

“The Way of the King”
Sermon for 25 January 2015
Matthew 4:23-5:5

Preaching the gospel of the kingdom (first occurrence/Matt.) –parallels the prior gospel of the kingdom, inaugurating the birth of the nation Israel, a divine kingdom—one in which God ruled. In this later instance, it is the rule of Jesus as the Christ which is view. There is a context for both instances: remarkable deliverances, miracles and signs. Just as God showed His mercy, through signs, wonders and miracles, in shattering the bonds that kept the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt, we have these verses (vv.23-25), recording the preaching of the gospel in actions framed in proclamation: **the preaching the gospel of the kingdom.** (Ellicott: commentary) Christ came to teach us that ***we only find happiness through holiness because holiness is what grants us access to God the Father!*** Holiness requires separation from worldliness and from our sinfulness—both past and present.

We read in Exodus 19 & 20, three months out from slavery, the people camped before Mount Sinai, a recitation of the mercies God worked in the deliverance of the people. **You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians,** (they saw His divine actions, in and around the ten plagues) **and how I bore you on eagles wings and brought you to Myself.** (They were drawn into His power and presence. 19:4) **Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.** (That is, speak this to all the people.) (vv. 5-6) Note what a powerful invitation this is: considering all the kindness, deliverances, wonders, signs and miracles God had already worked on their behalf—that God drew them out to make them holy . . . and therefore, happy..

Now let us consider all the signs, wonders and deliverances Jesus had worked prior to His Lawgiving moment in the sermon on the mount in Matthew 4:23 ff. What are these but the mercies of God, divine actions seen by all, demonstrating that the one who was to come, prophesied by Moses to be like him, from among their people had indeed arrived and they should **listen to Him.** (Deut. 18:15-18:**it is to Him you shall listen . . . And I will put My words in His mouth, and He will speak to them all that I command Him.**) A second opportunity to become a **kingdom of priests** had been granted to God’s own people. **And He (Jesus) went through all Galilee preaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.** *As in the first Exodus, the gospel of the kingdom declared through actions. This resurfaces in Jesus’ ministry.* The parallels are indisputable and crystal clear. Matthew 4 insinuates a vast amount of unrecorded teachings focused on: **The hours has come, the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel of God.** Words from the throne of heaven sent

to establish the throne on earth of the One sent to deliver us from our bondage to sin, the world and the devil. Holiness is possible in the here and now! Yet “God cares” is the underlying message of these gestures of grace: that is, love, tenderness. Jesus was overtly concerned for us, however, that the preaching of the kingdom must not be overshadowed by the healing and deliverance ministries *that both got Him an audience and demonstrated divine compassion*. Unlike the prince of this world, Jesus, the coming King, **healed to teach** people that destruction was not His agenda!

So Jesus resorted to their places of teaching and worship in every town and city in Galilee. He was somewhere *in worship* every Sabbath. Corporate prayer was enjoined in those services and the Law of God was read and expounded. Synagogue gatherings dated from before the Babylonian exile for it is recorded that the Chaldeans incinerated the synagogues earlier than 586 BC. There were, at one time, above four hundred synagogues in Jerusalem, despite the presence of the Temple in that city¹. Many held three services a day, three days out of the week! Of His healings, we may note that none were too bad, none too hard, lunacy and demonic possession—every misery and calamity known to man were subject to Him. Jesus came to heal the spiritual maladies of this world—any and all of them. As Matthew Henry notes, “Sin is the sickness, disease and torment of the soul: Christ came to take away sin and so heal the soul. *Now those who are healed are apt to be teachable, to want to learn more about the truth that keeps them from sin, and so keeps them whole*. Jesus taught those who believed the ordinances and doctrines of the Kingdom. This summary of Jesus’ earliest ministry depicts Him as the premier evangelist, a traveling preacher and miracle worker—by which I mean, a healer of human un-health (as in pain, disorder and chaos whether physical, or spiritual, or both at the same time). *One point to note is that Jesus did good works and generated a huge impression early on very like the huge impression worked by the Exodus*. **Great crowds followed Him** from all quarters of that region. Meanwhile He preached that the gospel is centered in the kingdom, in the God-given blessedness that follows from the approach and **evident present work** of the Messiah.

¹ The architecture and ritual of the synagogue mirrored that of the temple. There was an annual liturgical sequence of reading regularly from the Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses—plus the singing of psalms. In this worship there was a pulpit wherefrom an officiant read standing and expounded seated. *A symbolic gesture signifying that the interpretation transpired under, in submission to the Word*. The synagogues also served as courts of law (“they shall scourge you in their synagogues”) and public schools with boys academically inclined were taught there. And, higher up, seminarians were schooled there as well. Ten men were in charge, three of them were known as “The Rulers of the Synagogue.” One other. A fourth served as “Angel of the Church,” or as the bishop. The next three were deacons, or ministers to the poor. The eighth was “interpreter,” parsing the Hebrew into the vernacular. The ninth was Master of the Divinity School whom the tenth served as interpreter. See Matthew 10:27. All this was part of the Judaic tradition, and not even a Christian innovation.

