

DAY 4 | MATTHEW 5:1-16

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Counter Culture Values

by Alex Bryan

The Kingdom of Heaven is Significant

The kingdom of heaven was—and is—a very important subject for Jesus.

In fact, some say while on earth He spoke of the kingdom of heaven more than any other topic. The kingdom, apparently, was the *most* important reality. Jesus told many parables about the kingdom (Matthew 13). He contrasted the kingdom of heaven (His Father’s kingdom) with inferior kingdoms of this world (Matthew 4:8-10). He even described His mission as bringing the kingdom of heaven to the earth itself (Matthew 4:17). The prayer of Jesus, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10) shows us that God wishes for the ways and means of His kingdom to conquer the ways and means of the kingdoms of this world.



Alex Bryan is the author of this sermon. He can be reached at alex@the1project.org.

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A kingdom, of course, has a king. God is the king of His kingdom – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are on the throne. They are in charge. They make the rules. The life of Jesus describes what the kingdom is all about. We find in His life compassion, holiness, purpose, truth, and love. We see in His interactions with people how kingdom people are supposed to live. From His miracles of healing to His

practical teachings about money to His sacrificial death on a cross we understand the values of the kingdom. Jesus came to reveal God, to show us how God wants the world to work. Christ brings us “the law of the land,” which is, of course, built upon the law of love (Matthew 22:37).

Our purpose here, however, is not to identify the king, nor the kingdom’s rules and regulations. Instead, we will explore kingdom citizenship. Who gets to be a part of this kingdom? In an attempt to answer this question we will explore Matthew 5:1-14, which is the beginning of Jesus’ famous “Sermon on the Mount.” You may know that this teaching is the great discourse on ethical living in the way of Jesus – life lived in harmony with the kingdom of God. But in these first several verses, Jesus first wishes to explore the question of “who” actually qualifies for kingdom membership.

Qualifications for Kingdom Membership

Let’s begin reading in Matthew 5:1-2.

“Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.”

A quick and casual reading of these verses might leave us feeling as if there isn’t much to reflect upon other than some basic, uninteresting facts. “Jesus was teaching people on the side of a hill.” But there is much more to the story! Yes, Jesus is teaching. He was a rabbi, a teacher. And yes, the fact that He sat down was a common teaching position for rabbis. And yes, the word *disciple* means “one who is learning from a rabbi,” and the great outdoors was a common place to teach and a natural slope would have made for a nice classroom environment. All this makes sense. What doesn’t is this: Jesus was teaching the *crowds*.

Here’s the problem: rabbis were traditionally very selective about who they would teach. Only the best and the brightest entered their classrooms. Only the politically well-connected found a chair in their amphitheaters. Only those who were holy, righteous, of the right bloodline, only those who were Jewish, and only the boys were allowed to enroll in their schools. If you were female, you would not be taught. If you were the son of a poor man, you would not be taught. If you were

diseased, you would not be taught. If you were a Gentile you would definitely not be taught. If you did not meet a very select standard, you were simply out of luck.

Jesus is teaching the *crowds*. Jesus is treating the masses as those *worthy* of being taught. There is no “mettle” detector, testing the spiritual worthiness of those who would listen. This crowd is diverse: rich, poor, male, female, young, old, high IQ, low IQ, those who knew the doctrines and those who knew nothing of them. Jesus’ decision to teach the crowds—come one and all—presents a startling new vision of kingdom membership. The gates protecting the gated community are being torn down. The idea that only a few are God’s chosen—His select special ones—is eroding. This idea is now challenged by Jesus.

So what kind of people does Jesus see on that hillside?

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

Have you ever been “poor in spirit”? Has your spirit ever been low? Have you ever felt down and depressed? Has the darkness ever surrounded you and you felt completely hopeless? Have you ever doubted that life is good? Have you ever wondered, “God, do you exist”? Have you ever felt empty, impoverished in your spirit, in your soul?

Jesus says, “blessed are you.” What does He mean? You are chosen by God. God is smiling on you. God loves you. God is happy with you. Be of good courage. You can have a kind of joy even amid great sorrow. Just because you are “in the dumps” doesn’t mean you are somehow cut off from God.

