



Art: Sermon on the Mount by Jorge Cocco Santángel

## Kingdom of Blessedness

### Matthew 5:1-20

#### *Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount*

5 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, 2 and he began to teach them.

#### *The Beatitudes*

He said:

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

4 Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for  
righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because  
of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people insult

you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

#### *Salt and Light*

13 “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

14 “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

#### *The Fulfillment of the Law*

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 truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

THIS MAY BE ONE OF THE MORE FAMILIAR PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE OUT THERE. Even Monty Python did a sketch about it, back in the day.

This story takes place pretty early in Jesus ministry. He’s been baptized by John, sent to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, waited on by the angels, and then heard that John had been arrested. Which is a lot for your first month of ministry.

At that point, Jesus takes up the message of John. “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near’.” (Matt 4:17)

Immediately from there, he goes out to call his disciples, and then he starts to show us what this kingdom of heaven is all about. On one level, Jesus is the kingdom of heaven. On another level, we are called to take on kingdom of heaven behaviors that Jesus teaches us.

We aren’t Jesus. We won’t be ministered to by the angels after being tempted by the devil in exactly the same way he was. But when people metaphorically face devils, we are called to be the angels who minister to them.

The *kingdom of heaven has come near* is our reminder to be the kingdom of heaven for the world around us.

Jesus became an itinerant preacher, going from town to town, healing people, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. And we're told his fame began to spread and crowds started to follow him. And then we get to our passage today.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain.

The beatitudes are where the Incarnation of Jesus are most clear for Matthew. "God became flesh and lived among us" is the gospel of John's language for it. Matthew shows us the divine Son going up on a mountain side, as his ancestor Moses did, and proclaiming the Kingdom of Blessedness.

As we read through this gospel this season, pay attention for the connections to Moses. For Matthew, Jesus is the heir of the house of David, the fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures, and the person to take on the mantles of Moses and Elijah and any other prophet from the past.

Rather than using John's language of God becoming flesh, Matthew talks about the incarnation by talking about the kingdom of heaven. And when God becomes flesh and lives among us, everything we thought we knew about how the world shows blessing changes.

Jesus, though, doesn't have the blessings statements written on stone tablets, as Moses had the 10 commandments. At the end of this passage, Jesus says, "*do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.*" He's not trying to erase the commandments we received from Moses. He says he is here to fulfill them.

If you want to know what the Law was talking about—look to Jesus.

If you want to know what the prophets were talking about when they preached of God's justice and love—look to Jesus.

The incarnation of Jesus, the presence of God with us in the world, is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

The blessing of the poor, the mourners, the persecuted, and the meek is NOT an excuse to sit back and ignore the work of Kingdom.

It is, instead, Jesus' declaration, as one of my seminary professors put it, that the Kingdom of Blessedness has begun.

The blessings in this passage are not commands, instructing us to go out and be persecuted and hurt and meek. They are promises of hope that as those situations arise in our lives, we will never find ourselves alone in the midst of them.

The Beatitudes aren't the commandments. They are the description of what the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Blessedness, looks like.

The commandments, the instructions, come next when he says:

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

Let your light shine.

This is the section where we are given instructions on how to live into this Kingdom of Blessedness.

We are told we are **Salt and Light**.

I want the Salt instruction to be about Jesus wanting us to be spicy, because spicy is exciting and different and *spicy has a kick!*

Salt does add flavor. But salt is not habanero pepper. Salt is something we need to live. It is **essential** for life. It is a taste we **crave**. It is something we notice when it is absent, but not usually something we pay attention to when it is there. Nobody ever says, "*wow! The salt in that soup is delicious!*".

By telling us to be Salt, Jesus is telling us to be essential to the living of the world. He is telling us that our work in the Kingdom of Blessedness is something the world craves and needs to live. Be salt.

To be salt that has lost its flavor is to take **your** essential and needed gift and throw it out to be trampled underfoot.

Victor spoke last week about Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., and many of us met up for the MLK Day march downtown on Monday. Dr King called us to build beloved community and to proclaim the kingdom of blessedness for everyone, including and especially the people excluded from it by our society. Dr. King took many of his principles of non-violent protest from Mahatma Gandhi. The two men never met, but King called Gandhi a guiding light for him.

Gandhi was a big fan of Jesus' sermon on the mount, and he worked, through non-violence, to free India from British Colonial rule in the early and mid-20th century.

Britain had placed a tax on salt. They weren't the first to have done so, but in addition to the tax, they had a monopoly on the trade of it. And it was a repressive tax that hurt the poor the most. Everyone

needs salt to live, especially when they labored in the hot sun and lost salt in their sweat. So, because of the tax and monopoly in the early 20th century, salt was prohibitively expensive and difficult to obtain.

When Gandhi proposed protesting the salt tax, other leaders in India's independence movement thought it was a silly idea. They suggested something bigger, grander, spicier. *"It is difficult not to laugh, and we imagine that will be the mood of most thinking Indians,"* [wrote a newspaper editorial](#).

