

Text:

Matthew 5.1-16

Big Picture:

After calling his disciples, Jesus now begins to explain what discipleship really means.

Preparing for the Lesson:

Many of us are familiar with Matthew 5-7, or the Sermon on the Mount, as we often call it. Someone has said this pericope might better be called a “Discourse on Discipleship.” In it Jesus gives a fuller explanation of the requirements for those who commit to follow Jesus. Rooted firmly within Jewish thought and the Torah, we learn that Jesus’ call is not in contrast to Jewish law, but a fuller understanding of it.

Notice that although crowds prompt Jesus to go up the mountain, it is his disciples to whom he is said to address this message. However, we discover in 7.28-29 that the crowds have certainly heard the teachings. Given the nature of these teachings, we can assume that Jesus’ intent was for more than just his disciples to hear his words.

Because of this, we see within the section for this week, the Beatitudes, not only words of instruction, but also words of comfort. Given the nature of the “crowd” here, there almost certainly would have been those who were poor, or mourned, or meek, etc. As Jesus is speaking, they realize his words were inclusionary, not meant to exclude those who were not the spiritual elite. So from the start, the sermon changes the expectations of those seeking to follow God. You did not have to be the ones who were viewed favorable in the religious world to be a part—this gospel message was for all.

One of the questions often asked about the Sermon on the Mount is: Did Jesus intend for these commands to be followed literally, or is he using hyperbole to make a point? The bar he sets within this text is extremely high. Too high, some would say. I tend to lean toward the side of this equation that sees in Jesus’ words a high degree of expectation that his followers would do these things he lists. If Jesus is indeed a greater realization of the Torah, which already had a high degree of righteousness, why would he speak a message that encourages people to try real hard, but don’t sweat it if you don’t make it.

This leads to the second question. Are the Beatitudes intended to be prescriptive (that is, are we are to try to be poor or mourning, etc.) or are they descriptive of the state of people who receive the blessings of the kingdom? Given what we have said about the probable make up of the crowds and Matthew’s observance that these crowds were amazed, I take this passage to be pointing out the nature of those who will gain the kingdom.

Another observation helps show this. The beatitude was a popular form of Jewish wisdom literature. The form was most often: blessed is the person who *some action or character*, they will receive *some reward*. The difference between Matthew’s use of this formula is that in wisdom literature, the reward was focused on current things, or this present time. In Matthew’s gospel, the rewards focus more on the end times. This seems to indicate that Jesus’ desire was for people to understand what the kingdom of heaven (note 5.3, 10) looks like. He is including people not customarily thought to be a part of the kingdom. This new reign, if you will, will look different than current expectations. Certainly, the behaviors/characteristics cited in the

Beatitudes are admirable and worthy of taking on, but I do not believe Jesus intent was to tell his disciple to go out, do these things, and if you do, you will be “in.”

A final thought on the Sermon on the Mount or Discourse on Discipleship, whichever you prefer. As you prepare to study this passage with your group, be sure to read the entire sermon. We will study just a portion of it this week and next, but the entire sermon works together. Reading it as such will help you better understand its various parts.

Possible Lesson Outline:

To begin your discussion time, ask your group to answer the following question: What does one have to do to follow Jesus? Allow people to share what actions/behaviors/characteristics, etc. they see as being a part of being a disciple. The point of this exercise is to contrast their understanding of following Jesus with some of the things he mentions within his discourse on discipleship.

Ask discussion questions.

Consider using the “This Week” section for the upcoming week.

Close with a time of prayer.

For the Kids:

I would read the Beatitudes then ask the children in your group to describe those people listed within the text. Who are people who are poor in spirit? Why do people mourn? Why would Jesus list the meek? Sp on... You might select a couple of the people mentioned, if time is limited.

Help the children understand that while these people are important to Jesus, they are often not important to the rest of the world. These people are not considered the religious elite. By including these people, we discover that discipleship, and hence the kingdom, seeks for people to act, think, and be different than what the religious establishment would have expected.

Discussion Questions:

1. Matthew 5.1-2 tells us that Jesus begins teaching his disciples, but then in 7.28-29, we discover that the crowds are amazed because of the teaching of Jesus. Obviously, they heard his teaching. In what ways does the message of Jesus change depending on whom he was addressing?
2. We are told that Jesus began to preach: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” How does the teaching of Matthew 5-7 shape our understanding of what it means for the kingdom to be near? How does it help us better understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus?
3. Which of these beatitudes resonate most with you? Why?
4. The idea of rewards being given to those who are blessed was a common literary technique in Jewish writings. How appropriate is this idea—we will receive a reward for our behavior or actions or attitudes—for us today? In what ways do we struggle to believe this is true?
5. In verse 11, Jesus (through Matthew’s writings) changes from third person plural to second person plural. Why do you think there is a change in focus here? How does this change alter your understanding of what we actually read in verses 11-12

6. Many have pointed out that as Jesus spoke these beatitudes, those in the crowd—the poor, the mourners, the meek, etc.—would have heard these words. What implications are there for these folks that Jesus is including in this kingdom listing versus excluding them, as would have been a common occurrence? How does this affect our understanding today of what it means to be a part of the kingdom?
7. What concrete things can we as a group do to ensure the message of the kingdom is communicated in ways similar to what we see here in this text? What parts of this message is especially relevant for the world we find ourselves in?

This Week:

We list key verses every week for people to focus on or even memorize. This week, why not encourage your group to try and memorize the entire list of beatitudes, verses 3-10. If you do, spend some time next week allowing people to recite their memorization.

Prayer Ideas:

One idea for a way to pray this week in group is to list each of these characteristics (in verses 3-10) on a 3x5 card and then have individuals pray that we will not only take on those characteristics, but we will be aware of those who embody them and work to ensure we see them as part of the kingdom, much as Jesus does.

What's Next:

Next week's section is Matthew 6.19-7.29. One Groups will be looking at 6.25-34.