

## Kingdom Vision

---

Matthew 1:1-2

I would like to take you on an imaginary journey through one of the great temples of our time. Are you with me? And I'll ask at the end if you can guess where we are!<sup>1</sup>

As you arrive, you notice the comforting familiarity of the building's architecture. There are buildings like this all over the country, even the world, so anyone would feel quickly at home. The entranceway is a high glass doorway, framed by banners and flags. Familiar texts and symbols help the foreign faithful to quickly identify what's inside.

On the inside you are ushered into a foyer. There's a map for those who are new. And even though the regulars quickly know where to go, the wide open entranceway gives everyone a chance to decompress and enter into the spirit of the place.

The inside of the building is fascinating. Windows open up onto the sky, the whole building is flooded with light, but there are no windows that open up onto the surrounding carpark or urban landscape. By shutting us off from the clamour of the outside world, we are made to feel like we are in a sanctuary, a retreat from the hustle and bustle of our ordinary lives. Even time seems to come to a standstill, there are no clocks, as we are invited to lose ourselves in everything the temple has to offer. However, while daily clock-time is suspended, the worship space is still governed by a yearly calendar, variously draped in the symbols and images of an unending litany of holidays and festivals – to which new ones are regularly added to win even more pilgrims to the cause!

---

<sup>1</sup> This description is largely borrowed from James K.A. Smith's excellent book *You are What You Love*

And so a winding labyrinth of corridors offers you the chance to browse and reflect, preparing to enter into the innumerable chapels devoted to the various saints. In the windows of each chapel are statues and icons, embodying for the faithful concrete images of the "good life"; the ideals of perfection that we can aspire to imitate.

When you enter into one of the chapels, the real ritual begins. You are greeted by a friendly deacon who offers you any help to find the perfect relic to take the good life home with you. Having browsed through what the faithful call "the racks", with our newfound holy objects in hand, we proceed to the altar for the consummation of our worship.

The priest presides over the transaction, the sacrifice is made, and we leave with our newly minted relics, which are themselves the means to the good life of blessing that the whole temple has promised.

Can you guess where we are?

Yes! Of course, it's the shopping centre.

And you might think it is a little ridiculous to imagine going to the shops as a religious experience. And you may be right, but I literally saw a sign in the window in a shop window before Christmas that said this: *WELCOME TO OUR SACRED SPACE*

*Follow our welcome **ritual**...take a moment to breathe, be kind to yourself and to others and **immerse yourself** in our world.*

Profoundly *religious* language isn't it? It's an example of what I'm calling today, secular beatitudes.

As we walk around our temples of consumerism, we are not merely sold products, we are sold a *vision of the good life*. We are told a story of *blessing*.

*Blessed are those whose kids are dressed in Country Road, for they enjoy idyllic calm.*

*Blessed are those with the latest iPhone, for they are connected and sophisticated.*

And it's not just the shopping centres. Everywhere we go, we are told a story of what it means to be blessed. Our workplaces, sports stadiums, political parties, schools, and social media news feeds are holding out a vision of the good life.

*Blessed are those who climb the corporate ladder, for everyone looks up to them.*

*Blessed are those whose investments prosper, for they don't need to depend on anyone.*

*Blessed are those who go viral, for everyone knows who they are.*

*Blessed are those who get the best marks, for the whole world lies at their feet.*

*Blessed are those who have power, for they can do whatever they want.*

And we could go on and on with all sorts of different visions of the good life – with these different stories of blessing.

And whatever vision captures our hearts, will set the direction of our lives.

Today we begin working our way through the most famous sermon ever given. In The Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives us a grand, and quite frankly daunting, description of life in the kingdom of God.

But the doorway to the Sermon on the Mount are Jesus' *beatitudes*, and in these opening verses, Jesus is giving us his vision of the good

life. He doesn't begin with rules or commands, first He tells us a story of what it *really* means to be blessed.

