

Sermon – January 29, 2023  
“Blessed are the merciful; for they will receive mercy”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 5:1-12

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that continues transforming us into Christ's image and leading us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus onto his mission right here, right now. Amen*

Good morning! Thanks to all who prayed for the volunteer team who were part of last week's first Good News Club of the semester. If you forgot to pray, don't worry, you can pray this week as well. Let me suggest that when we pray, we pray for the children to have their hearts stirred to come to Good News Club. Pray for parents to want to have their children be part of the club. Pray that the volunteers will be open to Holy Spirit's guidance to love the children and share the good news of Jesus with them in a manner that will make them able to receive Christ's love. And pray that these children will find a church family to connect with where they can grow into Christ followers and that we will be open to Jesus' guidance as a church for ways to welcome them here.

As we encounter Jesus, we may spend some time asking ourselves, “Who is Jesus?” As we encounter Jesus in the scriptures, we learn that Jesus is the Son of God, the Son of man, and one sent by the Father. He is a minister for about three years, a redeemer by his death on a cross, the first born of the resurrection raised from the dead. He is our mediator reconciling us to God and is our priest seated at God’s right hand. We can spend a lot of time focused on the question, “Who is Jesus?” and as we do, we will be richly rewarded to learn that Jesus is all of these. He is our prophet, king, and priest. From a timeline point of view, Matthew’s text this morning has Jesus sitting on a mountain teaching his disciples as the crowds approach. Jesus will spend about three years walking the roads of Galilee and teaching that the kingdom of God has come near. One of the unique aspects of Matthew’s Gospel is showing how Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy and as such is God’s Messiah. But Matthew also devotes a significant portion of his Gospel to giving answers to what Jesus taught about the kingdom of God that has come near. As we accept Jesus as our savior and begin to follow him into his mission to all people, we should have some questions about what it means to be part of an in-breaking kingdom of God. We might wonder what Jesus taught about this kingdom he proclaimed. We might ask questions such as, “If the kingdom of God has come near, what does it look like? If we are citizens of this kingdom, what makes us different from others who are not?” And we might wonder what Jesus taught as he met with his disciples and the crowds who came to him during those three years of ministry. Matthew’s Gospel provides his readers with answers to these questions. Matthew includes five of Jesus’ sermons that describe in some detail Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God and its citizens. The first of these sermon starts with the Beatitudes. It is a sermon given by Jesus on a mountain. We typically know this sermon as the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount discourse is found in chapters 5 – 7 and provides a summary of the life of one who is in the kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ teaching to his disciples, those who have believed in him and are part of the kingdom of God that has begun to break in with Jesus’ arrival. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his disciples about life in a radical new kingdom, the kingdom of God. It contains Jesus’ teaching for everyday life in the culture, the places Jesus’ disciples find themselves daily. The second sermon is found in Matthew chapter 10 and is called the Mission Mandate. In this sermon, Jesus teaches his disciples to go out and live in a world that disagrees with their message, often rejecting them for their lifestyle and teaching. Through the Mission Mandate sermon, Jesus teaches us to go to a hostile world as his disciples

while not living as those in the world live. Next, in chapter 13, we find the Parabolic Disclosure which is a sermon rich with parables. In the Parabolic Disclosure sermon, Jesus teaches his disciples what it means for them to live as subjects in the kingdom of God in a world where God's kingdom has not yet fully come. Jesus teaches his disciples to live in the now and the not yet of the kingdom of God. In chapter 18, we find a sermon titled the Community Prescription where Jesus teaches his disciples to express their citizenship in the kingdom of God as a church, the gathered body of Christ. Jesus describes this church as characterized by the attributes of humility, purity, accountability, forgiveness, and reconciliation. And finally, in Matthew chapters 24 - 25 we find the Olivet Discourse, Jesus' final sermon to his disciples. In the final sermon, Jesus teaches us how to live as those who are expecting his return with power. Don't worry if you did not get all those sermons down this morning, as we will be looking at some of this teaching as we journey through parts of Matthew's Gospel in the weeks to come. Do remember that Matthew shares with us in his Gospel teaching what it means to be a disciple. Jesus' teaching forms the heart of Matthew's Gospel. Consider taking time this year to read Jesus' sermons in Matthew and to reflect on what you find as we journey to Easter.

