

**JESUS'S SERMON
ON THE MOUNT
AND
HIS CONFRONTATION
WITH THE WORLD**

A STUDY OF MATTHEW 5-10

TWO BOOKS IN ONE

D. A. CARSON



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Part One

Jesus's Sermon on the Mount

PREFACE

EARLY IN 1974 I was asked to give six addresses on the Sermon on the Mount to the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU). These addresses, slated for the Easter term of 1975, consumed a large part of my time and energy for the six weeks over which they were spread. I do not think I have ever enjoyed teaching people the Scriptures as much as I enjoyed speaking to the four or five hundred students who gathered every Saturday night. Unusually receptive, they challenged me by their genuine attentiveness to the Word of God.

Since then I have repeated the series two or three times, in churches located in British Columbia. As time has permitted, I have revised the series, writing it in a form more congenial to the printed page than a sermon or Bible reading usually is. However, I have deliberately not removed all traces of the earlier form. I have added two appendices, largely elicited by questions that have been put to me. Some of the material in the first appendix was interwoven into the original series, but I have thought it best in this book to separate it.

How does this volume differ from those now in circulation which deal with the same passage? Why offer another study on

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the Sermon on the Mount? Several reasons spring to mind. This exposition is shorter than most others designed for the general reader; but that is because it is more condensed. I have tried hard to be freer from the categories of systematic theology than some of my predecessors, though I want my work to be informed by the most significant theological points of view. The material in the two appendices is not usually included in popular expositions, but it may help the interested reader to view the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount with a more balanced vision and with deeper understanding. But more than any other reason, I am offering these studies to a larger circle because I am deeply convinced that the church of Christ needs to study the Sermon on the Mount again and again.

I take pleasure in recording here my deep gratitude to many scores of writers. I have read some of the popular expositions, but apart from the sacred text itself I have made it a point above all to read the best commentaries I could secure. W. S. Kissinger's *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* has been an invaluable tool in the later stages of study. A gold mine of information, it introduced me to some serious works of which I was quite unaware. Informed readers will also sense my indebtedness to Robert Banks' *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*. I want to record my thanks to Tyndale House, Cambridge, which afforded me the opportunity to read a copy of Banks' doctoral dissertation before his published revision put in an appearance. I have read only a few foreign-language works on the Sermon on the Mount. This I regret, just as I regret that I could not canvass more of the enormous body of secondary literature. Even in the journals that have crossed my desk during the past quarter there has not been any shortage of studies on these three chapters of Matthew's Gospel.

My sincere gratitude is also extended to Eileen Appleby, who transcribed the tapes of the original addresses; and to Sue

Preface

Wonnacott, and especially to Diane Smith, who transformed an excessively messy manuscript into neat and near-flawless typescript.
Soli Deo Gloria.

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1

The Kingdom of Heaven

Its Norms and Witness (5:3–16)

Introduction

The more I read these three chapters—Matthew 5, 6, and 7—the more I am both drawn to them and shamed by them. Their brilliant light draws me like a moth to a spotlight; but the light is so bright that it sears and burns. No room is left for forms of piety which are nothing more than veneer and sham. Perfection is demanded. Jesus says, “Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48).

The great theme of these three chapters is the kingdom of heaven. “The kingdom of heaven” is Matthew’s customary expression for what other New Testament writers preferred to call “the kingdom of God.” Matthew was like many Jews of his day who would avoid using the word “God.” They felt it was too holy, too exalted; therefore euphemisms like “heaven” were adopted. In meaning, kingdom of heaven is identical to kingdom of God (cf. Matt. 19:23f.; Mark 10:23f.; etc.).

Four preliminary observations may help to clarify these expressions. First, the idea of “kingdom” in both the Old and New Testaments is primarily dynamic rather than spatial. It is not so much a kingdom with geographical borders as it is a “kingdomion,” or reign. In the Scriptures, the spatial meaning of kingdom is secondary and derivative.

Second, although the kingdom of God can refer to the totality of God's sovereignty, that is not what is in view in the Sermon on the Mount. Indeed, in the universal sense, God's kingdom—his reign—is eternal and all-embracing. No one and nothing can escape from it. From the time of Jesus's resurrection and exaltation onward, all of this divine sovereignty is mediated through Christ. Jesus himself taught this: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). This universal authority is what Paul refers to when he says that Christ must reign until God has put all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25). Some refer to this “kingdom” as the mediatorial kingdom of God, because God's authority, his reign, is mediated through Christ.

But this cannot be the kingdom of God most frequently in view in the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, not everyone enters the kingdom of heaven, but only those who are poor in spirit (5:3), obedient (7:21), and surpassingly righteous (5:20). Similarly, in John's Gospel, only he who is born from above can see or enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). Since the universal kingdom by definition must include everyone whether he likes it or not, we see that the kingdom in these passages cannot be universal. There are conditions to be met before entrance is possible. The kingdom with which I am concerned in these essays, the kingdom preached by Jesus, is a *subset* of the universal kingdom.

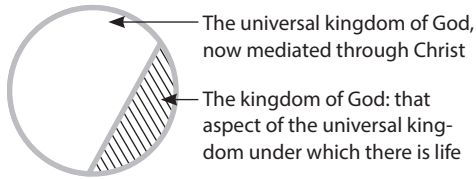
We get an idea what is meant when we compare Mark 9:45 and Mark 9:47. The first verse reads: “And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to *enter life* crippled, than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.” The second reads: “And if your

The Kingdom of Heaven

eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to *enter the kingdom of God* with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.” To enter the kingdom of God, then, is to enter life. That is characteristically the language of John’s Gospel; however, it is found in the Sermon on the Mount itself. These three chapters of Matthew are concerned with entering the kingdom (Matt. 5:3, 10; 7:21), which is equivalent to entering into life (7:13f.; cf. 19:14, 16).

