

A Better Life: Kingdom Heart
Matthew 5:38-48
March 1, 2020
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A better life? Who doesn't want that? In his most influential sermon ever, Jesus speaks with compassion about a better life, a life where we can live, move and have our being. What would this world be like? What would this life be like if we could identify, grasp, and grow into these teachings? For the next six weeks, as we journey through Lent together, we are going to be digging this sermon, The Sermon on the Mount, found in the gospel of Matthew. We start today with "you are blessed!" This message alone could turn the world upside down or would that be "right side up"? Jesus is saying, "Congratulations to those of you who are already living this way." But what if we're not? What does it take to live with a kingdom heart?

Matthew was writing to people living in the city of Antioch in about 60 AD. This was a city where Jewish believers in Christ rubbed shoulders with non-Christ believing Jews who were hostile towards Jesus and his followers. Matthew's main objective in writing his gospel, is to tell the story of Jesus, who is center stage in nearly every episode. Jesus is important to Matthew, not as a "gifted human" or a prophet but as the focus of God's activity on earth. First century Jews were well versed in the stories of the Old Testament and so Matthew saturates his gospel with Old Testament thoughts and images with the goal of illuminating Jesus as the culmination of the Old Testament's theme, the Kingdom of God. He uses Old Testament descriptions and phrases such as, "son of Abraham, son of David, God with us, the one who saves us from our sins," so to help the Jews make the connection. He is writing as a Jew to Jews and so he draws on the Old Testament prophets of Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah. He wants the listener to know that Jesus makes Israel's story complete and is fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. He wants the Jews who reject Jesus to recognize that they stand under judgement and calls them to repent of their sins and embrace Jesus as their Messiah.

But he also writes as a Christian to Jewish Christians because he understands the importance of the Law of Moses (the first five books of our Old Testament) to the Jewish people. He is attempting to represent Jesus as a new Moses. Like Moses came down a mountain, Mount Sinai, and delivered The Law, similarly, Jesus, **went up a mountain; and after he sat down,** (as if taking Moses' seat) **his disciples came to him. Then he began to teach them...** (Matthew 5:1) And as he begins to teach his disciples and expound on God's law, he is also inviting the crowd that has gathered to listen in. He is now "God with us." The Word that once prepared Israel for life in the land, now equips citizens for the Kingdom of God.

Jesus begins by giving a description of the citizens of his kingdom. This kingdom is a new order that has dawned through the life and ministry of Jesus; it is a new creation dawning, a new humanity forming. And what does this humanity look like? Well, in this section called The Beatitudes, Jesus spells out the characteristics of those who belong to his kingdom. Let's say them together.

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

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

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

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

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

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
(Matthew 5:3-12)

Jesus is offering a blessing for all people, especially people who are hurting and find that their experience of the world is lacking. And as the crowd listens in, they are invited into the kingdom of God. He is saying, it doesn't matter who you are or what you have done, you're invited. There's a place for everyone. This way of living can lead to personal transformation. Jesus urges us to view life as a journey towards God and "the kingdom" for which God has created us.

Jesus also offers words of comfort and assurance to his disciples helping them (and us) to realize that following him will mean interacting with those with whom we would rather not come in contact with, and those whom we might even consider our enemy. .. **You have heard that it was said** (Here again, Jesus is quoting the Old Testament), **'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'** **But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.** (Matthew 5:43-45)

"Loving your enemy" was an offensive thought to many Jews of Jesus' day. Any Messiah who would "turn the other cheek or love their enemy" was not the military leader the people wanted to lead a revolt against Rome. They were under Roman oppression. They hated the Romans and they wanted to retaliate and they were hoping for a religious solution to their intolerable political situation. But Jesus suggested instead a new, radical response to injustice.

If we're being honest, "loving our enemy" does not sit well with most of us either. When we are wronged by another person, our first human reaction is to get even. "An eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth." (Again, quoting Old Testament scripture) Instead, Jesus says we should do good to those who wrong us. This is not a natural response. It requires a supernatural power because we cannot do this by ourselves. That's why we need God! Only God can give us the strength to love as God loves. Instead of planning a counter attack, I should be praying, not that God will change the other person, but that God will change my heart! As God's grace is showered on both evil and good - so should our love extend not just to those who love us, not just other Christians, but to our enemies and non-believers as well.

We shouldn't be keeping score but seeking to love and forgive because **we cannot serve God acceptably when we are at odds with other people.** Therefore, we must make every attempt to reconcile. Instead of demanding rights, we must give them up freely. It's more important to give justice and mercy than to receive it. By loving and praying for our enemies, we can carry out God's commands in a way that fulfills our purpose and helps us develop a kingdom heart, extending love even to those we find the most offensive and the most unlovable.

