

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Matthew 5:1-16

Key Verse: 5:14a, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.”

Let’s recall the main points of the 3 messages thus far. First, Jesus wants us to pray, “Your kingdom come!” Second, Jesus calls us in his grace to forgive and heal us, and to give us hope for a new life. Third, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in Jesus’ name to all nations through Jesus’ witnesses.

Now we’ve come to this message from Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. This Sermon has been called The Constitution of the Kingdom of God. Jesus reveals in this great sermon the heart and mind of God, which is, through the Holy Spirit, the heart and mind of God’s kingdom people. My message covers just to verse 16 in two parts: the Beatitudes, or the “Blessed are those” sayings, and then, “You are salt” and “You are light.”

Christians are often criticized for being judgmental and hypocritical. Their lives don’t seem to be any different from non-believers. This should not be. So we must listen to Jesus and honestly examine our own hearts and lives in light of his words. Especially, we want to think about Jesus’ hope and promise: that God’s kingdom will shine through the hearts and lives of his disciples, that is, his kingdom people. May the words of Jesus give us all the hope, vision and promise of God’s kingdom.

I. “Blessed are those” (1-12)

The promised Messiah Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth. At about age 30 he was baptized by John. He defeated the devil’s temptations. He began preaching in Galilee, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 4:17). He called his first disciples, who were fishermen. Then he went around proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness of those who came to him. 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. It is Jesus’ most famous sermon. Jesus began by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus says “blessed are those” eight times. These “Beatitudes” are eight sayings describing Jesus’ list of blessed people. To be blessed is to be truly happy. But Jesus’ list of blessed people is quite different from worldly ideas. Worldly blessings are things like money, fame, achievement, position and good health. Jesus’ list of blessed people looks more like a list of losers or unfortunate people. Moreover, many people who say they’re Christians don’t have the lifestyle and characteristics that Jesus calls blessed. So we have to consider carefully Jesus’ description of kingdom people who have God’s blessing.

Before considering the eight blessed ones, let’s get a bigger picture first. These Beatitudes show us the mind and heart of Jesus Christ, which are also his vision and promise for his kingdom people. It is helpful to group the Beatitudes in a gardening metaphor. The first three are like roots, the fourth one like shoots, the next three like fruits, and the final one a natural result. The first three, the roots, represent the attitude of kingdom people. The fourth one, the shoots, represents the inner desire of

kingdom people. The next three, the fruits, represent the character of kingdom people. The final one naturally follows the others.

Let's consider the roots: the attitude of kingdom people. These three have one thing in common: humbleness. Let's consider each one briefly.

- (1) The poor in spirit. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

A person who is poor in spirit knows that they are needy. They realize they are a sinner in need of God's grace and mercy. The psalms record many prayers that are poor in spirit. Psalm 86:1 says, "Hear me, LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy."

To be poor in spirit contrasts a person who is proud, self-righteous and complacent. Listen to Jesus' rebuke: "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Rev 3:17). A person who is not poor in spirit is too proud to recognize their need for God. This proud attitude is reflected in a person who prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other sinners." But a person who is poor in spirit prays, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Lk 18:11,13). God blesses a person who is poor in spirit, and this attitude is foundational for a Christian. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. A person who is poor in spirit sees their sin. This leads to the next blessed attitude.

- (2) Those who mourn. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Is Jesus saying that those who cry a lot are blessed? No. Jesus sometimes told people not to weep. It really depends on what we cry for. The mourning or weeping that Jesus is speaking of is not for worldly reasons, but for godly ones. Worldly sorrow brings death; but godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret (2Co 7:10). Blessed people mourn because of sin—their own sin, the sin of others, even the sin of their nation. Such people take sin seriously. They don't try to hide their sin or blame others.

The prophet Nathan rebuked King David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. King David did not try to justify himself. He confessed his sin and wrote Psalm 51, in repentance. He wrote, "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise."

A Christian mother shed many tears in prayer for her son, and pleaded with her pastor to help her son. The pastor said to her, "It is not possible that the son of so many tears should perish." Before she died, she saw her son become a Christian. The son largely credited his mother's tears for his conversion. The mother was Monica, and her son was the great church father, St. Augustine. May we have tears that share in God's sorrow. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." One who mourns for sin can be meek. This is the next Beatitude.

- (3) The meek. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

A meek person is gentle and humble and does not exercise authority or power over others. In the world, meek people look weak and are easily ignored, while angry people get attention. Often, people are encouraged to get angry and to insist on their rights, while meek people seem to be losers. But Jesus doesn't think so.

