

The Sermon: Teachings From Jesus Christ
Part 1: The Upside-Down Kingdom
January 31st & February 1st

Welcome: For the next 15 weeks we are going to be looking at the most well-known sermon that Jesus ever preached! You can find it in the gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7.

Now...maybe you are familiar with the Sermon on the Mount...maybe not (that's ok). You might be asking why we would dedicate fifteen weeks of the year to one sermon.

2 Reasons: First, I believe that this is one of the best places in all of Scripture that gets to the heart of who Jesus Christ is, what it means to know Him, and when we know Him, how we will live! This is true whether you're a follower of Jesus Christ, or you're interested in Jesus, but still unsure of what it means to be a Christian; or whether your friend dragged you into this basement and promised you a free coffee!

Here's the 2nd reason why I believe that Jesus' Sermon is so important!

When you look out at what Christianity has become today, specifically here in the West, I find that there is a growing misunderstanding about what it means to be a Christian!

And I'm not referring to how the rest of the world views Christianity; I'm primarily speaking about how Christians view Christianity!

Let me give you an example. I'll make a few statements, and as I do, listen to the ones that most resonate with you.

Some view Christianity primarily...

As a set of rules or ethical teachings to be followed! So...if I do what the Bible says, I will become a better person. At the very least, I will be kinder, and more patient, and more caring than many of my neighbors or colleagues who don't claim to follow Jesus.

Others say... **No...Christianity is primarily something that I do.** *I attend church regularly. I attend certain classes or Bible studies; I volunteer in the church. I'm involved in my community. Those things are what make me a Christian.*

Some say, **Christianity is primarily about what I believe...about God, about the world, about the Scriptures.** *A Christian has the right kind of doctrinal beliefs!*

The Sermon: Teachings From Jesus Christ
Part 1: The Upside-Down Kingdom
January 31st & February 1st

Finally, and very few would actually say this...but when you peel away the layers, many absolutely believe this! **Christianity is primarily about living a certain way to ensure that I keep God happy, on my side!** *“So, I will commit to doing these things over here, and trying to avoid those things, and as long as I keep my end of the bargain, I can expect that God will fulfill his side of the bargain which is to keep me healthy and happy!”*

Do these sound familiar? In each of these cases, the Christian life becomes something of a transaction between the believer and God. If I believe this way, or if I live this way, or I arrange my priorities in a certain way, then God will take care of me. My family won't get sick, we won't lose jobs, my car won't break down, I'll occasionally pull a winning lottery ticket, the Patriots won't lose!

Now, please hear me. Of course, being a Christian will shape what you believe and what you value and how you relate to your friends or neighbors, but if we reduce Christianity to a set of beliefs and behavior, here's what is going to happen. When we peel away all the layers and get down underneath the belief and behavior, we will not have a growing intimacy with Jesus, and we will lack joy in following him, and there won't be a genuine transformation at the heart level that pervades our lives!

You see, when you read the Sermon on the Mount, and you hear Jesus describe what it means to be one of his followers (a Christian), you hear about a life that is beautiful and compelling, potent and transformational, inside and out. It is a way of life that flies in the face of the notion that Christianity is mere belief or behavior!

To show you this, let me give you a sampling of some of the things Jesus says in these three chapters!

“(5:13) A Christian is someone whose relationship to the world is like salt and light! In the 1st century, salt was a preservative. It pervaded the meat to keep it from spoiling. In the same way, Christians are to live in the world in such a radical way that they are willing to go into even the worst places – the worst homes, communities, and neighborhoods – to heal and transform what has spoiled and then to enhance its flavor for God's glory!

“(5:21) A Christian is someone who is relentlessly committed to building and maintaining whole relationships! If there is an ounce of anger or resentment or bitterness in us toward another person, we confess that and allow God to stamp it out of our lives, that we might be marked by love and tenderness and mercy!” Christians are radically committed to mending broken relationships.

The Sermon: Teachings From Jesus Christ
Part 1: The Upside-Down Kingdom
January 31st & February 1st

*“(5:33) **A Christian is a man or woman of their word!** They’re honest and loyal. When they say ‘yes’ to a friend or to a spouse, or to a neighbor, they can be trusted!”*

*“(6:1) **A Christian is a radically generous person** toward causes that are close to the heart of God...always looking for ways to give to the poor, to their neighbors, to the local church.’*

*“**A Christian is passionate about prayer!** Jesus says in chapter 6 that when we pray we’re to get away, shut the door and speak to our Heavenly Father in private. Prayer is the true acid test of our love for God. So...when we get alone, what do our thoughts drift toward? Do our hearts naturally move toward worship and adoration?”*

*“(6:24) **A Christian has built his/her life so steadily on the truth and promises of God,** that when life rocks their world (when the storms of life come), when illnesses or financial hardship, or job loss, or uncertainty comes your way, you don’t crumble...instead, you stand strong and confident that God is faithful and will not let you be crushed!*

Now...for years, many people have read the Sermon on the Mount and said... ‘It sounds like Jesus is giving us a handbook for living.’ ‘And if we just do what Jesus is suggesting; if we live the way he’s describing, the world will be a better place.’

