



Sermon on the Mount

Picturing a “Complete Life”

RE-INTRODUCTION

We said [last week](#) that we, as Jesus followers, operate under a fundamental assumption about life. We assume that we live in a world in which God rules. We believe that God reigns over the daily and global affairs of our planet with personal intimacy and assured purpose. And, we believe that submission to his reign leads to the abundance of life. In other words, we believe God’s ruling is not only a true thing but also a good and beautiful reality.

Yet there is a difference between the truth of God’s sovereign rule—his kingdom *existing*—and his intimate and purposeful rule, *experienced*. The difference is why Jesus speaks of us needing to “*enter* the kingdom of heaven,” so often in Matthew’s gospel. To **enter** the kingdom of heaven **is to experience** the realities of God’s authority to their fullest.

To “enter the kingdom of heaven,” as Jesus puts it, is to move from existing in a world in which God rules to living that existence to its complete potential and intent. “To enter the kingdom of God,” argues D.A. Carson, “is to enter life,”¹ to experience a “happy” and purposeful life forever. To enter the kingdom of God is to experience the fruitfulness and effectiveness of faith in Jesus, as Peter reminded his faith family ([2 Pet. 1:1-11](#)). To enter the kingdom of God is to experience a harmonizing relationship with the giver of life with the clear-eyed sight of the path before us from the light of the life of himself ([Ps. 36:9](#), [Jn. 1:4](#)). To enter the kingdom of heaven, in other words, is to experience everyday relationships, responsibilities, and roles in the **delight of and submission to** God’s intimate and purposeful rule.

To aid us in our delightful submission, Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, paints a portrait of kingdom life on earth as it is in heaven. This preached picture is, in the words of Eugene Peterson, “**training our minds and our emotions [through descriptive behaviors] to live [believe and behave] in response to the realities inherent in the kingdom of God: to live by faith [hope] and love...**”²

This earthy picture “describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God...[depicting] behavior which Jesus expected of each of his disciples, who is also thereby a citizen of God’s kingdom.”³ Jesus describes for his followers, you and I, a life in response and reception of all that God offers to those who live in-step with his presence and intent **even as we live amid the mess and miracle, beauty and brokenness, and sin and salvation of our everyday existence.**

The Sermon on the Mount portrays the portrait of the life experienced in God’s kingdom amid the muddle of a world of clashing kingdoms, dominions, authorities, and the like. In this sermon, Jesus gives us a picture of how we are to believe and behave as citizens of heaven *and* members of the American constituency. A

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: an evangelical exposition of Matthew 5-7*, 12.

² Eugene Peterson, “Jesus Went Up the Mountain,” in *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, 238.

³ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 18, 24.

depiction of how we can enter into, tangibly experience, within our homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, and city, relationships, responsibilities, callings, and communing with God; the life our Father has freed us to live through Jesus.

Through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is painting a representation of the kingdom of heaven experienced on earth. He is not offering a new set of ethical codes, a New Testament version of the “Ten Commandments.” Instead, Jesus is bringing into the present experience of life, an ancient way. A way that while not hidden, is often ignored or rejected ([5:11-12](#)), and just as often misapplied ([5:17-20](#)). Jesus depicts a way of received citizenship, set-apart, and yet fully immersed within the populace of the world, of America, of Texas, of Dallas, and our families.

THE FOCAL POINT



It is the applicable image of our received citizenship within God’s kingdom, which is the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, what the artist calls *the focal point*. The additional, individually depicted detail which fills the frame, as intriguing and masterful as they will be, have been drawn onto the canvas by the artist to enhance and add depth to the focal point, that area in the composition to which the observer’s eye is naturally drawn.

There is a visual organizing principle in the craft of making art called dominance. The principle of dominance suggests that certain elements should assume more importance than others in the same composition. The principle contributes to the organic unity of a piece by emphasizing the fact that there is one main

feature and that other elements are subordinate to it.

