

Sermon On the Mount Pt 1 A Survey

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Sermon On the Mount

I. Opening

Twenty one years ago I stood in front of witnesses and said two words. I do. And the moment those words left my mouth, something happened. I became a husband. Not sixty percent a husband. Not a husband in training. A husband, completely, full stop, right then.

Here's what's strange about that. I had no idea what I was doing. I didn't know how to be a husband yet. I didn't know how to listen when I wanted to be right instead. I didn't know when she needed me to just sit with her instead of trying to fix something. All of that I had to learn. Slowly. Over years. Some of it I am still learning twenty one years in.

So here is the question that sat with me for a long time. If I became a husband instantly and completely the moment I said those two words, why did it take years to learn how to actually act like one?

The answer is that status and practice are not the same thing. My status changed in a moment. My practice, the

actual living out of what that status meant, that took a lifetime, and it is still taking one.

I want to say one more thing about that vow, and then I am going to leave it alone for a few weeks. A vow spoken sincerely creates something real and complete, right then, in that moment. But a vow spoken and never meant, never actually intended to be lived out, that is a different thing entirely, even if the words sound identical coming out of someone's mouth. Hold onto that. We are going to come back to it before this series is over.

Tonight, here is what I want you to walk away with. Becoming something and learning to live like that something are two different processes. And that difference is the key that unlocks everything Jesus says for the next three chapters of the book of Matthew.

Because Jesus climbs a hill one day, and he is about to describe, in more detail than anywhere else in Scripture, what it looks like to actually belong to God's kingdom. And the question hanging over every word he says next is the same question I had to answer in my own marriage. Not, what do I have to do to get in. But, now that I am in, what does this actually look like.

That is what we are doing for the next five weeks. We are going to walk through the most famous sermon Jesus ever preached, and we are going to ask that question the whole

way through. Jesus never asks, in this sermon, how do you earn your way into the kingdom. That question is not on the table. The question he is answering is, what does the kingdom actually look like, once you are living inside it.

II. Who is listening: the original audience

Before we get to a single word Jesus says on that hillside, we need to talk about who is sitting there listening to him. Because if you get the audience wrong, you will get the whole sermon wrong.

Matthew 4:23–25 BSB

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

²⁴ News about Him spread all over Syria, and people brought to Him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering acute pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and He healed them.

²⁵ Large crowds followed Him, having come from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.

Matthew tells us Jesus had been traveling all through

Galilee, teaching in synagogues, and healing every kind of sickness and disease people brought to him. Word got out. And people started showing up from everywhere. Syria. The Decapolis. Jerusalem. Judea. From across the Jordan. Matthew says large crowds followed him.

Now, what kind of crowd forms around a man because he heals people? Think about that for a second. You don't travel for days, on foot, because you heard a really compelling teacher was in town. You travel for days because you are desperate. Because somebody in your family cannot walk, or cannot see, or cannot get free from whatever has been tormenting them, and you have run out of other options.

This was not a crowd of successful people who showed up to hear a motivational speaker. This was a crowd of people who were sick, and poor, and out of options.

And there's a reason for that, beyond just the healings. Galilee, at this time, is occupied territory. Rome runs the show. And Rome runs it the way empires usually do, through heavy taxation on people who did not have much to begin with. Families were losing land they had worked for generations, not because they were lazy or foolish, but because the tax burden made it impossible to hold onto. You had a population that was largely poor, and getting poorer, living under the thumb of a foreign power, with

religious leaders back home who mostly could not agree on what, if anything, God was going to do about any of it.

That is who is sitting on this hillside. Not the powerful. Not the comfortable. Not people with a lot of margin in their lives. People who are sick, and poor, and occupied, and tired.

Now hold that in your mind, because Jesus is about to open his mouth, and the very first thing he says is going to be, blessed are the poor in spirit. And if you do not know who is sitting in front of him when he says it, that line sounds like a nice devotional thought. A little inspirational quote you'd put on a coffee mug.

But if you know who is actually sitting there, it lands completely differently. Jesus is not opening his most famous sermon with a general spiritual principle for anybody who happens to be listening. He is looking at people who have nothing left to offer, people the world has mostly written off or overlooked, and he is telling them, first, before anything else, that they are exactly where God's kingdom starts.

Not the religious leaders. Not the wealthy. Not the people who had it figured out. The poor, the sick, the occupied, the tired. Jesus starts with them.

