

II. The Gospel of the Kingdom

After introducing Jesus of Nazareth and establishing His identity as the Messiah-King revealed and promised in all the Scriptures, Matthew immediately turned his attention to Jesus' message to the sons of Israel. That message echoed and advanced the proclamation of the Forerunner with an urgent call to repentance and faith in view of the present in-breaking of the eschatological kingdom of God (4:17; cf. 3:2). In that regard, two points are important to emphasize:

- 1) The first has already been touched upon, namely the fact that the presence of the kingdom of heaven obligated the covenant "sons of the kingdom" to *repent*. That this was the case is, again, startling proof that Israel didn't correctly discern the promised kingdom. Without a radical rethinking of the kingdom and their relationship to it, it was certain that Abraham's descendents would miss the day of their visitation – the day for which they and their forefathers had longed since God first called Abraham to leave his family and homeland and journey to the land of Canaan, the earthly habitation of God Most High.
- 2) The second is that the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom constituted a salvation-historical break from the former order of things. When confronted with John's confusion regarding His messianic identity, Jesus defended John by insisting that he wasn't culpable for his lack of clarity; he merely perceived the times through eyes belonging to the age preceding the coming of the kingdom. John heralded the kingdom, but only as one standing on its threshold; he would not enter it as a New Covenant believer. This was the sense in which Jesus declared that "*he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.*" John served as the point of transition between the former promissory and preparatory era represented by the Law and the Prophets and the era of fulfillment that had now been initiated with the coming of the Christ. With the coming of the promised messianic age, the prophetic voice of the Law and the Prophets was now taken up in the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom (cf. Matthew 11:2-13; Luke 16:16).

The proclamation of the gospel testified that the "fullness of the times" had come and all things promised in the Scriptures were being fulfilled. And if the gospel of the kingdom indicated that the kingdom itself was at hand, it equally established the responsibility of men to enter it. In accordance with the divine scheme revealed in the prophets, both the call and the obligation to enter had their first referent in the sons of Israel (cf. John 1:9-11 with Matthew 10:1-8, 8:5-12). From there they were to issue forth to all the nations in order that God's promise of global blessing through Abraham's seed should at last enjoy its realization (cf. Zechariah 8:18-23 with Isaiah 2:1-3, 11:10-12, 49:1-6 and Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:1-8; also Romans 1:16-17, 2:9-10).

So it was that the compelling call to enter the kingdom bore its first fruit among the sons of Israel. Matthew records that Jesus' first work of calling and ingathering involved a handful of Jews who would become His closest disciples and, upon His departure, the repository of His gospel and His apostolic witness for advancing God's work of global renewal and restoration (4:18-22). Jesus' selection of twelve men was intentional and purposeful, for it testified that, as Jacob's twelve sons had formed the *physical* foundation for Abraham's covenant household, so now these twelve pillars would serve as the foundation for Abraham's *spiritual* covenant household – the fulfilled "Israel of God" (cf. Galatians 3:1-28; 6:12-16; also Romans 4:1-12).

A. The Subjects of the Kingdom (5:1-16)

The call of the gospel went first to a group of men upon whom Christ would build His Church. He appointed the twelve apostles (with Matthias replacing Judas Iscariot) as the spiritual counterparts of Jacob's twelve covenant sons, and a new foundation for God's covenant household meant that the day of its fullness had arrived (Ephesians 2:11-22). Through the apostolic witness and personal union with Christ (the True Israel), God would fulfill in Abraham's *spiritual* offspring Israel's identity and calling as *son, servant, disciple* and *witness*.

And so, having set in place the foundation for His Church (4:18-19), Jesus began to build upon that foundation by heralding His gospel throughout all Galilee in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (4:12-17, 23). Jesus attended His proclamation of the in-breaking of the kingdom with affirming signs of the Spirit, and the result was that increasing multitudes began to follow Him as disciples (cf. 4:24-5:1, 7:28-29). These had seen and heard enough to believe that the messianic kingdom was at hand, *but they continued to view it through natural eyes*. In order to actually enter into Jesus' kingdom the sons of Israel needed to first perceive it as it really is, and that required that their thinking be radically altered. Thus Jesus gathered the multitude to Himself and began to unfold for them the true nature and character of His kingdom and its subjects.

