

# THE KINGDOM MANIFESTO

## The Sermon on the Mount



### Part 1: 'The Master Class of Life'

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In the early 1982 a group of Dutch art historians concluded that about half of the paintings attributed to Rembrandt in his early days, were in fact the work of students of Rembrandt. If their findings were true that would be very disturbing to the owner of one of these paintings! But what about the great painter Rembrandt himself? How would he feel? Do you think he would be angry that the work of his students had been credited to him? Do you not think he would be delighted to think that he had been able to pass on his skills in such a way that for generations we had not spotted the difference? Surely that is what any master painter or musician would want. And that is the challenge for us as Christians, those who claim to be students of our master, Jesus. The early believers were first called Christians as a nick-name because they were imitations of the real Christ. Of course, people could tell the difference but there were striking similarities. Is there any possibility that even at our best moments we could make the undiscerning public think we have come out of the same mould as Jesus? Sadly, the word that is often on the lips of the non-believer when asked about Christians is - '*hypocrites*' i.e. fakes!

In the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have received an invitation to make a pilgrimage into the heart and life of God. A door of welcome is open to everyone without exception. No person or circumstance other than our own decision can keep us away – *Whosoever will may come*. The danger is we think we have heard the invitation and accepted it. But when we look more closely we see that it has not changed our lives.

Take for example the US where, according to Gallup surveys, 94% of Americans believe in God and 74% claim to have made a commitment to Jesus Christ. About 34% confess to a 'new birth' experience. These figures are shocking when thoughtfully compared to statistics on the same group for unethical behaviour, crime, mental disorder, family failures, addictions, financial misdemeanours and so on. Could such a combination of profession and failure really be '*the life and life abundant*' that Jesus said he came to give? Why is today's church so weak? Why are we able to claim conversions and enrol church members but have less and less impact on our culture? Why is it that we Christians, who are meant to be indistinguishable from Jesus, are more often than not, indistinguishable from the world?

Throughout the autumn we were listening to **the message of Jesus and his kingdom**. It's pretty radical, challenging stuff! But you are still here or you have joined us along the way, so I am assuming you want to be part of this kingdom. You want to enter his kingdom and learn its ways. You want to live under Jesus rule. More than anything else, you do not want to be a fake. You want to become like him. So what do we do now?

In Jesus' day you would have gone to wherever he was teaching, on the shore, in the synagogue or on the hillside. That's where we want to go over the next few weeks, to a hillside, and a passage of scripture often called the **Sermon on the Mount**. Here we find the most concentrated example of the teaching of Jesus.

Our political parties are working very hard at the moment on their party manifestos in the run up to the general election. Here, in Matthew 5-7, we have Jesus' **kingdom manifesto**.

There is no better place to go if we want to understand what life would look like if we took his teaching seriously and were all living as citizens of his kingdom.

We find Jesus sitting on a hillside surrounded by his disciples. In that culture the teacher would sit and the students would stand. Much harder for them to fall asleep, but then there was little danger of that if Jesus was the teacher! The teacher is at rest. He does not have to entertain. The students are the ones on tiptoe. They are the ones eager to learn from the treasures the rabbi was sharing. They want to become like their rabbi.

Many of us have probably imagined that the Sermon on the Mount was answering the question: *'How do I go to heaven after I die?'* But as I study it I quickly realise that Jesus is exploring a very different set of questions:

*What kind of life am I going to live before I die?*

*How does God want me to live?*

*What does life in the kingdom of God look like?*

*What is a truly good or righteous life?*

Jesus doesn't just enable me to 'make the cut' when I die. Or to know what to protest against while I am alive. It is good to know that when I die all will be well, but I also want good news for this life. If I had to choose, I would rather have a car that runs than good insurance on one that doesn't. But can't I have both?

The focus of the Sermon on the Mount is not life after death in heaven. It is very much on life as a follower, as a disciple, here on earth. Jesus offers himself as God's doorway into this life that is truly life. He invites us to become his apprentices in eternal living.

We have just been celebrating the birth of Jesus – the incarnation. The Son of God came into this world and became one of us so that he could give human beings his life. He wants us to follow him and learn how to live this life.

If he were to come today, he could carry out his mission through almost any decent and useful occupation. He could be a computer engineer, an accountant, a bank clerk, a doctor, waiter, teacher, farm worker, lab technician or construction worker. He could run a house-cleaning service or repair cars. If he were to come today he could very well do what you do. He could live in your flat or house, hold down your job, have your education and live within your family surroundings. None of this would be a hindrance to him living the life of the kingdom. And none of this should be a hindrance to us doing the same.