That is going to matter for every single thing we look at over the next five weeks. This sermon was never written for

people who already have it together, being handed a slightly higher standard to live up to. It was preached to people with nothing, telling them what it looks like now that they belong to something.

III. What Is Being Announced — The Kingdom Arrives

So we know who is sitting on that hillside. Sick. Poor. Occupied. Tired. Now we need to ask what Jesus is actually doing when he starts talking to them.

Because here is something easy to miss if you have read this sermon a hundred times. Jesus does not just start teaching one day out of nowhere. Matthew tells us exactly what Jesus had already been saying, right before any of this happens.

Matthew 4:17 BSB

¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

That is the announcement. Not a suggestion, not a philosophy, an announcement that something has arrived. Look closely at the phrase. At hand. In the Greek that word carries the sense of something that has drawn near, close enough to reach out and touch. Not someday. Not off in the distance. Here.

And right after that, in the same chapter, Matthew tells us what Jesus was doing as he traveled.

Matthew 4:23 BSB

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. Notice what kind of word gospel is. It means good news, and specifically it was used in the ancient world for the kind of news you would send ahead when a king had won a battle, or a new ruler had taken the throne. It is announcement language. Something has happened, and now everything is different.

So before Jesus ever climbs the hill in chapter 5, he has already been walking through Galilee saying the same thing over and over. The kingdom of heaven has drawn near. It is here.

That raises an obvious question. What does Jesus mean by kingdom of heaven? Is he talking about someplace you go when you die?

To answer that we have to go back further than Matthew. We have to go back to the very beginning of the story.

Genesis 1:26–28 BSB

²⁶ Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness, to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, and over all the earth itself and every creature that crawls upon it.”

²⁷ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that crawls upon the earth.”

God made a world where his rule and human rule were not in competition. He made people to rule this world with Him, under Him, the way he would rule it. That was the plan from the very first page of the Bible. Not humans running the world their own way, off in a corner somewhere, while God stays somewhere else. Humans ruling with God, right here, his kingdom and this earth as one thing.

We know how that story goes from there. Genesis 3 tells us humans decided they would rather rule their own way, apart from God, and everything broke. Not just the relationship between people and God. The relationship between people and each other, people and the ground they work, people and their own bodies. All of it fractured at once.

So God starts over, not by scrapping the plan, but by choosing one family to carry it. He tells Abraham he is going to build a nation through him, and that nation is going to bless every other nation on earth. When God brings that nation out of Egypt and gathers them at Sinai, he tells them plainly what they are for.

Exodus 19:6 BSB

⁶ And unto Me you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you are to speak to the Israelites."

A kingdom of priests. Not just a nation among other nations. A living demonstration, out in front of the watching world, of what it looks like when people actually live under God's rule the way it was always supposed to work.

And Israel fails at that too. Over and over. Kings who rule like every other king around them. A people who forget the God who brought them out. Eventually the whole thing collapses, and they end up exiled, then occupied, then waiting, generation after generation, for God to make good on what he promised. The prophets keep the hope alive even in the worst of it. Daniel, writing from exile, tells a pagan king that a day is coming when the God of heaven is going to set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, one that will outlast every empire that has ever tried to rule the world its own way.

Daniel 2:44 BSB

⁴⁴ In the days of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will shatter all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, but will itself stand forever.

That phrase, the God of heaven, is not an accident. It is the same territory Jesus is standing on when he announces the kingdom of heaven has drawn near. He is telling his listeners, in language soaked in their own Scriptures, that the thing Daniel promised, the thing the prophets kept pointing toward, is happening now, in front of them.

And notice who it is happening to first. Centuries earlier, Isaiah described what it would look like when God's Spirit finally came to set things right.

Isaiah 61:1 BSB

¹ The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners,

Good news to the poor. Not the powerful. Not the people who had already arranged their lives comfortably. The poor, first. That is not incidental to what Jesus is doing in Galilee. It is the fulfillment of exactly what Isaiah said to expect. Jesus stands in front of a crowd of sick, poor, occupied

people, and he is not improvising. He is doing precisely what the God of heaven said he would do, to precisely the people God said he would do it for.

So when Jesus stands up and says the kingdom of heaven is at hand, he is not offering a brand new idea that has never been heard before. He is saying the thing Israel has been waiting on for centuries, the thing Daniel promised, the thing Isaiah described, is happening right now, in front of them, and it is starting with people exactly like the ones standing on that hillside.

