

Did Jesus Really Say That?

1. Qualified

Oct. 25, 2020

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

Let's try a little fill-in-the-blank. Let's see if you can complete these phrases: "Salt of the _____" [earth] and "Go the extra _____" [mile]. Great!

A lot of people might be surprised to hear that those phrases come from Jesus. And so do these: "Turn the other cheek," "Light under a bushel," "City on a hill" and "Left hand doesn't know what right hand is doing..." Not only do all of these phrases come from Jesus, they also come from the "Sermon on the Mount," which is the most famous sermon in all of history.

A couple of years ago, I was in Israel at the traditional site of the Sermon on the Mount. It is on the Sea of Galilee, where the shore slopes up from the water, creating a natural amphitheater. It is easy to imagine why Jesus picked this spot to preach; a voice can carry to lots of people here. There is a church built on the spot today. But this is not the only place Jesus preached this sermon. This was his core teaching. Jesus was a travelling preacher so he no doubt preached it in many places. The book of Luke tells us that Jesus preached it on a plain, not on a Mount.

Today we're starting a message series through the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps now more than ever we need to re-center ourselves on exactly what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' call to the revolutionary lifestyle of discipleship. It teaches us that each follower of Jesus is a subversive agent planting the seeds of the Kingdom through highly unlikely means. Jesus' message is so revolutionary that as we listen to it with fresh ears, we might wonder, "Did Jesus really say that?"

Interest rates have been at historic lows lately, so you might see a billboard or an online ad advertising an amazingly low rate, but often, if you look at the fine print, it will say "For qualified borrowers." The rate is not available to everyone, just a select few.

That won't shock many of us, because we quickly learn that the world works on qualifications such as: we have to qualify to get into a particular college (you've got to have the right grades, test scores, and more). To qualify to be a professional athlete, you have to have exceptional hand-eye coordination, strength, size, or speed. If we don't have those, we know not to even try for a career in professional sports. To be really popular, you need to have a certain personality, or look, or connections. Even at Kennywood, "you must be this tall" to ride certain rides! We get the message: You gotta measure up; some people have it, some people don't.

Spiritually – who qualifies to be part of the Kingdom of God? Who gets to be friends with God? Who gets to receive comfort from God? Who does God forgive? Who qualifies for rewards from God? Who gets eternal life in heaven? Do you have to be “this holy” to get in? Do some people “have it” and others don’t?

Jesus starts the Sermon on the Mount revealing who is qualified to be part of the Kingdom of God. In the book of Matthew, “the Kingdom of God” is called “the Kingdom of Heaven.” There’s not a real difference between the two terms; they mean the same thing. Matthew was writing to Jews, who believed the word God was too holy to pronounce, so he used the term “Kingdom of heaven” instead of “Kingdom of God.”

Let’s be clear about what Jesus means by “the Kingdom of heaven.” It is not where God’s people go after they die. Jesus was not speaking about just the afterlife. “The Kingdom of heaven” does not refer to the church. The Kingdom of heaven – or the Kingdom of God – is **life when God is in charge**.

Dallas Willard puts it this way: It’s “Where what God wants done is done.” That happens sometimes on earth, and all the time in the afterlife of heaven. We are praying for the Kingdom of heaven when we pray, “your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

The opening part of the Sermon is called “The Beatitudes.” “Beatitude” is not a word we use a lot these days. It refers to supreme blessing or utmost bliss. You might say that Jesus is describing the good life; who’s got it made.

To the Jews in Jesus’ day, it was obvious who was blessed. They were the ones with the clear blessings! The Bible reveals that they thought: first, **blessed people had money**. Listen to how Abraham’s servant describes him in **Genesis 24:25** *The Lord has blessed my master abundantly and he has become wealthy*. Wealth was seen as a sign that God blessed Abraham. Second, **blessed people were healthy**. The Gospel of John says that one day Jesus met a blind man and Jesus’ own followers asked him, **John 9:2** *“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* “Here’s a guy with physical problems, so the disciples figured that God was angry at him for misbehaving. That’s what they had been taught. Third, **blessed people had children; especially sons**. In those days, your children were your Social Security; they took care of you when you were old; and sons carried your family name and heritage.

In the New Testament, we read about a woman named Elizabeth who had no children. It was hard enough wanting to be a mother and not being able to be, she also knew that people thought, “God is not pleased with her – he hasn’t blessed her with children.” When Elizabeth finally had a son, she said, **Luke 1:25** *“The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”*

People thought that if you are wealthy, healthy, and have lots of sons, that means God loves you. You are blessed and God is for you. If you don't have those things; well, you are not blessed and you might even be cursed.

Many people believe some version of that today, too. That is, if you live right then God will bless you with the good life. Even many Jesus followers find it hard to believe that God is for them when life becomes really hard.

Studies show that the more time you spend on Facebook or Instagram, the more likely you'll get depressed. We look at someone else's post and they're smiling, partying with friends or on a tropical vacation with family and we think, "They have a great life. I haven't been off my couch in 5 months. I'm not measuring up. I don't have what it takes." It's easy to assume that they are blessed and I am not.