But Gandhi recognized the essential importance of salt to the daily living of life. And so, in March of 1930, he and many followers marched 240 miles to the coast where they could bypass the British salt monopoly and tax and make their own salt from the muddy deposits on the shore.



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Thousands of people joined him. At one point the length of the crowd was 2 miles long.

The protest spread so far, with people making and selling their own salt, British officials arrested over 60,000 people for the simple act of making salt. And the protest spread from there, revealing the cruelty of colonial occupation. 18 years later, India declared independence from Britain.

**'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.'**

Being salt to the world means helping people access what they need to live.

**Shelter, food, safety, health**—having physical needs for survival met.

I think there are other essential things we need to live as well.

**Hope, grace, mercy, and love.**

How can we be salt to the world, helping people know the Kingdom of Blessedness has arrived?

Light is also essential, of course. Photosynthesis and all that—allowing plants to grow, which creates oxygen for us to breathe.

But light can be very subtle. Light shines. And it illumines what had been hidden in darkness. But it doesn't point to itself. And it can't control the outcome. We are called to be light. But the light doesn't get to say, *"hey! Look over here! Look at me! Look at me!"*

It just shines.

The author, Annie Dillard wrote:

"You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it." — *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*

As she points out, the stars just shine. Whether we go outside in the dark of night to look at them, whether or not the clouds obscure our view, they are there in the sky.

They neither require nor demand our attention.

What does that mean for us as we live out our call to be light to the world? What do the stars say to us as we consider the instruction to *"let our light shine before others"*?

The first thing that occurs to me is that the stars aren't concerned about outcomes. They just let their light shine. They don't do it to make sure they get the credit or so they convert more people to being light. They don't shine to seek glory or fame or riches. They just shine because it is who they are and what they are called to be.

There aren't any ultimatums. Light doesn't say, "*We'll shine tonight as long as you agree to start treating each other as God instructs you to do.*"

I confess my tendency to do that. I want to shine for the people I love, the ones who are nice and kind. I'm less interested in sharing my light with haters and mean people.

But that isn't my call to make.

God doesn't tell us to let our light shine for our friends. We are called, simply, to shine, "so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (v 16).

How would our work in the world, our participation in the Kingdom of Blessedness, be different, if we removed from our shining, concerns about outcome, success, or prestige? If our light pointed people to God?

There are plenty of illustrations, as I look around this sanctuary, of how you are salt and light in the world.

**'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.'**

Your advocacy for equality, your work for justice, your support of mission work both here and around the world, your support at the interfaith food pantry, your presence in the lives of people seeking asylum and sanctuary, your work getting Prop M to pass (hope you've signed up for the presentation about that after worship today), and your presence in the lives of our 3 Matthew 25 partners at SafeHouse, SF Achievers, and Raphael House have all shown the kingdom of blessedness to San Francisco.

In a few weeks, we will be feeding people at the Interfaith Night Shelter. You can sign up to join us today after worship. There are many ways you have been poured out as God's salt to the world.

If you follow me on social media, it was at this point in sermon writing yesterday when I mentioned that I had cleaned the windows on my porch and then polished the silver rather than finish the sermon.

Preachers never have cleaner houses than when they have a sermon to write.

But one thing about this text occurred to me as I was polishing the silver. I inherited my mother's silver and I use it for my everyday silverware. And so, I had been seeing the tarnish each day, but hadn't gotten around to cleaning it. Polishing the silver is a long process. Which is probably why most of us don't do it that often. You can't really cut out steps. Piece by piece, you have to look for the spots, cleaning each one where it needs it. Then it has to be washed. Then dried, then polished and put back in the drawer. It takes time, attention, and elbow grease.

And that's true about the beatitudes, and the calls to be salt and light. You can't just say it, cross stitch it on a pillow, and move on.

If we want to really show the world that the kingdom of blessedness has begun, we actually then have to live our lives in ways that bless the meek, the mourning, the peacemakers, the justice seekers, and the pure in heart. And that takes time, attention, and some elbow grease.

Because society's version of the beatitudes is blessed are those who are strong, blessed are those who are successful, blessed are those who are rich, blessed are those who are white, blessed are those who are famous, or blessed are those who are powerful.

It takes intention to lift up a different way of blessing the world when we see the opposite every day.

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I've talked about this before, but we are in a time of change right now. In organized religion and in society. We are still learning what the true aftermath of covid will be for us. Calvary has weathered this better than some. You have elected great elders, deacons, and trustees who have faithfully led the way. I arrived in the middle of the pandemic to find an amazing staff hard at work to be church in new ways. The biblical story I kept thinking of in my first two years here was the Israelites wandering through the wilderness headed for the promised land.

And we may still have some wandering in us yet, but I want us to consider this passage as a guide for us as we move into this new season together—how are we being called to live into the Kingdom of Blessedness together, to be salt and light in new ways?

Looking forward to seeing what God is dreaming up for us in this coming year. Thankful to be on this journey with you.