In the Bible, to kneel or fall facedown before God is a humble or meek posture. Moses had every right to curse or get angry with his stubborn, impatient people. But he humbly fell on his face before God when he was criticized. God works in and through such a person. I am always impressed and encouraged by people who apologize first. Isn't it a joy and blessing to be around such meek people?

Of course, Jesus is the best example of a meek person. Even the lowliest people could approach Jesus for help and mercy. Jesus was meek when he washed his own disciples' dirty feet. Jesus was meek when he prayed before his death, "Father, not my will, but yours be done." Jesus invites each of us, "Come to me...Take my yoke...Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart..." (Mt 11:28-29) Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

We thought about the first 3 Beatitudes: to be poor in spirit, to mourn, and to be meek. Out of these humble roots come the shoots of the 4th Beatitude, which describes the inner desire of kingdom people for righteousness. When we recognize our need for God, our desires begin to change.

(4) Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

What do you hunger and thirst for? It is common to crave for someone's recognition or praise or attention or love. What do you love to talk about or what do you think about often? That indicates what you hunger and thirst for. A blessed person hungers and thirsts for righteousness, that is, for God's holiness, truth, and presence.

Psalms 42 describes this blessed desire: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?"

Blessed desire for righteousness or justice is not limited to our personal life. Blessed people long for what is right and just in their homes, their church, and their community. They long to see righteousness and justice in all places where there is unrighteousness and injustice. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

From humility and a hunger and thirst for righteousness come the fruits of the next 3 Beatitudes: mercy, purity and peace. These describe the character of kingdom people.

(5) The merciful. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

A merciful person forgives those who've sinned against them. Relationships are so often destroyed by unforgiveness. When we are hurt by someone's actions or words, our natural sense of justice wants to hurt them as they hurt us. We easily overlook how we hurt or offend others. But we take very seriously offenses against us, even for small things. A merciful person looks weak, since they have the right to get justice. But the merciful person says, "I forgive you." They do this because they know they are a sinner and that God has forgiven them of their own sins. A merciful person also helps the weak and needy who can't help themselves. Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." Mercy leads to a pure heart.

(6) The pure in heart. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

Proverbs 20:9 reads, "Who can say, 'I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?'" The answer is "no one," since our hearts are deceitful and beyond cure (Jer 17:9). So many things like worries, riches and pleasures make our hearts divided and impure. Only Jesus' blood can cleanse and purify our hearts. We need Jesus' grace and forgiveness to be pure in heart. We need to humbly pray

out of sorrow for our spiritual wretchedness: “Lord, cleanse my impure motives and create in me a clean, undivided heart.” Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Purity leads to peace.

(7) The peacemakers. Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

Peacemakers are the opposite of troublemakers. Troublemakers argue, disagree, gossip, slander and cause fights. What does a peacemaker do? A peacemaker does not run from conflict. Rather, they move in the direction of conflict in order to work for peace, forgiveness, friendship and love. Peacemakers defend the reputation of others and work for mutual understanding. Actually, God is the greatest Peacemaker of all. God made peace with us by sacrificing his Son for us. So peacemakers are doing God’s work. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. However, peacemakers are persecuted by those who don’t want peace.

(8) Those who are persecuted for righteousness. “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

We have reached the last of the 8 Beatitudes. This is not something we pursue, but it will naturally happen. Those who have the attitude, inner desire and character of blessed people will be persecuted. Why? Because this character is against the way of the world. When fallen people feel disrespected or judged, they insult, hate and attack in return. Like darkness, they hate the light.

Jesus repeats this last Beatitude, switching from “they” to “you.” He says to his disciples, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Actually that was exactly how the world responded to Jesus. Some people loved Jesus. But so many hated him, and wanted to kill him. Nobody wants to be insulted, hated and slandered. Rather, we want to be praised, loved and complimented. So we have to keep deciding: is my goal to please people or to please Jesus? Pleasing Jesus will often offend people and bring persecution from them. This is consistently how God’s kingdom people have been treated. Jesus says, “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Jesus promises great reward in heaven from God for those who are persecuted because of Jesus.

Through the Beatitudes Jesus described kingdom people who are blessed. In view of these characteristics, don’t you feel that you fall short? Actually, these eight kingdom values describe only one person perfectly—Jesus Christ. So we all have to be transformed by the power of God. We really want to have the attitude, desire and character of kingdom people, don’t we? Then how is it possible? It is possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. God transforms us when we receive Jesus and the gospel through repentance and faith in him. Then we make a radical difference in the world for Christ, which is what Jesus talks about next.

II. “You are the salt...You are the light” (13-16)

After describing the transformed character of his kingdom people, Jesus teaches about their identity and role in the world as salt and light.

- (1) You are the salt of the earth. Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”

Salt is essential for life. We use salt to give good flavor to food. Jesus’ followers give good flavor or good influence to the world. Salt is also a preservative. There were no refrigerators in Jesus’ time. But salt was used to preserve foods from decaying. Jesus is saying that, like salt, his disciples preserve the world from corruption and decay. Jesus’ kingdom people are the salty contributors to God’s kingdom society. As we live with the mind and heart of Christ, we are a good influence at home, at school, at work and wherever we are. But if we lose our saltiness, our lives make no noticeable difference. This is why we must be changed into Jesus’ image.

Ask yourself: How am I being a salty influence to the people around me—at home, at school, at work? Are you being salt, which is Jesus’ hope and promise for you?

- (2) You are the light of the world. Jesus says, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Aren’t you a little surprised that Jesus called anyone, even his disciples “the light of the world”? Of course, we know well that Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus said in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” We also know that the word of God is a light. Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path.” So Jesus is the light. And , the word of God is a light. But here Jesus says, looking at his disciples, “You are the light of the world.” Really? I am the light of the world? You are the light of the world? We are the light of the world? Really? Yes. How do I know? Because Jesus said so! If you are a disciple of Jesus, if you love Jesus, if you have accepted his grace of forgiveness of sin, then you are the light of the world!

Probably you know the song: “This little light of mine; I’m going to let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.” Then how are followers of Jesus the light of the world? Not by singing a song and pretending my finger is a light. Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Here again, Jesus tells us why we must be transformed to have his mind and heart.

Jesus says, “Let your light shine, that others may see your good deeds.” What are the good deeds that shine? They are deeds done from a meek and humble heart. When we apologize and ask for forgiveness for Jesus’ sake, we shine. When we put others ahead of ourselves because of Jesus, we shine. When we love others in the name of Jesus, instead of exalting ourselves or insisting on our own way, we shine. Shiny deeds are those that come from earnestly seeking righteousness and a pure heart. They are deeds motivated to honor, thank, praise and glorify God. They are deeds that reflect the mind and heart of Jesus Christ.

One way that the USA has been a light to the world has been through Christian missionaries. Jonathan Edwards was inspired by the short but dedicated life of David Brainerd, who was a missionary to native Americans. Here is a quote from David Brainerd: “We should always look upon ourselves as God's servants, placed in God's world, to do his work....not with a design to grow rich

and great, but to glorify God, and do all the good we possibly can.” So many Christian missionaries are shining the light of Christ all over the world.

When I was 18 years old, my dad died by heart attack. At that time, I just wanted to get a college degree, make a lot of money, and enjoy my life. But I felt meaningless, and the darkness of my sins made me a bad influence. However, through the light of God’s word and the light of Jesus Christ, I was given a new life of joy and living hope. Since that time, the light of Jesus has been shining in and through me. Sometimes I’m discouraged, wondering if my life is making any difference. Am I really salt and light? Recently, a former Bible student wrote an encouraging note to me and my wife. He said: “In a secular campus, Pastor Kevin’s evangelism at Northwestern was instrumental in helping me to have faith in Christ and grow in faith. I am forever indebted to Pastor Kevin and Northwestern UBF for the greatest gift of all--directing me towards faith in the only Savior, Jesus Christ.” Praise and thanks be to Jesus Christ! Jesus changed my darkness and has enabled me to shine light before others in this world.

In Jesus’ sermon, we have learned from Jesus who is truly blessed as kingdom people. The blessed ones, the kingdom people, are those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted because of righteousness. In a word, they are kingdom people who trust and obey Jesus and who are growing in the likeness of Jesus Christ. This is not something that we can just determine to do in our own strength and effort. It is only possible by the Holy Spirit, when we die to self and live by gospel faith in, for and through Jesus Christ. This requires a constant battle against sin, putting to death our sinful nature, and surrendering to Jesus’ good, pleasing and perfect will for us. And we are not in this alone. We are in this battle, the good fight, with like-minded brothers and sisters in Christ who are living as his kingdom people.

Do you want to be blessed? I know I do. Then let’s live as his blessed kingdom people, just as Jesus taught us and showed us. Sometimes it looks like our country is losing its light of Christian influence. But when we live by faith in Jesus and the gospel of his kingdom, we can be poor in spirit, and have inner desire for God. We can bear the good fruits of mercy, purity and peace. Then, says Jesus, we are the salt and light of the world. May Jesus’ grace be with all of us here to live with Jesus’ hope and promise: “You are the light of the world.”