

New Kingdom

We're going to take a look at the Beatitudes we just read, but we're going to take a while to get there, because I believe that to really understand the Beatitudes and really, the whole Sermon on the Mount, there's some background work we have to do. And that's the whole point of this series—to connect the individual stories and teachings in the Bible to the overall story so we can better understand.

So far, we've made our way through the Old Testament. In it, we learned that God, the true King created humans in his image to extend his rule on earth and give us wisdom to do it. But we're always tempted to usurp God's authority and do things our own way. And when we do, we create pain and struggle and chaos. But God doesn't give up on us.

In the biblical story, God launched his plan to redeem creation through a promise he made to Abraham that the whole world would be blessed through his descendants, the people of Israel.

Well, they weren't too keen on God being their king, so they asked God to give them a human king. The human kings were a mixed bag. Kings like David did his best to seek God's wisdom, but most of them chose to go their own way and God allowed them to be taken into exile. But while they were in exile he sent prophets to tell that at the right time, God would send them a new king that would end their exile and set up a new kingdom where righteousness, peace and justice would reign.

Last week we talked about the fact that Jesus was that promised king. He wasn't what the Jews were expecting because he came to invite anyone, not just the Jews to be a part of what God was doing. And that's where we pick up the story today.

At the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, after Jesus spent 40 days preparing in the wilderness, he began his ministry. He started by preaching and Matthew 4:17, is Matthew's summary of Jesus' message, **"From that time on, Jesus began to preach, 'Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.'**" That's the summary. His message was about something called, the Kingdom of heaven. Well, if that's the case, then we should probably know what he's talking about.

The New Testament scholar, Scot McKnight has done a lot of work on the theme of the Kingdom of Heaven in the Bible. And he says that today in popular Christianity, he sees two primary interpretations of the Kingdom of God—what he calls the "Skinny Jeans People" and the "Pleated Pants People."

The skinny jeans people are, of course younger because nobody wants to see an old dude like me in skinny jeans! But these are the millennial crowd that's passionate about doing justice. They want to fight poverty and oppression and change the world through social justice. They say that whenever someone is doing good in society—no matter who it is—that's Kingdom work.

Now, we can affirm a lot of this because they are passionate about something God is passionate about. All throughout Scripture, justice is a big deal to God. In fact, when

John the Baptist had doubts about whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus sent a message back with his followers. He said, **“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.”**

These people are likely to believe humans have a role in “bringing in the Kingdom.” When we do good things to improve society, we’re making the Kingdom closer to reality. As we work, the world will get better and better until Christ comes to reign in his Kingdom. And it’s up to us to do this.

But, McKnight says, as good and right as it is to do justice, good people doing good things isn’t what *Jesus* meant when he talked about the Kingdom of God. It’s incomplete if our good deeds aren’t accompanied by the sharing of the gospel. Theologian, Stanley Hauerwas says when the church only does good deeds, but don’t attach them to Jesus we just *“end up running errands for the world.”*

On the other side are the pleated pants people. These tend to be older, baby boomer types. And the pleated pants people say to the skinny jeans people, “You people have it all wrong. When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, he was talking about personal salvation. The work of the Kingdom isn’t social justice, it’s evangelism.”

One pleated pants missionary wrote this. He said, *“Religious work in Africa is very interesting. Almost no missionaries are doing Bible teaching, evangelism, discipleship or any church planting. We’re all doing orphanages or trade schools or working with the*

deaf or HIV/AIDS education, etc.” I suspect those missionaries who are doing those good deeds think they are doing “kingdom work.”

Pleated pants people don't use the term Kingdom much because personal salvation is personal and doesn't need a kingdom. If they do talk about the Kingdom, it's something way in the future. All we need to worry about is people accepting Christ as savior and we'll experience the Kingdom of God when we're all in heaven.

Now, the call to personal salvation through faith in Christ is certainly right, but it's not the whole picture of the kingdom. If the kingdom is only about Jesus dying for our sins and rising again so we can go to heaven, he wasted the first three years of his ministry healing people, casting out demons and teaching people how to live as kingdom people. Why didn't he just die and get it over with right away?

The reason is that all that other stuff like healing and casting out demons was also part of kingdom work. So, I hope what you're seeing is that the Kingdom of God is more than “good people doing good things” and it's more than just “being forgiven and going to heaven when you die.” It includes both of those things, but when Jesus taught about the Kingdom, he had something specific in mind.

When the Bible talks about a Kingdom there are five elements to it. You have to these five elements or you don't have a Kingdom. Here they are: you need a *King*, you need a *people*, a *law*, *land* and you need a *rule* or *authority*. We see all these elements in the OT in the Kingdom of Israel. And what I hope you see is the new kingdom is a

reforming of the old kingdom. So, Jesus would have had this in mind when he thought about the Kingdom. So let's trace these elements.