The Sermon on the Mount follows the principle of dominance in its composition. [Matthew 5:2-16](#) is the focal point, the central elements that assume the most importance in Jesus’ portrait. What follows, chapter 5:17 through 7:23, are the details sketched in around these elements to bring the focal point to the forefront and give depth to the principal aspects of the portrait.

Another way to explain the structure of the Sermon on the Mount is that it moves from a general description to particular descriptions.

GENERAL (5:2-16)

particular relating (5:17-48)

particular means (6:1-34)

particular submission (7:1-23)

GENERAL (7:24-27)

Jesus describes the general picture of kingdom life, then provides descriptive images that bring the general into particulars of daily life. Let’s look at the individual elements in the sermon’s structure to help us see this organic unity of the whole, and why it’s vital for us to do so.

The General Focal Point | (5:2-16)

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones contends “it is...important for us to take the Sermon as a whole before we come to the details, [because] this constant danger of ‘missing the wood because of the trees.’ We are all of us ready to fix on certain particular statements, and to concentrate on them at the expense of others. The way to correct that tendency...is to realize that no part of the Sermon can be understood truly except in the light of the whole.

I do not hesitate to say that, unless we have understood and grasped the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, we cannot understand properly any one of its particular injunctions [commands].”⁴ Now listen to how the good doctor says we come to view the whole of Jesus’s sermon,

“I mean [this,] that it is idle and useless and quite futile to confront anybody with any particular injunction in the Sermon on the Mount unless such a person has already believed, accepted, and has indeed already conformed to, and is living **the Beatitudes**.”⁵

For Dr. Lloyd-Jones, the famed “Beatitudes” found in [5:2-12](#) constitute the quintessence of kingdom citizenry. There is, contends the good doctor, an important reason why Jesus begins here. These couplets comprised with “simplicity of word and profundity of thought,”⁶ describe **the character and quality of kingdom life**. The essential nature of the Beatitudes has led to one scholar referring to them collectively as “The Norms of the Kingdom.”⁷ And, it is the distinct character and quality of kingdom citizens that provide them their **unique and necessary responsibilities** within their time and place-bound residencies as [5:13-16](#) details.

Here, in these opening verses, we have the full picture of the character, quality, and responsibility of the experience of life in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is not building an argument; he is stating a fact. He is not making an abstract painting but crafting an impressionist’s reality. And his depiction—bursting with color, light, and movement—is that of **a complete life**—happy and purposeful.

I used the word “happy” last week when describing both the life we are after and the life we receive from God. I intended to connect the emotions and thoughts which we associate with happiness to the reality that the life we seek and the life God makes for us under his rule is the most contented, most full life we can experience. Using “happy” got me a few questions, at least from my wife and GC! After all, happiness is a circumstantial emotion, a feeling of goodness that is contingent upon what we are experiencing in life at any given moment, isn’t it? The way we use the word happy in everyday conversations would seem to affirm our suspicions.

While the Greek word that we translate “Blessed,” *makarios*, “can and does mean ‘happy,’”⁸ there are many modern preachers and theologians who would prefer us to stay away from this translation Jesus’ often-repeated expression. Their reasoning is understandable, even if it skews our view of Jesus’ portrait. I think it is fair to say that the pursuit of happiness is baked into our American vision—literally written into our politics

⁴ Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 16.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Stott, 30.

⁷ Carson, 16.

⁸ Stott, 33.

and economics as an “unalienable right.” Achievement of happiness is the consummation of life and liberty. Yet our founding fathers did not envision shallow happiness that fades whenever the show ends, the stimulate wears off, or the relationship wears thin. Rather, they had in mind happiness as the ultimate end (measured quality) and purpose of human existence. An understanding of happiness they inherited from Aristotle.

In his seminal work, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sets out to discover the highest of all goods achievable in a life lived to the fullest, for both the individual and community. The knowledge of this ultimate good carries “great weight for our way of life,” for it would, as Aristotle argues, “make us better able...to hit the right mark,”⁹ in life.