We live in a world where mental illness is sometimes viewed with suspicion. Even today we may look down on those who need counseling, who need to speak with a mental health professional. We sometimes assume depression means, “This person is not right with God, with life.” We say of someone who is uncertain in their ability to believe in God, “They are agnostic, an atheist, a doubter . . . they are in real trouble with God.” Sometimes we associate bad moods and mental darkness with unfitness for the kingdom. But we forget even Jesus’ words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Even Jesus, who remained without sin, felt great darkness. Even Jesus wondered whether God had abandoned him. Such an extreme experience would have led any of us to doubt, and even reject, the reality of God. However, Jesus’ experience shows us that extreme

human experience is no evidence for the absence of God. We can be poor in spirit; we can live with troubled souls at times.

But this does not leave us cursed! Rather, we are blessed. We are beloved. We are invited to become citizens of the kingdom of heaven, of the kingdom of Jesus. If you are feeling low today, remember, you are blessed, you are beloved.

Jesus looks out at the crowd again (verse 4): “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Grief is not sin. Even Jesus wept with the family of Lazarus (John 11:35).

“But it was not only because of His human sympathy with Mary and Martha that Jesus wept. In His tears there was a sorrow as high above human sorrow as the heavens are higher than the earth. Christ did not weep for Lazarus; for He was about to call him from the grave. He wept because many of those now mourning for Lazarus would soon plan the death of Him who was the resurrection and the life. But how unable were the unbelieving Jews rightly to interpret His tears! Some, who could see nothing more than the outward circumstances of the scene before Him as a cause for His grief, said softly, “Behold how He loved him!” Others, seeking to drop the seed of unbelief into the hearts of those present, said derisively, “Could not this Man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?” If it were in Christ’s power to save Lazarus, why then did He suffer him to die?” (*Desire of Ages*, 533.4)

Kingdom membership does not require perpetual happiness. We may be sad and still be in sync with the Savior. We may mourn—even with overtones of anger. Grief includes anger—anger with ourselves, with circumstances, with other human beings, even anger with God. Strong emotions in connection with disappointment and loss are not necessarily contrary to following Jesus. Faithfulness to God does not mean elimination of human feelings. Are you suffering? You are not cursed. Believe that you are blessed, that you are beloved by God.

Jesus continues (verse 5): “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

Our world does not admire the meek. Weakness is perceived as a flaw. We admire those who are strong financially, strong athletically, strong in terms of the media's narrow definition of beauty. We like outgoing people. We like self-confident people. We like those with a quick wit. Those who are slow, ugly, poor, or dull . . . we aren't big fans of these unfortunate ones. And, of course, these distorted values can often be found in the church. We love strong preachers, strong leaders, strong Christian men and women who have their act together. But the meek? The weak? Those who live so often in the cracks and crevices of life? But here comes Jesus, and He says it's not the engaging evangelist and the wealthy donor and the perfect-pitched soprano who alone have access to the kingdom of heaven: "Blessed are the meek."

And then Jesus looks again out at the crowd (verse 6): "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Wow. In the Christian community we celebrate those who are well-fed in righteousness. We love holy men and righteous women. We love prayer-warriors and Bible study champions. We love those who tithe to the penny and don't eat cheese. Those who are well-nourished—the remnant of the remnant of the remnant—these are the true children of God! But here Jesus proclaims a blessing, a word of God's favor, to those who are hungry and thirsty. Jesus is pointing to those who have not been taking their holy vitamins and consuming three square meals of Godliness every day. Jesus says, "Welcome to the kingdom those of you who are spiritually starving. There is room enough for those who are not super-saints."

And Jesus continues (verses 7-9): "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."

Mercy implies not seeking justice when justice is deserved. It is grace. Purity of heart does not imply perfection, but rather honest confession and transparency—a pure-hearted person admits fault, claims God's gift of grace, and longs to be like Jesus. And peacemakers? Those who seek peace are less interested in getting what is fair and more interested in working for the common good—a community of grace. These three qualities may be attractive to us. But too often we admire the opposite in religion: we like those who discipline the fallen, we like those who maintain a veneer

of holiness, we like those who conquer. Mercy, heart-purity, and peacemaking often get left out in the cold. But Jesus says to His crowd of disciples, “Bring them inside, into the warmth of the living room of your life.”

And then Jesus says this (verses 10-12): “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.”

