

Rough Truth
Matthew 5:1-16
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At this time, I want to invite our children who are four years old to 1st grade to be excused to their time of children's church. And as we turn to God's word as we begin this new sermon series Living the Kingdom, this fall, we will work through the Sermon on the Mount in its totality, and then we will move to the parables for advent.

But I want to make one other introductory remark regarding our bulletins. You may note that this week's bulletin doesn't include the outline. That's because some weeks we will have room and some weeks we won't. Not everybody takes notes. But we do have available a notes sheet which is available to you when you come in to grab bulletins. There's a little bit of room this morning if you want to take notes. The outline will be projected each week at the beginning of each sermon so that you can at least know the points which we'll be covering. And again, it is a work in progress, and we're seeking the best way to utilize the space that we have.

So, with that note, let's begin the Sermon on the Mount. It is one of the most well-known parts of Jesus's teaching than anything else that people either know or remember. They think of this. Well outside the boundaries of faith or religion, somewhere along the line, people have largely heard of the Sermon on the Mount. Although, I recognize those numbers are dwindling. But still, people know the Sermon on the Mount. And yet, it's had a history of interpretation that has taken the application of the Sermon on the Mount in lots of different directions. But it is clear that everyone agrees that what Jesus is outlining is what does it look like to live as those who belong to the kingdom of God? A kingdom not marked out by boundaries, a kingdom not marked out by a particular set of ethics, but a boundary that is set out by relationship first and foremost, being in relationship with the Lord Jesus.

And so, He is gathering his disciples with Him, and that number would change throughout the sermon itself. But as they're gathering around Him, what He's calling them to is into relationship with Himself and what implications that has for them, what implications it has for us.

So, as we read this sermon, I want you to know that we are going to be dealing with some difficult truths over the next several weeks. This passage has some very rough truth to it. And we do not want to tame God's word to remove that roughness, but we want to hear Jesus's call to us afresh and anew for what it means to be disciples of Christ, to live as those who are in the kingdom. If in fact you are a professing Christian, you are in Christ's kingdom marked out by relationship with Him. That has implications. If you are not a Christian and simply investigating the Christian faith, we don't want to remove any of the roughness for you or for us. But we want you to understand that all of this is set within the context of what it means to be in a relationship with Jesus.

So, if you're investigating the Christian faith, please know that this comes as a result of knowing Jesus. And we encourage you and invite you to know Him. We encourage and invite you to ask serious probing questions regarding the testimony of Jesus and of the Christian church and even probing questions of us because this text does that.

Let's look together at Matthew 5:1-16.

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they

shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please join me in prayer together.

Heavenly Father, we come before this portion of your word as it was uttered by your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as it is recorded for us by Matthew. Matthew had a purpose in teaching us and bringing to bear Jesus's teaching. What was His purpose and how does that purpose still apply to us today as the church of Jesus Christ? Lord, we cannot understand that nor can we live it out nor can we receive it except by the power and presence of your Holy Spirit. So, by your Spirit, call us to renewed obedience, that our lives increasingly and that the life of the church increasingly would reflect the glory, beauty, grace, and mercy of Jesus Christ our Savior in whose name we pray. Help the teacher. Amen.

I must confess, I have a number of hobbies, and I'm generally passionate about all of them. But one that lurks quietly in my life is I enjoy professional detailing of my own cars. Part of that was because when I was young, one of my earliest jobs was working at a car wash where I learned how not to care for people's cars and how to learn to care for people's cars. So, be careful where you take your car. Just a brief word. Not everybody there knows what they're doing.

But I learned as I watched people and the professionals inside the detailing garage of how to care for a car. And so, over the last number of years, I've put together a whole group of tools and techniques and towels for different kinds of things. But one of the things I had to teach myself – which quite frankly I was afraid of doing, and so I watched a number of YouTube videos – but it was something that I could not get my head around until I actually tried it. And over many years, I tried different things. At first, when I first started, I had a little buffer and it went in circles. And if I threw my towel on the car, it would swoop across. I'm like, yes, that's it. Then I'd pull my car out into the sun, but it would have all these swirl marks on it. I'm like, man, what is going on?

And so, then I changed my tool, I got a nicer buffer, and I learned how to do all this stuff and I talked to professionals. And then I said, I have to do wet sanding. And I was like, wait a second, sandpaper on my car? Now, if you don't know what wet sanding is, you take some liquid, it generally has a little bit of soap in it. And in a shaded area with 3,000 to 5,000 grit sandpaper, you spray it onto the clear coat of your car in a small section where there's a scratch. And so, you take that wet sandpaper and you just back and forth in a straight line, not in circles. It's not wax on/wax off. Straight lines are easier to fix than swirls as I've learned. So, back and forth very lightly. And then you wipe it off. Then you do two more layers of buffing, and it's gone.