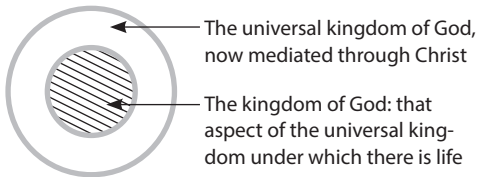
Thus the kingdom of heaven in this narrower sense is that exercise of God’s sovereignty which bears directly on his saving purposes. All who are in the kingdom have life; all who are not in the kingdom do not have life. We might schematize these conclusions as follows:

Figure 1



Or, if God’s saving purposes lie at the heart of his sovereignty, the scheme might be improved thus:

Figure 2



Of course, this diagram overschematizes the evidence. The word “kingdom,” having primary reference to the dynamic, can be used in the more extended sense or the special salvific sense. For example, Jesus elsewhere tells a parable in which he likens the kingdom to a

man who sowed good seed in his field, yet discovered weeds sprouting up, sown by an enemy (Matt. 13:24–29, 36–43). It appears as if the kingdom at this point embraces both wheat and weeds; in non-metaphorical terms, the kingdom embraces both men with life and men without life. In terms of the circular diagram above, the line between the inner circle and the outer becomes very thin. The emphasis seems to be on the universal kingdom, even though the sowing of good seed is its central purpose. Indeed, as a result of that purpose, the present mixed crop one day gets sorted out: at harvest time, the weeds are tied into bundles and burned, and the wheat is gathered into the master's barn (Matt. 13:30).

This ambiguity helps us to understand Matthew 8:10–12, where Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth." The Jews, privileged as they were to be the inheritors of the Old Testament revelation, were the expected "subjects of the kingdom"; but Jesus indicates that in fact many from all over the world will join the patriarchs in the kingdom. He also warns that many expected subjects will be excluded from the delights of God's saving reign.

Third, the expression "kingdom of God," in the saving sense (the only way I will use it from now on), applies to both present and future. Taken together, the books of the New Testament insist that the kingdom of God has already arrived; a person may enter the kingdom and receive life now, life "to the full" (John 10:10). Jesus himself argues that if he drives out demons by the Spirit of God—and he does—then the kingdom of God *has come* (Matt. 12:28). Nevertheless, the books of the New Testament insist that the kingdom will be inherited only in the future, when Christ comes again. Eternal life, though experienced now, is consummated then,

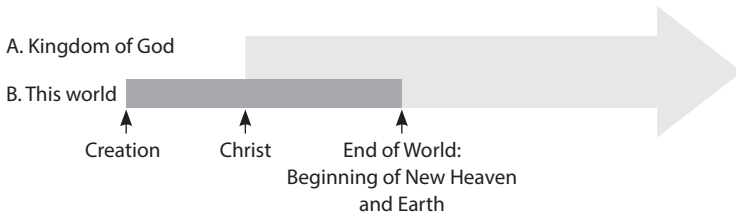
The Kingdom of Heaven

in conjunction with such a renovation of the universe that the only adequate description is “a new heaven and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1; cf. Rom. 8:21ff.).

Jesus tells several parables with the specific purpose of removing misconceptions among his followers, misconceptions to the effect that the full arrival of the kingdom would be achieved without any delay. He wanted them to think otherwise: the coming of the kingdom in its fullness might well require significant delay. For example, in one parable in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 19:11ff.), Jesus pictures a man of noble birth who goes to a distant country and then returns; and he receives full authority of a kingdom only after he has returned. Jesus is that nobleman, and the consummation of the kingdom awaits his return.

Another diagram might help to explain these truths:

Figure 3



All men live on the plane of “this world”; but from the time of Christ’s coming to the end of the world, the inheritors of the kingdom (and they alone) also live on the plane of the kingdom. Thus, from the circular diagrams it is clear that a man may or may not be in the kingdom of God; from the linear sketch it is clear that if he is in it now, he may yet look forward to its consummation at the end of the world, when Christ returns. There is an “already” aspect of the kingdom, and a “not yet” aspect: the kingdom has already come, but it has not yet arrived.

Fourth, although entering into life and entering the kingdom are synonymous, they are not always strictly interchangeable. The

very idea of “kingdom” as “dynamic reign” brings with it overtones of authority and submission not normally conjured up when we speak of “life.” The kingdom of God speaks of God’s authority, mediated through Christ; therefore it speaks equally of our whole-hearted allegiance to that authority. That is why Matthew 7:21–23 so stresses obedience: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evil-doers!’”

It is the kingdom of heaven, then, that is the great theme of the Sermon on the Mount. At the end of Matthew 4 we learn that Jesus went throughout Galilee “preaching the good news of the kingdom” (4:23). Both his preaching and his miracles of healing attracted large crowds to him. Accordingly Matthew 5 opens with the words, “Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.” Some have urged that Jesus’s response to the crowds was to withdraw and train his disciples. By training them Jesus would be multiplying his own ministry. This probably reads too much into the text, for in Matthew’s Gospel “disciple” is not necessarily a reference to the twelve apostles, nor even to committed believers and followers; it can refer to someone who is merely following and learning at that moment—without reference to his level of commitment (see, for instance, Matt. 8:21; or the example of Judas Iscariot). Moreover, if “disciples” are sometimes distinguished from “the crowds” (as in Matt. 23:1), we may be sure that crowds often pressed in close to hear the teaching primarily designed for those most concerned to learn. From the huge crowds assembling from all over northern Palestine, perhaps a smaller crowd of “disciples” followed Jesus to the quiet hill country west of Galilee in order to receive more extended teaching; and perhaps

more and more joined the class, partly because of Jesus's rising reputation and partly because a crowd attracts a crowd. This way of understanding the text is confirmed by Matthew's conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, *the crowds* were amazed at his teaching" (7:28). It is confirmed, too, by the fact that Jesus presses these "disciples" to enter the kingdom, to enter into life (7:13f.; 7:21–23).