All this was to declare “a new day,” (**The hour is come, the kingdom of God is at hand**) and to provoke the people to do something about it (**repent and believe the gospel**). **So His fame spread throughout all Syria . . . and great crowds followed Him** (vv. 24, 25) and as know, four apostles had been called already, it is possible that this enthusiastic following played some role in the acceptance of Jesus’ call among the remaining apostles. Jesus was famously popular at this stage of His public ministry—a radical contrast to the situation at the time of His atoning sacrifice!

“The preaching of the gospel, framed in action,” is the proper context for the “Sermon on the Mount.” What I have already preached should rescue us from any reduction of this teaching to merely ethical teaching (and contrasted with the more dogmatic discourses recorded in John). For our purposes also, I will suggest that what is recorded in Matthew, was reiterated, in various formats on other occasions—one of which is prominently featured in Luke. More than just different occasions, these teachings were customized for different audiences, too. In style, Jesus teaching was put in memorable, proverbial nuggets—which may well have been quoted in other teaching moments, as proverbs usually are. Indeed, it is a speech pattern we still imbibe in!

Ellicott’s introduction to the Sermon on the Mount is worthy of full citation: “In (Matthew) chapters 5 and 6 of the Sermon on the Mount there is strong evidence of a systematic plan, and therefore of unity. The Beatitudes and the verses that immediately follow ([Matthew 5:2-16](#)) set forth the conditions of blessedness, the ideal life of the kingdom of heaven. Then comes the contrast between the righteousness required for it and that which passed current among the scribes and Pharisees; and this is carried (1) through their way of dealing with the Commandments ([Matthew 5:17-48](#)), and (2) through the three great elements of the religious life—almsgiving, prayer, and fasting ([Matthew 6:1-18](#)). This is followed by warnings against the love of money, and the cares which it brings with it, as fatal to the religious life in all its forms ([Matthew 6:19-34](#)). In the precepts of chapter 7 there is less traceable sequence, but its absence is as natural on the supposition of missing links in the chain, as on that of pearls threaded on a string, or a tessellated mosaic made up of fragments. The Sermon, as it stands, might have been spoken in thirty or forty minutes. There is no reason to think that this was the necessary or even customary limit of our Lord’s discourses. Assume a discourse somewhat longer than this, heard by a multitude, with no one taking notes at the time, but many trying, it may be some years afterwards, to put on record what they remembered; and then think of the writer of a Gospel coming to collect, with the aid of the Spirit ([John 14:26](#)), the *disjecta membra* which all held so precious; comparing, if he himself had heard it, what others had written or could tell him with what he recalled; placing together what he thus found with a visible order, where the lines had been left broad and deep; with an order more or less latent, where the trains of thought had been too subtle to catch the attention of the hearers—and we have a process of which the natural outcome is what we find here. On these

grounds, then, we may reasonably believe that we have substantially the report of a single discourse, possibly with a few additions from other similar discourses,—the first great prophetic utterance, the first full proclamation of “the perfect law of liberty” ([James 1:25](#)), the first systematic protest against the traditions of Pharisees and scribes—that protest in which we find the groundwork of holiness, and the life of Jesus translating itself into speech. . . . our Lord spake the word as men were able to hear it; that this was the beginning, not the end, of the training of His disciples; that the facts on which the fuller doctrines rested as yet were not. And so He was content to begin with “earthly things,” not “heavenly” ([John 3:12](#)), and to look forward to the coming of the Comforter to complete what He had thus begun. Those who would follow His method, must begin as He began; and the Sermon on the Mount, both in its negative and positive elements, is therefore the eternal inheritance of the Church of Christ, at all ages “the milk for babes,” even though those of full age may be capable of receiving the food of higher truths.”

[For your aid, this sermon is available in print—please avail yourself of a copy for further study. But for the purposes of this message I wish to highlight the following: 1. This sermon is “milk for new believers” (It is neither the limit of the Lord’s teaching, nor is it the supreme summation of His words.) This is the Christian Life 101; it is the basic foundation. Those who teach it as the supreme ethic, as our ideal, tend to confuse everyone with their confusion! 2. The beatitudes set forth the conditions of blessedness, the ideal life of the kingdom of heaven which pertains to the believers life in both the here and in the not yet; 3. These conditions are immediately followed by the description of the quality of personal righteous, as contrasted with what passed for righteousness in that day and age, required for authentic inclusion in God’s kingdom; 4. This disparity persists in how the Ten Commandments treated in this setting as well as almsgiving, prayer and fasting—in all we are to be genuine and sincere; 5. The cares and distraction of the love of money—it is fatal to a pure religious life; 6. In brief here is a early, full expression of the “perfect law of liberty.” James writes about this law in the first chapter, verse **25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. 26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.]**

“As the great prophet and lawgiver of His church, the one way to present and future happiness, at the same time that He corrected those false notions of the Messiah’s kingdom which so generally prevailed, and which he foresaw would prove of destructive tendency to those who continued to be governed by them.” (Benson, Commentary) This is the complex purpose behind the Sermon on the Mount.

