

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT



So far in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been travelling the Galilean countryside, and causing quite a stir. Here is the one who can show how to succeed where ancient Israel failed. Here is the one who has come to save his people Israel from the cycle of sin that saw David's great kingdom destroyed so many years before. Here is the one who can reverse the curses of the exile. And yet here is the one who John the Baptist has warned has come to "clear the threshing floor," sort the wheat into the barn, and "burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." It's decision time for Israel. Are they going to be part of God's Kingdom of Righteousness... or would they prefer something else?

Jesus sits down on the slope, surrounded by a crowd of eager Israelites, and starts talking. People often quote the "Sermon on the Mount" as their "code for living" -- it's a part of the Bible that stands out, like the "Ten

Commandments." Maybe it is. But when Jesus first spoke these words to Israel, the air was charged with tension as he called the nation to a radical repentance that cut right to the heart.

As we read on, imagine yourself listening to the Sermon on the Mount as if you were hearing it for the first time. Listen as if you were a Jew, hungering for God to bring blessing again after so many years of suffering and oppression. Listen as someone who has actually *admired* the righteousness of the Pharisees as they flounce around the city square in their long robes, parading themselves as model Israelites. "Something is very wrong," says Jesus. Can you work out what it is?

KINGDOM BLESSINGS AGAIN

Matthew 5v1 to 16

You'll notice from the heading printed in most modern bibles that the first section of the sermon on the mount is traditionally called "The Beatitudes." This word comes from the Latin word "beatus", which means "blessed, fortunate or happy." To be "blessed" is to be "favoured by God." And that's what the Beatitudes are all about - the road back to true "blessing" in the Kingdom of God.

Revise...

a. According to Deuteronomy 30:1-6, what would Israel need to do to experience God's favour again after their punishment in exile?

b. Read again the following words from Isaiah 57. The prophet has been spelling out the terrible consequences of the sin and idolatry of Israel. He can see the exile looming just up ahead. But beyond that, there's a note of hope.

¹³ When you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you!
The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away.
But the man who makes me his refuge will **inherit the land** and possess my holy mountain."

¹⁴ And it will be said:

"Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people."

¹⁵ For this is what the high and lofty One says- he who lives forever, whose name is holy:

"I live in a high and holy place,
but also with him who is **contrite and lowly in spirit**,
to revive the spirit of the lowly

and to **revive the heart of the contrite**.

¹⁶ I will not accuse forever,
nor will I always be angry...

¹⁸ I have seen his ways, but I will heal him;
I will guide him and restore comfort to him,

¹⁹ creating praise on the lips **of the mourners in Israel**.

Peace, peace, to those far and near,"
says the LORD . "And I will heal them."

c. What sort of Israelites will God be looking for in the time after their punishment?

d. Make a note here of the underlined words in the passage above

Jesus is here to preach “good news” to Israelites who feel “poorly.” But will he find anyone mourning over the state of the nation of Israel? Or just an Israel misled by and arrogant and comfortable religious elite?

Read Matthew 5 verses 1 to 12. Watch for the key words that are underlined above.

1. What do you think the Israelites listening to Jesus on the hill would have thought he meant by **poor in spirit**? Why do you think this is the first “beatitude”?

2. Look back to Matthew's account of John the Baptist (Matt 3:1-9). Thinking of the types of people John spoke to, who best illustrated what it means to be “poor in spirit”? Who had the OPPOSITE attitude?

4. In what ways does the second beatitude flow from the first? Do you think Jesus is talking about **mourning** in general, or something more specific? How does Isaiah 57 help?

5. **Meek, contrite and lowly** aren't popular words. Why do we find the idea of “meekness” so distasteful?

Why, for the Israelites, would these attitudes be appropriate?

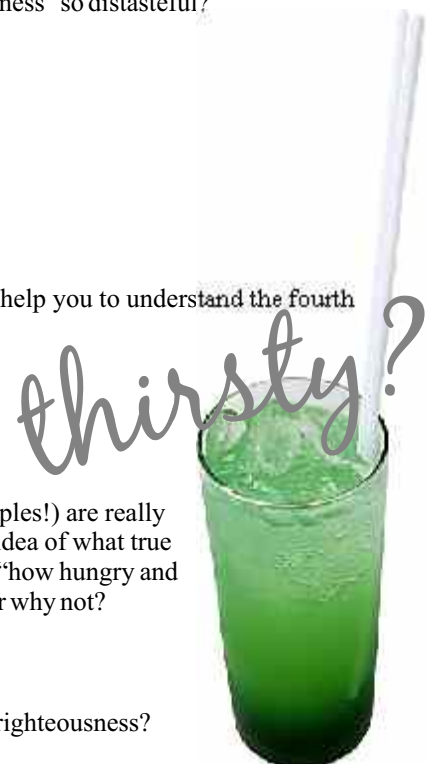
What attitude do you bring to your relationship with God?