For Jesus knows that it's only if we see the world the way that He sees the world, that we may then live as Jesus calls us to live. And so the beatitudes of Jesus show us that the "good life" is really the gospel. And if we are to give ourselves to Jesus' description of Kingdom living, our hearts must first be captured by this Kingdom vision.

## Kingdom Vision

So what is this vision of blessing in the Kingdom? Well there are three things I want to highlight today: NEED, HELP, and then THE KEY.

### - *Need: The Good Life of Grace and Faith*

So first of all, Jesus tells us that true blessing belongs to those who recognise their deep need. This is the theme of the first four beatitudes from verses 3-6. Jesus said...

The world tells us that the truly blessed are those who "have it all".  
*Jesus says true blessing is to know that you have nothing.*

The world tells us that true blessing is to always have it all together.

*But Jesus says that true blessing is given to those who see their poverty of spirit and are saddened by the reality of their own sin.*

The world tells us blessing comes to those who raise themselves up – to those who are powerful and strong.

*But Jesus says that blessing belongs to the meek and the humble. It is those who know they are poor in Spirit and so in their relationships with God and others do not think of themselves more highly than they ought.*

The world tells us that you're blessed when you're full and satisfied,

*But Jesus tells us that blessing belongs to those who know they are **starved** of goodness, and deeply desire to be filled up with what they lack.*

This is what true blessing looks like.

In fact, we've already seen this in Jesus' ministry so far. Remember at his baptism, Jesus joins himself to the lowly sinners not the lofty religious leaders. Last week Ray showed us how Jesus called the outwardly unimpressive fishermen, and was drawn to the gentiles, and to the diseased, and those in pain, to the demon-possessed and the paralysed.

Jesus ministry and his message are in perfect harmony: his kingdom belongs to the losers, to the lowly, to those with nothing and who know they have no hope.

How different to the world around us! In this earthly kingdom, it's all up to us. As one writer says

*All around you see people scrambling to be successful enough, happy enough, thin enough, wealthy enough, influential enough, desirable enough, charitable enough, woke enough, good enough. We believe instinctively that were we to reach some benchmark in our minds, then value, vindication, and love would be ours—that if we **got** enough, or **did** enough, then we would **be** enough.*

But Jesus gives us an utterly different vision of the good life. And it ought to sound to ours like sweet relief! Jesus frees us from the emptiness and anxiety of relentless striving, so that we would receive from God what we can never earn for ourselves.

You could call this first set of four beatitudes as the beatitudes of *grace and faith*. To recognise our own spiritual bankruptcy opens us up to receive the grace of God with the empty hands of faith. That we would receive God's comfort, God's inheritance, God's righteousness.

Or as the message Bible paraphrases

*You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.*

- *Help*

The beatitudes of grace and faith, are then followed by the next four beatitudes of service and love. First we are told that the *needy* are blessed; now we are invited to see the *helping* are blessed.

From verse 7, Jesus continues...

The blessed do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in their meekness they value others above themselves, not looking to their own interests to the interests of the others around them (Philippians 2:3-4).

And so they extend the mercy to others that they know they need themselves.

They do not harbour bitterness or malice in their hearts.

They quick to listen and slow to speak, happy not to "win" so that their might be peace rather than division.

And they are willing to pursue peace and mercy at great cost to themselves.

It turns out that blessing does not come from lifting ourselves up, but by lowering ourselves and lifting others up.

Jesus says blessing comes to those who give themselves, no matter the cost, to loving and serving others and not themselves.

- *The Key*

And so as a whole, all 8 beatitudes give us the vision of the very peculiar kingdom of God. The sayings of this kingdom are very different to our own. It's as if Jesus says:

- *Credit where none is due.*
- *Don't get mad, get reconciled.*
- *God helps those who are helpless themselves.*
- *Every lunch is a free lunch.*
- *It's a dog help dog world.*
- *Survival of the feeblest...*

A strange Kingdom indeed! And at this point, I think there are two unavoidable questions that Jesus' Kingdom vision raises.