Now, that's why, generally, I only do it twice a year. And it takes me about ten hours per car. It's a hobby, trust me. I like working with my hands. But something I learned is that often to get a better finish, it requires the roughness of fine grit sandpaper and the right conditions with care to bring about a surface that you would never be able to tell that the scratch was there.

Now, what if I left the inside of my car a complete mess? The outside looks great, but the inside is a pigpen. It's easy to do because that's what people see. But then when they get in, you go, oh, I'm sorry about the mess. And you're moving papers around. I've had to do that over the years. But then I learned that if I'm really going to commit to this, I have to deal with the inside.

And so, as I was thinking about this week as I'm doing that to one of my cars, and what a pain it is and the amount of work that it is, I happen to be coming on this passage which has within it a rough truth which means to bring about the recognition of the scars and scrapes we have in our lives, the sin and the sinful patterns that we have that need to be dealt with, that must be dealt with the rough truth of God's word. But at the same time, only within the context of a relationship with Jesus do we find the grace that enables us to not be scarred but renewed. And He doesn't just care about the outside. He cares about the inward working of our lives. This is not an outside versus inside sermon from Jesus. This is about the whole thing. And it begins with a renewed heart. And that is all within the boundaries of being in a relationship with Him.

But as we look at this passage today, we're going to look at it under two points. First, we're going to see in the Beatitudes as they are known, the kingdom values, verses 3-10. And then secondly, we're going to look at distinctive discipleship, salt and light, verses 11-16.

First, these kingdom values. There is no escaping that the image which should be brought to our minds here. If you're familiar at all with the biblical narrative of scripture, it's this. Jesus gathering together on a plain His people around Him so that He might teach them. This is meant to draw our minds back to the idea of Moses gathering Israel together to teach them God's law. And so, He is grabbing and gathering His disciples. Knowing that the crowds are growing in number, He must teach His disciples, what does it mean to be in relationship with God? Which is exactly what the ten commandments were. What does it mean to be my people? Jesus is doing the same here.

But before we go any further, I must give you a brief parenthesis that if we don't give you the historical context, what will happen to this passage is that we will lift it out of its most revolutionary context and we'll just try to apply it to ourselves. The truth is, what Jesus utters here is so revolutionary that His disciples had a hard time hearing it, they didn't get it, and they didn't practice it until after the resurrection of Jesus, He sent forth His Spirit. Then the Spirit began to recall to their minds all that Jesus taught.

So, what he does here is he understands within this context that Jesus sees Himself consciously as another prophetic voice, in fact, a fulfillment of the prophetic voice of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. And He's announcing to the people of God, to the nation of Israel who find themselves in exile, not exile because they're outside the place of Jerusalem, but they're in exile because they are under a foreign government's oppression. They are not walking with the Lord, and the Lord has allowed them to be under the oppressive hand of Rome. They understand themselves to be in exile.

And so, Jesus is coming in and saying, but I'm ushering in a new kingdom. I'm ushering you out of exile and into relationship with me. But in so doing, what He does is the following. In understanding Himself to have a prophetic voice, He is inaugurating a kingdom and He's announcing, offering to, and demanding of His hearers a renewal of their hearts. And what would characterize Jesus's program is a grace fueled discipleship that enables us to have renewed hearts and to live out what it means to follow Him.

Now, over the history and years of the church, the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount have been used in one of two ways, largely. One, they've been used as sort of a whip to make people feel guilty and get their lives in order and obey. But there's no mention of grace leaving people with the idea that so long as they fulfill these things, they'll find themselves in right relationship with God. That is an incorrect use of the Sermon on the Mount. But so is the other use.

The other wide plain in which this has been operating is that really what Jesus is doing here is giving us an internal way of living. That so long as I have the attitude of mercy, the attitude of love, and I seek to in my attitude love my enemies, then I'm okay because I recognize Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be perfect for your heavenly father's perfect," "Be perfect for I am perfect." But Paul says, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." So, there's no way we'll ever be able to obey this. And so, we will be satisfied so long as we have a good attitude.

