

Get Real! Grace for People and Persecution

Matthew 5:7-16

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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.

13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. 14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:7-16).

The title for our series is "Get Real!" because that is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about – real spirituality. Matthew 5-7 is a hard-hitting, in-your-face, and shocking spiritual wake-up call. It is Jesus' first recorded sermon, and you could think of it as his manifesto on what real religion is all about. It is the incarnate Son of God calling out superficial belief.

Last week I suggested to you that we need both the tone and the content of Matthew 5-7. We need the content because it addresses the real issues that we face: anger, lust, getting even, prayer, giving, anxiety and judging – to name a few. But even more, we need its tone. It is far too easy for us to domesticate the Bible. Do you know what I mean by that?

Domesticate means that you take something wild and make it ordinary, familiar, or acceptable so that it can serve you. You make a wild dog tame so it can live with you, conform to your life, and entertain you. And that is what so easily happens with the Bible. Its message can become mundane and common when it was meant to be shocking and radical. Domesticating the Bible leads to superficial Christianity, and that is why Jesus talks the way that he does in this sermon. He aims to be a bit shocking; to identify how far God's people were straying from real righteousness.

The Ethics of Grace

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, and the most prominent word is “blessed.” I suggested to you last week that the way to understand this sermon and the Beatitudes specifically is to see them as the ethics of grace. By that I meant that Jesus is not identifying a new law. Rather, he is demonstrating what comes out of a heart invaded by the reign of God. The Sermon on the Mount is all about the character that the kingdom of heaven creates.

Last week we looked at the first four beatitudes, and how they addressed one’s relationship to God. We learned that those who have been invaded by grace relate to God by:

- Complete dependency – “blessed are the poor in spirit” (v 3)
- Taking sin seriously – “blessed are those who mourn” (v 4)
- Refusing to insist on their rights – “blessed are the meek” (v 5)
- Having the right desires – “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (v 6)

The first four beatitudes acknowledge the way in which God has invaded the heart, created spiritual appetites for formerly impossible things, and express a longing for even more. In other words the follower of Jesus knows that he or she only hungers for righteousness because God created it, and, at the same time, there is a longing for more righteousness. God creates the possibility, and he increases the capacity for spiritual appetites. And that is why they are the ethics of grace.

Relating to People – The next four beatitudes

The next four beatitudes address how the ethics of grace affect our relationships with people. The list shows us the character of those who’ve been invaded by the reign of God.

1. Merciful (v 7)

The biblical word for mercy implies compassion in action. It includes emotions and feeling, but it is primarily focused on action. To be merciful means that one takes active steps to relieve the suffering of another or to treat someone with kindness that they do not deserve. It is a generous attitude toward others that includes an unwillingness to quickly take offense or to gloat over the shortcoming of others.¹ Basically it is treating others with the same kind of graciousness with which God has treated us.

¹R.T. Frances, New International Commentary on the New Testament – Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 168.

Mercy was a central part of Jesus' message, and the absence of it is a chief characteristic of superficial religion. Consider the following:

13 Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt 9:13).

7 And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless (Matt 12:7)

3 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness (Matt 23:23).

Jesus sees mercy as the natural response to having received mercy from God, and he tells us that it is the merciful that receive mercy from God (both in the present and future).

2. Pure in heart (v 8)

It is not a new thought that the pure in heart are the ones who see God. It is an echo of Psalm 24:3-4 – “3 Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart...” To “see God” is the same thing as ascending the hill of the Lord and standing in his holy place; it is to be involved in true worship.

