

Cries in the Wilderness

The Beatitudes

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Bible Verse: Matthew 5-7
Preached on: Tuesday, June 13, 2023

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I invite you to turn in your Bibles to Matthew 5 as we introduce a new series for our summer Tuesdays ahead out of the Beatitudes. I'm very delighted to bring this material again. We went through this seven years ago or more, and it's timely for the broader work of our church to come back to this material, to apply our hearts and minds to it afresh, and to trust the Lord for how he will use it mightily in our lives and beyond the walls of our church, we hope and pray and trust.

Matthew 5, I'm going to read verses 1 through 12, and tonight's just an introductory message to these Beatitudes. In verse 1, we read,

1 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Now as I said, we want to come to this text and kind of use it as a companion series to the broader series that we're doing, "How to Build a Christian Mind," and I want you to understand from the start why we are approaching things in this way. We have been teaching on how to build a Christian mind because of the centrality of right thinking, not only in the Christian life, but because it is desperately what our postmodern society needs. We, as I introduced this material some time ago, you know, we just made the point that the reason that we are in such a mess and the reason that Pride Month is such a wonderful thing in the eyes of our society is because people no longer hold to a concept

of absolute truth, thinking and truth is viewed as a relative matter, a subjective matter, and we need to be able to address that with a great foundation. It takes a thorough foundation. It's not something that you can correct in one or two messages. It's something that you would address consistently over time, synthesizing the teaching of Scripture over a year or two. This is not something that's easily done, and it's not something that lends itself to learning just by going through a particular book of the Bible at any given time.

And so we need right thinking. We must have right thinking, and that's what we've been working on for the past several months. But beloved, we also need right affections in our heart. We need to know and we need to see and we need the Spirit of God to work out what he implants in us at the moment of the new birth. God gives us and makes us a new creation, and that new creation comes with an entirely new set of desires and priorities that are explained to us in the Beatitudes in the verses that I just read.

And so we need right thinking and we need right affections. We need both of those things. And beloved, I can't tell you enough how, or strongly enough, how desperate I really believe the situation is around us, not simply in our society, but in, broadly speaking, the church of Jesus Christ itself. We live in a society, a postmodern society, that rejects absolute truth. That is a given these days. And here's the problem with that: people want, instead of truth, people want to feel things. They want to feel good. They want to feel things about truth and call that truth. They want experiences. And men reject authority and they do what is right in their own eyes. This is pervasive in the society around us. Now look, only a fool would suggest that those things have not affected the church of Jesus Christ. It's silently in the air like lethal carbon monoxide that will kill you without you even being aware that anything is happening. And you say, "What do you mean by that, within the church?" Well, broadly speaking, and I'm speaking beyond the walls of Truth Community Church and just making observations about the so-called evangelical scene as I understand it today, broadly speaking, people in the church do not want to think. That's why short sermons are in vogue. It's why seeker-sensitive ministry is so popular and light-hearted approaches to ministry where foolish men can get up and say we're going to have a Super Bowl of preaching on, you know, in February, and nothing is taken seriously and the effects of that are very far-reaching. Broadly speaking, not only do people not want to think, but people even within the church are not interested in personal repentance. They're not interested in personal righteousness. They're very happy for the society to be called to repent, very happy for the sins of the world to be condemned, but when it comes to addressing sin in their personal lives, that is off limits. That is not to be done. And yes, people within the church may be outwardly moral and respectable citizens, but that is hardly the nature of life in the kingdom of Christ. Outward morality and respectable citizenship has nothing to do with what it means to be born again, what it means to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. And so what you encounter, and again, I'm speaking broadly here, I'm just laying an outline for that which will follow in the weeks to come, while they're outwardly moral, perhaps inwardly, what you find as you interact with people over time, you find that they're self-satisfied, proud, and even unteachable that, you know, the word of God is fine for someone else but I'm fine the way I am, and barriers are put up and fences are built around personal lives because people do not see their need for personal repentance. They like outward religion.

