

Life in the Kingdom

by Steve Gallagher

The Sermon on the Mount describes life in the kingdom of heaven and how it should be lived out while remaining on earth, emphasizing the importance of going beyond outward behavior to the inward heart and treating others with compassion, mercy, and love.

Duration: 35:57

Scripture: Matthew 4:17, Matthew 5:3

Topics: "Kingdom Living", "Spiritual Transformation"

Description

This sermon delves into the essence of the Sermon on the Mount, emphasizing the radical transformation required for citizens of the kingdom of heaven. It contrasts the expectations of a materialistic kingdom with the spiritual reality Jesus presents, focusing on the inner transformation and righteousness demanded by God. The sermon highlights the Beatitudes as characteristics of kingdom citizens, the surpassing righteousness required, and the central theme of seeking God's kingdom above all else.

Transcript

Okay, to study the life of Christ demands that we study the message of his life. And his message was summed up by Matthew in the words that Jesus preached, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In other words, God's kingdom has come to earth and the way to prepare for it and to enter into it is to go through a radical transformation of your entire being.

As John Stott put it, he said the new age had dawned and the rule of God had broken into history. Yeah, well, it's so true. Well, this wasn't a new idea to the Jewish people.

You know, they had been expecting the Messiah to come for several hundred years actually, but they were thinking of it in terms of this, you know, powerful conquering hero would come and throw the Romans out and establish a kingdom that would be even greater than David's. That's the way they expected this kingdom to come in. And so when they heard that John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth urgently and earnestly proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, you know, it shot through Israel like a rocket.

But this kingdom was not going to be the materialistic temporal kingdom that the Jews were expecting. Farrar says the people were expecting a Messiah who would break the yoke off their necks, a king clothed in earthly splendor and manifested in the pomp of victory and vengeance. But Christ reveals to them

another king, another happiness, the riches of poverty, the royalty of meekness, the high beatitude of sorrow and persecution.

And if you study through the gospels in depth, you will find that there is one overriding, overarching theme through all of it, and it is the kingdom of heaven and what that looks like on earth. And by the way, I'll just mention, kingdom of heaven, kingdom of God, they're synonymous. Just save yourself a lot of grief and just assume they both are the same because they basically are.

Okay, in the book of Matthew, this kingdom theme is highlighted through the five great discourses. You know, of course, the Sermon on the Mount that we're going to talk about today, the mission discourse in chapter 10, the parabolic discourse in chapter 13, the church discourse in chapter 18, and the Olivet discourse in chapters 24 and 25. And there's three common denominators that are true in all of these discourses.

Obviously, of course, their focus is on different aspects of the kingdom of heaven. They also all present lengthy and substantial teachings of Jesus, and they all end with the statement, when Jesus had finished these words. So, of course, the Sermon on the Mount is the longest, the most famous, the most heavily quoted of all of them, and so we're going to look at that today.

But rather than try to go verse by verse and teach through it, what I would prefer to do is lay a foundational background for you so that when you study it, it will make more sense to you. You know, it won't just be this looking at a verse and what does that verse mean. Well, there's something behind that verse, and that's what we want to try to get into.

The first thing that stands out about the Sermon on the Mount is it's describing life in the kingdom for the citizens of heaven while they remain on earth. How that life should look, the way it should be lived out, the way that they should interact with each other and other people, and the way they should interact with God. It could be called the law book of the kingdom.

It could be called the book of etiquette of the kingdom, or maybe maxims of life for the kingdom. Those were just some ideas I thought of for names. I guess any of them would really be appropriate.

It's also got a certain literary style, like any part of the Bible does. You know, in one sense, it really resembles the wisdom teachings in the Bible in the sense that you see a lot of parallelisms and vivid contrasts, which you really see clearly in the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and so on. So, in one sense, it looks like the wisdom literature, but it's also very poetic.

Poetic literature is not designed to feed the intellect. It's more like creates mental pictures to stir people's emotions and call them to action. Poetic literature is not meant to be interpreted with the same inflexible literalism that straightforward teachings present.

