

## KINGDOM MANIFESTO

### The Sermon on the Mount



### Part 3: 'The Hopeless Blessables' Matthew 5:1-12 24<sup>th</sup> January 2010

*The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed.* JRW Stott

In our current series on the Sermon on the Mount, we are seeking to rectify the second point and hopefully, through the work of the Spirit in our lives, also the third point. This is Jesus' kingdom manifesto. This is Jesus' master class of life. It's his own description of what life in the kingdom is like. If we build our lives on these words and if we stick close to Jesus, so close that we get *covered in the dust of our rabbi*, this is what we'll look like. So, how do we actually live in the reality of God's present kingdom? Who has this blessed, this good life? Who's assured of this life of the kingdom, and who's not? Jesus' answer is here in the Beatitudes.

Everyone agrees they are amazing, beautiful words. We can preach them, meditate on them, hang them on the wall. But the big question remains. How are we to live in response to them? What are they actually saying? Is this list of the poor and the sad, the weak and the mild – really a picture of the ideal Christian? Because I know a lot of people who will say – *'That's not me and that's not what I want to be.'* And they will walk away because they have misunderstood Jesus. There will be many more who won't walk away but who will carry the burden of guilt for not being, or not wanting to be, on this list of the supposedly God-preferred. So either we have this morbid streak of guilt or the pride that swells in those who somehow imagine they are conforming to the 'blesseds' and say, 'Oh, I live by the Sermon on the Mount!'

Jesus is the great teacher, but what was he teaching with the Beatitudes? How do they fit in with his fundamental message that the kingdom of God has arrived? In the previous chapter of Matthew, we have seen Jesus demonstrating God's rule from heaven as he met the desperate needs of the people around him. Crowds followed him wherever he went. He healed the sick, the insane, the demonised and paralysed. Jesus is now teaching in the midst of this mass of raw humanity. Jesus is coaching his apprentices, but he is also teaching anyone else who will listen about the meaning of this kingdom life. Around him was a crowd of people whom he had touched. He could point to them, individuals who had been blessed, because the King had reached out and touched them. His message was clear and visible. The kingdom of God is 'at hand'. It is available and open to all.

***Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*** Blessed are the spiritual zeros – the spiritually bankrupt, deprived and deficient, the spiritual beggars without a hint of religion. They are blessed when the kingdom of the heavens comes upon them. Standing around Jesus as he spoke were people with no spiritual qualifications. There was nothing to suggest that the breath of God might move through their lives. And yet their testimony – and there are many of them in the gospels and in the history of the church – their testimony is – *'He touched me'*. When Jesus touches us, the rule of the heavens enters our lives. And we are blessed – healed in body, mind or spirit.

When Jesus says ***Blessed are the poor in spirit***, is he saying they are blessed *because* they are poor in spirit as though this state of spiritual impoverishment makes people worthy of the kingdom? Or is he declaring the availability of the kingdom *despite* their

spiritual poverty? It is a very important distinction. You only have to compare different translations of the New Testament to see that often they struggle as they look for something good that can be the justification for the blessedness e.g. *blessed are the humble-minded, those who know they are poor, those who know their spiritual poverty*. Each paraphrase leaves us with the feeling that the blessing declared, whether it is present or future, is because of the condition.

The problem is that being poor, spiritually or economically, being miserable, persecuted and so on is nowhere else in the New Testament a cause or basis of blessedness. The spiritually impoverished ones in the crowd before Jesus had been blessed for no other reason than that the gracious touch of the King had fallen on them. The blessings were not a reward, nor even a result. Dallas Willard is among a number of writers who argue strongly that the blessing comes not *because* of the condition but precisely *in spite* of it.

It is all very subtle. If all we need to be blessed in the kingdom of heaven is to recognise our spiritual poverty two things follow. 1. Our spiritual incompetence becomes a spiritual attainment just by humbly acknowledging it. 2. We avoid the embarrassment of receiving pure grace because our humble recognition makes blessedness appropriate. Well, we deserve it! And if we find being humble-minded too difficult then we can always have a go at mourning, or being meek, or getting persecuted. Our attitude or our circumstance becomes meritorious. It guarantees our acceptance with God! If not salvation by works, then it is salvation by attitude! And if this interpretation of the Beatitudes is correct i.e. they are giving directions on how to be blessed, then we will have to be poor, have to mourn, be persecuted and so on to be among the blessed. The fact is that very few people actually seek to be these things. As a result, many have decided that these promises must be for some future dispensation. Can we really believe that this is what Jesus had in mind?

Luke's version of the Beatitudes (Luke 6:17-26) seems starker and is accompanied by a series of uncompromising woes. It is not just – '**Blessed are you who are poor, you who are hungry**'. It is also '**Woe to you who are rich, you who are well-fed....**' This is not just a retelling of Matthew. The setting is different. Jesus has just spent the night in prayer, preparing to appoint his 12 apprentices and representatives. Early in the morning he calls the disciples together and announces the 12 'winners'. Then they go down to a plain where a great crowd gathers to listen to him and to be healed. Everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him. It is in this context that Jesus turns to his disciples and lists four groups of people who are blessed as God's provision from heaven comes upon them: the poor, the hungry, the grief-stricken and those hated and hurt because of their link to Jesus. Once again, these are the people in the crowd surrounding him.