The reality is we must avoid both. It is not meant to guilt us. It is meant to draw us into the reality that everywhere Jesus tells us how to live is a gift of grace. Hear this. Every drop and tiddle of God telling us how we ought to live is grace in and of itself. How do I know this? Because I'm a customer of IKEA. Have you ever tried to put something together from IKEA without the instructions? I have. It's a nightmare. It's a grace that someone in Sweden decided to give me these absurd instructions that even with them, I still have a hard time. But at least I have the grace of instructions.

It is God's grace that He tells us how to live. But understand it's all within the context of being in a relationship with Him. We don't obey these things to earn His favor, and to do these things isn't merely an internal attitude. They're actually meant to be practiced.

But one final note. This was hard for this group of people to hear because they did not expect to hear this kind of call. They were oppressed by Rome. Jesus was coming in as the Messiah. They wanted freedom from oppression. The idea that they would be called to meekness, the idea that they would not respond to persecution with vengeance, are you nuts? But that is precisely what Jesus says here.

So, let's look together at these kingdom values. You've heard them before. Let's walk through them and hear them, perhaps, transliterated into modern language, if you will. When He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," does it mean the literal materially poor, or does it mean spiritually poor? The key is we don't need to play those off of each other. The poor were with Jesus. So, it certainly has application to those whose poverty find themselves to be powerless to do anything about it. But it also has something to do with those who understand and recognize that they are spiritually powerless to do anything about the spiritual oppression that they are receiving from Rome.

But when Jesus says here, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," what He's saying is if you think that following me means I'm going to give you these great tools of power, no. Blessed are those who recognize and come to me because they know they are powerless no matter their gifts, no matter their skills, no matter their bank account, no matter their address, no matter their skin color, no matter their race, no matter their gender, no matter their age. None of those can be a source of power. And to Israel, no matter your politic. Do you feel powerless? Come to me. Blessed are those who sense their powerlessness.

Secondly, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The mourning here that Jesus is speaking of within His context is Israel recognizing the state of their own heart towards God. And He's calling them to grieve the state of their spiritual lives and of their faithfulness and faithlessness to the Lord. So, He's saying those who grieve and recognize their own sinful brokenness, you will be comforted. He's calling Israel and He's calling the church of Jesus Christ away from our puffed-up idea of our own righteousness. Do you grieve over the sin of the church? Do you grieve your own sin? If you do, come to me for you will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." This would've been so hard for the disciples to embrace. Wait a second. We want power to overthrow that which we believe it oppressing us. We want that power. But Jesus turns it on its head that the power is in meekness. If you want to understand what freedom is, come to me in gentleness and I will show you freedom that no one can take from me. For if you try to take back your freedom with the sword or with vengeance, then someone will rise up someday to take it back. But if you come to me in meekness, trusting me in powerlessness, grieving your own state of heart, I will give you the world.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” For them, what they understood as righteousness was justice. Look what Rome has done to us? We want justice. Jesus says, do you desire true justice? If you desire true justice, then you will understand that the battles that you face are not battles that will be won with vengeance and swords, but it will only be won through humility and gentleness. True righteousness is to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

Remember from our Summer in the Psalms, it’s not that we can’t be angry at injustice. It’s that we recognize that He is the Lord of justice, that we must call on Him to render judgement, that He has the power to bring about justice. Left to my own, left to our own, we don’t see what God sees. And so, those who hunger after righteousness and justice is that we walk humbly with our God knowing that He understands what true righteousness are and we let Him be the judge. Let Him be the one who brings about justice on the earth. Our justice that we seek is humbly depending on Him.

“Blessed are the merciful.” What they wanted was God’s mercy to be rescued from their enemies. Jesus says here, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” What He’s simply asking His hearers and what He would ask us as the church is how are you doing in the mercy department? Do you show mercy? Do you show mercy to yourself only, or do you show mercy to others? Not what you would say about your bosses, but what would those who perhaps report to you say about you? What would our neighbors say about us? What would our neighbors around this property say about us and the practice of mercy?

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” This idea of not being full of guile but being without guile. That’s different. Not being naïve, He’s not calling us to be naïve. He’s saying He’s calling us to be authentic and to giving others the benefit of the doubt and not acting in cynicism that we think we know what other people’s motives are. But do we move towards others in sincerity and authenticity in inviting them and allowing them the space to do the same with us? Or do we harbor our own secret motives to try to angle with our own power to get what we want from others? He says here, “Blessed are the pure in heart” who seek to live with integrity and authenticity and without guile, “for they shall see God.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” He’s now saying to the disciples who thought He was going to lead the revolution, He’s now calling them to be part of the peacemaker group, to bring peace between those who follow Jesus and those who would oppress. If you were wanting to go to war and now, you’re being called to be peacemakers, now, that is perhaps a mission you are not equipped for. But Jesus is saying if that is what it means to follow me, I will call you a son. And when we trust in Him, He gives us the ability to move about in peace and mercy and humility and gentleness. And that will bring about a path of peace.