Happiness. *We are made happy by being made holy.* It is not in the possession of things, or by performance nor even personal attributes (beauty, strength, intelligence) that we obtain blessedness. *This is the judgment of the world, not the judgment of the Word which Christ is speaking!* Those who are truly humble know and admit their dependency and spiritual deficiency. They are **poor in spirit**. (5:3) Their very poverty renders them teachable. Furthermore, they possess righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit that is available to no others. Their humility creates space within for Christ to inhabit. **For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.** (Isaiah 57:15) ESV **And All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.** (Isaiah 66:2) ESV

I dare say that most people do not deduce that happiness comes as a result of holiness! And, certainly, if they told you "I want to be happy," would be baffled if you prescribed holiness as the only spiritual path to happiness. A man who says he wants a wife who will make him happy is probably not realizing that what he really needs is a woman who will first make him holy (and, stunningly, humble). She would induce him to die to self, and lean into the Lord. **Loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and might** is instruction that only the humble embrace. As Matthew Henry notes: "The poor in spirit . . . see their want, bewail their guilt and thirst after a Redeemer." There is real enjoyment in living out an authentic sense of oneself—yes, because these are the ones Jesus chooses to bless and, if they persist in humility, they receive the kingdom of heaven both now . . . and forever! Jesus wisely saw that there is more hope in poverty than vanity in the pursuit of the comforts of this world. God helps those who receive their honor from Him and not self, or others. This is so counter-intuitive from the worldly point of view! The poor in spirit are an envelope wherein we often find the oppressed, the afflicted, the miserable and needy! When the suffering of the Hebrews climaxed, God heard their cry, sent Moses and delivered them from bondage in Egypt. Blessed are the poor indeed. *Christ is pointing to a self-emptying conviction that apart from God we have nothing, we are nothing.* And, as a parallel virtue, these folks are most ready to praise and exalt God. The destitute are willing to throw themselves with abandon upon God's compassion: **Whom have I in heaven, but You?** (Psalm 73:25) The riches of God are true and lasting favor!

The greater portion of humanity is ignorant of their soul's actual condition. Those who aim for grace, mercy and glory prevail. They are importunate, desperate for satisfaction *and they will not take no as an answer.* Therefore the gospel preached reaches their hearts and works transformation. It is difficult to overstate the differences between Jesus' approach and Moses. Jesus begins with attractions, allurements and pleasant promises (Luther) whereas the latter uses commands, threats and terrors. Repentance is the starting point, and the humility of the poor

renders them pliable on this point. Sadness for sin is really helpful, a growth step. And so is a willingness to submit to God. Fourthly, there is a hunger for righteous, and so on through all seven beatitudes (depending on how one counts).

If we hope to appreciate, this beatitude, we probably need to rethink “poverty.” For instance, we may need to consider that poverty is a relational issue rather than primarily, an economic one. It’s about living in a social setting characterized by oppressive relationships—and not just money. That oppressive setting dehumanizes, and devalues persons. *Ponder that the fundamental causes of poverty are perhaps spiritual!* Some of the physical and social causes are largely eternal (seen as outside the poor and beyond their control—despair arises from the disempowerments involved). Poverty is a situation in which relationships are not working from the well-being of all. The nature of poverty is relational; the cause is fundamentally spiritual. The poor feel excluded, disrespected, looked down upon. They have no energy, nor time for caring for the environment. (That is a luxury concern. The poor can’t afford environmentalism.) *Poverty distorts their knowledge of God as well as impairing their quest for truth.* “So poverty is the whole family of our relationships that are not all they can be.”

Both the poor and others hold to values that do not enhance life, or support thriving. Selfishness, greed, love of power and ordained entitlement/or privilege lead to egotists, people with god complexes—the entire opposite of humility. Fear walks with desperation for the poor. Superstition, the fear of gods that are no gods, and mere shadows of spiritual reality obscure the hope we need: the hope found in the free offer of God who desires to save, heal and help . . . and is able to do it!

The compelling question for the poor (and from others who consider the matter deeply) is: Who will save us? We have many offers: Science and technology? Free markets and globalization? Progress and evolutionary development? Human ingenuity and imagination? Wealth redistribution? *Or, is the sole source of salvation the cross and the resurrection?* Christians assent to the belief that only the latter has the power and capacity to bring us through . . . and all the way home. Blessed are the meek, they are those who have the best hope of getting it! And when they do, **theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

Amen.