They like the association of being associated with a church because that fits with a pre-existing construct of self-righteousness. But as you read through the Beatitudes and you see what God really requires of his people, you see that there's no real hunger for personal holiness. There's no hunger and thirst for a righteousness that we do not have and that hunger for holiness is simply not an ongoing controlling reality and affection of the heart even though Scripture says that without holiness no man will see the Lord, in Hebrews 12:14 I believe it is.

You know, as I study Scripture and have done so for a while now, as I preach, as I interact with many other pastors that I respect, hear what's happening in their churches and all of that, beloved, it's my humble opinion that there is a sad reality that we must come to grips with and respond to and that sad reality is this: our churches, and remember I'm speaking in the plural, I'm not, you know, I'm speaking beyond the walls of Truth Community Church here, but you look out on the scene, you see the disregard for truth, you see the easy immorality that church leaders fall into repeatedly. We're not even shocked by it anymore. We're shocked when someone isn't associated with scandal that's in leadership. And on and on you could go. You see how anemic the influence of the church is upon society. I look at all of that and I look at this text of the Beatitudes and try to take seriously what Jesus says and I can only come to one conclusion, and it drives the way that we are teaching and preaching in these days on both Sunday and Tuesday. Our churches are filled with people who are not truly born again. I see no other way to explain it because the new birth gives rise to new life, new attitudes. It gives rise to new affections. And it's just hard to look out on the scene, especially in America, and say, yes, our churches are dominated by people who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness. If they were hungering and thirsting for righteousness, ungodly churches would not be filled with the audiences that they are.

And there's a consequence of that. It means if that's true, and I believe that it is, if that's true then it means that men are dead in sin, men and women, many men and women are dead in sin while they are mouthing the name of Jesus. That's really troubling to think about. It's one thing to live a life of sin and know that when you die you're going to go to hell. It's another thing to mouth the name of Jesus thinking you're going to heaven and find out that you didn't when it's too late to do anything about it. With sorrow we look out at the situation and say that so many within the church have not truly repented so as to turn from their life of sin and to embrace Jesus Christ and to follow him as Lord, to have repented in a way that there is a great consuming desire to read and know and understand his word and to know doctrine and truth and to have your life shaped by it, to have a measure of repentance that humbles you and breaks you in the presence of God that leads you to a fear of God, a fear of God of loving obedience to him, a fear of God that trembles at his word, that is contrite of spirit, and seeks to know him. As Paul said, you know, Paul says in Philippians 3 that his surpassing desire is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. Look out at the church, broadly speaking, beloved, and ask yourself whether that's the mark of what passes for evangelical Christianity today and answer the question honestly, or compare that hunger for holiness with the entertainment model that is given to us, the diminishment of the word of God for experiential preaching and relational ministry in a way that just puts the man at the center of things, and as you

look at his bio on his website, you can learn all kinds of things about the football teams that he likes, and the coffee that he drinks, and his feelings about the attractiveness of his wife. Is this the mark of churches that are broken and contrite in spirit?

We need to not play games and we should not presume things that are not consistent with Scripture. That's why we want to turn to the Beatitudes here. The Beatitudes, when you read and study the Beatitudes, what you find is in those 12 verses I read, the 10 verses of the Beatitudes proper, what you find is as you look out at the scene, you find that the Beatitudes are crying out in the wilderness, saying, "This is true spiritual life. This is what it looks like to be born again. This is what the outworking of true repentance looks like." And as Jesus teaches the whole Sermon of the Mount in verses 5, 6, and 7, he starts with this matter of inward character, these things of desire that are of such a discount in the life around us today. I hope, I would like to be wrong in my assessment. It would be good, in one sense it would be better for the eternal souls of men if, you know, if this was a misdiagnosis. But you can't, beloved, you cannot read the Beatitudes and take the Sermon on the Mount seriously and say this is a reflection of the broad swath of evangelical Christianity. You can't and we'll see that as we go along.