I won't get off track here, but let me just say, for instance, give you an example. When Jesus says to cut off your hand, pluck out your eyeball, he's not meaning that literally. That's a poetic way of making a strong point of how terrible lust can be, that it would be better.

You know, he's just making a point, but unfortunately, there have been people who've actually done those things, trying to rid themselves of the demons of lust and so on. Someone said Proverbs are principles stated in extremes, and, you know, so some of the statements in the Sermon on the Mount have that kind of a sense to them. In fact, the theme verse in the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew 5, 48, which said,

when Jesus said, therefore, you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

That's an example of an extreme statement. There is no one who can be perfect like God, but what he's saying, he's calling us to a life of sanctification, like I was talking about in the backslider message the other day. He's calling us to strive.

It's a call that for the rest of your life, you should be striving forward towards this goal of being complete in Christ, of living a holy life, and so on. All right, another thing that stands out is that, you know, there's two versions of it. There's Matthew's version, and there's also one in Luke, and there's, you know, a debate among scholars about are they referring to the same day, the same event, situation, or are these two completely different incidents? In fact, some people call the version in Luke 6, the Sermon on the Plain, like as if it's two different ones.

You know, it's hard to say. In Matthew, it's definitely all condensed together. It's 107 verses in those three chapters.

In Luke 6, there's only 30 verses, but it's the principles of it, most of them you will find scattered throughout his gospel. So it's like it's there, but not all concentrated like Matthew did. But anyway, both gospels place it towards the end of the first year of Jesus' ministry.

Now, how do we know that? Well, first of all, you can just look at where it's at in the book, chapter 5 through 7, chapter 6. You know, you can get a sense about the chronological order just from that, but it's more than that. For instance, when Jesus first went out preaching, His message was simple. It was like John the Baptist, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

It was a strong, powerful message that you need to be transformed. The Sermon on the Mount then follows that up with this lengthy description of what they're being transformed into. You know, yeah, you've got to experience this radical change, but this is what your life should look like.

Also, I'll mention that in His earliest days, He taught in the synagogues, but by this point, the crowds were so enormous that He had to go into open air preaching, and that's what this was here, the first account of Him, you know, in that kind of a setting of open air preaching. All right, so there's four basic sections of the Sermon on the Mount that I'll go through and kind of give you some background on each of them. The first section would cover Matthew 5, 3 through 16, and we'll label this the citizens of the kingdom, because in this portion, Jesus paints a picture of the kind of people that are in the kingdom of heaven.

He's describing character traits. The Beatitudes, let me just say a couple of things about the Beatitudes. Some people have taken them to describe like eight different people groups.

You got these people who are really known for their meekness, and you got these people who are persecuted, and you got these people who are just peacemakers. No, it's not like that. We're all kingdom citizens, and all of these traits should be, you know, fairly equally growing in our lives, and also along with that is that the blessings aren't, you know, applicable just to each, how do I say it, each Beatitude has an accompanying blessing attached to it, but it's just a Hebraic form of teaching that Jesus used.

That's all it is. In other words, you know, you can't just say the meek shall inherit the earth. Well, those who are poor in spirit will inherit the earth.

Those who hunger for righteousness will inherit the earth also. You see what I'm saying? So all of those blessings are attached to any kingdom citizen, and all of these characteristics are attached to any kingdom citizen. All right.

I hope that was clear. It's very confusing to try to say it. Let me just mention another thing too is at least with the Beatitudes, this isn't a list of do's and don'ts, okay, to earn your salvation or something.

In other words, well, I'll tell you what. Like someone pointed out, when the jailer in Philippi asked Paul, what must I do to be saved? He didn't say, well, you need to really try to be more meek. You need to learn how to be poor in spirit.

You see what I'm saying? And these are characteristics of people who have already gone through a conversion experience, and they are going to be growing in these fruits or these graces, however you want to call it. Those graces will grow in their life as they continue on through this sanctification process towards the perfection of the Father. But they're not a list of do's and don'ts, you know.

Okay. I'll just leave that at that. The Sermon on the Mount really is almost more of a litmus test about whether you're actually in the kingdom or not.

Let me read a couple of quotes before we leave this first section. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia says, Jesus begins the exposition of His program with the promise of happiness. But the conditions of happiness proposed were in strong contrast with those in the popular thought.