How does purity of heart and true worship relate to one another? Purity of heart is referring to internal integrity that manifests itself behaviorally.² Jesus is calling for a real righteousness that is radically different from the external, legalistic and unbalanced religion of the Pharisees – the kind of superficiality that caused Jesus to say:

“You blind guides; you strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matt 23:24)

“ You clean the outside of the cup but inwardly you are full of greed and self-indulgence” (Matt 23:25)

“You outwardly appear righteous to others but within you are full of hypocrisy lawlessness” (Matt 23:27)

Jesus is aiming and calling for a purity that comes from the inside out, a kind of righteousness that will result in right relationships with people. The invasion of the kingdom into the lives of the followers of Jesus results in a fundamental purity that begins with God but extends toward others. A changed and purified heart produces righteousness toward others. In Matthew 15:19 Jesus warned that murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness and slander all come

² David Turner, The Gospel of Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008)152.

“out of the heart.” Each of those sins is toward someone else. Impure hearts hurt people. But the pure in heart are real worshippers who treat others with integrity and righteousness.

3. Peacemakers (v 9)

The next character quality produced in kingdom-invaded heart is peacemaking. Peace is a hallmark of the reign of the Messiah. The concept of peace is so central to Judaism that even today the Jewish greeting is “shalom” (the Hebrew word for peace). The Messiah was to be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace (Is 9:6). Central to the hope of God’s people and the role of the messiah was bringing shalom-peace.

The word in the Old Testament meant a sense of fulfillment, contentment, soundness, wholeness, harmony, tranquility, and overall well-being. In the New Testament the word means well-being, rest, reconciliation, and salvation. Peace is not a new concept to people in the world, but according to John 14:27, the peace that Jesus brings is different.

Jesus brings a peace to the soul, a cleansing of the conscience, and rest for the heart. People who have experienced the peace of God know that it surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7). And the result of their understanding and affection for the peace of God causes them to be peacemakers. They know what real peace and real reconciliation is all about:

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-18).

Therefore, followers of Jesus should be *peacemakers* - not peace-keepers, peace-breakers, or peace-fakers. Those who know the powerful, transformative work of Jesus should be effective agents of peace in the world because they know what the ultimate cause of conflict is: sin. But they also know what to do about it.

Before Sarah and I were married we had some great premarital counseling from the pastor of the church we attended while at Cedarville. To be honest, I was a bit nervous about getting married because I knew a number of couples that I respected whose marriages failed. I thought, “How do I know that the same thing will not happen to us?” In our first session I learned a basic biblical concept that gave me so much hope: “A Christian home is not a place where perfect people live; it is a place where people know what to do about their sin.” That was so hopeful to me because I know what brings real peace, real forgiveness, real reconciliation: Jesus.

Therefore I want to call you this morning to be known as a peacemaker in your home, in your neighborhood, at your office, on the road, in line at the drive thru, with your family, your

friends, your co-workers, and (are you ready) even your enemies and those who treat you unfairly. And that leads to the final beatitude.

4. Persecuted (v 10)

The final approval statement is given to those who experience suffering and persecution “for righteousness sake.” Notice that Jesus says “theirs in the kingdom of heaven.” Where have we heard that before? Verse 3 – “blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” So the beatitudes come full circle.

You would think that humble, meek, peace-making, honest people would be loved by the world. Jesus tells us that it will often be the opposite. Why? Because righteous people make unrighteous people uncomfortable, and often they are treated with contempt, resisted, or outright persecuted. Jesus tells us to expect this. In fact Jesus made his disciples a promise:

18 "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you (John 15:18-20).

Do you see the important explanation that Jesus gives here? He tells us that persecution is the natural result of 1) not being “of the world”, and 2) being a follower of Jesus. In other words a consistent lack of resistance from the world is not a good thing. Jesus doesn’t call us to be popular, adored, or admired by the world; nor does he call us to view the natural consequences of our foolish choices as persecution (see 1 Peter 4:15). Rather we are called to a radical love for Jesus that is bound to create some kind of conflict in the world. Jesus says that this is part of what it means to be approved.

Now this concept of approval in the midst of persecution needs some further explanation and that is what verses 11-16 are all about.