Finally, He says, “Blessed are the persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” He has just told them that they wanted to be the persecutors. They wanted to turn the anger and oppression of Rome back on itself, Jesus leading the way restoring Israel to all of its glory. And now, Jesus is saying, those who would follow me, who would be part of my kingdom and in relationship with me do not see themselves as those who are going to bring about overthrow, but rather who will consider being persecuted for being in relationship with me as a gift of pure gold.

Now, what’s that like, 21st century church? If we are persecuted for the name of Christ, do we run to our rights, or can we run to our Savior and praise be to God that we are being casted on with names and name calling and castigated because why? We believe in Jesus and in following Him.

Jesus says that if we’re doing so for His name, this is a gift which is why He then says as an outworking of that final beatitude that “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account,” notice that. It’s because of our belief in Jesus that we’re being persecuted, not because of our attitudes or our words but because of the one we believe in and follow that we’re being persecuted, He says looking to the future that our reward will not be here but when He comes again.

This is a tall ethic. This is an ethic that is first and foremost an outworking of what it means to be in relationship with Jesus. These are the values that ought to be the cornerstone of the way the church understands its mission and Christians individually see their life of faith in the world. But it is hard. It is rough truth. It is sandpaper that goes against much of how we often move and live and respond to people who come against us.

I like vengeance. We've talked about it. I like vengeance like anybody. And particularly, when you feel righteous. I'm a Christian. I'm an American. How dare you? But I'm reminded that God opposes the proud even when we're right. He calls us to a powerlessness of dependence not on ourselves but on Him. And instead of leading us as an army with weapons, He leads us as our Savior who shows us exactly how this is lived and calls us to follow in the way, but He gives us the grace to be able to do it.

I want to be clear about that. This is not Jesus teaching us tongue in cheek, I'm going to tell you how to live these values. I'm going to tell you what to live. But you know what? You're not going to be able to do it. Yes, that's right. On this side of heaven, we can't do it perfectly. But that doesn't mean His grace is without the power to enable us to walk in this way.

You see the cover of your bulletins, the Craig Keener commentary of the gospel of Matthew says, "The kingdom grace Jesus proclaimed was not the workless grace of much of western Christendom. In the gospels, the kingdom message transforms those who meekly embrace it just as it crushes the arrogant, the religious, and socially satisfied." What is Keener saying? We can't trumpet and preach grace if grace doesn't enable us to obey what Jesus calls us to obey. That's a workless grace. That turns Jesus's words here into tongue and cheek, I'm going to tell you what to do. But you know what? You can't do it. But God, through Jesus Christ and by His Spirit, gives us the grace to confess where we fail to follow in His way. And that is between you and the Lord. But for the church of Jesus Christ corporately, these are our values.

And I close with this distinctive discipleship. Here, He gives us two things. We're called to be salt and light. I don't know what you've heard over the years, but salt here is not table salt. It's not the salt we use for our seasonings at all, even though it might have been used sparingly in that way during that time. This is now how salt was used. This is also not the salt that we think of as the salt of preservation. Although it was used in that way, that's not how Jesus is using it. The salt which Jesus is referring to here is a specific kind of salt that was used in manure. So, we're called to be salt in manure, the earth.

Said this way, my friend Anthony Bradley, in a deep research on this very thing, says,

"When Jesus spoke about salt in Matthew 5 and Mark 9 and Luke 14, he was referring to several varieties of salt used in the first century. These salts were unlike modern table salt which is sodium chloride. The salt in Jesus's day were mixtures of chlorides, of sodium, magnesium, potassium, and very small amounts of calcium sulphate. Some of these would dissolve more quickly than others while some were better able to withstand the elements. These heartier saltier salts were generally more valuable in an agricultural context because that meant their benefits would last longer."

So, when Jesus talked about salt losing its saltiness or savor, it refers to a process in which the compounds of salt naturally disintegrate over time. Disintegrated salts lose a small amount of gypsum which changes its saltiness. This change renders it ineffective as fertilizer.

When Jesus talked to His followers about losing their saltiness, He was talking about losing their fertilizing properties, their ability to bring about life and growth where there is now no growth. Where do we use fertilizer? We use it in the garden when nothing has grown yet. We use fertilizer to bring up new seed. We use fertilizer perhaps where there's barren land. We go and are used of God where there is need and brokenness.