That is what makes the Sermon on the Mount different from a list of good advice for living a decent life. Everything Jesus says for the next three chapters is not a stand alone code of ethics, floating free of any larger story. It is a description of what it looks like when the kingdom God has been promising since Genesis actually shows up in a person's life. The announcement comes first. The description of what that announcement produces comes next. You cannot separate the two, and you should not try to.

Which means when we get to the Beatitudes next week, and Jesus starts describing the kind of people who are blessed, he is not handing out a checklist for how to become acceptable to God. He has already told this crowd the kingdom is here. Now he is describing what it looks like on the people who are living inside it.

IV. How the Sermon Is Built — The Literary Design

We have talked about who is listening and what is being announced. Now I want to slow down and look at how Matthew actually put this sermon together. Because this is not just Jesus rambling for three chapters. Jesus built this with real intention. And once you see the architecture, you cannot unsee it, and it changes how you read everything else we do for the rest of this series.

Let's start with the big picture. The whole sermon breaks into three main movements.

The first movement is the opening. That is the Beatitudes, along with the salt and light sayings that follow them.

Matthew 5:1-16

This section tells you who belongs and what they look like. Before Jesus asks anything of anyone, he describes the kind of people the kingdom is already producing.

The second movement is the main body. This is the largest section by far, and it runs from the middle of chapter 5 all the way through the first twelve verses of chapter 7.

Matthew 5:17-7:12

This is where Jesus works out what righteousness actually looks like, in how you treat people and in how you relate to God.

The third movement is the closing.

Matthew 7:13-27

Here Jesus stops describing and starts asking. He puts a choice in front of every single person listening. We will spend our entire last session in this section, because it is where everything the sermon has said gets put to the test.

Now here is where it gets interesting. That middle movement, the main body, is not just a pile of teaching thrown together. Matthew opens it and closes it with the same word, on purpose.

Matthew 5:17–20 BSB

¹⁷ Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.

¹⁸ For I tell you truly, until heaven and earth pass away, not a single jot, not a stroke of a pen, will disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

¹⁹ So then, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do likewise will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Read that carefully. Jesus opens the main body with the Law and the Prophets, and in the very next breath he tells you what fulfilling them actually looks like: a righteousness that exceeds the scribes and Pharisees. So the phrase Law and Prophets and the idea of righteousness are welded together right at the front door of everything that follows.

Now look at how the main body closes, right before the sermon moves into its final section.

Matthew 7:12 BSB

¹² In everything, then, do to others as you would have them do to you. For this is the essence of the Law and the Prophets.

The Golden Rule. And notice what Jesus ties it back to in the very same breath. For this is the Law and the Prophets. The exact same phrase he opened with.

That is not a coincidence. In writing, when an author opens a section with a phrase and then closes the same section with that same phrase, it is called an inclusio. It is a literary bracket. Think of it like bookends on a shelf. Everything between those two verses, all six case studies, all the teaching on prayer and fasting and giving, all the material on wealth and worry and judging, all of it sits inside a frame built from the phrase Law and Prophets, a phrase Jesus has already told you means righteousness, at the start and at the end. Matthew wants you to read the whole middle section through that lens. Whatever else is happening in these two chapters, it is all in service of one question. What does real righteousness look like.

Now let's look inside that frame, because it is not evenly built throughout, and I want to be honest with you about where the pattern is tight and where it loosens up.

The first thing inside the bracket is a set of six case studies, where Jesus takes a command from the Torah and shows what it actually demands underneath the surface.

Matthew 5:21-48

These six break cleanly into two groups of three. The first three deal with murder and anger, adultery and lust, divorce and remarriage. The second three deal with oaths and honesty, retaliation and nonviolence, and love for enemies.

Two clean triads, back to back. We will spend an entire session inside this section alone, because there is a tremendous amount of ground to cover here.

After that comes a section on religious practice.

Matthew 6:1-18

This one is also a clean triad. Giving, then prayer, then fasting. Three practices, each one handled the exact same way, which we will get into when we look at why structure matters in a few minutes.

After that, the pattern gets looser, and I want to say that plainly rather than force it into a shape it does not actually have. You have teaching on wealth and worry.

Matthew 6:19-34

And then teaching on judging others, and on asking, seeking, and knocking, closing with the Golden Rule we already looked at.

Matthew 7:1-12

These two sections are not built as a tidy triad the way the case studies and the religious practices are. They cover real ground, and they matter, but if I stood up here and forced them into some artificial three part structure just to keep a

pattern going, I would be doing something to the text that Matthew did not actually do.