Jesus arrived at his chosen theater and "sat down." In his day, this was the traditional position for a teacher in a synagogue or school. Some English versions then say: "He opened his mouth and taught them, saying. . . ." We might ask ourselves wryly how he could have taught them without opening his mouth, until we recognize that the expression is a semitic idiom, a traditional formula. It seems to add deliberateness and sobriety to what follows.

The Norms of the Kingdom (5:3–12)

The Beatitudes, 5:3–10

There are some general observations to make about these beatitudes before examining them individually. First, the word "beatitude" is a rough transliteration of the Latin *beatus*. Some Christians call these beatitudes "macarisms." This is a rough transliteration of the Greek word *makarios*. Both "beatitude" and "macarism" are transliterations of foreign words which can best be translated "blessed."

Although some modern translations prefer "happy" to "blessed," it is a poor exchange. Those who are blessed will generally be profoundly happy; but blessedness cannot be reduced to happiness. In the Scriptures, man can bless God and God can bless man. This duality gives us a clue just what is meant. To be "blessed" means, fundamentally, to be approved, to find approval. When man blesses God, he is approving God. Of course, he is not doing this in some condescending manner, but rather he is eulogizing God, praising

God. When God blesses man, he is approving man; and that is always an act of condescension.

Since this is God's universe there can be no higher "blessing" than to be approved by God. We must ask ourselves whose blessing we diligently seek. If God's blessing means more to us than the approval of loved ones no matter how cherished, or of colleagues no matter how influential, then the beatitudes will speak to us very personally and deeply.

Another observation is that the kind of blessing is not arbitrary in any of these eight beatitudes. The thing promised in each case grows naturally (or rather, supernaturally) out of the character described. For example, in verse 6 the person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness is filled (with righteousness); in verse 7 the merciful are shown mercy. The blessing is always correlated with the condition, as we shall see.

Finally, we need to notice that two of the beatitudes promise the same reward. The first beatitude reads, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3). The last one says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:10). To begin and end with the same expression is a stylistic device called an "inclusio." This means that everything bracketed between the two can really be included under the one theme, in this case, the kingdom of heaven. That is why I have called the beatitudes, collectively, "The Norms of the Kingdom."

First: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3).

What is poverty of spirit? It is surely not financial destitution, or material poverty. Nor is it poverty of spiritual awareness. Still less is it poor-spiritedness, that is, a deficiency of vitality or courage. And certainly the expression does not denote poverty of Holy Spirit.

The expression seems to have developed in Old Testament times. God's people were often referred to as "the poor" or "the poor of the

Lord,” owing to their extreme economic distress. This distress often came about because of oppression. Some of the various Hebrew words for “poor” can also mean “lowly,” or “humble”: the association of the two ideas is natural enough. For example, in Proverbs 16:19 we read, “It is better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud” (RSV). The word translated “lowly” is elsewhere rendered “poor”; and both “poor” and “lowly” fit the context. Two verses in Isaiah stand close in meaning to the poverty of spirit of which Jesus speaks: “Thus says the high and lofty One 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 humble spirit” (Isa. 57:15 RSV). Again: “This is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2 RSV).

Poverty of spirit is the personal acknowledgment of spiritual bankruptcy. It is the conscious confession of unworth before God. As such, it is the deepest form of repentance. It is exemplified by the guilty publican in the corner of the Temple: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” It is not a man’s confession that he is ontologically insignificant, or personally without value, for such would be untrue; it is, rather, a confession that he is sinful and rebellious and utterly without moral virtues adequate to commend him to God. From within such a framework, poverty of spirit becomes a general confession of a man’s need for God, a humble admission of impotence without him. Poverty of spirit may *end* in a Gideon vanquishing the enemy hosts; but it *begins* with a Gideon who first affirms he is incapable of the task, and who insists that if the Lord does not go with him he would much prefer to stay home and thresh grain.

Poverty of spirit cannot be artificially induced by self-hatred. Still less does it have in common with showy humility. It cannot be aped successfully by the spiritually haughty who covet its qualities. Such efforts may achieve token success before peers; they never deceive God. Indeed, most of us are repulsed by sham humility, whether our own or that of others.

I suspect that there is no pride more deadly than that which finds its roots in great learning, great external piety, or a showy defense of orthodoxy. My suspicion does not call into question the value of learning, piety, or orthodoxy; rather, it exposes professing believers to the full glare of this beatitude. Pride based on genuine virtues has the greatest potential for self-deception; but our Lord will allow none of it. Poverty of spirit he insists on—a full, honest, factual, conscious, and conscientious recognition before God of personal moral unworth. It is, as I have said, the deepest form of repentance.