In her book, *Unbroken*, (and the 2014 movie of the same name) Laura Hildenbrand recounts the amazing true story of World War II veteran and prisoner-of-war survivor Louie Zamperini. On May 27, 1943, Zamperini's bomber left Oahu in search of survivors from a downed plane. About 800 miles from the base one of the engines cut out and the bomber plunged into the ocean. Zamperini and another soldier would stay afloat on a tiny life raft for 47 days—a world record for survival at sea. After confronting sharks, starvation, and dementia, their real battle would begin. Zamperini spent the next two years as a Japanese POW in the notorious Sugamo Prison. In

particular, a guard nicknamed "The Bird", ensured that Louie endured constant physical torture and verbal humiliation—all in an attempt to shatter his spirit.

As Louie thought back on his life, what resonated with him was not all that he had suffered but the Divine Love that had intervened to save him. He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man that The Bird had striven to make him. In a single, silent moment, his rage, his fear, his humiliation and helplessness, had fallen away. That's what the love of God can do. That morning, he believed, he was a new creation in Christ and began to live his life with a kingdom heart.

So how do we do that? Matthew says, "**Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect.**" (Matthew 5:48) When we hear that command, most of us hear a directive to a kind of impossible moral perfectionism. But that's not actually what the original language implies. "Perfect" in this case, stems from the Greek word *telos* which means **goal or purpose**. The sense of this word is more about becoming what was intended, accomplishing your God-given purpose, connecting your life with a purpose.

This is not a demand to "be perfect" but instead to persist for a purpose. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* gets closer to the mark, I think, when he translates it, "**You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity.**" (Matthew 5:48) But we can only do these things—repay evil with good, forgive and pray for those who harm us, in other words, live with a kingdom heart, only to the degree that we can live into our God-given identity as blessed and beloved children. You can't give what you don't have. Only those who have experienced love can share it with others.

So what is it that gets in your way of being the kind of person God created you to be? Take a minute now and write down one thing that is keeping you from living into your God-given identity; one fear, one hurt, one memory, one resentment—that keeps you from embracing and becoming the person God wishes you to be. This is a symbolic, honest confession that you are entrusting this one thing to God and leaving it behind. No one needs to read your confession. This is between you and God. The goal, the *telos*, is that you'll feel little less burdened by having confessed your limitation and therefore accept the love of God so that you may find it a little easier to love, forgive and help others and live with a kingdom heart.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we thank you that you are a submissive, servant God who turns this world right side up by turning power on its head. We confess that turning the other cheek or loving our enemy doesn't come easy for us. We more often choose to seek revenge and power over forgiveness and grace. Forgive us God, for failing to see that your way is always the way of the cross. Empower us to be submissive servants in our life together, in our relationships, in our marriages, in our families, in our workplaces, in our classrooms, on our sports teams, in our neighborhoods and in our world. Fill us with your love so that our lives overflow with your forgiveness, mercy and grace. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of March 1, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, Thank you for willingly undertaking your journey to the cross. As I begin my Lenten journey, help me to know the next steps I need to take. I want to be your messenger but confess that I am sometimes afraid I won't know quite what to say. During Lent, please give me the vision to see, the words to say, and the opportunity to respond to those you bring into my path. Amen.

Monday, March 2

Scripture: Matthew 1:1-17

A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah,
whose mother was Tamar.

Perez was the father of Hezron.

Hezron was the father of Aram.

Aram was the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.

Nahshon was the father of Salmon.

Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.

Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.

Obed was the father of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of David the king.

David was the father of Solomon,
whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.

Solomon was the father of Rehoboam.

Rehoboam was the father of Abijah.

Abijah was the father of Asaph.

Asaph was the father of Jehoshaphat.

Jehoshaphat was the father of Joram.

Joram was the father of Uzziah.

Uzziah was the father of Jotham.

Jotham was the father of Ahaz.

Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh.

Manasseh was the father of Amos.

Amos was the father of Josiah.

Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers.

This was at the time of the exile to Babylon.

After the exile to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel.

Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel.

Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud.

Abiud was the father of Eliakim.

Eliakim was the father of Azor.

Azor was the father of Zadok.

Zadok was the father of Achim.

Achim was the father of Eliud.

Eliud was the father of Eleazar.

Eleazar was the father of Matthan.

Matthan was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary—of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.

So there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to Babylon to the Christ.

Observation: Yes, this passage has a lot of names that are difficult to pronounce! But each of our readings this week helps us see who Jesus really is. Today's passage answers the question, where did Jesus come from? Matthew provides this genealogy. The types of people mentioned here reveal not only his genealogy but the broad scope of those who make up the people of God.

Application: Which names do you recognize? In verse 1, we are told that Jesus is "son of David, son of Abraham." Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience. In case they were unfamiliar with Jesus, these words would make it clear that Jesus fulfills the covenant. Five women are also listed: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba (Uriah's wife) and Mary. At least three are Gentiles. What does this mean that Gentiles (and women) are included? Could it be that God's activity is not limited to men or to the people of Israel?