Happiness does not consist, says Jesus, in what one possesses in lands and houses and social position and intellectual attainments, but in the wealth of the inner life, in moral strength, in self-control, in spiritual insight, in the character one is able to form within himself and in the service he is able to render to his fellow men. Happiness then, like character, is a byproduct of right living. It is presented as the fruit, not as the object of endeavor.

Okay. So again, it's kind of saying the same thing I just said, that we don't strive to become poor in spirit. We pursue God, pursue the kingdom of God, and so on.

And as we allow the Lord to deal with us, as we grow in grace, these things become more evident in our lives. Martin Lloyd-Jones said it a little differently. Let me just read what he said in his excellent commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, which is that thick.

Very good. He said, happiness is the great question confronting mankind. The whole world is longing for happiness, and it is tragic to observe the ways in which people are seeking it.

The vast majority, alas, are doing so in a way that is bound to produce misery. Anything which, by evading the difficulties, merely makes people happy for the time being is ultimately going to add to their misery and problems. That is where the utter deceitfulness of sin comes in.

It is always offering happiness, and it always leads to unhappiness, and to final misery and wretchedness. The Sermon on the Mount says, however, that if you really want to be happy, here is the way. This, and this alone, is the type of person who is truly happy, who is really blessed.

Okay. So, that's the first section of the Sermon on the Mount. The second section covers the rest of Chapter 5, and we'll call it the relation of the new righteousness to the Mosaic Law.

Okay? So, this section is characterized by the statement, you have heard that it was said, but I say unto you. Now, let me just give you a couple of things about that. In some cases, Jesus is going from the outward behavior to the inward heart.

Okay, for instance, he said, you have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery, but I say unto you that any man who even thinks of committing adultery, however he says it, is committing adultery, et cetera. So, he's taking it beyond just the realm of our outward behavior into the very thought life, the inward life of a person. But also, he uses this, I don't know, formula, however you want to call it, to deal with the Pharisees, because the Pharisees, or I should say, not deal with the Pharisees, but deal with the mentality that the Pharisees had built into Judaism.

It was a corruption of many of the portions of the Old Testament law. I'll give you an example, Matthew 5, 38. Let's see, where is it at? You have heard that it was said, there's our formula, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, do not resist an evil person.

Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. Okay. Again, that shouldn't be taken literally, you know, so on.

But let me just talk about the way the Pharisees taught this. This is found in the Old Testament. It's found in Exodus 21, Leviticus 24, and Deuteronomy 19.

But the context, as we know, and have heard so much, context is king. The context is that this is describing the way in which a judge could determine the proper recompense to a victim in the civil courts. So, you know, Joe gets mad at Bill and kills his donkey.

So, the law that's been put in place to deal with these things, you know, Bill is brought before the court, the judge, and the judge has a law, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. So, what happens? He's got to give a donkey to Joe. Did I say that right? I don't know.

Huh? I said it backwards, but you know what I mean. Anyway, that's the way it was, that's what that verse means in the Old Testament law. It was not meant to establish the way we deal with each other, but that's what the Pharisees had corrupted it into.

And of course, they used it to abuse other people. Actually, the truth is the Old Testament taught the very opposite. This law was really put in place to prevent personal vengeance.

It was to make the victim feel like the justice system was going to take care of the situation, and he didn't have to take it upon himself to go, you know, make it right. That's the point of the law, but the Pharisees had twisted it around to become the exact opposite of what it really meant. In fact, it says, for instance, a number of times it says this, I'll give you one, Leviticus 19.18, you shall not take vengeance.

It couldn't be any more clear. And it goes on to explain that you shall love your neighbor as yourself, you know. So, that's just one example of how Jesus was correcting some of the faulty teachings that had come to the Jewish people through the Pharisees.

Alright, one more thing I'll mention here is that the Pharisees accused Jesus of doing away with the law. In our day and age, we would say, you know, you're preaching easy believism. You're just making it, busting the doors wide open so anybody can think they're part of the kingdom, that sort of thing.