And so what does this mean for us within Truth Community Church? Well, it gives us an opportunity to examine ourselves corporately. It gives us an opportunity for each one of us to examine ourselves individually in light of the word of God, in light of what Jesus says here, and so we want to take our time, take it carefully, and to do that tonight, I just want to set the broad context in the book of Matthew for the Beatitudes. And what we find is this, is that when the gospels open up with the arrival of John the Baptist, John the Baptist arrived after there had been a 400-year period of silence since the close of the Old Testament Canon. There had not been a prophetic voice speaking out and saying, "Thus saith the Lord," with the authority and truthfulness of the Old Testament prophets. There was this silent period of 400 years. Think about it, 400 years from us would take us back to the early 1600s, long before the founding of America. There had been no word from God, no new word from God in that time. But as you come into the gospel of Matthew, the night is coming to a close. Now the sunrise of new revelation is starting to rise and you're starting to see light on the morning sky and in that, John the Baptist appears on the scene. He was the divine forerunner who proclaimed the coming of the King, Jesus Christ, as had been prophesied about him in the book of Isaiah.

Look at Matthew 3:1 through 6, and realize that John the Baptist was the herald going before the coming king, saying, "The King is coming." That was his unique role in the history of redemption. We read in verse 1, "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" So Isaiah had prophesied not only of the coming of Christ, but of the immediately prior coming of a forerunner who would prepare the way for the Lord, and this was John the Baptist. And notice in verse 2, that the preaching, the theme of the preaching of John the Baptist was repentance because the kingdom of heaven was at hand.

Now in verse 4 we read, "Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey." And pausing for a moment between verses 4 and 5, apparently his preaching ministry was extremely powerful. People realized that there was an authority to what he had to say. They realized that God was breaking into the world again to speak, and so people wanted to hear him. And he had a broad following. The audience gathered around him as the Spirit of God called attention and put the spotlight on John the Baptist. You read that in verse 5, "Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." John was having an impact, and the broad population was going out to hear him. And you think about it in this way, is that John has the benefit of this public attention. The spotlight is on him and with that spotlight on him, and rather than taking it to himself, he uses the spotlight and points elsewhere and says, "This is the one that you must hear. This is the one that you must listen to." In John 3:30, as he was speaking of Christ, John the Baptist said, "He must increase, but I must decrease," as his own ministry was drawing to a close. John used that public attention that we read about in verse 5 in order to point people to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Look at verse 11 in Matthew 3, where we read this. John says, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Now if I can speak very colloquially here, John is saying that, "You're paying attention to me and you think that I'm something special based on the ministry that God has given to me." John the Baptist says, "understand that I am nothing compared to the one who is coming after me. I'm not worthy to untie his sandals. I'm not worthy to touch the soles of his feet, he is so much superior than I am." And so you see that John the Baptist is given the spotlight only in order to announce the coming of the King.

Now, as you read on in Matthew 3, you see the arrival of the King. Jesus appears on the scene in sequence following after the ministry of John the Baptist. We read in verse 13 this, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" John's saying, "I'm the sinner here, not you. How could you ever submit to baptism by me, given your perfect righteousness?" And Jesus' answer shows that he's acting in a representative capacity to fulfill righteousness on his people, that's all material for another time. But Jesus answers him in verse 15, "'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented." Verse 16, "And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"

Now, beloved, just take a moment to soak in what's happening here. It's rather an unintentional pun there about soaking in something after reading an account of water baptism, but soak in what's happening here. A prophetically appointed and recognized man, John the Baptist, had pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ and said, "He is the one that you are to follow." In the course of his baptism, there are two other witnesses that

descend, as it were, upon Christ. The Father speaks down and says, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." A supernatural voice from heaven affirms Jesus as being the true Messiah. And also you have the Holy Spirit coming down as a dove, resting upon Jesus and lending his own testimony to the person of Christ as well. A prophetic spokesman affirms him. The Father in heaven affirms him. The Spirit affirms him.