1. In applying His spiritual corrective to His hearers Jesus began by articulating broad characteristics that mark the subjects of His kingdom. As a prelude to examining those characteristics and Jesus' commentary on them, it is worthwhile to make a few general observations that are helpful in rightly understanding the passage.
 - a. The first thing to note is that Jesus' instruction highlights the *selective* nature of His kingdom. That is, it possesses only certain individuals as its subjects. So, for instance, it is the poor in spirit who enter the kingdom and reside within it (5:3; cf. also 5:10, 20, 7:21). When Jesus' "kingdom of heaven" is recognized to be the kingdom promised throughout the Old Testament, it becomes obvious that Christ's work of *redemption* is the point of delineation between those who have a share in His kingdom and those who do not. Jesus Himself affirmed this, increasingly making it clear that participation in His redemptive work through personal faith in Him constitutes the sole ground for entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Thus the "sons of the kingdom" – the household of Israel to which covenant privilege and promise had been granted and which was the first referent of those promises – could find themselves cast out of God's kingdom should they continue in unbelief (Matthew 8:1-12; cf. 21:23-44; Luke 13:22-30; etc.).
 - b. The selective nature of Jesus' kingdom reinforces the fact that the "kingdom of God" doesn't refer to God's universal reign as Creator-Lord. It is true that God's sovereign lordship extends to all things, but His dominion portrayed and promised in the Old Testament and inaugurated in Christ doesn't encompass the whole creation – that is, the whole human race – but only certain persons. The kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of *life*; it embraces only those individuals who have passed from death into life (ref. 7:13-14, 21; cf. also 5:27-30 with Mark 9:43-48).

- c. Third, the kingdom of heaven has *present*, *continuous*, and *consummative* aspects (“already-but-not-yet”): The kingdom has come, but it will also advance and increase until its consummation in the renewal of the entire creation at the end of the age (Romans 8:18-25). This understanding is fundamental to interpreting the Sermon on the Mount (cf. 5:3, 10, 19-20, 6:10-13, 33, 7:13-14), but, beyond that, all of Jesus’ teaching regarding the kingdom (ref. esp. Jesus’ kingdom parables, which together address all three of the kingdom’s temporal aspects).
2. The opening passage of the Sermon on the Mount is generally referred to as *the Beatitudes* (5:3-12). This title reflects Jesus’ repeated use of the adjective *blessed* to characterize the individuals He describes in this passage. Though “blessedness” is often associated with good fortune and the happiness it produces, its biblical meaning is richer and more theologically significant: Blessedness speaks of the condition of being approved or highly or uniquely regarded (cf. Genesis 1:22, 28, 14:18-19, 31:55; Exodus 20:11, 39:43). Either men or God can be the subject or object of blessing, but here it seems to indicate primarily God’s favor toward and approbation of those being described. In turn, this divine approbation results in a personal, inward state of “blessedness” – settled contentment or *felicity* – for those thus approved (ref. esp. vv. 11-12).

Recognizing the Beatitudes to be a representative (not exhaustive) list of defining characteristics of the subjects of the kingdom of heaven, it is best to treat them as a cohesive whole. In that regard, the following interpretive guidelines are important:

- 1) The first is, again, that Jesus was describing those who have a personal share in the kingdom of heaven He had come to inaugurate. The most obvious evidence of this is Matthew’s (if not Jesus’) use of the literary device called *inclusio*. *Inclusio* serves to demarcate a passage and highlight its main emphasis by bracketing it at the beginning and end with the same or similar statement. Here, Jesus opened and closed His Beatitudes with a description of those who possess the kingdom of heaven (5:3, 10), thereby indicating that all of the material between these statements concerns those – and only those – who are subjects of His kingdom.
- 2) Moreover, by the clause, “*theirs is the kingdom of heaven*,” Jesus was emphasizing the salvation-historical nature of the kingdom rather than its temporal (present vs. future) features. Clearly the obtainment of the kingdom in full awaits the Parousia and consummation, but Jesus’ emphasis was on delineating those who have a share in the kingdom *as such*.