But, in the opening to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turns that thinking upside down. **Matthew 5:1-2** *Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them.* Let's be clear about who Jesus was talking to. Most of the crowd didn't have much of what was considered the blessed life. Scholars have examined the DNA from graves from the first century and found that people in Jesus' immediate area were protein deficient.¹ They had a terrible diet. 75% of Israelites in Jesus' day died by the age of 26. Jesus' hearers were living under foreign military occupation by Rome and they were taxed more than twice as heavily as you and I.

The crowds listening to Jesus didn't fit the Jewish picture of a blessed person. They were poor. They were hungry. They were powerless. Many were grief-stricken and Jesus told them: "You've got it made!" *He said: ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* Instead of feeling sorry for those who mourn, who are meek, and who are spiritually poor, Jesus says, "Envy them! They are BLESSED!" Why? Because they will have the kingdom, comfort, and everything will be theirs.

Jesus' core message in the Beatitudes is: **Life in the Kingdom of God is available to anyone who wants to live under God's leadership.** He goes on to tell people who deeply want to live God's way: *⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Jesus says, ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.* Don't look down on people who show mercy instead of making other people pay. They're blessed! God will show them mercy; the forgiveness of the kingdom!

Do you want to be a child of God? Do you want a reward from God? God will grant it, even if other people mistreat you. If you want to live under God's leadership, you can, and it will be so good that you'll be the envy of your friends.

¹ *Four Fascinating Reasons Jesus walked so much.* By Brian Jones *The Art of Living* blog

Jesus isn't telling us to strive to be poor, to make it your goal to mourn and be meek. No, he is saying that if you are those things, you are still qualified to be blessed!

The good life under God's direction is not reserved for the powerful, the elite or those who impose their will on others. The Kingdom is open to those who are poor in spirit and mourn. You are still qualified to be comforted and filled. You are still qualified to inherit the Kingdom and the earth.

Jesus' main message tells us that everyone is pre-qualified for the blessings of Kingdom life, simply by trusting and yielding to Jesus.

Have you been disqualifying yourself? One of the evil tactics of our enemy, the devil, is to convince believers that God's blessings are for other more qualified people. So we think: "I believe that God speaks to people today, just not to me" or "Sure, God answers prayer, just not mine" or "I guess I'm his child, but not one of his favorite ones."

The Beatitudes tell us that if you want more of God, that qualifies you to experience him, no matter what else is happening in your life. If you are hungry for God, it's because the Spirit is at work in you, pulling you toward him.

"Hunger attracts God." If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, you will be filled. If you are pure in heart, that is, if your intent is to know him, you will! You'll see God.

If you think you don't have much to offer God, that's good! The Kingdom of God is a gift. Remember, you do have what no one else can offer God: your love and trust. Don't write yourself off as ineligible for the good life in the Kingdom of God.

Who else have I written off, spiritually? You can never tell who will respond to God's invitation to life and be transformed.

Saul was a ferocious persecutor of Christians until he met the risen Christ himself. Then he became the Apostle Paul, who became the greatest church planter ever. At first, other Christians were afraid to be around him, because they had a hard time believing THAT GUY could have become a follower of Jesus. But he did! You can never tell who might become a follower of Jesus, so you can't write anyone off ahead of time.

Brian "Head" Welch was living a dream that became a nightmare. He was a guitarist and co-founder of the band Korn. If you're not familiar with the group's music, *Chicago Tribune* called Korn "perverts, psychopaths, and paranoiacs." The group's songs often have lyrics that are very, very dark.

Head was famous and rich, but he was addicted to drugs and alcohol, and his life was crashing. At that moment, I am guessing very few people looked at Head and said, "You know, I think he is going to make a great disciple." Welch's life was on the brink of

destruction when a friend gave him a Bible. "It's not about religion, it's not about this church; it's not about me. It's about the Book of Life, and everybody needs THIS."

Welch read that Bible and God worked a miracle in his life. Head committed his life to following Jesus and a week later, he flew to Israel to be baptized in the Jordan River. Shortly after that, Brian left the band. Some people thought it was a practical joke, but Welch showed up to Valley Bible Fellowship the following Sunday and told the crowd of 10,000, "I am the happiest man in the world right now."²

A few years later, Head rejoined the group, but he is still following Jesus passionately. After concerts, he invites fans who are interested to meet with him and to receive prayer and hear about Jesus. And they do!

Let's ask ourselves, "Am I writing anyone off?" Our mission as a church is to make disciples who make disciples. That means we are to reach everybody who is open. Jesus said, "Go into *all* the world and make disciples." He didn't say "Go into some parts of the world." He didn't say, "Go into the places where the people are like you." He didn't say, "Go into all the world except to those people – don't pay attention to them..." Every person we see is prequalified for life in Jesus' kingdom.

Let's take a moment and let the Spirit speak to us. Let's bow together, wherever we are. Is there someone you know that you have written off as impossible or think that person will never come to Christ? Let the Spirit speak to you about that, and ask for the ability to expect that person can become a follower.

Maybe the person you have written off is yourself. Maybe you have assumed you are not the type that will know God or be changed by him. If you are open, Jesus will enter your life and transform it.

² <https://www.onlinechristiancolleges.com/famous-christian-converts-and-7-famous-de-converts/>