The scripture we heard read today is the introduction to Jesus' teaching and provides a summary of the attributes of the life of a Christian. Jesus' teaching outlines a progression to be found in citizens of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. As Jesus' disciples live and grow into Jesus' image, they are to develop these attributes. The development is not done by our will, striving, or strength, but by becoming part of the kingdom of God and opening our hearts for inside out transformation by Holy Spirit. Growth is not something we do; it is something done in our hearts. Our growing progression is neither linear nor continuous but comes as we open our hearts to Jesus and surrender to his rule in our lives. We have these summary words of Jesus' teaching so that we might learn, reflect, and surrender to Holy Spirit's transforming power in our lives. As we reflect on these attributes, we will find that what Jesus teaches is opposite to what our culture holds as desirable attributes for successful people. Let me summarize the complete list of attributes as being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, having a hunger and thirst for righteousness, being merciful, being pure in heart, being known as peacemakers, and being persecuted. I would like to start at the beginning of the list and work through Jesus' teaching on each of these items. However, we might recall that when Jesus teaches the crowds and his disciples, one of the miracles that follows is the feeding of the thousands. Jesus' teaching on

these topics could last for days at a time, so coverage of the entire set will take a while. We might recall that just before COVID, I preached on peacemakers from this text, so we have already covered that attribute. And to be honest, I thought about just reading the entire text of this sermon, chapters 5 – 7 and then the miracles that Jesus does that follow his teaching as this morning's sermon, but that also would take a lot longer than what we are used to for a sermon. There is a reason that John Wesley had 14 sermons on the Sermon on the Mount in his collection of standard sermons. This morning I hope to introduce more of Jesus' teaching with a short focus on three attributes: being poor in spirit, mourning, and meekness.

Jesus' summary list begins with "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."<sup>i</sup> Let's look at the idea of being poor in spirit. There are two aspects to the idea of being poor in our Bibles. The first is centered on those in difficult economic situations. The idea of poverty we typically have is one related to those with economic needs. Jesus' usage of the word poor is not without this aspect as often those at the bottom of the economic ladder are his focus. But Jesus' idea of the poor also includes those who are "spiritually and emotionally oppressed,"<sup>ii</sup> those who have a need for God's help. Those who are affluent can be spiritually and emotionally poor with a great need for God's help. Jesus' teaching on the poor in spirit includes people who are without spiritual guidance in their lives, or true spiritual guidance. They are not part of the kingdom of God but are seeking to follow a world view that is without God's influence or direction. One first century concept that we still find today is that people who have material blessings are those with God's approval. Jesus' teaching is counter to this concept. He teaches that those who are without material blessings and rely on God are those found in the kingdom of heaven. Those who are receiving the kingdom of heaven are those who are humbly dependent on God's protection when they are oppressed by the ungodly rich. They have nowhere to turn and no assets to use to meet their needs, so they depend on God as their provider and protector. Dependence on God is not a weakness of character or an outcome of circumstance; it is, rather, a positive spiritual orientation to God of one's heart. Those who are poor in spirit have a positive spiritual orientation towards the one God through Jesus Christ in the power of Holy Spirit. They are the opposite of those who are focused on themselves to meet their needs and are too often willing to do so at the expense of others. They are not focused on God and find God irrelevant to their life situation. The poor in spirit joyfully accept God's rule over their lives and

as such become citizens of the kingdom of God. The foundation of those who are poor in spirit is begun through repentance of sin and a realignment of our life towards God.

