

THE BLESSINGS OF THE KINGDOM

The Sermon on the Mount opens with nine blessings. Eight times Jesus says, "Blessed are..." and then describes those who enjoy the blessing of the kingdom and how those blessings will come to them. The beatitudes raise the simple question, "What does it mean to be blessed?"

There are two different word groups in Hebrew and Greek that we translate "blessed." We might distinguish between the groups by describing the first as the unconditional blessing of God and the second as the conditional blessing of God. The first describes an act of free grace on the part of God, the second describes a manner of life or being before God in which we experience the fullness of his grace.

Our salvation is a blessing of the first order. It is a free act of God's grace. We did nothing to earn or deserve it. He simply drew us to himself and blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus in the heavenly realms.

The joy of our salvation is a blessing of the second order. Even though we have already been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus, we only experience the fullness of God's grace when we walk with him

The beatitudes describe a way of being before God by which we live and thrive in our relationship with him.

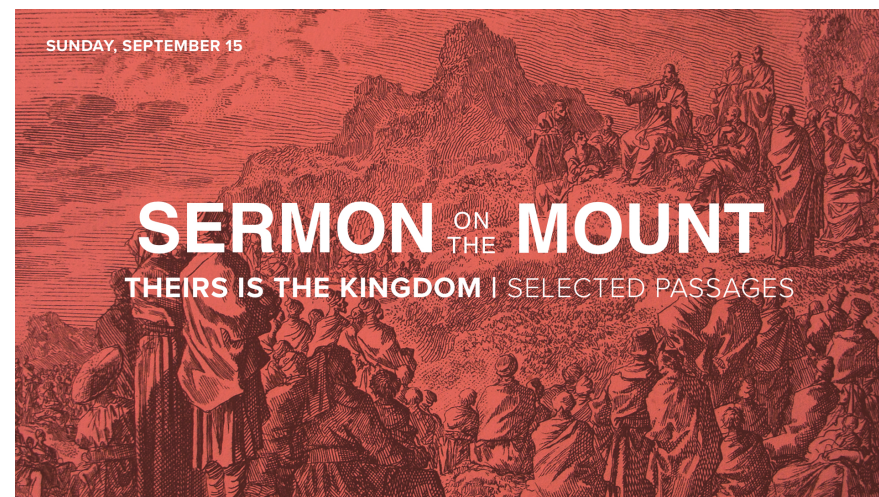
We thrive in our relationship with God when we recognize our spiritual poverty (5:3), are deeply grieved by the brokenness we see in ourselves and the world around us (5:4), are humbled by our sin and are gentle with other sinners (5:5), and deeply long to be right with God and each other (5:6).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why is it important to distinguish between the conditional and unconditional blessings of God?
2. Why is it important to recognize that our salvation is an unconditional blessing?
3. What role does grace play in our ability to experience the fullness of God's blessing?

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Matthew is a master storyteller. The story he tells is the most compelling story the world will ever hear. The Sermon on the Mount is one of the masterful strokes in Matthew's literary canvas. Matthew frames the Sermon in the overall context of "the good news of the kingdom." Jesus opens the Sermon by describing those who will experience the fullness of the kingdom.

MATTHEW'S FRAMING TECHNIQUE

Matthew frames the different sections of his gospel with corresponding or similar phrases. These phrases or frames are crucial to understanding what Matthew is emphasizing in each section. As we launch into the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, three frames are of particular interest.

The first frame involves the more extensive section of Matthew's gospel in which the Sermon on the Mount is included. The panel runs from 4:23 to 9:35.

"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (4:23)."

"Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness (9:35)."

This section clearly describes the scope of Jesus ministry "he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom" and engaged with hurting people. Those two activities are essential for us as well.

Matthew closes this section of his gospel with an observation and an appeal for prayer.

"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field (9:33-35).'"

We cannot pray that prayer without being in part an answer to the prayer, in the next section of Matthew's gospel, Jesus empowers the disciples to do the same things he has been doing.

The second frame serves as bookends for the Sermon itself.

"Now, when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them (5:1-2),"

"When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean (8:1-2).'"

Jesus went up on the mountain to teach, and he came down from the mountain to engage with broken people. These are two significant rhythms for anyone who would follow Christ. We need to withdraw to be refreshed in the gospel, and we need to engage for the sake of the gospel.

The third frame envelopes the beatitudes or the introductory section of the Sermon on the Mount.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (5:3)."

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (5:10)."

So, the beatitudes describe what it means to live and thrive in the kingdom of heaven.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What do Matthew's frames tell us about what is important to him?
2. What are the two activities that best describe Jesus' ministry?
3. Why are these important for us as well?
4. What happens when we try to engage a broken world with the gospel without withdrawing to be refreshed by the gospel?
5. What happens when we withdraw to be renewed and refreshed in the gospel but never engage a broken world with the gospel?
6. How can we keep the two in balance?

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

The kingdom is a major theme in Matthew. We've already discovered that Matthew begins and ends the first section of his gospel with the phrases, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom... (4:23)," and "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom... (9:32) "

So we are not at all surprised that the "kingdom of heaven" is a recurring theme in the Sermon on the Mount as well. The beatitudes begin and end with the phrase, "theirs is the kingdom of heaven (5:3, 10)." We will encounter the phrase six more times in the rest of the Sermon. Here are some key references.

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20).

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-10)."

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:31-33).

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven (Matthew 7:21).

From these passages we learn the kingdom is something we must enter (5:20). It calls for a completely different kind of righteousness or way of being right with God (5:20). It is the intersection of heaven and earth, where God reigns, and his will is done (6:10). We are to pursue it above all else (6:33). Not everyone who thinks they are in are really in (7:21).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How would you describe the "kingdom of heaven?"
2. How does one enter the kingdom of heaven?
3. Does the kingdom of heaven have to do more with heaven or earth? Explain your answer. This one could be fun.
4. What do you think it means to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness?"
5. What does Jesus promise those who "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness?"