But here’s the problem! If you’ve tried to live this way for any length of time, you’ve probably realized that you can’t do it!

“Imagine waking up every day and having the first thought that pops into your mind be, ‘how can I live every minute of this day for the good of others and for the glory of God?’

“Try being completely pure in your thoughts and heart 100% of the time. Never entertaining envy or jealousy or revenge or lust. Try it.”

“Imagine looking at every one of your with an untainted, unselfish outlook. Always gracious, merciful, and quick to forgive! Never critical, or condescending, or judgmental.

“Try telling the truth all of the time. Never bending the details of your story to make yourself look better. Never trying to make yourself appear better than you are.”

The Sermon: Teachings From Jesus Christ
Part 1: The Upside-Down Kingdom
January 31st & February 1st

“Try approaching money the way Jesus suggests. Never worrying about food or clothing, the mortgage or the bills because you always trust that God will take care of your needs! And not only do you never worry...you’re always on the lookout for ways to give your money away!

Try that for a week, or a day and then let me know how that is working out for you!

You see, if we’re being honest, most of us can point to places where our lives do not match up to the standard that Jesus is calling us to.’

Oswald Chambers wrote a little book called, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*. In it, he wrote this...

“We are so used to the sayings of Jesus that they slip over us unheeded; they sound sweet and pious and wonderfully simple, but they are in reality spiritual torpedoes that burst and explode in the subconscious mind, and when the Holy Spirit brings them back to our conscious minds we realize what startling statements they are.” Oswald Chambers

Chambers is saying that on one hand, Jesus’ teachings sound wonderful and captivating and they show us what it means to be a Christian inside and out. But on the other hand, when we place our lives up against Jesus words’ we see that we don’t have a chance of living this way...

Chambers continues...

“The Sermon on the Mount produces despair in the heart of the natural man, and that is the very thing Jesus means it to do, because as soon as we reach the point of despair we are willing to come as paupers to Jesus Christ and receive from him.”

Oswald Chambers

When Chambers writes that the Sermon on the Mount produces despair in the heart of the natural man, he’s saying that until God goes to work in our hearts by his mercy and power, we will be continually overwhelmed by our inability to live it out!

But...he says, this is exactly what needs to happen in us! That when we finally acknowledge our complete inability to do what Jesus’ says, our hearts are positioned for God to move!

Now...Jesus says the very same thing. Listen to the first words of Jesus’ sermon in Matthew chapter 5, verse 3!

The Sermon: Teachings From Jesus Christ
Part 1: The Upside-Down Kingdom
January 31st & February 1st

“God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. Matthew 5:3

The word ‘blesses’ means to approve of, or to accept.

Will’s Blessing: When I decided that I wanted to ask Beth to marry me, I called her father on the phone and asked him to meet me for breakfast. There are very few times in my life that I have been as nervous as I was the morning when I sat across the table from Will to ask for his blessing, his approval! Here’s the deal...I didn’t know then what realize now as a father of three little girls. That asking a father for his daughter’s hand in marriage is a holy moment! I have an agreement with my girls that I will not entertain a man’s request for a date until they are 27 years old. Until then, if you come to my house for one of my daughters, I will “bless you.” Seriously, the fact that Will gave me his blessing to marry Beth was an incredible gift! He was essentially saying... *“I approve of you. I accept you.”*

Blessing...approval...acceptance. Every one of us is looking for it, and we look for it everywhere we go!

When you went to school for the first time, when you walked the grounds of your college campus as a Freshman, and you looked around at all of your peers, what were you asking? Will I receive their blessing? Will they accept me, right?

When you left college and started applying for jobs...you were essentially applying for a blessing...for approval! Out of all the potential applicants, and after all of the interviews, you wanted ‘acceptance.’

Each of us wants someone to look at us and say, ‘I accept you...I approve of you as you are.’

In fact, Jesus goes one step further and says that blessing is the very thing we were created for. We long for the God who created us, who knows us inside and out...to look at us and say, “I approve of you. I love you. I accept you.” That’s what we want at the deepest level of our soul, and our souls are restless until they rest in Him!

If this is true, the question is, where are you searching for this blessing? Where are you seeking this approval?

Irreligious – Some of us search for acceptance and approval through our education or career or romance or beauty. We say, *“If I’m smart enough, pretty enough, successful or likeable enough, people will accept me.”* At the end of the Sermon on the

The Sermon: Teachings From Jesus Christ
Part 1: The Upside-Down Kingdom
January 31st & February 1st

Mount, Jesus warns us and says that if we live our lives seeking approval through those things, we'll find ourselves empty-handed. They'll never satisfy! When life comes crashing down around us, we'll be crushed...