What is “the highest of all goods achievable in action? As far as the name goes,” says Aristotle, “most people virtually agree; for both the many and the cultivated call it happiness, and they suppose that living well and doing well are the same as being happy.”¹⁰ **Happiness is the whole of life, a whole life, and consists of the way life is lived, the actions of and in life.** For Aristotle, he could “not find it natural to speak of someone being [happy] for a few minutes and then ceasing to be [happy].”¹¹ “For,” as Aristotle put it, “one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day; nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make us blessed or happy.”¹²

Happiness for Aristotle is life’s completeness. That is happiness, as “activity and actions of the soul that involve reason,”¹³ are the end, final, and perfect fulfillment of human existence. Complete, for Aristotle, “applies to something that has reached its *telos* [its ultimate object or aim], and hence it applies to a mature, adult organism.”¹⁴ “Happiness...is...something complete and self-sufficient, since it is the end of the things achievable in action...For we always choose [happiness] because of itself...[for] by itself it makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing.”¹⁵ While we may use goods like pleasure, wealth, health, honor, and the like to gain happiness, and yet, happiness “is not counted as one good among many,” but rather, as Aristotle argued, the “best good...**a complete life.**”¹⁶

If we understand happy in this way, as the most choiceworthy existence, lacking nothing, then we need not dismiss and try and work around those translations that transcribe “Happy are...” the people of the kingdom of heaven. Nor do we need to fear or attempt to manufacture a shallow, circumstantial, and subjective feeling as a mark of the kingdom life. Instead, when we read “Blessed are...” in Jesus’ opening lines of the Sermon on the Mount, we hear the declaration of “an existing state of happiness,” an already complete life, full and whole life for those in the kingdom of heaven. We catch an affirmation of the “quality of spirituality that is already present.”¹⁷ And we ascertain the “distinctive [note of] religious joy which accrues to [the man and the woman] from his [and her] share in the salvation of the kingdom of God.”¹⁸

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (trans. Irwin, 2nd ed.), 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 8-9.

¹⁷ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: cultural studies in the gospels*, 68.

¹⁸ Friedrich Hauck, quoted in Bailey, 68.

A life lived well at its end (having as our possession a good life), and acting and fairing well in its living, is the “Blessed,” the “happy” life which Jesus says is already those who enter the kingdom. It is through experiencing life in the kingdom that we receive the ultimate good. The highest good in our character, in our quality of life, in our responsibilities, and in our final measurement ([7:24-27](#)). The focal point Jesus paints in the opening lines of his sermon is of citizenship received, which is accrued within the activities and actions, beliefs and behaviors, of the kingdom of heaven. With this focal point in the frame, Jesus begins to fill in the rest of the portrait with the particulars.

The Particulars (5:17-7:23) |

Having sketched the focal point in the opening verses, Jesus begins to fill in the details around this central image. Each unit adding dimension and clarity to the dominant feature. In summary, we can divide and describe the particulars this way:

Righteous Relations ([5:17-48](#)) |

“Righteousness” is not “an absolute ideal ethical norm” but is “out and out a term denoting relationship.”¹⁹ How we relate rightly to one another, to our neighbors, as kingdom citizens within an American constituency, is not through the keeping of a moral or civil code, but through the law of God, which is “perfect”—complete, mature—love (5:48). The law of God, as summed up by Jesus, is to love God and neighbor ([22:34-40](#)). While we want regulations (for a variety of reasons) to define and bind and justify our interactions (or lack thereof), there is only one binding and just ethic: love. For if we can love our enemies, pray for those who are antagonistic towards us, no matter how evil or unjust; how much more would we live in communal harmony with those who are not actually against us? Even if they are different from us.