We all know that poor, hungry and grief-stricken people can remain as ungodly as sin itself. Many have filled their lives with bitterness against God and man, and are anything but blessed. So, whatever the point of the Beatitudes, it cannot be that they state conditions that guarantee God's approval, salvation or blessing. Similarly, we are all fortunate enough to know people who please God without being poor, hungry, grief-stricken or persecuted. They trust Jesus with all their heart, and they love and serve their neighbours in his name. Their hearts are full of peace and joy in believing and they 'do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God.'

So what is Jesus saying to us with the Beatitudes? I think Simon & Garfunkel got it; *Blessed are the sat upon, spat upon, ratted on*. He is saying God can come to any person with his care and deliverance. There is no human condition that excludes blessedness. The Beatitudes clarify Jesus' fundamental message that God's rule and righteousness are freely available to all, through reliance upon Jesus himself. They do that by taking those

who are regarded from a human point of view as the most hopeless, most beyond the possibility of God's blessing and interest. They show them enjoying God's touch and abundant provision from the heavens.

***Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.*** Luke calls them 'the weeping ones' – the man or woman whose mate has just deserted them leaving them paralysed with rejection; the parent in gut-wrenching grief over the death of a child; the person who has lost their job, their business or their life-savings because of the economic down-turn. So many things to break the heart! But as they see the kingdom in Jesus, they come and accept his invitation. They enter the kingdom and find comfort.

***Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.*** Who are these meek ones? The shy, the unassertive, the intimidated, the ones who always step aside to let you pass, the ones who always feel it is their fault if something goes wrong, the ones who never raise their voice to assert their legitimate claim. But as the kingdom unfolds, they see that the whole earth is their Father's and theirs as they need it.

***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.*** These are the ones who long for things to be made right. The wrong may be in them and they long to be purified. It may be a longing for justice in the world that drives them to their knees. It may be some terrible wrong they have suffered personally. But the kingdom has a power to touch our lives, transform the past with all its terrible losses. In that place God restores our soul and fills us with goodness.

***Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.*** The worldly wise say, 'Woe to the merciful for they shall be taken advantage of.' Outside heaven's rule, that is true. But I would rather be taken advantage of than harden my heart. We give and we lend without expecting to be repaid. The truth is that since we encountered God's kingdom and the great profusion of heaven's goodness, we have found mercy to meet our needs.

***Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.*** Dallas Willard suggests that these are the ones for whom nothing is good enough. These are the perfectionists. They find fault in your doctrine, your practice and probably your heart as well. They may be even harder on themselves. They can tell you what is wrong with everything. And yet the kingdom is even open to them. There at last they will find something that satisfies their pure heart. They will see God. They will find what they have been looking for, someone who is truly good enough.

***Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.*** The peacemakers are called everything under the sun. They are caught in the middle. No one trusts them. They have to deal with the ungrateful and the wicked. They can't win. But under God's rule there is recognition that they are displaying the family likeness as they take the good news to people who are in the wrong.

***Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*** Now we have those who are attacked because of their stand for what is right. They refuse to be compliant with the dishonesty and corruption around them. Jesus' kingdom promise is an unshakable security in which they cannot be harmed.

Finally we have those insulted, persecuted and lied about because they are happy to be associated with Jesus. ***Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.*** From a human point of view you cannot get much further from God's blessing. In the eyes of the world around them,

they were the ones offending against God. Jesus said that when they kill you they will think they are doing God a favour (John 16:2). But Jesus says, jump for joy when this happens, knowing that you have a great and imperishable reward in the heavens. Your reputation before God and his eternal family is secure.

When Jesus was invited to read from the Scriptures in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, he read from the prophet Isaiah: *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. For he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor... release to the captives... sight to the blind etc.* ' Then, he let his townspeople know that he was the one through whom these blessings would come. And because they knew he was claiming to be God's anointed leader, they tried to kill him. The list from Isaiah of the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed – it is like the list in the Beatitudes – these lost causes who would come to know the blessing of the kingdom through the hand of Jesus.

When John the Baptist was languishing in King Herod's jail, he began to question whether Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus said to the messengers: *'Tell him what you see. The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor hear some real good news.'* Again, a list of hopeless cases who are blessed through the sufficiency of God. And then he added a beatitude: ***'Blessed are those who are not disappointed with me'*** (Matt 11:4-6).

***Many who are first shall be last, and the last shall be first.*** (Mark 10:31) The Beatitudes are a list of the human 'lasts' who at the touch of heaven become divine 'firsts'. The good news of the kingdom is that no one is beyond blessing, because the rule of God from heaven is available to all.

Now if we live this good news and walk it out in our daily lives, then we can go with confidence to any of the hopeless people around us and assure them that they can now enter this life of blessedness with God.

So, who would be on your list of 'hopeless blessables'? Murderers, child-molesters, wife-beaters, drug lords, pornographers, war criminals, terrorists, the perverted, the filthy, the filthy rich? Do you have some sympathy with Jesus' contemporaries when they said – *'He's a friend of people like that. He even eats with them'*? There is something in us that says: *I don't really want the kingdom to be open to such people.* But that is the heart of God. It was that heart of God that welcomed us into his kingdom. It was that heart of God that enabled Corrie Ten Boom to reach out and take the hand of the Nazi who had killed her family. Who will experience the heart of God this week because you have reached out with his grace and offered his blessing?

*For use in your*

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

Meditate on Matthew 5:1-12, Luke 6:17-26.

Share how God is speaking to you.

Are you ever disappointed (stumbling block) with Jesus? Matt 11:6

Do we struggle with the totally inclusive grace of God?

Who are your 'hopeless blessables'?

Encourage each other to express God's blessing.

Pray.