6. Think about the last time you were hungry or thirsty. What was it like? How does this help you to understand the fourth beatitude?

- What might it mean to **hunger and thirst for righteousness**?

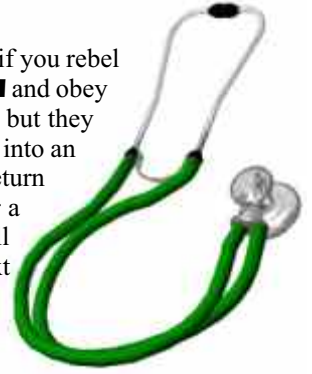
- As Matthew's gospel unfolds, we'll find out if the Israelites (and even the disciples!) are really hungry and thirsty for righteousness. And in the Sermon on the Mount, we'll get an idea of what true righteousness looks like. But at this point it doesn't hurt to ask yourself the question, “how hungry and thirsty AM I for righteousness.” Is righteousness something you really desire? Why, or why not?

- What will the outcome be for those listening to Jesus who really ARE longing for righteousness?



Getting to the Heart of the Problem

Remember Deuteronomy 30? That's the passage we keep going back to where God says to Israel, if you rebel against me I'll send you into exile... but if you turn back to me **with all your heart and soul** and obey me, then I'll bless you again. The Pharisees were famous for their efforts to do one part of this... but they forgot the most important bit. They were passionate about obeying God's law, which they codified into an immense list of rules and regulations. And they thought by doing this, God's blessing would finally return to Israel. The problem? They had forgotten the heart! (Sneak a look ahead at Matthew 15:1-9 for a good example of this!) God was looking for an Israel that wanted to serve him right from the heart. All along, God had been looking for an Israel hungry for righteousness! So how's your heart? The next few beatitudes are a good check...



7. What is **mercy**? How does our attitude towards others reflect our genuine attitude towards God?

Should mercy be turned into a “rule”? Why, or why not?

What's the difference between being merciful because you *have to*, and being merciful because you *want to*?

8. According to verse 8, what sort of heart is God interested in?

Is it possible to go through all the motions of “religion” and yet fail at this point?

How can we avoid falling into this trap?

9. How can we be **peacemakers**? Give some practical examples from your experience where you have - or have not - acted in this way.

10. Being a peacemaker doesn't guarantee a life free from attack. What does Jesus foreshadow as the outcome of :-

a) pursuing righteousness

b) identifying too closely with him

c) From what you know of the rest of Matthew's gospel, how do you think his hearers experienced this first hand?

d) What should our response be if this is our experience?

11. In Matthew 5:5, Jesus used the word **meek**, which is a translation of the Greek word *praus*. This word is only used in two other places in the New Testament, where it is translated **gentle**. You'll find it in Matthew 11:28-30, and Matthew 21:5.

Who are both these verses about?

How does Jesus demonstrate the ultimate truth of this final beatitude?

Keep an eye out for other key ideas from the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus puts into action himself even if nobody else does!



Read Matthew 5:13-16.

12. In v13-16, Jesus says, **You are the salt of the earth**, and **You are the light of the world**. And that's EXACTLY what Israel was always meant to be. Of all the nations on earth, Israel was to be God's "treasured possession." That was the plan in the past, and according to Isaiah, that was the plan for the future as well - "My justice will become a light to the nations," says God.

How were those who heard the words of Jesus expected to be "salt" and "light"?

What will the fate of Israel be if they fail to be the "salt" and "light" they were meant to be?

Why do YOU do good deeds? Why *should* you?

CONCLUSION

If you're feeling poorly about the state of your heart, if you're in mourning about it, if you're feeling a hunger for the sort of REAL righteousness Jesus is talking about, that's exactly how the Israelites should have been feeling too. And here's some good news! Go back and read the beatitudes in verses 3 and 6.

What attitudes will you need to change to:-

become more genuinely "poor in spirit"?

become truly hungry and thirsty for righteousness?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is going to show what returning to God "heart and soul" will look like. In Deuteronomy 30, the promise was this: "return to me with all your heart, and then I'll change your hearts." Those looking for righteousness, and dis-satisfied with their own attempts to achieve it, are now called to come to Jesus, who'll provide the righteousness that's lacking. The same offer still stands!