It is not surprising, then, that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. At the very outset of the Sermon on the Mount, we learn that we do not have the spiritual resources to put any of the Sermon's precepts into practice. We cannot fulfill God's standards ourselves. We must come to him and acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy, emptying ourselves of our self-righteousness, moral self-esteem, and personal vainglory. Emptied of these things we are ready for him to fill us. Much of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is designed to remove these self-delusions from us, and foster within us a genuine poverty of spirit. The genuineness and depth of this repentance is a prime requirement for entering into life.

Second: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (5:4).

This verse follows naturally from the one which precedes it. Mournfulness can be understood as the emotional counterpart to poverty of spirit.

The world in which we live likes to laugh. Pleasure dispensers sell cheers and chuckles, all for a neat profit. The *summum bonum* of life becomes a good time, and the immediate goal is the next high. The world does not like mourners; mourners are wet blankets.

Yet the Son of God insists, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." This does not mean the Christian is to be perpetually morose, forever weepy. The Christian must not fit

the stereotype in the mind of the little girl who exclaimed, "That horse must be a Christian; it's got such a long face!" Still less is the verse a defense of that grief which arises out of groveling self-pity.

What is it, then? At the individual level, this mourning is a personal grief over personal sin. This is the mourning experienced by a man who begins to recognize the blackness of his sin, the more he is exposed to the purity of God. Isaiah was one such, as he was accorded a vision of the Deity, in which even the very angels of heaven covered their faces and cried in solemn worship, "Holy! Holy! Holy!" Isaiah's reaction was utter devastation (Isa. 6:5). It is the cry of a man who goes after purity in his own strength and finds he cannot achieve it, and cries, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24).

But there can also be a mourning stimulated by broader considerations. Sometimes the sin of this world, the lack of integrity, the injustice, the cruelty, the cheapness, the selfishness, all pile onto the consciousness of a sensitive man and make him weep. Most of us would prefer merely to condemn. We are prepared to walk with Jesus through Matthew 23 and repeat his pronouncements of doom; but we stop before we get to the end of the chapter and join him in weeping over the city. The great lights in church history learned to weep—men of the caliber of Calvin, Whitefield, Wesley, Shaftesbury, and Wilberforce.

The Christian is to be the truest realist. He reasons that death is there, and must be faced. God is there, and will be known by all as Savior or Judge. Sin is there, and it is unspeakably ugly and black in the light of God's purity. Eternity is there, and every living human being is rushing toward it. God's revelation is there, and the alternatives it presents will come to pass: life or death, pardon or condemnation, heaven or hell. These are realities which will not go away. The man who lives in the light of them, and rightly assesses himself and his world in the light of them, cannot but mourn. He mourns for the sins and blasphemies of his nation. He

mourns for the erosion of the very concept of truth. He mourns over the greed, the cynicism, the lack of integrity. He mourns that there are so few mourners.

But he will be comforted! And what comfort. There is no comfort or joy that can compare with what God gives to those who mourn. These people exchange the sackcloth of mourning for a garment of praise, the ashes of grief for the oil of gladness. At the individual level, the mourner grieves over his sin because he sees how great is the offense before God; but he learns to trust Jesus as the one who has paid sin's ransom (Mark 10:45). He luxuriates in deep joy as he discovers in his own experience that Jesus came to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). And as he weeps for other men, he finds to his delight that God is answering his prayers, very often even working through him to untangle sin's knots and provide others with new birth, new righteousness. But even this great comfort will be surpassed: one day in a new heaven and new earth, the kingdom of God will be consummated, and God himself will wipe away all tears from the eyes of those who once mourned. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away (Rev. 21:4).

Third: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (5:5).

How does meekness differ from poverty of spirit? In this way, I think: Poverty of spirit has to do with a person's assessment of himself, especially with respect to God, while meekness has more to do with his relationship with God and with men.

Meekness is not, as many people imagine, a weakness. It must not be confused with being wishy-washy. A meek person is not necessarily indecisive or timid. He is not so unsure of himself that he could be pushed over by a hard slap from a wet noodle. Still less is meekness to be confused with mere affability. Some people are just naturally nice and easy-going; but then again, so are some dogs. Meekness goes much deeper.

Meekness is a controlled desire to see the other's interests advance ahead of one's own. Think of Abraham's deference to Lot: that was meekness. According to Numbers 12:3, Moses was the meekest man who ever lived, and his meekness is supremely demonstrated in that chapter by his refusal to defend himself, by his controlled self-commitment to the Lord when his person and privilege were under attack. But it is Jesus himself who is the only one who could ever say with integrity, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28f.).

Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it this way:

The man who is truly meek is the one who is amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do. . . . Finally, I would put it like this. We are to leave everything—ourselves, our rights, our cause, our whole future—in the hands of God, and especially so if we feel we are suffering unjustly.¹

The Scriptures make much of meekness (see 2 Cor. 10:1; Gal. 5:22f.; Col. 3:12; 1 Peter 3:15f.; James 1:19–21), and so it is the more appalling that meekness does not characterize more of us who claim to be Christians. Both at the personal level, where we are too often concerned with justifying ourselves rather than with edifying our brother, and at the corporate level, where we are more successful at organizing rallies, institutions, and pressure groups than at extending the kingdom of God, meekness has not been the mark of most Christians for a long time.

To the extent that meekness is practiced among us—to that extent, we may be sure—a crassly materialistic world will oppose it. Materialism argues, "Grab what you can; the strong man comes first and the devil take the hindmost." This is true whether one is on the right or the left of the political spectrum. Individually, each man tends to assume, without thinking, that he is at the center of

the universe; therefore he relates poorly to the four billion others who are laboring under a similar delusion. But the meek man sees himself and all the others under God. Since he is poor in spirit, he does not think more highly of himself than he ought to. Therefore he is able to relate well to others.