The next summary topic is mourning: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”<sup>iii</sup> We are most familiar with mourning when our loved ones die, but we will mourn for any loss including financial loss, our status, or even our standing before God. Jesus’ teaching about the future of those who mourn is that they will be comforted. As we enter the kingdom of God, we get our first experience with the idea of God comforting us through the cross, a concept that will end with our resurrection and “God wiping away every tear from our eyes.”<sup>iv</sup> It is a time when we come into the fullness of the kingdom of God, a time when we will be present with God and will be greatly and tenderly comforted. As citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we will know times of mourning as we seek to “weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice.”<sup>v</sup> Citizens in the inbreaking kingdom of God will have times of joy. As we experience times of mourning, we are not to be overcome with grief like those outside the kingdom who lack a future hope of comfort. As citizens, we will also find times in the not yet complete kingdom to mourn over personal sin and the social evils we encounter in the world because we will mourn as God does over these evils. And, as citizens of this new kingdom, we seek to be those who bring God’s comfort to those who lack the comfort of God. As a pastor, one of the opportunities I have is to try to bring God’s comfort to people who are outside of the kingdom of God and are mourning over the loss of a loved one. Such opportunities are not times for us as citizens to wonder how those who mourn without hope will be able to recover, but to bring the comfort we have through Jesus from God into those situations and share that comfort with them.

We might hear in Jesus’ teaching on mourning an echo of Isaiah 61:1-2, verses that we use as our weekly Sunday morning benediction. The mourning we are seeking to bring comfort into is not just mourning for personal loss but mourning for people whose situations are wretched, who are without hope, and who have no provision of sure comfort. When we find ourselves in such a time of mourning, we can and should rely on the comfort that comes from being God’s people. We know the endpoint of our mourning ends in reconciliation, comfort, and joy. In this world we will face times of mourning, but we know the one in whom we have placed our trust and that he has won victory over the source of our mourning.

The last attribute of the citizens of the kingdom of God we will look at this morning is meekness. We might notice that with this attribute we have moved from internal attributes to an

interpersonal attribute. Meekness is not to be confused with weak, noneffective people. Jesus bore the punishment on the cross for our sins. God's judgement was completed in Jesus Christ. Jesus demonstrates great strength and love by suffering in our place, but his willingness to suffer unjustly for another does not demonstrate weakness but shows great strength. Jesus' life and teaching will demonstrate gentleness to his followers. Jesus fully follows God's will and demonstrates the tremendous strength necessary to bring others into God's will. It is an easy thing to force a person of lesser strength or ability to do our will, but it takes great strength coupled with the removal of assertiveness to lead another into the kingdom of God. A person with this attribute is a gentle person who can and will endure much to bring God's purpose forward into the life of another person. Jesus lives a life lacking arrogance and oppression as he demonstrates the idea of meekness to his disciples. We are to lose our own tendency towards arrogance and oppression of others as we follow Jesus in our lives and work as citizens in the kingdom of God.

The world is not typically focused on those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, or who are meek. People with such attributes might make the news to add a bit of reality to a desperate situation, but those who live around us will be drawn to lives marked with these attributes. They may not initially seek us, but they will note that there are people who have very different attributes from what they expect, and as they encounter such strange citizens, their hearts will begin to open to a kingdom that is filling with citizens of like nature. Our goal is to be such citizens and to seek to live in the world in a manner that these kingdom of God attributes shine forth. As Christ followers, those who have heard Jesus call our name asking us to follow him and become fishers of men, we are to put on these attributes and live lives defined by them. We must ask ourselves if we are those who are poor in spirit, who mourn and are meek. If we are not, then we are to repent and turn again to God by following Jesus. The transformation from a person filled with the world's attributes to a citizen of the kingdom of God is not a transformation we accomplish in our strength. These attributes are inward transformations brought about by a life opened to God through the work of Holy Spirit. We are to be those who are reading Jesus' teaching from the scripture and seeking to open our hearts to inward transformation into a citizen of the kingdom of God. Only Jesus can bring about this transformation as our hearts are turned toward him and are open to his transforming touch.

*Pray with me: Jesus, we come before you as those who yet lack a spirit that is poor, as those who do not yet mourn over that which you mourn, and as those who too often set aside meekness in the heat of life. Lord, forgive us and open us to the transforming power of Holy Spirit that we might be remade from the inside out into citizens of your kingdom. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> NRSV Matthew 5:3

<sup>ii</sup> Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (p. 205). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iii</sup> NRSV 5:4

<sup>iv</sup> NRSV Rev 20

<sup>v</sup> NRSV Romans 12:15