

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Matthew 5:1-16

Key Verse: 5:14

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.”

Matthew’s gospel contains Jesus’ great teachings about the kingdom of heaven. While these teachings can be found in other gospels, Matthew’s treatment is richer and more lucid, and his writing is the most beautiful. In today’s passage we begin the study of the Sermon on the Mount. It contains the principles of the kingdom of heaven, spoken by the King, Jesus. When we accept and practice these teachings, we can taste heaven while living in this world. We can reveal Jesus to a world in darkness. Today Jesus teaches us how to be the light of the world.

First, true blessing comes from God for his purpose (1-2).

Look at verse 1. “Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him....” The news about Jesus’ healing ministry was spreading. Crowds of people came to Jesus. Jesus’ heart went out to them. He wanted to meet them one by one, heal their wounds, and plant the word of God in their hearts. But there were so many. To reach them all, Jesus worked with strategic wisdom. Jesus called disciples to follow him and to grow as shepherds like him. Through them Jesus would reach others. The disciples didn’t fully understand what was going on. Yet, when they saw the crowds, they sensed that something great was happening. With eager minds, they came to Jesus. They were ready to learn.

Look at verse 2. “...and he began to teach them, saying....” Jesus taught them through his words. Jesus’ words were not merely a professor’s lecture that fills a student’s head with knowledge. Jesus’ words were not merely a motivational speech, which stirs up people’s emotions. Jesus’ words were the words of God that gave life to their souls (Heb 4:12; Jn 6:63). Jesus’ words had transforming power to recreate their inner persons in the image of God. As they listened to Jesus’ words, they were transported into heavenly rapture. They felt the presence of God. They felt that anything was possible. The peace of God came upon them, and hope sprang up in their hearts.

What then were the contents of Jesus’ teachings? In verses 3-10, Jesus gives eight specific teachings. Each one begins with the word “Blessed.” We could call this passage “The Eight Blessings.” However, the NIV Bible calls this section, “The Beatitudes.” This comes from the Latin word “beati,” which is the equivalent of “blessing.” It is significant that Jesus began his great teachings by explaining who is really blessed. It was very important to Jesus to correct our misconceptions about blessing. Though we like the word “blessing,” we often think of it from a purely human point of view. Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the song “God bless America” has been sung frequently. The title of the song is great. Yet those who sing it seem to say to God, “Give us peace, keep our families safe, protect our soldiers, and give us enough money.” While these things may accompany God’s blessing, they are not the essence of God’s blessing. We need to understand what the Bible teaches about God’s blessing upon mankind.

As Genesis 1:28 says, the first time God spoke to men, it was to bless us. This was a general blessing. We can find God’s specific blessing on one person in Genesis 12:2-3. God says to Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3). God’s blessing was not about Abraham living a comfortable life on earth, or feeling happy all the time. God’s blessing was to use Abraham for his eternal purpose. Ultimately, this purpose was to send the Savior Jesus who forgives our sins and restores to us the kingdom of heaven (Gal 3:8). The essence of being blessed by God is to be used by God for his world salvation purpose. Mary understood this when she accepted God’s will to be the mother of the Messiah (Lk 1:46-48). It is true that she had overflowing joy. But it was a result of her blessed state of knowing God and accepting his great purpose for her.

God gave the people of Israel a great purpose to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:6). He set before them blessings and curses (Dt 11:26). To maintain the blessed life, they had to struggle to obey God’s word. But many times they were tempted by idol worshipers. They were deceived into thinking that life without mission and without God was happier—free and full of pleasure. They complained to God and tried to abandon God. Like a father, God disciplined them to bring them back to their senses, and restored them. This repetition of failure and restoration by God’s one-sided grace seems to be the theme of Israel’s history. Finally, God sent Jesus. In Acts 3:26

Peter says, "When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways." True blessing is to turn from our wicked ways. True blessing is to accept Jesus as our King and live for his great purpose. Jesus' disciples were blessed when they accepted his high calling and followed him. America is blessed when she serves God's salvation purpose as a missionary-sending country. Each of us are blessed when we are used by God in his gospel work.

Second, the eight blessings (3-10).

In verses 3-10, Jesus tells us specifically what kinds of people God blesses and what God's blessings are. Look at verse 3. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." God blesses the poor in spirit. Basically, these are people who are humble before God. They realize that they are sinners who have nothing to offer God but their repentance. They admit that they are totally dependent on God's mercy. When they stand before God they do not claim any self-righteousness. They can be contrasted with the haughty in spirit, that is, the proud. This contrast is well explained by Jesus' parable of a Pharisee and a tax collector (Lk 18:9-13). The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus said that one of them went home justified before God. It was the tax collector. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. When we humbly ask God's mercy, he will give us the kingdom of heaven by his grace.

Look at verse 3 again. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus says, "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." They can experience the kingdom of heaven while on earth. Jesus comes into their hearts to reign as king. Jesus gives heavenly peace and joy, even though their situations may not be easy. Then they can see what God is doing in them, in others, and in their nation. Husbands can love and respect their wives, and vice-versa. Parents love and care for their children; children obey their parents with a glad heart. They are hopeful and positive in Jesus, even though they face hardships.