Now, here is the detail I think is the most important thing in this entire section, so I want to slow all the way down for it. Right in the middle of that religious practices triad, tucked between teaching on giving and teaching on fasting, sits this.

Matthew 6:9–13 BSB

⁹ So then, this is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’

The Lord's Prayer. Think about where that sits. Not at the start of the sermon, where you might expect something so famous to be placed for maximum impact. Not at the end, as some kind of grand finale. Right in the middle of the middle

section, which itself sits in the middle of the whole three part sermon. If you wanted to point to the exact structural center of the most famous sermon Jesus ever preached, your finger would land right here, on a prayer.

I want you to sit with that for a second before we move on. Of everything Jesus could have placed at the architectural heart of this sermon, a legal principle, a warning, a promise, he placed a prayer. We will come back to why that matters when we get to session four. For tonight, just notice it. It is not an accident of where the verses happened to fall. It is where the center of the sermon actually is.

Some teachers describe this entire sermon using an even tighter pattern than what I have shown you. Three main sections, with the middle section breaking into three parts, and each of those three parts breaking into three parts again, all the way down. It is a genuinely compelling way to look at the sermon, and some real features support it, the inclusio we just looked at is one of them, and the giving, prayer, fasting triad is another. But I do not think that full nested pattern holds up cleanly across every part of this sermon, and I already showed you why. The wealth and worry section and the judging and Golden Rule section do not break into a clean triad the way the case studies do. The pattern is real where it is real. Righteousness bracketing the whole middle section, that is solid. The prayer sitting at the literal center, that is solid. But I am not going to stand up

here and claim a perfect symmetry that is not actually there, just because it would make a tidier outline. The text does not need us to force it into a shape to make it worth studying. It already tells us what it cares about, if we are paying attention.

And what it cares about, all the way through, is righteousness. Where it comes from. What it looks like. And whether it is real.

That is exactly where we are headed next.

V. Why the Structure Matters

So let's put together everything we just looked at. Righteousness bracketing the entire middle section of the sermon. A prayer sitting at its exact structural center. Matthew is telling us, through how he built this thing, what the sermon is actually about. Now I want to show you what happens the moment you step inside that bracket, because it answers a question we have not asked yet. What does this righteousness Jesus keeps returning to actually look like, up close.

Look at how the religious practices section opens.

Matthew 6:1 BSB

¹ “Be careful not to perform your righteous acts before men

to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Take care not to practice your righteousness in front of people, to be seen by them. Stop and notice what Jesus assumes here. He assumes his listeners already want to be righteous. He is not trying to talk anyone into caring about it. What he is doing is warning them about a specific danger hiding inside that desire, the danger of doing the right thing for the wrong audience.

Then he walks through three practices, giving, prayer, and fasting, and after each one, he says almost the exact same sentence.

Matthew 6:4 BSB

⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6:6 BSB

⁶ But when you pray, go into your inner room, shut your door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6:18 BSB

¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be obvious to men, but only to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Three times, back to back to back, nearly word for word. When Jesus repeats himself that precisely, that many times, in that short a space, he is not running out of things to say. He is making sure you cannot miss it. Real righteousness, the kind God actually rewards, is not the righteousness anyone claps for. It is the righteousness nobody sees but him.

Now hold that next to what we already found sitting at the exact center of this section. A prayer. Not a performance. Not a public demonstration. A private conversation with a Father who is already there, already listening, already fully aware of what is true about you before you say a word. The center of the sermon is not a spectacle. It is an intimacy.

So here is what I think Matthew wants us to see, and it is the thesis for this entire series, so I want to say it as plainly as I can, once, clearly, and then we are going to spend the next four sessions unpacking everything underneath it.

Righteousness is not the price of the ticket in. It is the shape of a life once it actually belongs to the kingdom Jesus is announcing.

We are going to come back to this sentence every single week. Righteousness is not the price of the ticket in. It is the shape of a life once it actually belongs to the kingdom.

Think back to where we started tonight. The day I said I do, I became a husband completely, in a moment, not by degrees. What I did not have yet was the practice of actually living like one, and that came slowly, over years.

Righteousness works the same direction. It is not a fee you pay in installments until you have earned enough of it to get in. It is what a life starts to look like once you are already in, the same way learning to actually love my wife well was not how I earned the right to marry her. It was what marriage produced in me, once it was real.