But actually, the Sermon on the Mount, as I already said, goes beyond the behavior, the outward behavior, right into the inward life. It was overwhelmingly more difficult to obey the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount than the ceremonial laws and ritualism and all that stuff of the Old Testament. In fact, it's impossible.

It is not possible for any human being to completely fulfill the laws put forth in the Sermon on the Mount. It's just not possible, but yet it's describing what we should be growing in and striving towards and so on. So this is why Jesus said, I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Because the scribes and Pharisees just did outward things, you know, but their inward life was completely different than, you know, those outward deeds were showing and so on. Okay, the third section in the Sermon on the Mount, we'll call this the New Righteousness. It covers all of Matthew 6 and the first part of chapter 7. And the central thought that is presented in this section is that all righteousness looks towards God.

Excuse me. He is the source and the aim of life. That's the way we should do life.

So let me just kind of break this down into three subsections here. The first half of Matthew 6, Jesus is talking about giving, praying, and fasting. And basically He's saying, if your acts of worship are being done so that you can be seen by men and so men will, you know, think highly of you, you're not going to receive a reward from the Father.

I mean, that is the basic message in that first section. And of course later, Jesus would say that the Pharisees do all their deeds, why? To be noticed by men. So this is just one more example of how our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees.

We have to do it from the heart with the right motivation and so on. And the Lord is looking in at our hearts about why, you know, why we're doing what we're doing. Okay, the second half of Matthew 6 deals with the overriding purposes and desires that govern our lives.

Why do you do what you do? You know, what are you expending your energy on? What are the most important things in your life? Are we truly living for the kingdom of heaven or are we really just living for the temporal life here on earth like the rest of the world is? It's those heart-searching questions that come forth from this section of the Sermon on the Mount. You could basically look at it in a positive and a negative way. I don't know how else to say it.

He deals with covetousness and so maybe Matthew 6, 19 would be the kind of theme verse there where he says, do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. Okay, so that's dealing with a covetous spirit of wanting more, more, more, never satisfied. But then on the negative side, he has to deal with worry because some people are driven by covetousness and some people are driven by worry and fear, fear of not having enough, you know, and that sort of thing.

So then at the last part of the chapter, we could sum it up in verse 34, but seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. If you make that the pursuit of your life, don't worry. The Father sees your heart.

He will take care of you. You don't need to be overly concerned about money and clothing and all that stuff. Listen, that's the way the Gentiles live.

You know, if you're a citizen of God's kingdom, you should be, have a completely different mindset than the world has. All right, then the first 12 verses of Matthew 7 deals with our attitude towards other people and he begins, you know, by talking about judging other people, but we have to keep in the back of our minds that he's not saying we shouldn't be discerning. And as we'll see here in a minute, he calls upon us to be discerning with people and I've said this, you know, I'm sure you guys have heard me say it, that there's the difference between a critical spirit and a discerning spirit is brokenness.

When you have been broken by the Lord, you see the faults in another person, but you see them through eyes of compassion and mercy and love. But when you're unbroken, you're like a Pharisee who's looking down on the other person and just sizing them up and ripping them down in your mind to make yourself feel better about yourself or something like that. So anyway, the climactic statement of this section and really the whole Sermon on the Mount, I guess, would be verse 12.

Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the law and the prophets. He sums up the entire Old Testament in this one statement. Now, it's interesting in the earlier part of the Sermon on the Mount, he said, I did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.

And now, he identifies what the law and the prophets is, you know, to sum it all up, it's love. It's to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. That is the sum total of the entire teachings of the Word of God.

And so, he puts it in a slightly different way here than he did, you know, when he quoted the Old Testament law. All right, the last section of the Sermon on the Mount is the conclusion, Matthew 7, 13 through 27. And in this section, he gives four vignettes of these different people groups.

And each of these groups are people who claim to be part of the kingdom of heaven. They identify themselves. We're not talking about pagans out there.

We are talking about people who believe that they are part of the kingdom of heaven and put across that image to everyone around them, whether they are or not. And actually, each of these vignettes exposes some aspect of the kingdom that separates the true from the false believers. All right, so the message of the narrow way versus the broad way is that most of the people who claim to be in the kingdom of heaven are actually citizens of this world.