Now this is a new era that is dawning in redemptive history. After 400 years of silence, with no prophet being available, now you have this supernatural attestation to the Lord Jesus Christ. Something new is taking place here. Something distinct. There is a step forward in the divine plan of redemption. God is no longer speaking through prophets, through human prophets who were sinful in their own right. If you remember Isaiah 6, Isaiah saw the glory of God and he said, "Woe is me, for I am a man of sinful lips, and I live among a people of sinful lips!" And you read this in Daniel and elsewhere as well. These men were conscious of their own sin. Even though God used them as spokesmen, they were not sinless. They certainly were not divine. What you have in the coming of Christ is something completely different. You have something on a different order of magnitude of significance. God no longer speaking through sinful men, he is speaking through his holy Son, so holy, so blameless that God could say, "I am well pleased with him."

Now turn back in your Bibles to Hebrews for just a moment as you see this summarized in the brilliant, concise nature of the Holy Scriptures, you see an echo, something of, you could say, a biblical commentary on all of this that we're considering this evening when in the opening verses we read, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days," something new has happened. There's something distinct. There's something different. "But in these last days," in contrast with the days of the prophets, now there is something new, something different. "In these last days," verse 2, God "has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." That's who's on the scene. That is the magnificent Christ that John has affirmed, the Father has affirmed, the Spirit has affirmed.

A new day has come. Christ is on the scene. And what did, here's our question for this evening, what did the Son have to say? What did Christ have to say as he entered into his own ministry of teaching? Well, look at Matthew 4:12. Jesus is beginning his ministry here. After he had been tempted and tested by the devil and had passed that with perfection, verse 12, Matthew 4, we read this, "Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.'" Christ has come. They've seen him. Darkness is dispelled by the presence of Christ. And what happens at that point? What did the Son have to say? Verse 17, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the

kingdom of heaven is at hand." It's a summary statement of the theme of the message of Christ, "Repent." It's the same message that John the Baptist was preaching. We saw that in chapter 3, verse 2. John the Baptist said, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Christ comes, the King comes, and he says and preaches on the exact same theme, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Now what does it mean to repent? We'll define this more precisely over the next message or two. For tonight, I just want to say this in the simplest of terms: to repent is to turn from sin in order to serve Christ the King. True repentance has a Christ-ward focus. To truly repent biblically is not simply to stop committing certain acts or patterns of sin. You don't have to be a Christian to try to change your habits, that's why people make New Year's resolutions, right? People make a lot of New Year's resolutions that they don't have the power to keep, but they start in January 1st and they say, "Now I'm going to turn over a new leaf." They're going to try to stop sinning or lose weight or whatever it is. My point is, is that that is not biblical repentance that you see there. Maybe a humanly commendable effort at self-improvement, but not repentance as the Bible defines it. Not repentance that turns from a self-centered perspective on life in order to serve and follow Christ. Not a repentance of godlessness and unrighteousness, of indifference to God, indifference to his word, indifference to his people, not repenting of those things in order to become God-centered, Christ-centered, and hungering and thirsting after righteousness, with a desire to do nothing else with your life but to glorify Christ and to know him, You see the obvious distinction between a New Year's resolution type of self-change versus a biblical sense of repentance, of turning from sin in order to embrace Jesus Christ the King. That's just by way of introduction.

Now I want to point something that I believe is extraordinarily critical to understanding the concept of repentance as well as the Sermon on the Mount in particular. Look back at Matthew 4:17, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" And then in verse 18, it immediately shifts to a different scene. "While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen." Notice that there's no explanation that immediately follows of what it means to repent. It shifts to a narrative rather than expanding on an explanation of the theme of repentance. But what you do see is that tied with the call to repentance, Jesus saying to those first disciples, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men. Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Follow me and I'll make you fishers of men." You look at that, you kind of raise your eyebrow, you cock your head to look at the text more closely and say, "There must be something in repentance that is tied with following Christ." That's the only point I'm making right now. There must be something in repentance that is tied to following Christ. It's not just about changing human behavior on a horizontal level, something in the call to repentance calls people to Christ himself, to the King that has arrived.