Having established a beachhead of divine life in an ordinary human existence, Jesus finally stepped into the public arena to expose his life and make it available to the world. ***'Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.'*** Review your plans for living and base your life on this remarkable new opportunity.

The secret is out – the *ordinary* is made to be a receptacle of the divine. The rule of God had become available to human beings. As he met human need in the face of sickness, oppression and death, he was himself the evidence for the truth of his announcement. The kingdom of God had arrived and it was available to everyone. That is why he did not teach as the scribes did, citing others. He had an authority of his own. In effect, he was saying, *'Just watch me and see what I say is true.'* But Jesus was also offering to share that same rule of God with others who would receive and learn it from him and then pass it on.

Brian McLaren loves to tell the story of how he received a phone call one day from the father of a boy who had been on a summer camp with him many years before. He could

just remember teaching the boy 4 or 5 chords on the guitar. He had also encouraged the boy to leave the guitar out of its case so that he was more likely to pick it up and practice. The father was phoning years later to thank Brian for that advice. His son, Scott had gone on to major in classical guitar in college. The greatest classical guitarist ever, Master Segovia, had heard him play and invited him to become one of his last students. Just the week before, the now Master Scott had played his master recital with Master Segovia listening. Afterwards the father had remembered Brian and the part he had played at the beginning of this journey. He had phoned to say *'thank you'*. That phone call blessed Brian with the sense of honour that he had influenced Scott in this direction. But it also got him thinking – *Master Segovia, master recital, Master Scott* – he had never heard the word *'master'* used so many times in such a short space. He thought of other uses of the word – master craftsman, for example. And then the penny dropped! This is what Jesus did and wants to do with his students or disciples.

Jesus was the master of making the music of life. He invited twelve apprentices or disciples to learn to make beautiful life-music in his secret, revolutionary, kingdom-of-God way. He helped each of them learn the disciplines and skill of living in the kingdom of God. He gave them, if you like, three years of private lessons. They watched him play, watched him live and interact, and imitated his example until they began to have the spirit of his style, the power of his performance. Then, after the resurrection, Jesus said, “Now you are ready to be sent out as masters yourselves – masters of my secret message, masters in living life in the kingdom.”

Now masters must continue to practice or they will get rusty. They continue to play and give pleasure to those around them. But masters also take on students themselves. The whole kingdom of God project, then, began as a community of people learning to love and play the music of the kingdom in the tradition of the Master and his original apprentices. That's why we shouldn't be surprised when one of those early apprentices called Paul could write to younger apprentices – *Imitate me*. After all he was a master authorised to train students. It is just like Master Scott taking on guitar students and saying – *Play like me*.

For 2,000 years the art of living, performing and teaching in the tradition of the Master has been passed down from parent to child, teacher to student, friend to friend. Sometimes the music has been sweet and beautiful but too often it has been ugly, out of tune and unworthy of the Master composer they claim to follow.

Learning to play this music properly – living the life of the age to come – experiencing eternal life – begins with confidence in Jesus' ability to save us by his death and resurrection from darkness, disease and death. But we do not live just as consumers of his merits. The message *of Jesus* and *about Jesus* is good news for our life now, not just for dying. It is about living now as his apprentices in kingdom living,

Discipleship – being apprenticed to Jesus - is the very heart of the gospel and the really good news for us is that Master Jesus, unlike Master Segovia, is still taking students in his master class of life.

*Sometimes the places where God's effective or actual rule is not yet carried out, and his will is not yet done, lie within the lives and little kingdoms of those who really do belong to Christ because his life is already present and growing within them. Dallas Willard p.38*

*For use in your*

**Cell, Accountability Group or on your own**

**Pray** for eyes to see and ears to hear.

**Read** together 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

**Share** your observations, reflections, feelings and questions.

Who in your life, by way of example, challenges you to live a better life?

What problems in the church in Corinth does Paul address? Are there similar problems at St Chads?

**v.1-4** How does Paul cope with the negative, critical spirit in the church? What matters most to him? How do we distinguish between pleasing people and serving people? What effects does criticism have?

**v. 7-13** What are the signs and dangers of spiritual complacency? What is the link between this and the earlier judging?

**v.14-21** Who have been our spiritual role models? Are we in mentoring relationships now? Reflecting honestly on v.20, is your Christian life more a matter of talk or of power?

What can you do to 'walk the talk' this week? **Pray for each other.**