And the meek shall inherit the earth! These words, cited from Psalm 37:11, constitute a devastating contradiction to the philosophical materialism so prevalent in our own day. But this blessing of inheritance is true in at least two ways. First, only the genuine meek man will be content; his ego is not so inflated that he thinks he must always have more. Besides, in Christ he already sees himself "possessing everything" (2 Cor. 6:10; cf. 1 Cor. 3:21–23). With this eternal perspective in view he can afford to be meek. Moreover, one day he will come into the fullness of his inheritance, when he will find the beatitude fulfilled most literally. Fifty billion trillion years into eternity (if I may speak in terms of time) God's people will still be rejoicing that this beatitude is literally true. In a new heaven *and earth*, they will be grateful that by grace they learned to be meek during their initial threescore years and ten.

Fourth: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (5:6).

Thorough righteousness is often parodied as some form of obsolete Victorian prudishness, or narrow-minded and vehement legalism. The pursuit of righteousness is not popular even among professing Christians. Many today are prepared to seek other things: spiritual maturity, real happiness, the Spirit's power, effective witnessing skills. Other people chase from preacher to preacher and conference to conference seeking some vague "blessing" from on high. They hunger for spiritual experience, they thirst for the conscience of God.

But how many hunger and thirst for righteousness?

This is not to argue that the other things are not desirable, but rather that they are not as basic as righteousness. It is with good

reason that this is the fourth beatitude. The man marked by poverty of spirit (5:3), who grieves over sin personal and social (5:4), and approaches God and man with meekness (5:5), must also be characterized as hungry and thirsty for righteousness (5:6). It is not that he wants to be a little bit better, still less that he thinks of righteousness as an optional luxury to add to his other graces; rather, he *hungers* and *thirsts* for it. He cannot get along without righteousness; it is as important to him as food and drink.

Most people who read these lines have experienced very little hunger and thirst. I myself am not old enough to have undergone the privations many experienced during the Great Depression or the last world war. However, two or three times during the sixties, when I was a student first at university and then at seminary, I ran out of money and food at the same time. Too proud to ask for help, and wanting to see if God would really supply what I needed, I drank water to keep my stomach from rumbling and carried on as usual. After two or three days I *began* to understand what it is to be hungry.

The norms of the kingdom require that men and women be hungry and thirsty for righteousness. This is so basic to Christian living that Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says:

I do not know of a better test that anyone can apply to himself or herself in this whole matter of the Christian profession than a verse like this. If this verse is to you one of the most blessed statements of the whole of Scripture, you can be quite certain you are a Christian; if it is not, then you had better examine the foundations again.²

What is this righteousness which we must thus pursue? In Paul's epistles, "righteousness" can refer to the righteousness of Christ which God reckons to the believer's account, even as God reckons the believer's sin to Jesus Christ. If that were the righteousness here in view, Jesus would be inviting unbelievers to pursue the righteousness God bestows by virtue of Christ's substitutionary death. Some have thought that "righteousness" in Matthew's Gospel

refers to the vindication of the downtrodden and the afflicted. Now, however, those who have studied Matthew's use of the term increasingly recognize that "righteousness" here (and also in verses 10 and 20) means a pattern of life in conformity to God's will. Righteousness thus includes within its semantic range all the derivative or specialized meanings, but cannot be reduced to any one of them.

The person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, then, hungers and thirsts for conformity to God's will. He is not drifting aimlessly in a sea of empty religiosity; still less is he puttering about distracted by inconsequential trivia. Rather, his whole being echoes the prayer of a certain Scottish saint who cried, "O God, make me just as holy as a pardoned sinner can be!" His delight is the Word of God, for where else is God's will, to which he hungers to be conformed, so clearly set forth? He wants to be righteous, not simply because he fears God, but because righteousness has become for him the most eminently desirable thing in the world.

And the result? Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. The context demands that we understand the blessing to mean "will be filled *with righteousness*." The Lord gives this famished person the desires of his heart.

This does not mean that the person is now so satisfied with the righteousness given him that his hunger and thirst for righteousness are forever vanquished. Elsewhere, Jesus does in fact argue along such lines: "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. . . . I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 4:14; 6:35). So there is a sense in which we are satisfied with Jesus and all he is and provides. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which we continue to be unsatisfied.

An example from Paul makes this paradox understandable. Paul can testify, "I *know* whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (2 Tim. 1:12); but he can also say, "I *want to know* Christ and the power of his

resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death . . ." (Phil. 3:10). In other words, Paul has come to know Christ, but knowing him, he wants to know him better.

In a similar way, the person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness is blessed by God, and filled; but the righteousness with which he is filled is so wonderful that he hungers and thirsts for more of it. This built-in cycle of growth is easy to understand as soon as we remember that righteousness in this text refers not to obeying some rules, but to conformity to all of God's will. The more a person pursues conformity to God's will, the more attractive the goal becomes, and the greater the advances made.

Fifth: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (5:7).

Some try to interpret this verse legalistically, as if to say that the only way to obtain mercy from God is by showing mercy to others: God's mercy thus becomes essentially contingent to our own. They point to Matthew 6:14f. (which we shall consider in the third chapter): "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." But whenever a tit-for-tat interpretation of such verses prevails, I think there is a failure to understand both the context and the nature of mercy.

What is mercy? How does it differ from grace? The two terms are frequently synonymous; but where there is a distinction between the two, it appears that grace is a loving response when love is undeserved, and mercy is a loving response prompted by the misery and helplessness of the one on whom the love is to be showered. Grace answers to the undeserving; mercy answers to the miserable.