The reason this distinction is so vitally important is that people’s natural tendency is to view Jesus as here setting forth a set of divine standards to which a person must apply himself in order to secure an entrance into heaven (the phrase “kingdom of heaven” being regarded as synonymous with heaven itself). Thus Jesus is commonly thought to be saying: *If you want to go to heaven when you die, you must be poor in spirit, humble and merciful; a person who pursues peace, righteousness and personal purity and who is willing to suffer for the sake of doing what’s right and unpopular.*

Viewed in this way, the kingdom of heaven becomes a matter of future potentiality – largely (if not entirely) tied to human effort rather than a present reality into which men are entering by faith. Considered in isolation, one could conceivably argue for this understanding of the Beatitudes, but the larger teaching of the Sermon on the Mount (and the New Testament) excludes it. The kingdom of heaven is the kingdom of Christ: *It is the realm of eternal life into which men immediately pass when, through faith in the King, they are enlivened and renewed by His Spirit* (John 5:24, 6:47-54; Ephesians 2:1-7; Colossians 1:13-14, 3:1-3). True, those Jesus was speaking of do await the coming of the kingdom of heaven, but only in the sense of entering into the fullness of what they already possess.

3) And just as the Beatitudes address the issue of present status rather than future potentiality, so they describe the essential nature of those who are citizens of the kingdom and not personal disciplines by which men can hope to enter it. This distinction was especially important for Jesus' Jewish audience who regarded their share in the promised kingdom in ethnic and ethical terms.

- First and foremost, they understood from the Scriptures that the kingdom of heaven was God's inheritance appointed for Abraham's descendents. Even as the God of the patriarchs had honored His covenant promise to them by establishing the kingdom of Israel, so He would fulfill it in full through the covenant son promised to King David. The multitude standing before the King had as their primary ground of confidence their ethnic and covenantal connection to Abraham by birth and by circumcision.
- But they also were confident of their place in the kingdom by virtue of their possession of and conformity to what they regarded as the covenant of the kingdom, namely the Law of Moses. The Sinai Covenant had defined, established and governed the "sons of the kingdom" for more than a thousand years; it was the charter and rule of David's kingdom as the "kingdom of God" and that would not change with the ushering in of the messianic kingdom under the rule of David's greater son.

Thus the marrow of John's work as the herald appointed to make a smooth highway for Yahweh's entrance and the inauguration of His kingdom was to prepare the hearts of the sons of Israel to receive their Messiah. John called all Israel to repentance, not as the mere alteration of their behavior, but the transformation of their thinking. In order to be prepared to receive the messianic King and His kingdom, the sons of the kingdom would have to be stripped of the confidence and security they found in their covenant status: their Abrahamic heritage and possession of the Law of Moses. As he passed the baton to Jesus, John also passed to Him his work of dismantling and reconstruction. For the next three years the Lord continued to instruct the sons of Abraham in the true doctrine of the kingdom, calling them to repentance and faith until at last they had filled up the full measure of their condemnation. The kingdom they had refused to see was now to be taken from them (ref. again Matthew 21:23-22:14; Luke 13:22-35).

- 4) Fourth, the “already-but-not-yet” quality of the kingdom of heaven also applies to Jesus’ Beatitudes. In each instance, a *present* condition or attribute brings *present* blessedness (“Blessed **are** the...”), but by virtue of a *future* realization or fullness to which the present reality looks (“for they **shall**...”). Present blessedness stands upon the confident hope of future consummation and perfection. Expressed differently, *the subjects of the kingdom of heaven in its present incomplete form nonetheless enjoy full blessedness in view of the surety of the kingdom’s future consummation and their own consummation together with it.*

In summary, the Beatitudes – like the entire Sermon on the Mount – must be viewed and interpreted through both an historical and a salvation-historical perspective. Though it has universal relevance, Jesus’ instruction was tailored to and directed at the Jews of His own generation – a people who conceived of the kingdom in categories associated with theocratic Israel. The sons of Israel believed God would *supernaturally* usher in His kingdom, but regarded their own inheritance in it as a matter of *natural* considerations. Not personal renewal and transformation by the Spirit, but ethnic status and personal conformity to the Law would secure their entrance into the messianic kingdom.