Jesus tells the men and women seated on that hillside to be aware. Joining the kingdom will not be easy. You will be persecuted. You will be mocked. You will be tortured. You might even be killed. Kingdom living is not a life enjoyed behind protective walls. Citizenship in the community of Jesus has a cost. We will be persecuted like the prophets of old. And who did this persecuting? Yes, at times, secular, profane, evil forces—like Pharaoh, Ahab, and Nebuchadnezzar. But the prophets were also persecuted by those claiming to do the work of God. In Matthew 21:33-46 Jesus tells a parable illustrating the long history of persecution—at the hands of religious leadership. And at the end of the parable the chief priests and the Pharisees realize that Jesus has been “talking about them.” How ironic! The people who would claim privileged status in God’s kingdom are the ones warring against that very kingdom. It is a sobering thought that those who presented themselves as most holy, most righteous, most religious, most serious about cleaning up the synagogue, and making it pure—it was those religious leaders who were doing the most damage to the church. Their hearts were not pure. They would bind burdens on others but not lift them with their own little finger (Matthew 23:4). And so Jesus says to those in the crowd who are already feeling this persecution, “Just because religious leadership is on your case, this does not mean you are on the wrong track. In fact, it is these men, these so-called religious leaders, who are opposing me.” Wow! How bold is Jesus in straightening out true membership in the kingdom!

Kingdom Responsibility

And then Jesus pivots His sermon. For these first several verses He has been throwing the door wide open—to the depressed, to the sad, to the lowly, to the

spiritually marginal, to the humble, to those viewed poorly by religious establishment. And now He calls the crowds to greatness (Matthew 5:13-16):

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Imagine how these words must have felt to those who believed their lives were worthless. Jesus is saying, “You can make a difference. You can do my work. You can make the world a better place. You can bring spice and color to the world. You can turn the world upside down and right side up!” Jesus’ message is not only one of acceptance (you are beloved by God and can be part of this kingdom), His message is also one of confidence (you are able to do great things for God with your life). “I love you and I expect amazing things from you.” And the crowds, who had felt neither the tenderness of God nor His confidence in them, were amazed.

A Seat for All

In conclusion, a story.

A few years ago my wife and I planned a party for our preschool-aged daughter, Audrey. You have to put quite a bit of thought into doing something like this correctly. We made decisions about the kind of food, decorations, games, and crafts that would be fun (and not too messy) for five-year-olds. The night of the party came and everything was going along exceptionally well. The kids were having a blast and the other parents, we could tell, were pleased. At some point during the party we invited all the parents and children to the finished basement of our home, where we keep an upright piano, to play the game “musical chairs.” We placed ten chairs in a circle, facing outward—one chair for each little boy and girl. My wife explained the rules of the game and the children took their seats. I started to play

the piano and, per the rules of the game, the children leapt out of their chairs and began to run in a circle. My wife removed one of the chairs, I played for a few more seconds, and then the music stopped. Ten little boys and girls rushed for the nine remaining chairs—all of them successfully claiming a seat except for one little boy. Immediately, this small chair-less five-year-old looked over at his mommy and daddy and burst into tears. Sobbing, he ran over to them. My wife and I glanced at each other with a quizzical look. *That didn't go as we thought it would.* And so I started to play the piano again—and nine little boys and girls ran in a circle. My wife removed another chair, I played a few more seconds, and then the music stopped. This time, nine little boys and girls raced for the eight remaining chairs. Eight claimed a space, leaving one girl the odd person out. Immediately, she looked to her mommy and daddy, burst into tears, and ran into their waiting arms. My wife and I looked at each other with understanding. *If we don't do something quickly this is going to turn from bad to worse!* And so we coaxed all the (shaken) children to try one more time. My wife replaced the two missing chairs. The children each took a seat. I started to play the piano, and . . . no chair was removed. I played for a few more seconds and then the music stopped. Ten little boys and girls raced for ten available chairs.

And every one of them found a seat.

They screamed and yelled and shouted at me, "Pastor Alex, do it again! Pastor Alex, play it again!"

And we played that game until those kids (and my fingers) were completely worn out.

The kingdom of heaven has a seat for everyone. There's room enough for every little boy, every little girl, each and every child of God. The music of heaven invites all of us to join in a heavenly game filled with laughter, and joy, and the opportunity to draw others in to play.

No matter your place in life. No matter your circumstance. No matter your past.

God has a place for you. Will you join the game and take your seat? ●