Grace for Persecution

Living by these ethics of grace ultimately leads to life that is counter-cultural. Followers of Jesus emulate the values, ethics, and actions consistent with the kingdom, and the result is that their lives are different than the rest of society. They become the salt and the light of the world.³

There are two ways for followers of Jesus to look at persecution: as an outcome for joy and an opportunity for witness.

³ I take verses 13-14 as a continuation and further application of Jesus’ comments on the kind of counter-cultural living that produces opposition and opportunity for witness.

An outcome for joy

Verse 11 simply restates verse 10 so that verse 12 stands out with the kind of shocking reality that Jesus was looking for. "Rejoice and be glad!" Luke 6:23 adds even more to this thought. He says, "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy..." So the idea is that there is a great reason to celebrate when persecution comes. What is it?

Jesus indicates that every loss in this lifetime results in reward in heaven. In other words, God sees, knows, and approves what we've done; he will make everything right. Throughout the book of Matthew you will find him making frequent mention of rewards (see 5:46; 6:1-5; 10:41-42). He has no problem listing the reward in the context part of the motivation. This is more than a quid pro quo; it is "an acknowledgment that the good promised to the disciples far outweighs the bad that they experience now."⁴

Additionally, Jesus identifies that persecution puts them in good company. The disciples take up the mantle of the prophets in the Old Testament, and they are now those who speak for God. To suffer for righteousness sake is in fact a badge of honor.

Based upon the promised rewards and the honor promised, Jesus tells his followers to take joy in persecution! Nothing suffered or lost in this lifetime is a waste.

An opportunity for witness

Finally, Jesus shows his disciples their role in the world. They are to be salt and light in the world. What does this mean?

Salt was worthless if it lost its saltiness. Its purpose was to be an additive, a preservative that prevented decay. Take away the saltiness and it no longer has any value. Jesus is referring here to the way in which real righteousness serves as a preservative in life, culture, and society. Jesus is commending the way in which believers can be a kind of moral antiseptic.⁵ Jesus envisioned his followers to bring a measure of the kingdom with them into every arena in which they entered. Jesus aims to do in culture what he does in hearts – invade and transform. But the cultural transformation comes through Jesus-invaded people bringing the power of the gospel to bear on their community.

The second opportunity for witness is described as being light in the world. Jesus clearly says that his disciples are "the light of the world", implying that the world is in darkness. Jesus himself is called the light (John 1:5), and now he is calling his disciple to be like him. By their

⁴ France, 169.

⁵ Turner, 104.

righteousness and kingdom values, they are to be clearly distinguishable from the rest of the world.

To make this point clearer, Jesus addresses the value of light. No one puts a light under a basket. Rather lights were meant to be held up, put on a stand, or set on a hill (like a city) that cannot be hidden. The implication should be obvious: Jesus wants the reality of the ethics of grace to be seen in the world so that people will know that the followers of Jesus are different. Jesus envisions people saying, "There is no way that you could be like that one your own. God must be helping you because you could never be that by yourself."

Glorifying God is the Ultimate End

Here is the driving ethic behind the ethics of grace. Here is the reason why we have the beatitudes. Here is the reason why God invades the hearts of men and women. Here is purpose behind the approval of God that rests upon people. Here is the reason for humility, repentance, meekness, hungering for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking and joyful endurance of persecution. Here is the purpose of the being salt and light. Here is the ultimate purpose in Jesus' life. And here is the reason for getting real – to glorify God!

The ultimate aim of this sermon and the beatitudes is to demonstrate the incredible value of a life lived for the glory and enjoyment of God. It is to compel us to live in such a way that the world sees that there is nothing better than God. Nothing.

"The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends are but shadows; God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams. But God is the ocean."⁶

Get Real! is a call to see that there is nothing greater or more enjoyable or satisfying than living for the glory of God.

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⁶ Jonathan Edwards, "The Christian Pilgrim" The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol 2. (Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 244 as cited in John Piper's book God's Passion for His Glory – Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards.