

## The Key to the Kingdom Mathew 5:1-12

This morning's message is an introduction to a series of upcoming messages based upon Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Lenten season will soon be upon us, and my hope that it will help us in our earthly journey with Him to Resurrection Sunday. The central theme of this series will be reclaiming the cross for the glory of Jesus. It is my prayer that our world will become a better place as we do.

Part of our mission as disciples of Jesus Christ is to influence and impact our world for good, without letting the world influence us. If we are to be successful in doing that, it will be helpful for us to learn and put into practice the principles from one of the most important sermons ever preached in the history of humanity, the Sermon on the Mount. It is found in chapters 5-7 of Mathews Gospel, and it deals with a myriad of things that have plagued society throughout the ages. Jesus teaches about eternal rewards, love, prayer, charity, fasting, truth and even how to build a home. He also speaks of the persecution of believers, the shortcomings of the law and government, anger, lust, wealth, worry, hypocrisy, and false teaching.

The last two verses of chapter 7 sum it up well. The sermon on the mount is was no ordinary sermon preached by an ordinary rabbi. Then and now, sermons are preached to a variety of people on a variety of topics for a variety of reasons, and the best sermons will accomplish two objectives. They will educate and inform us of the basic Scriptural principles God has decreed for us to live our lives by, and they will soften our hearts so that the Holy Spirit might influence our actions and attitudes. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. **James 1:22** In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus accomplished both of those objectives as well as a third- He established His authority to teach. Without that, His words would have been just another message heard on Sunday and forgotten on Monday. To use as modern- day cliché, Jesus alone has walked the walk and talked the talk. Unlike much preaching of today, it was much more than a self- help chat or a feel better about us message. I use that word us intentionally, as Biblical truth knows no human boundaries. **It applies to all of us and is just as applicable to the preacher as it is for the people.**

Matthew 16:24 may not be part of the text of the Sermon on the Mount, but it is certainly part of the message. Jesus has set the bar so very high for His followers in this sermon that some say His ideals are unattainable in this world. As with the Biblical command to be perfect, many simply refuse to try. However, as followers and disciples of Jesus we are to listen to His teaching, follow His example and impact our world for good in the hope of reaching our goal of Christian perfection.

Much has changed in the 2000+ years since Jesus first preached that incredible sermon. Modern technology, communication and transportation have influenced society in too many ways to count. However, it appears that one thing that may have changed the most is this: fewer people understand the power of the cross. Fewer and fewer people are willing to put others ahead of themselves. Perhaps that is because there are fewer Christians.

As with the generations before us, we continue to struggle with monumental social and moral issues that affect our day to day lives and for that matter our place in the kingdom of heaven. War, poverty, discrimination, and the sanctity of human life are some of the greatest. Whether we choose to admit it or not, it is certainly reasonable to conclude that all of those things are interrelated, at least to some degree with one another. It is also reasonable to conclude that all of those things are contrary to God's goodness and will for our lives. The Sermon on the Mount offers insight into all of these social ills, as well as every other thing that will prevent us from accomplishing our goal of impacting and influencing our world for good.

As we seek to do that very thing, we will have our Bibles in hand and remember the three simple rules John Wesley taught the people called Methodists – **do no harm by avoiding evil, do good and stay in love with God.** More often said than done, they are really a practical prescription for holy living- personal holiness which when practiced will lead to social holiness. Those two things- the Bible and the three simple rules- intersect on the Sermon on the Mount. It is a treasure of practical principles we can choose to apply to our own lives to allow us to follow those three simple rules and one that Jesus taught- love your neighbor as yourself.

**The power to do that comes from the message of the cross.** It is the key that unlocks the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. Jesus knows something about that kingdom, because He was there when it was designed, He was there when it was created and His whole mission was to make it known to creation. Jesus has the authority to teach about the kingdom of God because it is His kingdom. Jesus tells us everything we need to know about it (not everything we want to know!) in this book we call His Word.

So, what does He have to say about it? Why did He teach and heal the multitudes that day on the side of the mountain? And more importantly for us, how can we be taught and how can we be healed as well? To find the answer, we must begin with **5:3**. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The word blessed literally means happy, fortunate, or blissful. Poor in spirit does not imply material poverty or even spiritual poverty as we traditionally understand it, but it conveys the uncomfortable truth that we are totally lost, completely dependent upon the grace of God. More than just humility, it is the idea that we are morally and spiritually bankrupt and helpless to help ourselves in spite of our attempts to become righteous on our own.

Happy and fortunate and blissful are those who know that it is not their efforts or actions that save them but God's grace. It is not our work, our trying to be like Jesus that reconciles us to God and grants us the kingdom but the work of Christ on the cross that He has already done for us. That is not just teaching and preaching but that is healing. Those times when we have desperately tried on our own without success are in the past. When we believe the kingdom is already ours, we have power to live our lives in a way that is different from those who have not yet experienced the love of God. Not with arrogance or self-confidence or even fear, but with the humility of knowing that the kingdom of heaven has been made available to us and our way has been prepaid at very high price, the price of the cross. **The cross is the key to the kingdom of heaven.**

It might sound strange, but that has never been a popular message, and it is even less popular today. Now more than ever, those that still believe in some sort of higher power tend to think they can approach that higher power on their own terms in their own way. As we saw last week in 1 Corinthians 1:18, in the words of the apostle Paul the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing.

Jesus told His early disciples and He tells us to expect some hostility from them. 5:10 Happy and fortunate and blissful are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. Why? Because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:11 Happy and fortunate and blissful are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

5:12 Rejoice, be happy and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

The power to do that comes only from the cross of Christ. It is the key to the kingdom of heaven. I encourage you to spend time in Mathew 5-7 in your devotions in the coming weeks so that we might ponder and treasure that blessed truth together.