Verse 22, "Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him." But go on and read, come back to the Beatitudes now, and just note the verbal connections here. There are links in a chain that are tying these narratives together. Chapter 3, verse 2, John the Baptist, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Chapter 4, verse 17, Jesus says, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And now look at this. When I first

started to understand this many years ago, it exploded on my mind in a wonderful way and I never get tired of considering these verbal links that help us in the interpretation of God's word. Chapter 5, verse 3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Chapter 3, verse 2, "the kingdom of heaven." Chapter 4, verse 17, "the kingdom of heaven." Chapter 5, verse 3, "the kingdom of heaven." Chapter 5, verse 10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Now what you have here then is that verbal link of the kingdom of heaven tells you that you are supposed to understand the preaching of Christ about repentance as being explained and expanded upon in the Sermon on the Mount. The kingdom of heaven links those themes together.

And beloved, here's my point: if that is not true, if the Sermon on the Mount has nothing to do with the concept of repentance, then we are left without any meaningful explanation of what Jesus was calling people to do when he called them to follow him. We have nothing to give any content to that in the context of the narrative. If it's repent and then he goes on and preaches something completely unrelated in Matthew 5, 6, and 7, we don't have any biblical guidance to an interpretation of the theme of repentance. That's ridiculous to contemplate as if that could be the way that it was. No, watch this. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is expounding on the meaning of repentance. He shows us how repentance that flows from the new birth, how repentance works itself out in every area of life, culminating in final judgment as we will see later this evening. It is a comprehensive discussion of the nature of true repentance. And this call to repentance that John the Baptist made, that Jesus makes, that the Sermon on the Mount makes, this call to repentance, I'm speaking somewhat figuratively here, it is a cry into the spiritual wilderness to men who live in darkness, the call to repent comes to follow Christ the King and to live out this life that he calls you to. It is a beckoning to those in darkness to come out of darkness, to be saved from this perverse generation, to follow Christ and to live out the nature of repentance that he calls them to.

Let that sink in. You know, it's not easy, they are out there, but it's not easy to find churches that will emphasize the theme of repentance. Oh, they'll talk about accepting Jesus into your heart and how easy it is to be saved, but the theme of repentance cuts against the grain of the natural man. By definition, the biblical call to repentance tells men and women that they are not acceptable to God as they are. You must turn from the way you are to embrace new life in Christ and to bring forth fruit in keeping with that repentance, as John the Baptist explained to the audience around him in Matthew 3. We didn't take time to look at that. Repentance is of necessity, by definition, offensive to the natural man and yet here it is, John the Baptist, "Repent." Jesus Christ, "Repent." Jesus Christ calling us to repent. You see it in the message of the apostles also. Peter said, you know, to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. Paul preached repentance. It's a theme that is woven throughout New Testament preaching, beloved.

And so, coming back to the theme on which I opened it up and, you know, my concern for the state of, I'm not alone in this, of course, but my concern for the state of so-called evangelical Christianity, what can we say about a movement, for lack of a better word, what can we say about a system that in the name of Christ has so very little to say about repentance? By what measure is it truly identified with Christ if the theme of repentance

has been silenced? If Christ opens up preaching repentance, on what basis do those who claim to know him hide that message from those to whom they preach? Do you see the problem? Do you see the problem? We have the visible fruit of an impotent spiritual organization showing us that there's not much visible reason to think that the power of God's at work here based on the affections that that so-called Christians bring to life and the way that they live, the affections for holiness and understanding and being contrite in spirit and fearing God, fearing God enough to turn away from evil, which is part of the definition of the fear of God in Proverbs. The fear of the Lord is to turn away from evil, it says in Proverbs 16. If the call to repentance and those spiritual affections are absent, on what ground do we think that the power of God is at work in it? You have a biblical description of life and you look for those symptoms of life and you find them lacking. It would be like in the physical realm, knowing that, and I shouldn't speak anything about medicine here, so I just speak in the very broadest of simple terms, that in physical life you would look for signs of brain activity and breathing and a heart beating, and you know that physical life is marked by those elements and others, and then you come across a human form that has no brain activity, the heart is not beating and he's not breathing and you say, "It's okay. He's alive." That's ridiculous. You know in advance what to look for for life and it's not there, you say, "That's dead. Call the coroner. It's too late for hospice. Call the coroner. We have a corpse on our hands that has no life in it." Well beloved, if it's repentance and following Christ enough to love holiness and turn away from evil that's the mark of spiritual life, draw your own conclusions.