Now, I need to stop here and guard against something, because this thesis is very easy to hear wrong, and I would rather correct the wrong hearing tonight than let it sit unaddressed for four weeks.

Some of you may have just heard everything I said and think it means the demands in this sermon do not really apply to you the same way, since righteousness is a result and not a requirement. That is not what I am saying, and it is not what the text says either. Listen to what Jesus says right at the seam of the sermon, in the very verse that opens the whole bracket we have been talking about all night.

Matthew 5:20 BSB

²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Exceeds. Not matches. Not comes close to. Exceeds. The scribes and Pharisees were, by any ordinary measure, serious, disciplined, religious people. And Jesus tells this crowd of poor, sick, occupied nobodies that what is required of them goes further than that. Not less far. Further.

So hold both of these at the same time, because the sermon absolutely will not let you let go of either one.

Righteousness is not how you earn your way into the kingdom. And righteousness is not optional, or symbolic, or something you can quietly scale back because grace is covering the difference. It is the real, costly, uncompromising shape of what it looks like to actually belong to what Jesus is announcing. We are not going to soften a single thing he says over these next four weeks. If anything, once you see that this is about a life, not a transaction, the bar gets higher, not lower. There is no partial credit for a life. Either it is being formed into this shape, or it is not.

That is the lens for everything ahead of us.

VI. Where This Series Is Headed

Before we close tonight, I want to give you a quick look at

where we are going, because I think it helps to see the whole shape of the road before you start walking it.

Next week, we are in the Beatitudes.

Matthew 5:3-16

We are going to ask what kind of people Jesus is describing when he says blessed, and why he starts with the poor, the mourning, and the meek instead of the strong and the accomplished. This is the character of kingdom people, laid out before Jesus has asked them to do a single thing.

After that, we move into the six case studies, where Jesus takes commands from the Torah and shows what they actually demand underneath the surface.

Matthew 5:17-48

Murder and anger. Adultery and lust. Divorce. Oaths. Retaliation. Enemy love. This is where we will spend the most time in any single session, because there is a lot of ground here, and none of it is going to get softened.

From there we go into the hinge of the whole sermon.

Matthew 6:1-34

Giving, prayer, and fasting, with the Lord's Prayer sitting at the center, and then straight into wealth and worry. This is

where we ask where your attention actually rests, and why Jesus says that is where your righteousness comes from.

And finally, we close with the choice.

Matthew 7:1-27

Judging, the Golden Rule, and then the three closing images. Two gates. Two trees. Two houses. This is where everything we have said for four weeks gets put to the test, and where we ask the hardest question of the whole series. How do you know if any of this was ever real.

Five weeks. One sermon. One question underneath all of it. Not what do I have to do to get in, but now that I am in, what does this actually look like.

VII. Closing

I want to bring this back to where we started tonight.

The day I said I do, I became a husband completely, in a single moment. Not gradually. Not in installments. What I did not have yet was the practice of living like one, and that took years, and honestly, it is still taking years. Status and practice are not the same thing. One was given to me instantly. The other, I am still learning.

That is exactly the shape of what we found tonight in Matthew's sermon. Jesus stood in front of a crowd of sick, poor, occupied people, and he told them the kingdom of heaven had arrived. Not someday. Now. And everything he says for the next three chapters is not a list of requirements for getting into that kingdom. It is a description of what that kingdom actually looks like once you are living inside it.

One more time before we go. Righteousness is not the price of the ticket in. It is the shape of a life once it actually belongs to the kingdom Jesus is announcing.

So here is what I want you to do this week, and I want to be specific, not vague, because a takeaway you cannot actually act on is not much of a takeaway.

Jesus opens this entire sermon by saying blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:3 BSB

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Poor in spirit does not mean sad, and it does not mean timid. It means knowing you have nothing to offer God that would earn you a seat at his table. It means coming to him the way that crowd came to Jesus on that hillside, sick, tired, and empty handed, because that is the only way any

of them were ever going to come.

This week, I want you to ask yourself one honest question. Where in your life are you still trying to negotiate your way into God's kingdom with something you think you bring to the table, instead of coming to him poor in spirit, empty handed, the way this sermon says the kingdom actually starts. Sit with that question. Do not rush past it. We are going to build the entire rest of this series on top of the ground we covered tonight, so if this foundation is not settled in you, everything after it will be harder to build.

Next week, we start with the Beatitudes, and we find out exactly what a life shaped like this looks like from the inside.