Some of us, especially those who have been around the church for a while, might say, "*Jed...you must be saying that what I need is religion! If I get religion, then God will bless me!*"

But notice that Jesus doesn't say that "God blesses those who are good...who are holy...who are religious."

Religious – Being religious and being a Christian are two very different things. You see, it is possible to try to gain God's approval by being very good! By following the rules! By attending church, and having the right beliefs. By saying, "If I keep my end of the bargain, God will bless me. He'll accept me."

Jesus warns against this in Scripture and tells us that it will never work! You see...to be a Christian is not about being good (although if Jesus is the King of your life you will certainly grow in goodness). To be a Christian is first and foremost, to be so radically in love with Jesus and loyal to Him as King that your devotion to Him infiltrates every area of your life (your work, your romance, hobby, leisure, passion, your friendships, the way you spend your money)...everything!

But we've already admitted that we don't have that kind of love for Jesus all of the time." Jesus says, as soon as you're able to admit this! As soon as you're able to say, 'God, I can't do it...I don't love you like this. My heart doesn't beat for you like this. I don't live like this.' The moment you can admit that, you're on the doorstep of God's Kingdom!

Listen again to the words of Jesus!

"God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. Matthew 5:3

When Jesus says that God blesses the poor, He is not talking about an economic poverty! He's not saying that God favors and accepts the materially poor (although there are plenty of Scriptures that talk about God's concern for the poor.).

Jesus is using a metaphor to describe spiritual poverty. A recognition that we are spiritually bankrupt before God!

The Sermon: Teachings From Jesus Christ
Part 1: The Upside-Down Kingdom
January 31st & February 1st

The narrative of Scripture says that we were created by God and for Him. To know Him and love Him with our whole lives! Yet sin has distorted and ruined that in us!

You see...If the Sermon on the Mount reflects the life God created us for...why can't we live it out? Why is it that no matter how hard we try to obey Jesus, we don't obey Him in thought, motive and deed all of the time? Why?

Ask yourself...

"Why am I not the father or mother I want to be?"

"Why am I not as radically generous as I'm called to be?"

"Why do I constantly worry about my resources, and have such a hard time trusting God?"

"Why have I been unfaithful in my relationships?"

"Why do I get angry and resentful toward people?"

"Why do I have such a difficult time forgiving?"

"Why don't I have a vibrant prayer life?"

The Bible says that our sin has created a chasm between us and God...and the life He created us for! Sin has broken our hearts beyond repair, and we are indebted to God as a result! We long for his acceptance and approval, but in our sin we deserve his judgment and condemnation!

And Jesus says...the moment when you can finally acknowledge your poverty before God is the first and greatest sign that God is working out his mercy in your life! That the blessing of God is on you!

"The bedrock of Jesus Christ's Kingdom is poverty, not possession; not decisions for Jesus Christ, but a sense of absolute futility, 'I cannot begin to do it.' Then, says Jesus, 'Blessed are you.' That is the entrance, and it takes us a long while to believe we are poor. The knowledge of our own poverty brings us to the moral frontier where Jesus Christ works." Oswald Chambers

Only Christians or those becoming Christians suddenly realize that they have nothing in their lives that merits the blessing of God. Nothing we have to offer to begin to pay off our debt to God!

The Sermon: Teachings From Jesus Christ
Part 1: The Upside-Down Kingdom
January 31st & February 1st

**How could God bless us when we admit that we don't deserve to be blessed?
It's a contradiction!**

In Philippians 2:5-8, the Apostle gives us the answer –

“You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.” Philippians 2:5-8

Paul says that the very thing Jesus asks us to do, to admit our poverty, is the very thing that He did for us!

Jesus became poor...in spirit and in body...he was stripped of everything so that we could become rich!

On the cross, Jesus mourned so that we could rejoice in God's acceptance!

Jesus became unrighteous (filthy, covered in our sin) so that we could become pure and holy and without fault!

Jesus gave up fellowship with the Father so we could walk into His arms!

He took the position of a slave, obedient to the Father, to make you a son and a daughter!

Furthermore, Jesus died to make it possible for you to live out the Sermon on the Mount...**Later on, Paul writes...**

“He (Jesus) gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds.” Titus 2:14

When you see that God loved you that much. That before you even took your first breath, God was willing to give that much for you! When you look into the perfect and priceless love of Jesus, and you see that you have done nothing to earn it, it will give you the humility to say to God, ‘I'm poor and penniless. I have nothing to offer you...but I come to you! Please accept me on the basis of what Jesus has done for me!’

And that is the moment...Jesus says...when you stand under thqe acceptance and approval of God!

The Sermon: Teachings From Jesus Christ
Part 1: The Upside-Down Kingdom
January 31st & February 1st

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Pray