesus' listeners that day, His choice to use eight declarations of happiness instead of ten commandments, would have indicated both an initiation of a new covenant, and also described a fundamental difference in the character of this new kingdom.**

It is important to note that **Jesus' listeners here were already outwardly part of God's kingdom.** They were Jews, physically, and God had made a covenant with them that, if they continued to walk in His commandments, they would be His people and He would be their God. The problem was that no one kept the Law perfectly, and **religious leaders had added hundreds of extra rules that were meant to clarify the Law, but only made it burdensome.** Many had felt that they could not possibly please God, and had all but given up.

The good news for them was that they could start over, clean and new (“Repent, and be baptized.”), **and that the way of God's kingdom was open to them.** Jesus did not tell them to become believers in God, because they already were. **What He *did* call them to do is to follow Him and His teachings.** He would not lower the standard of

the Law, but He was going to cut through the religious gobbledy-gook that had added only confusion. **At the heart of His teaching was a call to put aside the practice of religious duties to be seen by other people.** Those looking for human approval, or pride in performance in comparison with others, will not have intimacy with God. **In the same way, materialism was not OK with Jesus.** We are not to focus on what money can bring, to inordinately seek wealth, or be anxious for what material needs we may have. Our Father in heaven knows what we need. We cannot be devoted to two masters. We cannot serve God and the god of wealth. **Jesus calls us to not compare ourselves with others, and to be very cautious about judging others,** knowing that the same standard by which we would judge others will be applied to us. We are to pray with confidence and perseverance, knowing that our Father in heaven will act on our behalf.

The focus of the message is to be doing the good works that come from good hearts. Those who are evil cannot consistently do good, and eventually will become evident. The Jews, and especially those who had become followers of Jesus, were the salt of the earth. They must retain their unique flavor, or they would be of no benefit at all. They are the light of the world, and must not hide their light. Instead, they are to let their light shine before people so that they may see their good works and glorify God. **Doing the will of the Father is the key. Knowing the Scriptures counts for nothing if one is not living them.** Even religious behavior, miracles or what appears to be authority over the demonic mean nothing, if that is only a compartment of a person's life. **Radical obedience to the Father's will, a whole life dedicated and activated for Him, is what Jesus was after.** This was not the typical path that people were going. It was a call to turn aside from the crowd and get serious in following God, and His will. Those who do not do this will find destruction. **Those who make the choice to follow the narrow path will find that it is difficult, ...not easy. For those who press on, however, life and fulfillment await them.**

The kingdom Jesus described in these three chapters was strikingly different than that of the world system, or even first century Judaism. In many ways, **the values and perspective of the kingdom of God were upside down from the kingdom of this age.** In addition, **the kingdom rallying cry Jesus issued called for a lifestyle and spirituality that went much deeper and was more extensive than the religious expectations of His day.**

For example, those who are happy in the world system are those who are full, rich and self-satisfied. In the kingdom of God, those are happy who know their inner emptiness, and who grieve and lament over the sin and brokenness in and around them. Instead of being arrogant and domineering, they are meek and gentle. They hunger and thirst for inner righteousness, and are compassionate and merciful to others. They are pure in heart, and work to reconcile others. They are misunderstood, maligned, falsely-accused and persecuted, and yet they have joy. God will *respond* to them, and will open His heart and His kingdom to them.

Those who are part of this kingdom are on mission. They are not just living for themselves. They are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Their lives will affect those around them, and will reveal God's heart. **Through their kind and helpful deeds, they will cause those they help to praise and glorify God.**

Jesus called those who follow Him to a righteousness that exceeded the demands of the Law, and even went beyond the strictest religious devotees of that day. While they were focused on limiting their expressions of anger, *Jesus* taught reconciliation. While they were judging the extremes of lustful behavior, *Jesus* advocated purity of heart. While they debated the permissibility of divorce, *Jesus* called for faithful commitment. While they created all kinds of ritual vows, arguing about which vow would be binding upon a person, *Jesus* advocated simply doing as you say. While they argued for fair retribution, *Jesus* preached responding to evil with grace. While they advocated loving your neighbor, and hating your enemy, *Jesus* exhorted His followers to love even those who hate them. **Instead of focusing on behavior, Jesus focused on the heart.**

The same could be said of religious disciplines, ...things like helping the poor, prayer and fasting. While the "religious people" made a great show of such things, "in order to be seen by others", **Jesus advocated doing these things in secret, so there could be no mixed motives. If they were doing these things for God, they would do them on their own, ...from the heart, not to impress others.**

The inner nature will be made known by the outward behavior. Just as a tree is known by its fruit, so the hearts and character of people will be evidenced by their actions and attitudes. **The kingdom of God is for those who are willing to follow Him as their King.** You cannot call Jesus, "Lord, Lord", and not do what He says. **Those who are wise will take seriously the call to obedience.** They will not do a hasty "gloss over" to have an appearance of righteousness. **They will dig deep and build their lives around responding to Jesus.**

The unmistakable, central teaching of Jesus' message is that He is the King!! The new beginning, the new covenant, the new people of God, the new kingdom of God is for those who will choose Jesus as King.