Jesus says in this beatitude that we are to be merciful. We are to be compassionate and gentle, especially toward the miserable and helpless. If we are not merciful, we will not be shown mercy. But how could the unmerciful man receive mercy? The one who is not merciful is inevitably so unaware of his own state that he

thinks he needs no mercy. He cannot picture himself as miserable and wretched; so how shall God be merciful toward him? He is like the Pharisee in the temple who was unmerciful toward the wretched tax collector in the corner (Luke 18:10ff.). By contrast, the person whose experience reflects these beatitudes is conscious of his spiritual bankruptcy (Matt. 5:3), grieves over it (5:4), and hungers for righteousness (5:6). He is merciful toward the wretched because he recognizes himself to be wretched; in being merciful he is also shown mercy.

The Christian, moreover, is at a midpoint. He is to forgive others because in the past Christ has already forgiven him (cf. Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). Simultaneously he recognizes his constant need for more forgiveness, and becomes forgiving as a result of this perspective as well (cf. Matt. 6:14; and especially 18:21–35). The Christian forgives because he has been forgiven; he forgives because he needs forgiveness. In precisely the same way, and for the same kind of reasons, the disciple of Jesus Christ is merciful.

It is sometimes said that an alcoholic who won't admit he's an alcoholic hates all other alcoholics. Similarly, it is generally true that the sinner who won't face up to his sin hates all other sinners. But the person who has recognized his own helplessness and wretchedness is grateful for whatever mercy is shown him; and he learns to be merciful toward others.

This macarism forces the professing disciple of Jesus Christ to ask himself some hard questions. Am I merciful or supercilious to the wretched? Am I gentle or hard-nosed toward the downtrodden? Am I helpful or callous toward the backslidden? Am I compassionate or impatient with the fallen?

I am persuaded that, should the Spirit of God usher in another period of refreshing revival in the Western world, one of the earliest signs of it will be that admission of spiritual bankruptcy which finds its satisfaction in God and his righteousness, and goes on to be richly merciful toward others.

Sixth: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (5:8).

In this beatitude, our Lord confers special blessing not on the intellectually keen, nor on the emotionally pious, but on the pure in heart. In biblical imagery, the heart is the center of the entire personality. Jesus’s assessment of the natural heart, however, is not very encouraging. Elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel he says, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (15:19; cf. Jer. 17:9; Rom. 1:21; 2:5).

Despite this horrible diagnosis, the sixth beatitude insists that purity of heart is the indispensable prerequisite for fellowship with God—for “seeing” God. “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully” (Ps. 24:3–4; cf. Ps. 73:1). God is holy; therefore the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews insists, “Make every effort . . . to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

Purity of heart must never be confused with outward conformity to rules. Because it is the heart which must be pure, this beatitude interrogates us with awkward questions like these: What do you think about when your mind slips into neutral? How much sympathy do you have for deception, no matter how skillful? For shady humor, no matter how funny? To what do you pay consistent allegiance? What do you want more than anything else? What and whom do you love? To what extent are your actions and words accurate reflections of what is in your heart? To what extent do your actions and words constitute a cover-up for what is in your heart? Our hearts must be pure, clean, unstained.

One day, when the kingdom of heaven is consummated, when there is a new heaven and a new earth in which only righteousness dwells, when Jesus Christ himself appears, we shall be like him (1 John 3:2). That is our long-range expectation, our hope. On

this basis John argues, “Everyone who has this hope in him [that is, in Christ] purifies himself, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:3). In other words, according to John, the Christian purifies himself now because pure is what he will ultimately be. His present efforts are consistent with his future hope. The same theme is found in various forms throughout the New Testament. In one sense, of course, the demands of the kingdom do not change: perfection is always required (5:48). But from this it follows that the disciple of Jesus who looks forward to the kingdom as it will be finally perfected, is already determined to prepare for it. Knowing himself to be in the kingdom already, he is concerned with purity because he recognizes that the King is pure, and the kingdom in its perfected form will admit only purity.

The pure in heart are blessed because they will see God. Although this will not be ultimately true until the new heaven and earth, yet it is also true even now. Our perception of God and his ways, as well as our fellowship with him, depends on our purity of heart. The *visio Dei*—what an incentive to purity!

Seventh: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (5:9).

This beatitude does not hold out a blessing to the peaceful, nor to those who yearn for peace, but to the *peacemakers*.

Within the total biblical framework, the greatest peacemaker is Jesus Christ—the Prince of Peace. He makes peace between God and man by removing sin, the ground of alienation; he makes peace between man and man both by removing sin and by bringing men into a right relationship with God (see especially Eph. 2:11–22). Jesus gave the traditional Jewish greeting new depths of meaning when, *after his death and resurrection*, he greeted his disciples with the words, “Peace be with you” (Luke 24:36; John 20:19). Thus the good news of Jesus Christ is the greatest peacemaking message, and the Christian who shares his faith is, fundamentally,

a harbinger of peace, a peacemaker. Small wonder Paul uses the imagery of Isaiah, who pictures messengers racing along the trails of the Judean hill country: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isa. 52:7; Rom. 10:15).

Yet there is nothing in the context to argue that in Matthew 5:9 Jesus is restricting himself to gospel peacemaking. Rather, the disciple of Jesus Christ must be a peacemaker in the broadest sense of the term. The Christian’s role as peacemaker extends not only to spreading the gospel, but to lessening tensions, seeking solutions, ensuring that communication is understood. Perhaps his most difficult assignments will take place on those occasions when he is personally involved. Then he will remember that “man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:20), and that “a gentle answer turns away wrath” (Prov. 15:1). He will not confuse issues, even important issues, with his own ego-image; and fearful lest he be guilty of generating more heat than light, he will learn to lower his voice and smile more broadly in proportion to the intensity of the argument.