Look at verse 4. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." We don't usually associate mourning with blessing. But Jesus did. Mourning is an acute sorrow that pierces the soul, bringing unbearable pain. Why is that painful condition blessed? Because it brings repentance. 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." Jesus' disciples would have to confront their own sin as they followed Jesus. Sometimes they would feel miserable. Regardless of their feelings, it is a blessed time. One young man frequently mourns over his sins when he shares his Bible testimony. He is really blessed. One young lady needs to mourn for her sins. But she avoids it. May she accept this word of Jesus. There is another kind of blessed mourning. It is to mourn over the lost condition of others. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Those who mourn for others are sharing Jesus' heart.

There is a blessing given to those who mourn. It is the promise of comfort. This comfort comes from the forgiveness of sins and the purification of our souls. God comforts the repentant as only he can. Isaiah 40:1-2 says, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." Sometimes we feel that our eyes were made only for weeping. But someday Jesus will comfort each of us personally. He will wipe every tear from our eyes (Rev 21:4). Jesus' comfort is certain. Let's not avoid the time of mourning.

Look at verse 5. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." The meek are generally patient, gentle, and submissive. Spiritually speaking, the meek are those who recognize God as the sovereign ruler of creation. They submit to God. So when a conflict arises, they pray instead of suing others; they share the word of God instead of getting into a boxing match. They let God's will be done through their total submission. God is pleased with these kinds of people and he blesses them to inherit the earth. Moses is a good example. Numbers 12:3 says in the King James Version, "(Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.)" God had raised Moses as the spiritual leader of the Israelites. But Moses did not try to exert strong leadership from his own will power. Moses depended absolutely on God. When there was a leadership crisis, Moses did not fight politically. Instead, Moses fell face-down before the Lord in total submission (Num 14:5; 16:4; 16:22; 16:45; 20:6). When Moses did so, God upheld Moses and used him. Today, Moses' descendants are everywhere, even in our neighborhood. The meek inherit the earth.

Look at verse 6. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Blessed people have an appetite for spiritual life, not just physical life. Physical life consists of enjoying the things of the world. Physical appetites are never permanently satisfied as long as we dwell in the body. Tom Brady, quarterback of the New England Patriots, has led his team to three Super Bowl titles in the last four years. He is young, rich, and single. But he said this week, "There's got to be more to life than this." He is not satisfied. It is because he also has a spiritual desire for righteousness. This desire is an intense longing for Jesus, our righteousness from God (1Co 1:30). This drives us to study the word of God and to spend time in prayer. This is a blessed life. Instead of wasting time on the perishing things of the world, we seek the immortal God and eternal blessing. Jesus is pleased to bless those who long for him. Jesus satisfies our souls completely. Jesus forgives our sins, imparts eternal life, and gives us the kingdom of heaven.

Look at verse 7. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." Those who have Jesus become merciful. Out of overflowing gratitude to God, they open their hearts to others. They are willing to forgive others and to help others. Then mercy begins to flow among them like a river. Those who practice mercy toward others can find God's mercy to help them in their time of need.

Look at verse 8. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Many people would agree that one who has a pure heart is blessed. The heart is the wellspring of life (Pr 4:23). When our heart is pure and clean, we have great joy and peace. We can love God and love others and we are happy to live life to the full, doing the work of God. The problem is how to have a pure heart. Since the fall of man, there has been a stain of sin in man's heart. This has corrupted our motives, jaded our consciences and tainted everything we do with selfishness, arrogance, and vile wickedness. How then, can we have a pure heart? 1 John 1:7 says, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." Jesus' blood can make our hearts pure.

Look at verse 9. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." Jesus is the best peacemaker. Jesus made peace between God and man. Romans 5:10a says, "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son..." To give us peace with God, Jesus died for our sins. Jesus took the full measure of God's wrath that we deserve. Since God's justice has been satisfied, we have true peace with God. Jesus also gives us peace between people. Ephesians 2:14-16 says, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." The gospel brings true peace. We can be peacemakers when we share the gospel of Jesus with others. The gospel can bring peace on our campuses, and peace in the Middle East.

Look at verse 10. "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Many recruiters will not talk about the down side of following their teaching. But Jesus told his disciples at the very beginning that they would be persecuted when they followed him. Jesus also told them that persecution because of him was a blessing. It is the sure evidence that they were standing on Jesus' side as members of his kingdom. Look at verses 11-12. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Third, you are the salt of the earth, the light of the world (13-16).

Look at verse 13. "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men." In Jesus' day, salt was a preservative. It kept meat and fish from spoiling. Likewise, Jesus' disciples would be a preservative for the world. Their godly lives keep the world from being utterly corrupted. However, if they lost their spiritual influence they would become useless.

Look at verse 14. "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden." When Jesus' disciples live by his teachings, they reflect the great light of Jesus. Jesus wanted them to be bold in doing so, so that all people in the world might see their good example. Many would be saved. Ultimately, God the Father in heaven would be praised

by men (16). When the Puritans came to America, they carried the verse, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” This was Governor John Winthrop’s key verse as he led the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They prayed for America to be a city on a hill that reflected the great light of Jesus. They wanted to bring glory to God and salvation to men. We share this vision as we pray for North America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. To realize this vision, we must practice the teachings of Jesus. May God help us live up to the teachings in this passage for the glory of God.