First, we need a king and at first, God was Israel's king. Eventually, Israel got tired of that arrangement and asked for a human king. So, God gave them human kings in Saul, David, Solomon, etc. When that project failed they were exiled which means not only did they not have a king, they didn't have land and so they were no longer a kingdom.

When we get to the New Testament, we know that God sent Jesus to be the new king. Jesus is called, "Christ." That's not his last name, Christ means "king." We won't go too far into this one because we talked about it last week. But I will say this:

This is why we can't call good people doing good things Kingdom work. While those are things kingdom people should be doing, for the good deeds to be kingdom work, they have to be coupled with the message of Jesus as King. Atheists or even Satanists can do good things, but that doesn't mean they're doing kingdom work.

My son, Duncan works at Cub food stocking shelves and he's been able to save up a good amount of money doing it. He stocks shelves and comes home with a paycheck. Sometimes when I go into Cub, I see palates of beans or mac and cheese in the aisle. Now, I could stop and take the beans off the palate and put them on the shelves. I suppose that might be helpful. But just because I stock shelves at Cub, doesn't mean I should expect to get a paycheck next week. In the same way, "kingdom" work can only be done by kingdom people serving the king. A kingdom needs a king.

Second, a kingdom needs *laws*. In the Old Testament, Israel had the Law of Moses. Following the law of the land is what distinguishes a citizen from one kingdom from a citizen of another kingdom. That's why Israel had laws about circumcision, they had food laws, laws about how to dress and the specific festivals and holidays they were to observe. People show they are part of a Kingdom by living according the law.

Next week, we'll talk more about the law of the new Kingdom, but suffice it to say, the passage we're starting to dive into today—Matthew, chapters 5-7—what we call the “Sermon on the Mount,” is Jesus laying out the new Kingdom law.

He says in verse 17, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”** And in verse 20, he says, **“²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”** We'll dive into the law of the New Kingdom next week. We have a *king* and a *law*.

Then what about the *land*? Israel wasn't a kingdom until they were living in the Promised Land. They were a family, a people, a group of tribes, but they weren't a kingdom. When they were in exile in Babylon, they again stopped being a kingdom and were only a people.

This is where it gets tricky with the New Kingdom, but I don't want to get too far into it today, but one of the problems with the idea that being saved is only about going to heaven when I die is that it promotes an escapism that tells us that the earth will be

destroyed so it doesn't matter. But that's not the biblical picture. The biblical picture is the reign of heaven coming down to a new earth, where Jesus restores everything to what it was intended to be in the first place.

In Revelation 11:15 is the image of loud voices in heaven saying, **“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.”** Some of you are singing those words from Handel's Messiah in your head. The picture is of Christ, establishing his rule on earth. So, the Kingdom of God has a king, a law and land.

Fourth, you need a rule. Now, we have to explain this one a bit because we don't think about it, but it's actually more important than we realize. Let's say there are a million people in a kingdom. And despite the fact that they outnumber the king a million to one, for some reason, they let him tell them what to do. What reason would they have for allowing the king to make laws that governed how they live?

Well, for many kingdoms it was the belief in something like the divine right of kings. The kings of Babylon or Egypt would claim divine authority. So, if the king has the power to the gods behind him, you better do what he says.

Now, what's interesting about Israel is that when God ruled the people directly, he didn't just tell them that they should obey him because he's God. You would think that would be enough. It was enough for most people. It was enough for people in Babylon and Egypt. But he actually gave them a different reason. You see, if God claims authority

simply because he's God, our motivation would be strictly out of fear. Sometimes fear works, but it's not very good for long-term relationship.

So, God doesn't rely on that. Instead, he calls on grace. Over and over he reminds the people of Israel, *"I am the God who brought you out of Egypt."* And this is interesting. In Isaiah, chapter 43, he comforting them in while they are in exile and this is what he says to them, **"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine."**

Do you see what he's saying? He's saying, "when you were slaves in Egypt, I rescued you." You can trust me because I want what's good for you. What he did for them not only gives him the *right* to rule, but it makes them want to follow. He rescued them from a kingdom that held them as slaves and invited them into a Kingdom that offered freedom, protection and relationship with their creator. //

And as we get to the New Testament, we see the same thing. The claim of Christianity from the beginning is that Jesus has the authority to govern our lives—to command how we live. That's why the most basic statement of faith for a Christian is "Jesus is Lord." There are a few times the New Testament calls Jesus "savior," but far more often, he's called "Lord," because that's what you call kings.

But the question is, why should we accept Jesus as Lord? Is it just because we like what has to say? Well, we like some things he has to say, but other things, not so much. So, why should be bring ourselves under Jesus' rule? Well, there are a couple of reasons.

First, at the end of his ministry, when he was telling his disciples to go out and spread the word, he said, **“All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me, therefore, go and make disciples...”** So, how does Jesus have that kind of authority?

Well, he got it from his Father—God himself, who also happens to be our creator. During his ministry, one of the proofs that he had that authority was when he healed people and cast out demons and forgave sins. But the ultimate proof of his power and authority is that after he died, he rose again proving his power over sin and death.