The first question comes from the apparent disconnection between the need and help beatitudes. *How do the first four beatitudes of grace and faith, give way to the beatitudes of love and service?*

For how is it, that those who are poor in Spirit, become pure in heart in verse 8?

And where will those who mourn over their own sin find the resources to be merciful towards the sin of others in verse 7?

How are the meek and the powerless going to find the strength to be makers of peace in verse 9?

How is it that those who hunger and thirst because of their lack of righteousness are then those who persecuted because of their righteousness in verse 10?

And then the second question comes from the sheer audacity of Jesus' promises. Given everything we know about the way that life works, isn't this the most far-fetched, preposterous statement you've ever heard?

The world belongs to the meek? Yeh right! Embracing suffering and weakness is the path to satisfaction? Unlikely. The poor in spirit being welcomed freely into *God's kingdom*. Beyond our wildest imagination.

So how can any of this be true? How can we possibly take Jesus at is Word.

Well I think **the key** that unlocks this whole passage and answers our questions is found in that sneaky last beatitude that hangs on the end. Did you notice that *verse 10* is strangely repeated in *verse 11*?

In this repetition we see that Jesus is not teaching us about some spiritual stuff called righteousness. Nor is he giving us spiritual boxes to tick in order to make it to heaven. Jesus' vision of the good life is *incredibly personal*. Just listen to the last two blessings that Jesus declares, and why Christ's people might be persecuted:

*Blessed are those who are persecuted **because of righteousness...***

*"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you **because of me.***

Do you see the parallel?

The Righteousness that Jesus speaks of is equivalent to Jesus Himself.

So hungering and thirsting after righteousness is a craving for Christ. To be blessed is for Christ to lift you up from the pit of your sin, to set you standing with his righteousness, and for him to send you out as bringers of mercy, and makers of peace to a hungry and thirsty world.

And so the lowly outsiders that met Jesus in chapter 4 were blessed precisely because they *met Jesus*.

And Jesus can take a beautifully personal turn in this last statement and say to his disciples *blessed are **you***, because they are ***gathered around him***.

And all these blessings are offered to us, and they really are available to us, because Jesus is *more real than the way things appear in this world*. And every spiritual blessing is freely given to all who put their trust in him.

For Jesus is the true King  
*who welcomes us into the Kingdom.*

He is the suffering servant  
*who brings comfort to those who mourn.*

He is the creator of the universe  
*who shares the inheritance of the world with his people.*

He is the bread of life  
*who nourishes us with his righteousness.*

He is the merciful saviour  
*who overflows to us with his grace.*

He is the faithful high-priest  
*who makes God known to us and brings us into his presence.*

He is the prince of peace,  
*who reconciles us with God.*

He is the faithful Son  
*who brings us home to the Father.*

And so the question God's Word now asks of *us* is

"DO YOU KNOW JESUS"

The question is not, are you good enough, or have you done enough. The only condition of this blessing is that you come with empty hands to receive everything from God.

So come with a broken spirit, and a contrite heart, and the rumbling stomach of your brokenness and sin. And Jesus will forgive you, and feed you, he will fill you up and satisfy your every deepest desire. You will be welcomed with open arms into his family as a dearly loved child of God. And you will be blessed.

## Cultivating Kingdom Vision

This is the vision that Jesus gives to us in his beatitudes. It's a vision of the good life that turns the secular beatitudes of the world entirely on its head. And so we find ourselves living in a tension, caught between two rival kingdoms, competing for our affections. Someone like Augustine captures the tension well when he speaks about the two cities in which believers live:

*"Accordingly, [he says] two cities have been formed by two loves [or you could say two visions of the good life]: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord."*

*- Augustine*

So how can we be people formed in the love of God. How can we embrace the good life of grace and faith, love and service, that comes from knowing Jesus?