So, I fear sometimes we perceive ourselves as salt that's preserving the culture. No. But we are called to be used of God in the culture that may be dying around us. But God by His grace and by His Spirit, we're in the world with the love of Christ, with the mercy and gentleness of the gospel, and seeking to live out these values. And when we do so, it brings about new life. What does that look like?

Well, it looks like this. Nicholas Kristof, not a Christian but a regular contributor and author in the New York Times, wrote this in 2011. He said the following. He said that while at many times, he finds evangelical leaders who act hypocritically and don't reflect Christ at all, he still finds the following to be true. Quote.

"But in reporting on poverty, disease, and oppression, I've seen so many others, evangelicals are disproportionately likely to donate ten percent of their income to charities mostly church related. More important, go to the front lines at home or abroad in battles against hunger, malaria, prison, rape, human trafficking, or genocide. And some of the bravest people you will ever meet are Christians and conservative Catholics, who are similar in many ways, who truly live out their faith. I'm not a particularly religious person, but I stand in awe of those I've seen risking their lives in this way. And it sickens me to see that faith is mocked oftentimes at New York cocktail parties."

But it's not just New York cocktail parties. This is someone who's talking from outside the church. And what he's saying is although he doesn't realize it, he is seeing salt and fertilizer around the world where there is brokenness, and new life comes about. And sometimes it can be in a grand way. Sometimes it can be in a corporate way, how we might be able to assist Mission to the World to bring some sort of comfort and healing and help to the Bahamian Islands that have suffered so much loss over this last week. It might be something corporately we can do. It could be something an individual can do.

This past week, Jermaine Bell, 7 years old, had been saving up money to go to Disney World because his parents said if he wanted to go, he needed to save money. So, he had been doing all kinds of little sales and things to save up money. But then the hurricane was threatening to hit the South Carolina coast. And they live in the pathway of many of the evacuation routes. So, he took all of his money that he had saved, and he bought hot dogs and potato chips and other foods. And as it was told in his local newspaper, he fed over a hundred people who stopped and got a meal on their way out of town.

I have no idea whether Jermaine Bell is a Christian or not. But I know one thing. That is what fertilizer looks like. He took out of his own comfort at his own sacrifice to help those who were in need. We can do it individually. We can do it corporately.

Then finally, to be the light. The light here isn't necessarily individual lights. It's the light of the church, the collective testimony of Christ's people at work in the world. Just after the gospel of Matthew would've been penned, there were other letters being written, other letters which are important and give us an indication that the sermon which Jesus taught was being received by the disciples and now being taught to the early parts of the church. And they were beginning to not only believe it, but they were beginning to practice it.

Because just after this gospel would've been penned, there were other letters as a part of the Roman government oppressive regime. And these letters were sent to Trajan, who was one of the really brutal Roman leaders. And in these letters, we find the following over and over again.

"We have sought to live out your command to bring persecution, indeed, torture to this people. But after repeated attempts of persecution, torture, and even in many cases, killing them, we find them to be unwaveringly faithful to this God that they preach. They gather together in small

communities and sing some kind of ritual song. And they read these things together to one another on a daily basis.”

That is the light. The one writing that letter was the one who was in command of the troops who would bring about the persecution and the torture and the death for Christians. But the testimony was, instead of meeting these persecutors with swords and shield, they met them with hymns and fellowship and breaking of bread together and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

This is rough truth. But it is a truth that is given to us by Jesus our Savior who calls us into relationship with Him. And the implications of being in relationship with Him change everything about how we live with each other and how we live in the world and how we respond. And Jesus says, come to me in your powerlessness, and I will give you rest. This is hard. But it is the calling of the church. May Jesus equip us, encourage us, give His vision for how He can use us corporately and individually, and be part of God’s bringing about of new life through spreading us as fertilizer here and around the world. Not for our glory, but for His. Let’s pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your grace to us. We thank you for this, your word. We ask that you would give us your Holy Spirit that we might be able to put into practice as we come to you in humility confessing to you, Lord, this has not often been what characterizes the way in which we live. But Lord, you call us to because of our relationship with Jesus. Lord, we need your grace as you’ve shown us how to live. We also need your Spirit to walk in this way. Lord, help us individually and corporately to be used by you to glorify your name and to rest in Jesus Christ and to point people to the gospel and not to ourselves. Help us, O Lord. Help us. For this word is not only relevant to those who first heard it, but it is also so relevant for us. Now, by your Spirit, enable us to practice it. In Jesus’s name. Amen.