That's the message of that little parable. The message of the false teachers is that we have to be careful. We need to be discerning.

Just because someone claims to be a teacher of the word of God and so on, you can't just take people at face value. You need to look below the surface. You need to look for the fruit of the spirit at work in their life.

Is there evidence showing that this is someone who really does follow the Lord and his teachings? So you could go right back to the Beatitudes, go down the list of Beatitudes, and look at this teacher's life. I welcome you to do it in my life. No, I don't.

Never mind. No, I'm just kidding. You know, is there poverty of spirit? Does this person realize their great need for God? You know, do they mourn over their sin? Do you see signs of repentance? Or are they constantly justifying themselves? Are they meek? Do they really submit themselves to God's will? Do they hunger and thirst after righteousness? You just go through those and just, you know, I'm not saying be

critical.

I used this illustration once in a sermon where Jesus is basically painting the picture of a teacher of the law as a tree. And there's fruit there. And we are allowed to come up and taste that fruit and see if there's anything, you know, if there's something to it.

And if, you know, you look at the fruit and you have to decide, is this person really a true teacher of the gospel? Someone who's really living it? Or are they false? You know, and there's not very much discernment in the church these days. All right, the next one is the vignette, the parable of the false confessors. These people are completely convinced they are part of the kingdom of heaven.

And they are shocked when they stand before the Lord and discover that they are being barred from entering heaven because of self-will. You know, they can say all the right things, do all the right things. They're part of, they're in, you know what I mean, in the church.

They just, they looked apart. But inside, they have never really submitted themselves to God's rule. They constantly rise up against it and do their own will.

And the last one is the parable of the two builders or the two foundations. Really, the message of this is it's not the talk that counts. It's the walk, you know.

Does your life exemplify someone who really is doing the words of Jesus? Or are you just talking? Because the storms of life will tend to show up what you really are made of. But if not the storms of life, definitely the storms of judgment day will certainly show it up then. All right, so the effects of this sermon.

Let me read the last two verses of Matthew 7. We're going to get done early today. When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching. For He was teaching them as one having authority and not as their scribes.

Now, it's just amazing. It is just amazing. And they saw it.

And you wonder where were these people when Jesus went to the cross and everything and they're crying out to crucify Him. You wonder how many of those people were here listening to this or heard these kinds of teachings later, were amazed but it didn't penetrate their hearts. All right, let me end with a couple of lengthy quotations that are worth hearing.

Farrar says this, The teaching of their scribes was narrow, dogmatic, material, and cold. It had no freshness in it, no force, no fire. It was intricate with legal pettiness and focused on Levitical minutiae.

But this teaching of Jesus dealt with the human soul and human destiny and human life with hope and charity and faith. It appealed to the conscience with its irresistible simplicity and with an absolute mastery that stirred and dominated the heart. In a word, it had the authority of the divine incarnate.

It was a voice of God speaking in the utterance of man. Its austere purity was yet pervaded with tender sympathy and its sobering severity with unutterable love. Its perfect balance.

Jesus always lived and taught in the perfect balance of truth and mercy. Okay, Shepard said this, The great sermon was over, but the spell of the preacher's voice and manner yet held the people in astonishment. They were deeply and strangely moved with the contending emotions of wonder joy, almost fear at times.

He spoke with a startling independence and the charming originality of a teacher whose appeal was to spiritual truth or reality. This was a new note to them. They had been accustomed to hearing the rabbis quote extensively the opinions of their predecessors claiming no authority to say a word of their own.

Their sermons were a tiresome reiteration of traditional rabbinical rules and ceremonial details which hung as a burdensome yoke on the necks of the people. The preaching of Jesus was different. His fervent words stirred their hearts and brought a great new light and relief to their jaded and burdened spirits.

The scribes had neglected spiritual religion in favor of the punctilious etiquette of ceremonialism. Here was a preacher who made his appeal direct to the scriptures and to God. It's such a different atmosphere in Jesus' words as to those of the Pharisees and so on.

All right, so that's it for today. Next week we're going to look at the mysteries of the kingdom. God bless you all.

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