Peacemakers are blessed because they will be called “sons of God”—not “children of God,” as in the King James Version. The difference is slight, but significant. In Jewish thought, “son” often bears the meaning “partaker of the character of,” or the like. If someone calls you the “son of a dog,” this is not an aspersion on your parents, but on you: you partake of the character of a dog. Thus, “son of God” may have a different connotation than “child of God.” Both expressions can refer to some sort of filial relationship; but the former has more emphasis on character than position.

The peacemaker’s reward, then, is that he will be called a son of God. He reflects his heavenly Father’s wonderful peacemaking character. Even now there is a sense in which Christians

intuitively recognize this divine dimension in the character of the peacemaker. For example, when Christians at some convention or church business meeting enter into heated debate, the brother who keeps calm, respectfully listens to each viewpoint with fairness and courtesy, and spreads oil on the troubled waters is silently regarded by his peers as spiritual. But such conduct ought to be considered normal among disciples of Jesus Christ, for Jesus Christ himself has made it normative. It is part and parcel of being a son of God.

Eighth: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:10).

This final beatitude does not say, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are objectionable, or because they rave like wild-eyed fanatics, or because they pursue some religious-political cause." The blessing is restricted to those who suffer persecution *because of righteousness* (cf. 1 Peter 3:13f.; 4:12–16). The believers described in this passage are those determined to live as Jesus lived.

Persecution can take many forms; it need not be limited to the rigorous variety experienced by our fellow-believers in certain repressive countries. A Christian in the West who practices righteousness may be ridiculed by his family, ostracized by his relatives. But even the Christian who comes from a secure and understanding home will face flak somewhere. Perhaps at work, he will discover that some of his colleagues are saying of him, "Well, you know, he's a Christian; but he carries it a bit far. He won't even cheat on his income tax. The other day when I offered to slip him a company binder that I knew he needed for his private papers at home, he turned it down. When I pressed him, he said that taking it would be stealing! And have you ever seen his face cloud over when I tell one of my jokes? What a prig!"

The reward for being persecuted because of righteousness is the kingdom of heaven. In other words, this beatitude serves as a test for all the beatitudes. Just as a person must be poor in spirit to enter the kingdom (5:3), so will he be persecuted because of righteousness if he is to enter the kingdom. This final beatitude becomes one of the most searching of all of them, and binds up the rest; for if the disciple of Jesus never experiences any persecution at all, it may fairly be asked where righteousness is being displayed in his life. If there is no righteousness, no conformity to God's will, how shall he enter the kingdom?

This basic principle reappears again and again in the New Testament. The Christian lives in a sinful world; therefore if he exhibits genuine, transparent righteousness he will be rejected by many. Genuine righteousness condemns people by implication; small wonder that people often lash out in retaliation. Christ's disciples by their righteous living thus divide men: men are either repelled or drawn to our precious Savior. Jesus himself taught:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: "No servant is greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. (John 15:18–20)

Paul adds, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:29). "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12; cf. 1 Thess. 3:3f.).

This eighth beatitude is so important that Jesus expands it, making it more pointed by changing the third-person form of the beatitudes to the direct address of second person:

Expansion, 5:11f.

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 (5:11f.).

Besides the impact of the direct discourse, this expansion of the eighth beatitude affords three important insights.

First, persecution is explicitly broadened to include insults and spoken malice. It cannot be limited to physical opposition or torture.

Second, the phrase “because of righteousness” (5:10) Jesus now parallels with “because of me” (5:11). This confirms that the righteousness of life that is in view is in imitation of Jesus. Simultaneously, it so identifies the disciple of Jesus with the practice of Jesus’s righteousness that there is no place for professed allegiance to Jesus that is not full of righteousness.

Third, there is an open command to rejoice and be glad when suffering under persecution of this type. Elsewhere in the New Testament, many different reasons are advanced for rejoicing under persecution. The apostles rejoiced “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41). Peter saw trials as a means of grace to prove the genuineness of faith and to increase its purity (1 Peter 1:6ff.). And in the Old Testament the fiery furnace became the place where the divine Presence, even in a visible emissary, was made manifest to three Hebrew young men (Dan. 3:24f.). However, in the passage before us only one reason is given to prompt Jesus’s disciples to rejoice under persecution, and that reason is sufficient: their reward is great in heaven. Jesus’s disciples, then, must determine their values from the perspective of eternity (a theme Jesus expands in Matt. 6:19–21, 33), convinced that their “light and momentary troubles are achieving for [them] an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Cor. 4:17). They have aligned themselves with the prophets who were persecuted before them, and thereby testify that in every age God’s people are under

the gun. Far from being a depressing prospect, their suffering under persecution, which has been prompted by their righteousness, becomes a triumphant sign that the kingdom is theirs.

The Witness of the Kingdom (5:13–16)

These verses are tied to the preceding ones in two ways. First, Jesus continues to address his hearers in the second person. Second, and more important, a motif implicit in the beatitudes now becomes an explicit theme, that is, the believer as witness.