Prayer: God, thank you that you sent Jesus into the world for all people. You are able to work through each life. I give thanks that I am included in your great legacy of love and forgiveness. Amen.

Tuesday, March 3

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: *Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, And they will call him, Emmanuel.* (*Emmanuel* means "God with us.") When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

Observation: In Hebrew, the name "Jesus" is the same as Joshua. Hearing the name, Matthew wants us to remember that it was Joshua who brought the people into the Promised Land. Jesus fulfills the law of Moses, setting people free from the bondage of sin. Lent is the season to reflect on our own hearts and lives and allow God through Jesus Christ to set us free.

Application: In Matthew, the story of Jesus' birth is seen through the eyes of Joseph. In Luke, we see it through Mary's eyes. We are given a picture of Joseph who is afraid but listens to God and takes a risk. How difficult is it to trust God? When have you felt God's direction taking you outside your comfort zone? When we are living outside our comfort zone may be when we rely on faith the most.

Prayer: Ever-present God, keep me secure enough in my faith that I can be challenged to step beyond my comfort zone to live boldly and serve courageously. In this season, lead me into a purpose greater than myself. Amen.

Wednesday, March 4

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him." When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote: *You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel.*" Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

Observation: The news of Jesus' birth draws political attention from King Herod and "magi" visitors from afar. This tension between the agent of God and Herod (who was Rome's agent) leads to the necessity of an escape to Egypt.

Application: What does it mean for Jesus to be the true king of the Jews? What does this mean for you? Then, come to him – by whatever route you can, and with the best gifts you can find.

Prayer: God, I admit that there are many things in my life that compete for first place in my heart, and at many times I have lost touch with you. Forgive me. I want to follow you and use what I have and what I am doing today to honor you. Amen.

Thursday, March 5

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-23

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him." Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: *I have called my son out of Egypt.*

When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet: *A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and much grieving. Rachel weeping for her children, and she did not want to be comforted, because they were no more.* After King Herod died, an angel from the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. "Get up," the angel said, "and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who were trying to kill the child are dead." Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus ruled over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he went to the area of

Galilee. He settled in a city called Nazareth so that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled: He will be called a Nazarene.

Observation: People well versed in the stories of the Old Testament (in the first century, it was the only testament) would think of the parallels as they heard this passage. Jesus was born in a land and at a time of trouble, tension, violence and fear. Matthew draws on the prophets: Hosea 11:1; Jeremiah 31:15; Isaiah 11:1. Matthew wants us to know that Jesus makes Israel's story complete. Jesus is bringing deliverance even when life in this world seems bleak.

Application: How does this message make sense for what our world is facing today? How could a message about Jesus make a difference in your life? Take a few minutes to write how your relationship with Jesus influences your life.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for coming into this world and showing the world how your ways invite us all into a better life and a better world. Help me to stay close to you as I walk the path that you lived. Amen.

Friday, March 6

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said: *The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight."* John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out."

Observation: This was a turbulent time. Herod had been brutal; Roman military occupation was harsh. There was tension around the change of governors from Gratus to Pilate in 26 AD. Most people hoped for a religious solution to their intolerable political situation, and when they heard of a new prophet, they flocked out into the desert to hear him. John the Baptist echoed the prophet Isaiah's great message of hope, forgiveness and healing after Judah's exile to Babylon. And he called the people to prepare for God who would come to rescue and to comfort the people. Now is time to get ready! The king, God himself, is coming back!

Application: But the people were not ready. John calls them to repent. Repentance is not merely a change of mind but a radical change in one's life as a whole. It is saying no to sin, and saying yes to or turning to God. Where is repentance needed in your life? What will you need to give up to be ready to live wholly and completely in God's direction?

Prayer: Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me! Please don't throw me out of your presence; please don't take your holy spirit away from me. Return the joy of your salvation to me and sustain me with a willing spirit. Amen. (from Psalm 51)

Saturday, March 7

Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." So John agreed to baptize Jesus. When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

Observation: Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his Messianic ministry. There are several reasons for his baptism: "to fulfill all righteousness" (verse 15); to show that he is approved (consecrated) by God; to identify him with humanity's sin and failure; and to set an example for his followers. Today, baptism continues to be what marks us as Christian believers and followers of Jesus. It is the beginning.

Application: Have you heard the voice that Jesus heard from heaven? As we learn to put aside our own plans and submit to God's, we are granted moments of vision, glimpses of God's greater reality. God loves you. God wants what's best for you. To experience that reality requires that we listen and respond each day. Turn to the opening prayer in this GPS and read it aloud and in your heart.

Prayer: Eternal God, thank you for your love that claims me and identifies me as one of your beloved children. Let me never forget how important I am to you and to your plan for creation. Amen.