

Following The Way Of The Kingdom: Studies in the Sermon on the Mount

First Methodist Church of Tulsa
Fall 2025

Matthew 4:17

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

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I. OVERVIEW & SCOPE

The purpose of this class is twofold. The first is to help students develop an understanding of what becoming an apprentice, or disciple, of Jesus entails. This will include not only an understanding of the goal of the Christian life (becoming like Jesus) but also an understanding of how to live the Christian life. The second purpose is to help familiarize students with Jesus' most famous teaching on the ethics of the kingdom of the heavens.

II. SUGGESTED READINGS & RESOURCES

Primary Texts:

The Holy Bible, any modern translation (*Tell Pastor Matthew if you need a Bible*)

Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. NavPress, 2021.

III. SESSION SCHEDULE

Session 1: (Sept 3) Introduction to the Kingdom (Matthew 5:1-2)

Session 2: (Sept 10) The Blessed Life (Matthew 5:3-12)

Session 3: (Sept 17) Responsibilities of Kingdom Life (Matthew 5:13-16)

Session 4: (Sept 24) Righteousness (Matthew 5:17-48)

Session 5: (Oct 1) Piety (Matthew 6:1-18)

Session 6: (Oct 8) Possessions (Matthew 6:19-34)

Session 7: (Oct 15) Judging of Persons (Matthew 7:1-12)

Session 8: (Oct 22) Entrance to the Kingdom (Matthew 7:13-14)

Session 9: (Oct 29) False Prophets (Matthew 7:15-23)

Session 10: (Nov 5) Obedience (Matthew 7:24-27)

Session 11: (Nov 12) The Sermon as a Whole (Matthew 5:1-7:27)

Session 12: (Nov 19) Putting it All Together

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Matthew 5:1-2

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

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1. Sandra Richter says something to the effect of “it’s hardly a fish who knows it’s in water.” What she means is that a fish has no idea it’s swimming in water. That’s the way it is with worldview; we almost never know we have it, but it directs our living. If you take a few moments to think about it, what are some non-negotiable aspects of your worldview?

2. In a quote used in the lesson by Dallas Willard, he says, “We do not become able to obey by trying to obey, but by *becoming the kind of person* who naturally does obey. That means our intention is to acquire, by intelligent effort and grace, the inward character of Jesus Christ himself. We think and feel like him, our will has his habits of choosing, our very body is poised toward righteous deeds, and our way of taking on our relations to others is governed by his kind of love.” What do you think the difference is between trying to obey and becoming the kind of person who obeys? Is there a gap between the two in your own life?

3. If you joined me in praying, “God, your kingdom is here. Change my life,” what do you hope the outcome will be? In other words, what is it in your heart that you are asking God to change?

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I. Going over syllabus

A. Purpose.

1. *The purpose of this class is twofold. The first is to help students develop an understanding of what becoming an apprentice, or disciple, of Jesus entails. This will include not only an understanding of the goal of the Christian life (becoming like Jesus) but also an understanding of how to live the Christian life. The second purpose is to help familiarize students with Jesus' most famous teaching on the ethics of the kingdom of the heavens.*

2. Becoming like Christ

B. Schedule.

C. Reading.

1. Suggest reading the Sermon on the Mount every week. Every day if possible.

2. Bible. Renovation of the Heart.

a. Why RotH?

II. Life in the Kingdom – What it is and how we do it.

Hopefully, I've made the purpose of this course clear and now I want to say a little more about that because we need to start on the right foot if we want a

chance of the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit making a difference in the way we live our lives.

The Sermon on the Mount begins in Matthew 5, but the path to understanding the message begins a little earlier than that in Matthew 4:17. After the temptation in the wilderness, where Jesus defeats Satan's temptations, it says, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" I want us to identify two very important concepts Jesus is introducing here: Repentance, the kingdom of heaven (or, the kingdom of the heavens), and what "at hand" means.

The first thing Jesus preaches is an imperative to repent. In the Old Testament, the word that is translated as "repent" into English from Hebrew means "to turn." Simply put, the image is of a person walking a path and they hear a beckoning call to turn and walk a different path, one that leads them in the way of God. It's a way that leads that person to God. In the New Testament, the word that is translated into English from Greek means "a change of mind," or a change of thinking. It's not a half-hearted nod toward what is true and good while continuing to do what one desires to do. It is a change of *desire*, of the whole life, including the mind in order to change course. A fundamental question to ask ourselves is, "is Jesus' way better than my way? Is his way of living and thinking better than my way?" If the answer to those questions is, "yes," then something has to give, doesn't it? We're not equipped to last very long as a person living inconsistently by our actions with what we know to be true. If we acknowledge that murder is wrong, then practicing murder is going to create a crisis within us (not to mention outside of us with the legal ramifications.) So, if Jesus' way is true and better than our way, we must turn and change our way of thinking and that's called repentance.

One of the reasons repentance is so hard is because it is difficult to change our way of seeing the world. Dr. Dennis Kinlaw talked about the way we see the world as our own paradigm. N.T. Wright calls it the metanarrative. Others call it a worldview. Every single one of us has a paradigm, or a metanarrative, or a worldview. It's the way we see the world and make sense of it. Those worldviews are created by a number of different inputs into our lives. We craft a worldview based upon the way we were raised, most of the time either an embrace or a rejection of the way our parents taught us. We also form a worldview based on our own responses to stimuli. For instance, a child who falls into a campfire and gets badly burned, spending time in a hospital getting skin grafts, is probably going to have a worldview that says, "fire is not only dangerous, it's evil," and will then avoid fire at all costs. If something terrible

happens to us that is beyond our control, something inside of us will probably subconsciously drive us to exert our internal sense control in every situation in life. We don't think about these things, they just express themselves through our thoughts and actions just like the way our hearts beat without us thinking "beat, heart. Beat, heart," every moment of the day. Or how we breathe without thinking about it.