Now, would it be lighter, would it be more fun for us to talk about other things? Yeah, maybe. I mean, not really, but it's hard to find much to be jovial about in this. And this isn't the way that you're supposed to attract crowds, you know, give them what they want and, you know, make them happy, make them laugh and give them free coffee and they'll come back. But beloved, at what point do we say, "Do you know what? There are things that are more important than a jovial atmosphere. There are things that are more important than having a good time. There are matters of eternal consequence. There are eternal souls. There's an eternal God who will be an eternal judge to those who reject him and men are hurtling toward a judgment before him. How can we not, how can we know these things, how can we know that these things are true, say that we believe them, and stay silent on those things before men? How can we do that?" It's a total betrayal of what men say they believe when they step into a pulpit and it's a total betrayal of love to those who need to know that they're in danger. If we don't tell them that they need to repent and follow Christ, who will tell them? The Biden White House under the scope of the Pride flag, will they hear it there? Will they see it on Netflix? Will they read it online and see it on TikTok or whatever?

Beloved, this is a problem. This is a problem. And so we need to understand, we need to say, "Do you know what? I don't care what other people are doing. I just need to know what Christ says, what Scripture says, so that I can see these things and that I can start to have it affect the way that I think and the affections that I bring to life, and what it is that I say when I have an opportunity to speak about Christ to a lost soul, what is embedded in, what is the nature of this call to repent." Well, I want to break it down into two sections here. That's a 50-minute introduction. We see two different calls in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount, which is expounding on the call to repentance,

the Sermon on the Mount gives us two distinct calls, two aspects of the call to repentance and you could say it is a call to righteousness and it is a call to blessing. It is a call to righteousness and it is a call to blessing.

First of all, let's look at the call to righteousness. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his hearers to a righteous life that reflects the character of God. He calls men and women to a righteous life that reflects the character of God. And remember, we're just touching themes tonight; we'll go through all of this in detail in weeks to come. So I just want you to see the broad themes. Matthew 5:6, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Verse 20, Jesus says, "I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of God." Verse 48, "you therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Jesus calling men to a righteous life not simply by way of outward conduct but by inward desire to spiritually hunger and thirst for righteousness in a manner that is analogous to the daily appetites that a man has for food and water; as natural and as necessary as food and water are day by day for physical life, true repentance, the new birth produces a spiritual appetite that desires righteousness, to turn from sin, to follow Christ, to live in accordance with his word. That's what Jesus is talking about. He calls us to that. He calls men to holiness in the middle of real life in the real world.

Look at Matthew 6:33 and notice the desire aspect of what we're about to see here. Matthew 6:33, Jesus says, "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Seek it first. Make this your highest affection, your highest priority. Make this the defining aspect of why you live, "I want to know the kingdom of God. I want to know his righteousness. I want to practice it and live it out in my life." Real holiness in the midst of real life. That verse comes, as many of you know, in an extended section on Jesus' teaching about anxiety. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. Seek it. Desire it. Want it. Pursue it. Pursue it first. See, beloved, it's inward. It's not simply a matter of practicing external religion. It's not simply a matter of going through religious rituals as the wretched, wretched Catholic system teaches people to think and do. There is a living reality in the heart of man that pulsates desiring this righteousness that God has and that God calls us to, and Christ here in this sermon, chapter 5, chapter 6, now chapter 7, he calls us to godliness in the midst of a world of sin and false religion, and of false professors of religion, those who claim to know but don't.