Mixing Up the Means With the End ([6:1-34](#)) |

The focal point of Jesus’ portrait portrays the image of one who has received the life they are after when seeking God. The picture is of a “Blessed,” already happy, and purposeful life. This “complete life” is the end of what we are all after, the fulfillment of a good life, the ultimate good itself. Yet, we humans are too often guilty of mixing up the means which aid us in achieving the end, with the end itself. What we desire—even if we cannot fully articulate it—is a good life, a happy life. And, at times, we believe that honor, respect, and esteem (influence) will make us happy, and so we confuse happiness with having those things (6:1-18). At other times, we believe that wealth and abundance of resources will make us happy, and so we confuse happiness with having those things (6:19-24). And still, there are those times when we think happiness comes from having what we need and the security of that need in the future, and so we confuse happiness with having those things (6:25-32). Being a citizen of the kingdom of God does not deny the contribution of the means (the goods) to the experience of the complete life. Still, it does keep the end in proper perspective—as received

¹⁹ Gerhard von Rad, quoted in Bailey, 77.

blessedness within the kingdom (6:33). Maintaining the means and end in their proper place is what allows us to experience a complete life now, even in the troubles of today (6:34)—it removes the “circumstantial-ness” of happiness that is fleeting when the means and the end get mixed up.

Submissive Allegiance ([7:1-23](#)) |

Like it or not, our tendency as humans is to use knowledge to our detriment and the detriment of others. We’ve been doing this since our ancestral parents ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil back in [Genesis 3](#). This tendency is nowhere more prevalent and more damaging than among the religious—which we all here would fit that category. Equipped with a little knowledge, we set ourselves up as judges, magistrates of one another’s lives, rather than empathetic co-laborers and citizens (7:1-6, 12). With a little knowledge of God’s ways, we can keep the outside together, while the inside rots and destroys (7:15-20). Because we know, we do, but mainly those things which exercise our authority over the unseen, setting right our world (keeping control) all the while failing to ask, seek, knock and find the good the Father would have for us (7:21-23, 7-11). The path of continued detrimental use of knowledge is a path of broad possibilities and relatively easy, that is, “natural” for us humans to walk down. After all, we have, as a species, walked it for millennia, if not more. Yet the way that leads to life in its fullest requires submission to limits and “unnatural” perseverance (7:13-14). Carson once noted that “although entering into life and entering into the kingdom are synonymous, they are not always strictly interchangeable. The very idea of ‘kingdom’ as ‘dynamic reign’ [total] brings with it overtones of authority and submission not normally conjured up when we speak of ‘life.’ The kingdom of God speaks of God’s authority, mediated through Christ; therefore, it speaks equally of our whole-hearted allegiance to that authority.”²⁰ Without such submissive allegiance, entrance into the kingdom of heaven is elusive, lacking the “rich provision” of which Peter speaks ([2 Pet. 1:8-11](#)).

The final element of Jesus’ portrait is meant to re-focus our attention on the focal point in the opening verses. The familiar image of two houses built in the truth of God’s rule amid the troubles of this world, similar but different. Jesus began with the end, a picture of a complete (happy and purposeful) life, and concludes with the same image amid the floods and winds of everyday existence. Only now, he contrasts his picture of the sturdy and sure life with an image of life no less under the sovereignty of God but washed away because they failed to *enter into* the kingdom of heaven (7:24-27). How devastating it is to see and know the full picture and choose something else, something less.

A CONCLUDING EXHORTATION

As we read through the Sermon on the Mount in our “[three-day cycles](#),” let us keep the complete life of the kingdom in view and be ones who choose to build our lives on the rock of kingdom life experienced—not

²⁰ Carson, 14-15.

merely affirmed. Might we be ones who see our heavenly Father's kingdom come in our character, in the quality of daily living, and in the unique responsibilities which we undertake for one another and our world.

Let's pray.

COMMUNION

The kingdom of God is not earned; it is entered. We have a *received citizenship*, one given us by our faith in Jesus, our delight and submission in his life given for us, his sacrifice made for us, his victory over death for us. Let us confess and receive what Jesus offers us today, and live upon his nutrients in the week ahead. Say this with me:

We have, each of us,
misunderstood and misapplied
your Word and Way
in our relationships with family,
friends, and strangers.

We have, each of us,
mixed up the good means for,
the best good,
settling for less.

We have, each of us,
used our knowledge, of You,
to the detriment of ourselves, and
of others.

And still, Your Son,
gave His life, so that
each of us
can be called "Blessed."

We receive with delight,
the means of our citizenship
in your Kingdom,
and enter into, the fullness
of life with You.