To see how this works out, we must recognize that it is impossible to follow the norms of the kingdom in a purely private way. The righteousness of the life you live will attract attention, even if that attention regularly takes the form of opposition. In other words, the Christian is not poor in spirit, mournful over sin, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, a peacemaker—all in splendid isolation. These kingdom norms, diligently practiced in a sinful world, constitute a major aspect of Christian witness; and this witness gives rise to persecution. Nevertheless, the conduct of Jesus's disciples needs to be considered in its effect on the world, just as the opposition of the world has been considered in its effect on the Christian. In verses 13–16, therefore, Jesus develops two telling metaphors to picture how his disciples must by their lives leave their stamp on the world which is so opposed to the norms of the kingdom.

Salt, 5:13

In the ancient world, salt was used primarily as a preservative. Since they did not own deep-freeze refrigerators, the people used salt to preserve many foodstuffs. Incidentally, of course, salt also helps the flavor.

In the first metaphor Jesus likens his disciples to salt. Implicitly he is saying that apart from his disciples the world turns ever more

rotten: Christians have the effect of delaying moral and spiritual putrefaction. If their lives conform to the norms of verses 3–12, they cannot help but be an influence for good in society.

But supposing the salt loses its saltiness? What then? It loses its *raison d'être*, and may just as well be thrown out onto the street—the garbage dump of the ancient east—to be trampled by men.

This observation has been interpreted two ways. Because salt by its nature cannot be anything other than salt, it cannot really lose its saltiness; therefore some have taken Jesus to be saying that there is an inner necessity which compels Christians to witness. This interpretation, it seems to me, smacks of the pedantic. Although salt *per se* cannot lose its saltiness, it can nevertheless be adulterated. If sufficiently adulterated by, say, sand, then salt can no longer be used as a preservative. It loses its effectiveness in staying corruption, and so must be jettisoned as a useless commodity. The purpose of salt is to fight deterioration, and therefore it must not itself deteriorate.

The worse the world becomes and the more its corruption proceeds apace, the more it stands in need of Jesus's disciples.

Light, 5:14–16

The second metaphor our Lord uses to describe the witness of the Christian is light. Christians are the light of the world—a world which, by implication, is shrouded in thick darkness.

Jesus talks about two sources of physical light: the light from a city set on a hill, and the light from a lamp set on a lampstand. The first source, the city, is often misunderstood. Some think that Matthew, in recording Jesus's teaching, became somewhat confused and put in an irrelevant illustration about a city visible from a great distance because of its elevation. The illustration is colorful, it is thought, but out of place in a context concerned with light. Such critics, I think, are only revealing that they live in the industrialized world where light is so readily available.

They do not know how black nature can be. In Canada it is possible to go camping hundreds of miles away from any city or town. If it is a cloudy night, and there is no phosphorus in the area, the blackness is total. A hand held three inches from your face cannot be seen. But if there is a city nearby, perhaps a hundred miles away, the darkness is relieved. The light from the city is reflected off the clouds, and the night, once perfectly black, is no longer quite so desolate. Likewise Christians who let their light shine before men cannot be hidden; and the good light they shed around attenuates the blackness which would otherwise be absolute.

When once we imagine a world without hundreds of watts of electric power at our instant personal disposal, we will understand how darkness can be a terror and a symbol of all that is evil. The light from the city, even if it is not as powerful as our modern sources of illumination, makes the darkness a little more bearable than it was before. Light is so important that it is ludicrous to think that anyone would want to extinguish the flickering flame from an olive-oil lamp by smothering it with a peck measure. That burning wick may cast only a little light by modern standards; but if the alternative is pitch blackness, its light is wonderful, quite sufficient for everyone in the house (5:15).

“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (5:16). What is this light by which Jesus’s disciples lighten a dark world? In this context, we read of neither personal confrontation nor ecclesiastical pronouncement. Rather, the light is the “good deeds” performed by Jesus’s followers—performed in such a way that at least some men recognize these followers of Jesus as sons of God, and come to praise this Father whose sons they are (5:16).

The norms of the kingdom, worked out in the lives of the heirs of the kingdom, constitute the witness of the kingdom. Such Christians

refuse to rob their employers by being lazy on the job, or to rob their employees by succumbing to greed and stinginess. They are first to help a colleague in difficulty, last to return a barbed reply. They honestly desire the advancement of the other's interests, and honestly dislike smutty humor. Transparent in their honesty and genuine in their concern, they reject both the easy answer of the doctrinaire politician and the *laissez-faire* stance of the selfish secular man. Meek in personal demeanor, they are bold in righteous pursuits.

For a variety of reasons, Christians have lost this vision of witness, and are slow to return to it. But in better days and other lands, the faithful and divinely empowered proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ (who himself is the light of the world *par excellence* [John 8:12]) so transformed men that they in turn became the light of the world (Matt. 5:14). Prison reform, medical care, trade unions, control of a perverted and perverting liquor trade, abolition of slavery, abolition of child labor, establishment of orphanages, reform of the penal code—in all these areas the followers of Jesus spearheaded the drive for righteousness.³ The darkness was alleviated. And this, I submit, has always been the pattern when professing Christians have been less concerned with personal prestige and more concerned with the norms of the kingdom.

“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

Notes

1. *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959–60), 1:69–70.

2. *Ibid.*, 1:74.

3. I recommend the reading of such books as J. W. Bready's *England: Before and after Wesley* (in the abridged American edition, the title is *This Freedom—Whence?*), or D. W. Dayton's more recent *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*. Although I am not always convinced by their theological analyses, nevertheless such books teach us how almost all valuable social trends were spawned by the Evangelical Awakening under such men of God as George Whitefield, John Wesley, Howell Harris, Lord Shaftesbury, William Wilberforce, and others.