Look at Matthew 7:21. Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Do you see it again, the kingdom of heaven, see that repeated theme? "But the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." The one who is practicing righteousness as God defines it. You see, beloved, in this call to righteousness, it's more than a call simply to stop committing acts of sin, to stop sinful patterns. It's so much more than that. It's not simply a call to avoid the negative things and the violations of God's law. It is a call to follow Christ and to practice positive righteousness for his sake. You say, "Well, you know, if you start talking like that, you're talking about something that's a total demand on all of life." Yeah, yeah, that's right. That's right. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. Hunger and thirst for it is a daily product of true repentance. It's a call to righteousness of the highest and most robust sort.

Now, we'll cover that in days to come but, secondly, this is a sweet part of the call to repentance, is that the call to repentance in the name of Christ is a call to blessing. It is a call to blessing. And oh, I love to emphasize this aspect of it because it refutes the false caricature that you will see made of biblical preaching, say, in the entertainment media, movie portrayals of pictures and, you know, even in family friendly things that preachers are portrayed as angry loudmouth preachers that just preach hellfire and judgment and utterly distort a perception of what the true message of repentance is. You would never ever see this portrayed, you would never ever see a portrayal of this aspect of the message of repentance in any of those venues. But you read the Sermon on the Mount, and you see what Christ actually said, and you see that he calls men to repent. He's calling them to come to himself so that they would receive blessing, that they would receive benefit, that they would receive goodness and grace from his hands. And once you're alerted to this, it is all over the place in the Sermon on the Mount. What Christ does is he promises great blessing to those who turn to follow him. Nine times Jesus pronounces blessing on men and women who repent in the Beatitudes alone.

Look at it there in verse 3, beginning in verse 3, and I'm not going to reread the whole passage again; we'll go through this verse by verse. But he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." For right now you just have to take my word for it that all of these verses are expressing different aspects of the one true repentance. To one degree or another, these character traits are present in everyone who truly repents. But for tonight, the focus is simply on that word "blessed," the privilege of being on the receiving end of divine favor. Verse 3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you." Verse 12, "your reward is great in heaven."

Now, to a weary, defeated, sin-sick soul, the idea that there could be favor given to you in your sin and unworthiness is astonishing. Christ calls men to himself in order to be good to them, to bless them. The call to repent is a call to turn from sin, yes, to turn to righteousness, yes, but it is a call to enter into the blessing of God in the kingdom of God. It's a message of untold goodness to call men biblically to repent.

Let's keep going. We'll look at the details of this another time, but look in chapter 6, verse 4. Chapter 6, verse 4, Jesus says, "your Father who sees in secret will reward you." In chapter 6, verse 6, "your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Chapter 6, verse 18, "your Father who sees in secret will reward you." God, as it were, stands ready, willing, able, and intending to bless those who repent and enter into the manifestation of the fruit of repentance that the Sermon on the Mount describes. This is a place of receiving divine favor. This is a place of goodness, of joy, of blessing that Jesus talks about. Matthew 6:33 again, "all these things will be added to you." God just giving and giving and giving to people of this nature. Chapter 7, verse 7, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." The treasure house, the vault of the blessing of God is available to those who repent. Why would anyone not want that?

And so in the call to repent, Jesus calls us to righteousness, and at the same time, he promises his goodness to us. "This will become your possession if you repent and follow me." It's wonderful but, beloved, let us not misunderstand or diminish what is at stake. The promise of blessing is not to be trifled with. It is not to be despised. It is not to be lightly rejected because what is at stake in this call to repentance, what is at stake as we hear the word of God together tonight, as others will hear it in subsequent media, what is at stake in this call to repentance is far more than what might seem possible as we gather together in a comfortable room, in a comfortable suburb. There's so much at stake. Nothing less than life and eternity hinge on the way that you respond. Nothing less than that. We have been speaking tonight of things that have the farthest reaching eternal consequences far beyond what we could imagine or think, and Jesus warns us that the consequences are real and significant, and that it's not an easy matter to find these things. You have to look and search for them.