When those worldviews collide with something outside of it, something that challenges our worldview, then we come to a crisis, or a fork in the road. Truth will always try to reshape our worldviews and for some people that is a deeply difficult and painful process. That's repentance. But, you may ask, a repentance to what? What am I being asked to align with by Jesus?

After Jesus tells us to repent, he gives us the reason. Eugene Peterson, in his interpretation of this verse, helpfully frames it as "change your life." Why? Because the kingdom of the heavens is at hand. What is the kingdom of heaven (or "of the heavens")? Let's take a step back for a minute. We live in 2025 and there aren't many countries that are considered kingdoms anymore. There was a time in the not so distant past where nearly every country was ruled by some kind of regent: one person at the top who dictated policy and ruled the nation. This was true back in Jesus' day, too. The kingdom, or empire, of Rome was the dominant political and cultural force of the 1st century near east. That empire had a code—laws—which was the way they expected you to behave so that you could productively participate in the society it dominated. When competing kingdoms, or ways of living, came into conflict, there was war. It was winner take all. Take, for instance, the situation in the early 6th century B.C. You're a citizen of Judah, living in Jerusalem. There was a code or set of laws to follow. Then, in 587, a competing kingdom called Babylon comes in and defeats Judah, taking away many of the productive members of that society to Babylon, forcing them to adapt to their way of living. After the Babylonians were defeated by the Medes and then the Persians and the Judeans went back to their land, they found themselves defeated by the Greeks, winning their autonomy briefly under the Hasmoneans, and then Rome comes on the scene. In the middle of this, Jesus declares that there is another kingdom, one not of this earth but originating in the heavens. This kingdom not only has a competing claim on the territory of Judea but on the whole earth. This kingdom has a different code than that of the Romans and every other nation on earth. The Jews had been living with a worldview that tried hard to maintain their social codes while at the same time living with the reality that they were dominated and occupied by another kingdom. Jesus comes and tells them, and

us, that we must change our lives, our ways of living and thinking, in order to align with another king, the *real* King of the universe. No doubt, adopting an ethos of another kingdom is going to create some problems, but it is the only way to keep oneself in line with the one true king. Caesar may kill you, but that's not the worst thing that could happen (which Jesus alludes to in the Sermon on the Mount, but we'll get to that later.)

Lastly, Jesus tells us that this kingdom is "at hand." I agree with Dallas Willard that far too many of us read "at hand" and think, "Jesus is telling us that the kingdom of God is near, it's on its way." But that's not what Jesus is saying. He is saying that the kingdom of the heavens is *here*. It's not far off in the future, it is here. Jesus is the rightful king who has come to establish his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Because it is here, we have a choice to make: do we live according to the kingdoms of this world, seen and unseen, or do we live according to Jesus' kingdom? If we chose the latter, then we repent and align ourselves with him and live according to his decrees.

This brings us to the beginning of the sermon. Jesus sees a crowd, calls his disciples near, and opens his mouth to teach. What he teaches is the concern of this course over the next many weeks. Before we start into the meat of that next week, though, I think it will be helpful for us to frame the sermon in a couple of ways.

The first frame is the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20. Jesus tells the disciples to make disciples of all nations, to baptize them, and to teach them all that Jesus commanded them. This is a command to tell people to realign their lives with the kingdom over which Jesus is the king. In other words, tell people to repent and align with me so that they live lives that are in sync with the way I live and rule. Do this by baptizing them and instructing them. This is how we make disciples. Being a disciple, an apprentice, of Jesus is the goal for you and for me. A disciple is someone walking with Jesus, obeying him, and desiring to make sure their lives bear the marks and the fruit of having been with Jesus. That's a point I want to make forcefully this evening. The number one priority of a disciple of Jesus Christ is being with Jesus. I'll have to do some work to flesh that out this fall, but this comprises the first two steps of discipleship that Robert Coleman notes in his book *The Master Plan of Evangelism*: Selection and Association. Jesus selects his disciples and then they associate themselves with him. Over the course of three years, they were with him and being with him, they learned from him. The most important thing the twelve and all of us learn from being with Jesus is his will and his way. Dallas Willard says that the

goal of being with Jesus is becoming a disciple and that “discipleship to Jesus primarily means learning from him how to do--easily and routinely do--the very things he said for us to do.” This is obedience. Not a word that is super popular these days. We all want to be our own little Frank Sinatras who do it “my way.” But if you spend any amount of time with Jesus, he puts a claim on your life and calls you to follow him in doing things his way, not your way. This is obedience. Willard later says, “we do not become able to obey by trying to obey, but by *becoming the kind of person* who naturally does obey. That means our intention is to acquire, by intelligent effort and grace, the inward character of Jesus Christ himself. We think and feel like him, our will has his habits of choosing, our very body is poised toward righteous deeds, and our way of taking on our relations to others is governed by his kind of love.”

Is that a tall order or what? But I want you to hear that very clearly because too many of us will read the sermon on the mount and think, “I have to start doing this stuff.” This stuff is good, it is important, and it is the ethos of God’s kingdom. But, as Willard helpfully points out, we will be frustrated at every turn as we try to do what we find in the sermon *if we have not become the kind of people for whom the sermon is natural*. We need a worldview change that can only come by the work of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to reading the Sermon on the Mount every week at home (or every day if you choose), I want to ask you to also pray a simple prayer every day based upon The Message’s interpretation of Matthew 4:17. Remember he interprets, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” as “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.” So the prayer is, “God, your kingdom is here. Change my life.” Write it on a 3x5 or create a reminder on your phone that says, “God, your kingdom is here. Change my life,” and let’s pray that every day of this course.