

Jesus: The New Moses

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in an eight-week series

June 21, 2020

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Matthew 4:23-5:16(NRSV)

²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. ²⁴So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. ²⁵And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Who but God can speak with the authority of God?

God led the Israelites to Mt. Sinai after their flight from slavery in Egypt. There, Moses ascended the mountain and received the Law from God. He then came down the mountain and presented God’s Law to the gathered people of God. Though we often refer to this Law as the Law of Moses, that is really a bit of a misnomer, for it is God’s Law, not Moses’s. He is the official spokesman, but it is the Law of God. Similarly, though Moses is the one who chosen to be the agent of God’s work, it is God who frees the Israelite slaves and it is the Spirit of God, in the fiery pillar, who leads them to Mt. Sinai.

The parallels between Jesus and Moses are so striking that we often describe Jesus as a new Moses. But even this only goes so far. Yes, Jesus leads his disciples up a “mountain” to teach them, but he does so with the authority of God, not that of a mere spokesman or prophet. Jesus speaks and acts as if he is God! See the text box on page two for a leading rabbi’s take on this. The Sermon on the Mount is spoken with the authority of God in every word.

The Sermon on the Mount

Spanning three chapters, the Sermon on the Mount is the largest and longest block of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew’s Gospel. Though we may not realize it, much of the Sermon on the Mount is familiar even to Christians who don’t read the Bible. In it we find the Lord’s prayer, the Beatitudes, the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” lust in the heart¹, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, “love your

¹In 1976, presidential candidate Jimmy Carter gave an interview to Playboy magazine in which he said that though he had never had an affair, he had “lusted in his heart.” This got a lot of public attention at the

enemies,” “do not judge, so that you may not be judged,” the narrow gate, wolves in sheep’s clothing, houses built on rocks v. houses built on sand – all this and much more. With so much here, the obvious question is what do we do with it all? How do we begin to make sense of it?

Because there is so much in the Sermon on the Mount that seems far removed from the “real world,” many Christians tend to see the Sermon as an impossible ideal reflecting a world that will be great when it comes . . . but sure has little to do with the lives we lead right now! Even when we correctly understand that the Sermon is about the Kingdom of God, we think of the Kingdom as some future-only reality, rather than remembering that the Kingdom is *present-but-still coming* or *already/not yet*, to go back to last week. In the end, reading the Sermon on the Mount as if it is a wonderful, but impossible, ideal is the one thing we cannot do.

Training in the Kingdom of Heaven²

Richard Hays³ notes that Jesus as an authoritative teacher is a dominant theme of Matthew’s Gospel. The church is seen as a community of disciples, of those being taught to be evermore Christ-like. In this light, we see that the Sermon on the Mount is training in the Kingdom of God. Jesus provides the disciples plenty of on-the-job training as they carry out Jesus’ ministry. But Jesus also trains his disciples as a Jewish teacher would – by sitting them down and talking to them about the nature of the Kingdom. So it is no surprise that the Sermon opens with Jesus reminding his followers that they are the “light to the world” – the training has a purpose that goes beyond these individuals. Likewise, Jesus closes the Sermon with a call to obedience. What is the point of training if there is no action?

The Sermon on the Mount is not about how well we can conform to a set of rules. Rather, it is about our character, for our actions flow outward from our character. Selflessness is a matter of the heart, not a rulebook. But you might ask, isn’t what Jesus is asking of his disciples unrealistic and impossible? Jesus’ answer is “no.” We have

The Authority of Jesus

Jacob Neusner was one of the most respected Rabbinic scholars of our generation. A few decades ago, he wrote a book about the Sermon on the Mount titled, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. In it, he tried to imagine that he was a devout Jew of Jesus’ day. What would be his reaction to Jesus’ sermon?

Rabbi Neusner believes that had he heard Jesus teach he would not have become a follower of Jesus. It isn’t so much what Jesus taught. Other Jewish teachers of Jesus’ day expanded and elaborated on the Law of Moses. Other teachers interpreted the Law to be about the heart, not merely external conformance with rules. Rabbi Neusner’s argument with Jesus would have been with the authority Jesus took upon himself.

Rabbi Neusner put it this way, “Here is a Torah teacher who says in his own name what the Torah says in God’s name . . . So we find ourselves . . . with the difficulty of making sense, within the framework of Torah, of a teacher who stands apart from, perhaps above, the Torah . . . We now recognize that at issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is doing far more than merely showing his followers a better understanding of God’s Law. Jesus is taking upon himself the very authority of God as he shapes and molds a community of the Kingdom of God.

time (he dropped 15 points in the polls), but Carter was only striving to be true to Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, though why he chose that forum in which to bear his soul always puzzled me!

² Matthew’s Gospel is the most “Jewish” of the four Gospels in the NT. Respecting the sensibilities of his Jewish readers, Matthew refers to the “Kingdom of God” as the “Kingdom of Heaven.” God’s name, even the word “God,” was so sacred to many Jews that they would not say it aloud. Even today, you can find ultra-orthodox websites that will only spell out “God” as “G-d”!

