

[Matthew 5:1-12](#)

If ever I want to wind up a congregation about how long the sermon is going to be, I tell a story I've often used about the famous Puritan preacher Richard Baxter of Kidderminster. On one Sunday, he was heard saying in his sermon, "And sixty-fifthly ..."

Now, I've never preached a sixty-five point sermon. Honest! A typical sermon of mine has three points. I know that's a cliché to many, but psychologists have suggested we remember things in threes.

But today's reading could tempt me to preach an eight-point sermon: one point for every beatitude. I did attempt that once as a young minister, preaching on Remembrance Sunday, where this reading is also set. Let's just say it wasn't one of my most successful sermons.

Actually, I think the Beatitudes are best served by a sermon series or by a weekly series in a Bible study group – one week for each Beatitude. That way we can get to grips with them.

Instead, this week what I want us to do is something we often miss by rushing into the Beatitudes at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. I shall say a little about the Beatitudes, but mainly I want us to think more widely about the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount. That should set us up well for the next couple of weeks, when we also have passages from the Sermon to reflect on, and I hope it will help us in the longer term on those occasions when we return to the Sermon on the Mount.

So my question for today is this: what is Jesus doing in the Sermon on the Mount?

Firstly, Jesus is showing his *authority*.

It is not an incidental detail when Matthew tells us that Jesus 'went up on a mountainside' (verse 1). Whenever Jesus goes up a mountain in Matthew's Gospel, something important happens. Other examples include the Mount of Transfiguration in chapter 17 and the mountain where he gave the Great Commission after his Resurrection in chapter 28.

This repeated mountain pattern alerts his Jewish readers to something important. They remember that God gave the Law to Moses on a mountain – Mount Sinai. Here is a new Moses.

And then they remember that they were promised one greater than Moses would appear. For the Sermon on the Mount is the first of five big blocks into which Matthew divides Jesus' teaching – just like the so-called 'Five Books of Moses': Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

A new Moses, indeed one greater than Moses is here. He has special, if not unique authority. Therefore we cannot dismiss the teaching here as just 'good advice.' Nor can we dismiss it as unrealistic and other-worldly. We can't say it's idealistic nonsense that doesn't apply in the real world. You could say it is the ideal ethics of the kingdom, but

It is the ideal ethics of the kingdom that its citizens must exemplify in advance.¹

Jesus is bringing God's new Law, the Law of his kingdom. This is meant to make us stand up on our feet and give it our full attention. Why? Because Jesus has the very authority of God.

Secondly, Jesus focusses his teaching on his *disciples*.

His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them.

In the previous chapter he has called people to repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near (4:17). Now, he says, this is what the life of a repentant disciple looks like.

One experience preachers occasionally have at the door after the service is the person who comes up to us and says, "Thank you for your sermon this morning, that was meant for so-and-so. I hope she was paying attention!"

However, before we rush into saying that the teaching we find in the Sermon on the Mount is applicable to other people, maybe politicians for example, we need to remember that it is first and foremost addressed to those of us who claim to be disciples of Jesus, however imperfect we are.

In the Sermon on the Mount you and I get to take a good, hard look at ourselves and how we are getting on as followers of Jesus:

Jesus himself apparently expected full compliance with his teaching, not in the legalistic or ascetic ways he himself condemns, "but as signs of God's kingdom."²

In the Gospel narratives Jesus embraces those who humble themselves, acknowledging God's right to rule, even if in practice they fall short of the goal of moral perfection.³

If we want to know how we are getting on as Christians, the Sermon on the Mount is a good barometer. If we are wondering what to do for Lent this year, maybe one good discipline would be to read through the Sermon in Matthew 5-7 in small chunks, reflecting on Jesus' teaching, and bringing our findings to God in prayer.

Thirdly, Jesus teaches in full sight of the *world*.

Jesus teaches here outdoors as many rabbis of his day did, not confining his teaching to the synagogue. This is a way of life that is meant to be lived out in the world. It is not private piety.

And moreover, he knows the world is watching:

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside ...
(verse 1a, my italics)

There are a couple of things we can draw from this. One is what I've just said, that the world is watching the disciples of Jesus as they are taught. And you can be sure that if your friends or family know that you are a Christian, they are watching you, too.

Therefore, it's all the more important that we engage with the teaching of Jesus. I know that the old cliché is true when we say, 'Christians aren't perfect, they're just forgiven', but I want to take issue with that word 'just.' Yes, we are imperfect and we are forgiven, but we are more than that. We are people on a journey, growing in grace and faith. As Paul tells us in Philippians 1, God has begun a good work in us, and he is going to finish it. It's like the catchphrase from Mastermind: 'I've started, so I'll finish.' And our neighbours are watching our progress.

The other thing about Jesus teaching in full sight of the world is that

He wanted both [the disciples and the crowd] to hear, calling both to decision.⁴

When Jesus teaches his message here, he is saying, "This is what the kingdom of God looks like. Are you up for it? Make a decision!" And when we live it out before the watching world, there is a sense in which we are doing the same.

“This is what the kingdom of God looks like. This is God’s future. What are you going to do about Jesus?” Such faithful living is the beginning of our evangelism.

Fourthly and finally, Jesus begins the Sermon with *encouragement*.

That’s what the Beatitudes are – encouragement. They are encouragement for disciples of Jesus. The preamble to an ancient speech or letter, or the ‘proem’ as it was called, was often filled with encouragement for the hearers or recipients. You see the same in the way Paul begins most of his letters. Even when he’s cross with a church, he often starts by recounting blessings associated with them.

And so that’s why Jesus says ‘Blessèd’ eight times at the beginning. You are blessed – times eight! You are blessed as you live the life of a disciple. You may not always think you are blessed as you follow me, he says, but really and truly you are.

You are blessed in the work of the kingdom – when you long for righteousness and you make peace.

You are blessed in the attitudes of the kingdom – when you grow in meekness, mercy, and purity of heart.

You are even blessed in the suffering that comes from walking in the ways of the kingdom – when you are poor, grieving, or persecuted.

These conditions do not always look like what the world would call ‘blessèd’, but God is with his disciples there, he is growing their work and character, and he is promising them justice when the kingdom has fully come. In all these ways he encourages his people that they are on the right path. We simply need to take care that we are walking in these directions, and God will take care of the blessing.

So as we submit to the authority of Jesus by seeking to follow his challenging teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, we are helped by the Holy Spirit. And as we live out values such as the Beatitudes before the world, we shall be challenging that world about the need to respond to the call of Jesus.

¹ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A socio-rhetorical commentary*, p161.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Op. cit.*, p161f.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p165.