

Title: The Manifesto of the King: Jesus’ teaching on the Sermon on the Mount

Subtitle: Laying the foundation for a blessed life

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/TF9R0WeZUiw>

Last Sunday’s Gospel featured Jesus calling disciples and traveling throughout Galilee; he taught in their synagogues and proclaimed the good news of the kingdom. Today, we glimpse what that kingdom looks like when it manifests itself in people’s hearts and lives. It is famously known as “The Sermon on the Mount. Some have called it “The Manifesto of the King,” and others have described it as the Magna Carta of the Christian life. This charter of liberty declared that the kingdom of heaven was near. It was never meant as an after-life consolation prize but an ever-present-tense possibility.

Matthew tells us that before delivering this Sermon, “*Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down.*”¹ Whenever Jesus had significant issues to discuss, the Gospel writers describe Jesus as sitting down. Likewise, it was the stance Rabbis took when they had complex issues to present and explain. Recently, before discussing a sobering issue with someone I deeply care about, I also asked them to sit down before dealing with the problem at hand.

Sitting down in a relaxed posture always sets the stage for a teachable moment. Jesus knew that this particular teaching would raise objections and mixed feelings due to the change in how it interpreted the Torah. From a merely human point of view, the standards outlined in this Sermon seem impossible, but God’s kingdom dynamic imparts new possibilities and powers. On our part, it doesn’t happen without effort, but ultimately it is the fruit of

¹ Matthew 5:1

the Holy Spirit that produces these virtues. Without him, we are doomed to defeat.

An unbeliever who noticed this once said, “You Christians seem to have a religion that makes you miserable. So you cannot expect outsiders to seek very earnestly for anything so uncomfortable.” I have to admit that there is some merit to this person’s objection. A mentor of mine once made the following memorable statement about our futile efforts to live up to the standards of the Christian life. He said, “I can’t, but God can, and He lives in me, and I am in him.” It is through Christ and with Christ and in Christ that we now have “*wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption,*”² as our New Testament lesson declares. So when unbelievers see us struggle, we need to know that the opening words of the Sermon on the Mount give us hope with a promise of happiness when Jesus declared, “***Blessed are the poor in spirit.***”³

The word “**blessed**”⁴ means “happy,” but not in a worldly sense that would depend on circumstances. Instead, it is due to receiving God’s grace and favor to such a bountiful degree as to make that person enviable. Yet the secret of this happiness is not found in ways you might expect. The world looks for happiness through money, fame, power, romantic love, and security—in every way but the manner outlined by Jesus. Instead, true blessedness is found in a poverty of spirit characterized by humility—a foundational principle upon which the rest of the virtues listed in this Sermon are built. It is a quality of heart that is the opposite of pride without giving a person’s ego a blowout. It doesn’t destroy a person’s self-image; it establishes it by enabling believers to acknowledge all that they are and have and are due to God, who is dynamically at work in them.

² 1 Corinthians 1:30

³ Matthew 5:3a

⁴ Strong’s Concordance #3107 makarios (mak-ar’-ee-os): blessed, happy; Usage: to be envied due to receiving God favor which (literally) extend (“make long, large”) His grace (benefits).

Therefore this poverty of spirit has nothing to do with a pious inferiority complex. The Gospel confronts us with our sins and need for a Savior. When someone is under such conviction, he may cry out with Isaiah, ***“Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips.”***⁵ They may even despair and say with the Apostle Paul, ***“Oh wretched man that I am, ‘Who will deliver me from this body of death?’”***⁶ But they are never without hope, for Paul immediately states, ***“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Therefore, there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.”***⁷ Jesus took our sins so completely upon himself that we can now stand before Him with boldness and confidence, for ***“If God is for us, then who can be against us.”***⁸

Isaiah gave assurance to this confidence when he proclaimed, ***“For this is what the high and exalted One says— he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.”***⁹

Through this quality of spirit, meekness, mourning, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness thrive. And from it comes manifestations of mercy, purity of heart, and the ability to be a peacemaker.

Saint Augustine, before his conversion, was proud of his intellect and knowledge, which held him back from believing. It was only after he had emptied himself of his pride and his sense of being able to manage his life as he wanted that he found God’s peace and wisdom that he ultimately craved.

Martin Luther’s experience was similar. When the future German reformer entered the monastery at a young age, his purpose was to earn his salvation through piety and good works, but it wasn’t

⁵ Isaiah 6:5

⁶ Roman 7:24

⁷ Romans 7:25 and Romans 8:1

⁸ Romans 8:31

⁹ Isaiah 57:15

long before he experienced an acute sense of failure. After he recognized his inability to please God and emptied himself of all attempts to earn his salvation, God touched his heart and showed him the true meaning of Paul's statement, ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”***¹⁰ This realization launched the Protestant Reformation, which changed church history.

The person who recognizes his spiritual poverty and learns to trust in God's grace alone can't stop there. The blessings of the Christian life come to those who mourn and are meek and hunger and thirst for righteousness.

This hunger prompted the Psalmist to ask, ***“who may dwell in your tabernacle? Who may abide upon your holy hill?”***¹¹ His question is answered in our reading from the prophet Micah, who wrote: ***“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”***¹²

These words describe the qualities Jesus outlined in the beatitudes and flow out from those who humbly and freely rely on God's grace.

If you lack the qualities outlined in this Sermon and acknowledge them, you are blessed. And if you take steps to yield yourself to the Holy Spirit, then you can be assured that ***“He that began a good work in you will bring it to completion”***¹³ as he ***“equips you with everything good that you may do his will and work in you that which is pleasing in his sight.”***¹⁴ Amen.

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:8-9

¹¹ Psalm 15:1

¹² Micah 6:8

¹³ Philippians 1:6

¹⁴ Hebrews 13:21