³ Hays’s very important book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

been born from above (John 3); we are new creations. With God, all things are possible. With faith, nothing is impossible. By virtue of God's creative work in our lives, the seemingly impossible becomes possible.

The Beatitudes

These nine beatitudes, with which Jesus begins his teaching, are not simply an introduction to what follows – they are its very foundation. These are not “entrance requirements” to God's Kingdom. They are not conditional – none of them say “if you will x, then y.” These are straightforward declarative statements of what is. Indeed, Eugene Boring goes further.⁴ He notes that the Beatitudes do not merely declare what it is; they bring it into being – much like an umpire crying out “strike” or a minister pronouncing a couple man and wife. The Beatitudes are Gospel – they proclaim to the world the Good News! Because these are prophetic pronouncements, they point us toward the teacher. They are not self-evident. It is Jesus' authority that makes the Beatitudes the foundation of the Sermon.

Each of the nine Beatitudes points us to God's Kingdom (the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew). They either mention the kingdom directly (the first and eighth Beatitude) or some aspect of it. In the kingdom of God, his people will be comforted and filled and shown mercy. They will inherit the earth. They will be rewarded in heaven. They will be called the children of God. They will see God!⁵ All the rest of the Sermon on the Mount has to be read in this bright light.

For whom is the Kingdom of Heaven?

The kingdom of heaven is for the people of God. The people of God are those who place their faith in Jesus Christ, in God. Those who have faith in Jesus strive to be ever-truer disciples. Those who are disciples of Christ strive to be Christ-like, much as an apprentice strives to be like the master. In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches about his followers about the characteristics of genuine disciples. These aren't merely words to live by” in the world at large; they are what characterizes those who enjoy the kingdom of God. Here are some thoughts on each Beatitude.

- Those who are “poor in spirit” are those who know that they are dependent in God. As Boring puts it: “Persons who are pronounced blessed are not those who claim a robust ego and strong sense of self-worth, but those whose only identity and security is in God.”
- “Those who mourn” doesn't refer only to the death of loved ones, but also to our lament for the condition of God's creation and his people. In other words, those who live in the kingdom of God realize how far short of God's hope for the present world falls.
- Like “poor in spirit,” meekness (meaning gentleness and humility) flies in the face of conventional wisdom about what it takes to be “successful.” Of course, Jesus also challenges us to reconsider what we mean by success. (see Psalm 37:9,11 also).
- “Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” are those who long for the coming of God's kingdom and the vindication of right. At the same time we need to understand that Jesus brings comfort to those who are quite literally poor, hungry, and thirsty.

⁴from Eugene Boring's excellent commentary on Matthew's Gospel in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Another excellent and readable commentary is by Douglas Hare in the *Interpretation* series.

⁵In Revelation 22:4, God's people see his face. Compare this with Exodus 33:20 where God warns Moses that he cannot see God's face and live. We don't need to get too literal here. God doesn't have a face like you or I do. But just reflect for awhile on this imagery and the promise that we will see God as Adam once did, when, in the evenings, God would come and walk in the garden with his children. The significance and comfort of what the biblical writers are trying to tell us ought to take our breath away!

- Matthew chooses a Greek word for “mercy” that is not merely about having compassion for others – the merciful are those who *act* on their compassion.
- In v. 8, purity of heart goes beyond the avoidance of impure thoughts to a single-minded devotion to God.
- Many of Jesus’ followers expected him to call for the overthrow of the Roman oppressors, by force if necessary. But Jesus disappoints them. The people of the kingdom are people of peace. In God’s kingdom, swords are broken into plowshares.

Jesus knows that to the extent that his training of his disciples moves them toward “Christ-likeness,” they will be increasingly out of step with the world around them. They will be reviled and persecuted as they shape their lives around the values of the kingdom. Jesus pronounces blessing on them and on their prophetic mission . . . our mission . . . to be the light to the world.

What is a beatitude?

The Sermon on the Mount is not the only place we find beatitudes in the Bible. For example, Psalm 1 begins “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked.” This is a beatitude. Many more are in Revelation: 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and 22:14!!

A beatitude is written so as to be a declarative statement of fact. It is not an opinion. It is not a command. (You English majors will know that a beatitude is written in the indicative mood!)

The first word of each beatitude in the Bible seems to pose a problem for translators. In Greek, the word is *makarios*. In the secular Greek world, it meant simply “happy” or “fortunate.” At times you find it translated this way, such as Psalm 1:1 in the NRSV. But in the religious context, “happy” is not the best choice; “blessed” is better, such as the NRSV translators used in Matthew.

This matters because a beatitude is centered on what God does, not some feeling on our part. It is God who blesses. The opposite of “blessed” is not “unhappy,” it is “cursed.” Our happiness comes from the many blessings God bestows upon us.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of Matthew’s Gospel

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Genesis

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj’s.-- we’re on-line now so who’d even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, “Scott Engle”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle.”

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.