But there’s a second reason Jesus has the right to be Lord. That authority comes from the same place as in the Old Testament. It’s because through his death and resurrection, Jesus *redeemed* us.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote the church in Colossae, he writes, **“May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.” (Colossians 1:12-14)** In other words, Jesus has the right to rule us because he has redeemed us.

And because of that, we follow Jesus, not out of fear, but out of gratitude. When someone saves your life, there’s a sense that you owe him—and you want to owe him. Jesus’ death and resurrection is an invitation into the Kingdom life. And that invitation isn’t an obligation. It’s good news!

In Matthew, chapter 13, Jesus tells a parable about the Kingdom. It's really simple, **“⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”**

According to Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is something worth giving everything for. If that's true, then one of the most important questions is, “who gets to be a part of it?”

Well, this is where our passage today comes in. Who are the kingdom people?

At the beginning of Matthew 5 is what's known as “The Beatitudes.” Growing up in Sunday school, when I was taught the Beatitudes my teacher would tell me “this should BE your ATTITUDE.” In other words, they were like laws to follow. Jesus says I should be poor in spirit. I should mourn, I should be meek, I should hunger and thirst for righteousness. If I do all those things, then I will be blessed.

But that's not what Jesus was saying. Now, there are some things here we should emulate. For instance, we should be “pure in heart” and be “peacemakers.” But it would be strange to tell people they should be “poor in spirit” or that “mourning” is a good thing. Jesus wasn't telling us these are things we should emulate, but that the Kingdom is good news for people who are already in these situations. Why is it good news?

It's because these are the people who get pushed to the margins of society. In Jesus' day and certainly in our day, these are the people who don't get ahead in life. Meek people aren't rewarded in our society. We have saying like, “You snooze you lose!”

“Grab life by the horns.” The meek don’t get rich, it’s the assertive and confident people. No job counselor tells you to be as meek as you can in a job interview.

Society doesn’t always benefit the pure in heart. They get passed up by people with ulterior motives or the people who cut corners and break rules and step on others to get ahead. The world is not set up to value these people. But Jesus is saying that while the world is skewed toward the powerful, assertive and wealthy, the Kingdom of God operates by a different system and that’s good news.

Now, this is not the way many people think about the Church, which is the tangible Kingdom of God. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard someone say that the reason they aren’t part of a church or don’t attend worship service boils down to the fact that they don’t believe they’re good enough. They have skeletons in their closet, they don’t have their act together enough, they don’t pray well enough or know much about the Bible. I’ve heard it often—“I don’t belong there.” That’s the perception people have—that you have to live up to a certain standard to be a part of the church.

But compare that to who Jesus says is invited to be a part of the Kingdom of God. This is my paraphrase.

Blessed are those who are spiritually impoverished, the Kingdom is for them.

Blessed are those who are broken-hearted because life has let them down, for they’ll find comfort there.

Blessed are those who aren't powerful enough to conquer the earth. They will inherit it from the one who owns it.

Blessed are those who have been deprived of justice, for their hunger is satisfied in the Kingdom of God.

Blessed are those who show mercy to others. They will be shown mercy in return.

Blessed are those who seek peace, this is how children of God behave.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because they live by the rule of the Kingdom. These are the people the King honors.

You see, no one get into the Kingdom because they're a high-achiever. That's not how the Kingdom works. In the Beatitudes, Jesus tell us who can be a part of the Kingdom people. And what he's saying is that your past, your sin, your social status, your lack of power or spiritual experience—none of that will keep you from the Kingdom of God. That's good news for all of us, because we all have "stuff." None of us deserves it. //

Luke chapter 7 tells the story of a time when Jesus was invited to a Pharisee's house for a dinner party. While they were eating, a woman that the bible simply says, "lived a sinful life," comes in and bows at the feet of Jesus and pours perfume on his feet—essentially anointing him with perfume. Well, the Pharisees aren't happy about this. She's a "sinner." Why is he allowing her to touch him?

He tells them another parable. **"A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver^[b] to one and 50 pieces to the other.** ⁴² **But neither of them could repay him, so**

he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?" Who gets to be a part of the kingdom of God? People like her. Why should Jesus be your king? This is why?

We have a king who invites us into the people of God and made it possible by forgiving our sin and redeeming us from the power of sin and death by dying on the cross and being raised again to life.

Jesus is the king who called people, **"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest..."** (Matthew 11:28) If you've accepted that invitation, you are part of God's redeemed people. And we need to be reminded of this because we're not redeemed because we're all that great. We're redeemed because God's love is.

If you've never accepted that invitation, I want to give you the opportunity to do it now.

"God, I don't know exactly what it means to follow you yet, but I believe in you and I want to follow you. I want you to be my Lord and I want to be a part of your Kingdom. Thank you for forgiving my sin through your death on the cross and redeeming me from my former life and making it possible to be a part of your people. Teach me and change into what you created me to be."