Matthew 7:13, Jesus makes very plain what's at stake. Jesus teaches plainly, he speaks honestly, and to the extent that it's ever diminished, it's not the fault of Christ because Jesus, as I like to say when I teach on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is teaching for keeps. This is the ultimate reality of it all. This must not be ignored or slighted. Jesus says in verse 13, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." It's hard because it requires repentance. It's hard because you have to forsake your sin and yield your pride to the glory of Christ. Men don't want to do that and so Jesus says, "Consider it all carefully. Count the cost. Be aware that there's a narrow gate and you cannot measure what is real, what is true by counting noses. This is not a popularity contest. This is not majority opinion or majority vote. Enter by the narrow gate." He graciously says, "Be careful because many people go the broad way and they're on a conveyor belt that just drops them into destruction."

In verses 24 through 27, chapter 7, verse 24, look at that with me. Again, Jesus is showing us that life and eternity are at stake here in what we consider. Verse 24, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." The idea is that the fall was great and the echo that reverberates in your mind is it's great, great, great, great, great, great. It echoes throughout all of eternity the greatness of the fall. And so we come to the end of the entire sermon and Jesus counsels us, calls us, describes for us the necessity of responding genuinely to what he says and not neglecting it, not ignoring it, not walking away because to walk away, to not act upon it, to not respond in repentance and faith is to seal your doom and your doom will be great, great, great, great, great.

And so, what we've seen here is that the Beatitudes open as a cry in the wilderness to wayward men, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Follow Christ. Bring forth

fruit in keeping with repentance." And beloved, it's a cry in the wilderness today. It is no less a cry in the wilderness today because we come with this message from Scripture, from Christ, from the Holy Spirit, and we proclaim this to a culture and to a church that reject authority and any measure of sober thought. Again, when I use the word church, I'm using it broadly beyond the walls of just our local church, but our local church would be included. This kind of preaching goes to people who are conditioned and who love to reject authority and who do not want to think seriously about serious things. It's a cry in the wilderness. Who will hear the cry? And yet, Christ speaks with authority, and his authority should not be rejected, it should not be ignored, it should not be treated as, "Well, I'll come back to this another time." That's a fool talking.

Look at verse 28 and 29, "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes." They knew that Jesus was commanding from a position of absolute final authority. A lot of them didn't respond, but they recognized that there was a distinct note to the voice of this man, to the content of what he said that could not be denied. It was distinct from everything else. And in a like manner today, in the biblical call to repent, Christ sets forth the path to life and blessing. The cry that goes out is, "Turn from this age and by faith submit to Christ. Be saved from this perverse generation," Acts 2:40. Many reject that cry and it's so sad to realize that rejecting that cry in the wilderness is to their ultimate eternal ruin. What we need, what you need, is a cry of your own in your own wilderness. May God give us all the saving response of a cry of our own that cries out in response, "O Christ, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

Let's pray together.

Gracious Lord, if any of us wind up in eternal hell after seeing these things in your word, it'll be our own fault. It won't be because you haven't spoken with clarity. It won't be that you haven't spoken with compassion. It won't be because you haven't pleaded by your Spirit with hearts to come to you. It's all right there, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Father, I pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit, that through the proclaimed word, you would bring many to faith in Christ. And for those that are in Christ under the sound of my voice here this evening and later, Father, those that are truly in Christ, may your Spirit affirm to them the fact that you have truly saved them from this perverse generation and they are on the path that leads to eternal life. Strengthen them with joy in response to the proclaimed word. But Father, let us not trifle with it. Let us not pretend that these things aren't real, aren't urgent, that it's not the way that things really are. There will be many on the broad path to destruction. There will be many whose houses collapse under the winds of the judgment of God. Spare many, Father, from that awful fate, cause them to flee urgently to Christ, responding eagerly to the call to repentance that they would enter into the fullness of blessing that you promised to those who become the children of God. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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