Well I want us to finish by thinking about two common Christian practices, and maybe frame them in a slightly different way, as practices form and shape us in the sort of kingdom vision that will lead to kingdom living.

## - Church

Firstly, church. Week after week, we gather together as God's people. And as we do that, we are not simply a community of individuals who are all a bit religious. No, we are an outpost of the Kingdom of God. And as we come together, we not only come to gather new information about God, but also for the *transformation* of our vision.

This is the way one writer says it:

*Isn't this what Christian worship is meant to do, week after week?  
To let the Spirit of God, with whom nothing is impossible,  
convince us that **this could be**: that despite a million voices  
crying otherwise, the gracious good news of the gospel is **true**.*

It's one thing for us to understand the sentence, *blessed are the poor in spirit*. It's a whole other thing to freely confess your sins with your church family and to hear together of God's forgiveness.

It's one thing to know in our heads that God's kingdom belongs to the lowest and the least, but to see that lived out in church fellowship drives that truth deep into our hearts.

It's one thing to grasp intellectually that it's a blessed thing to hunger and thirst, but to fast and pray for a week with your church helps us to experience that truth at a whole other level.

This is what happens in all our gatherings as God's people, big and small. As we gather as a body around the Word and the Lord's table, as we pray and sing, confess and give thanks, as we welcome each other in and lift up our hearts – *together we will be captivated by the reality of Jesus' kingdom vision* so that we can see that what he says is really true and that life in his kingdom really is the good life.

- *Word*

And then secondly, this is also true of our reading of God's word, both together and also personally. Like coming to church, reading the Bible is not only about gaining more information. It's about transforming our vision to see the way the world really is.

Over summer I read a wonderful book by Marilynne Robinson called *Lila*. *Lila* is a woman who just about embodies the beatitudes of Jesus. An orphaned wanderer for much of her life she finally stumbles, literally hungering and thirsting, at the door of a church.

And there she meets an older single preacher and a very unlikely relationship develops between them. And what really amazes *Lila* is that this kind man can see anything *good* in her at all. She had only ever been looked down on, and here is this man who *loves* her. Somehow he sees in *Lila* someone who is *blessed*. And there's this lovely moment when *Lila* reflects on why this might be:

*Or maybe he saw it the way he did because he had read that parable, or poem, or whatever it was. Ezekiel. The Bible was truer than life for him, so it was natural enough that his thinking would be taken from it.*

This is why we devote ourselves to the word of God. For through it the Spirit works to transform the way that we see the world, and the people around us. That our thinking and our doing would be shaped more by what God says, than the way things may appear. For it's true you know, the Bible really is truer than life, and I suspect I'm only beginning to really understand *how* true it really is.

And so the Bible is like spectacles that give us a clearer vision of what we see around us. But it is also like a mirror that helps us to see ourselves clearly, that we really might understand our situation and our circumstances.

At another point in the book Lila looks back and she remembers the way she thought for so much of her life that she was nothing at all, just out there in the world all on her own. But then she finds herself reading Ezekiel of all things and finds to her surprise:

*[here I was] right here in the Bible! Don't matter if it's sad. [she thought] At least Ezekiel knows what certain things feel like. That voice above the firmament. He knows the sound of it.*

The most amazing thing happens when we read the Bible: we find ourselves in it! In the Bible God shows us the reality of our situation, he gives us the hope of his mercy and grace, and then strengthens us to live in his kingdom no matter what. And this is true because in the end the Bible is setting before us the ultimate story of blessing; the story of Jesus. It is the story of his kingdom, the kingdom that belongs to those who are poor in spirit, but are clinging onto Jesus for dear life.

And so ultimately, brothers and sisters, we look to Jesus, and we ask him to captivate our hearts and to fill our vision.

Together, and on our own; as his church sustained by his Word:

*We turn our eyes upon Jesus,  
look full on his wonderful face,  
and the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
in the light of his glory and grace.*