But Jesus would have men understand that the kingdom of heaven isn’t an earthly dominion as such but a spiritual reality: It is the realm of the new creation and its restored relationship with God. Thus, by describing the individuals to whom the kingdom of heaven *belongs*, Jesus was showing, on the one hand, the characteristics of those who presently possess the kingdom, but, on the other (specifically as His discourse was directed at the sons of Israel), what must characterize those who intend to have a share in it. Even as all the inhabitants of the kingdom are personal participants in the new creation, so this renewal is the prerequisite for all who would enter it (John 3:1-3).

And so, from the one perspective, the Beatitudes (as also the entire Sermon on the Mount) provide instruction to Christians concerning who they are and how they are to understand and live out their new identity as citizens of Christ’s kingdom. But, in context, they were intended to tear down the natural and religious citadels of self-righteousness and self-resource, showing that entrance into the kingdom of God demands a supernatural work of renewal, not a renewed commitment to self-reformation.

With this foundation in place, the Beatitudes themselves can be properly interpreted and applied. Again, the foremost thing about them is that they individually and collectively address the *essential nature* of the subjects of Christ’s kingdom and not their religious or moral convictions and/or conduct. And recognizing that the kingdom of heaven signifies the realm and reality of creational renewal and restoration promised from the time of the Fall, this “essential nature” may be understood as the authentic, uncompromised humanness for which man was created. *The Beatitudes, then, summarize what man is like when he is truly man – when he fulfills his identity and function as God’s image-son.*

- If this understanding is indeed correct, one should expect to find these beatific qualities mirrored in Jesus Himself. The reason is that He is True Man – the Last Adam into whose image the sons of God are being conformed by the Spirit.

- Jesus is the quintessential “image-son,” but not simply as perfect man. He is also the image of God in the sense that, in Him alone, the fullness of deity dwells bodily (Colossians 2:9; cf. Hebrews 1:1-3).

Jesus’ humanity thus presents to the world a perfect manifestation of both God and man; when the sons of Israel saw the true man, Jesus of Nazareth, they were equally seeing His divine Father who sent Him. What this means is that the qualities expressed in the Beatitudes ought to be divine as well as human. A summary examination of the individual Beatitudes shows this to be precisely the case (ref. also 5:43-48).

- a. The first quality Jesus’ mentioned – the quality that forms the opening “bookend” of His inclusio – is **poverty of spirit** (5:3). Some, comparing this verse with Luke 6:20, have concluded that God highly regards and rewards material destitution. Deprivation is seen as a means of divine blessing and spiritual well-being, and this has led to vows of poverty and other sorts of ascetic practices.

But Jesus wasn’t referring to material deprivation any more than to a kind of “poor-spiritedness” that reflects a lack of spiritual vitality or boldness. Poverty of spirit refers to a person’s sense of self-destitution – that is, his profound awareness that he is destitute without God. *Poverty of spirit characterizes the person who understands the nature and function of man and therefore the great calamity and consequence of human estrangement from God.* The one who is poor in spirit recognizes that, in the absence of intimate communion with God, he is nothing, he has nothing, and he can find nothing that will satisfy him.

This poverty of spirit isn’t a natural phenomenon but a supernatural endowment. God opens the eyes of men to see their true nature, condition and need, and this illumination marks the end of the tyranny of self-righteousness and self-resource. Now having eyes to see, men are made capable of saving faith; they are made suitable to enter the kingdom of heaven. But once having entered it, this poverty of spirit doesn’t disappear; rather, God strengthens it, even as it is vital to the nurture and growth of faith. As indicated above, what is first and foremost Jesus’ instruction to a self-righteous and self-deceived people also pertains to His Church; it is for the subjects of His kingdom as much as those who seek it.

- b. The citizens of Christ’s kingdom are secondly characterized by **mourning** (5:4). Here again Jesus wasn’t speaking of a natural human phenomenon, whether sorrow or even the overwhelming agony that accompanies times of great pain or loss. *These responses are within the natural capability of men and ultimately reflect their innate sense of self-interest.* Indeed, such mourning characterized the nation of Israel at various times in their history. Rather, Jesus was referring to the spiritual sorrow that marks those who are able to look at themselves and the world around them with unveiled eyes. D. A. Carson has said that Christians are to be the truest of realists, and the reason is that they alone – having minds illumined by the Spirit – are able to see things as they actually are. The subjects of the kingdom of heaven mourn because they see a world that isn’t the way it was created to be.