

Matthew 5:1-20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 5 verses 1 to 20 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 Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets I have not come to abolish them But to fulfil them For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away Not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments And teaches others to do the same Will be called least in the kingdom of heaven But whoever does them and teaches them Will be called great in the kingdom of heaven

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees You will never enter the kingdom of heaven Matthew 5 is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount The first of five great bodies of teaching that we find within the book of Matthew Matthew particularly foregrounds Jesus' teaching Mark foregrounds Jesus' acts of power Luke, Jesus' travelling on a mission and his prophetic ministry A number of people have seen in Matthew's five speeches A similarity with Moses' five speeches in the book of Deuteronomy The Sermon on the Mount begins with eight beatitudes And these are mirrored on the other side of the book With eight woes that are given in chapter 23 As I hope we're beginning to see Matthew structures his book very carefully And this development from blessings at the beginning to woes at the end Is drawing upon patterns that we see in the Old Testament as well

The book of Deuteronomy, for instance, is framed by the choice between blessings and woes The book of Psalms begins with a beatitude Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly And then speaks about the woes of the wicked The book of Proverbs has a similar structure The first nine chapters preparing you And then that choice between wisdom and folly The blessing of the person who chooses wisdom And the woe of the person who chooses folly This then is a structure that we've seen elsewhere in Scripture A moral structure for a body of teaching The beatitudes themselves were probably designed to be memorised Peter Williams has observed that the first four beatitudes All involve alliteration on the letter pi The sixth alliterates using kappa alpha And the fourth alliterates using delta iota So these different Greek letters are all being used in a way that serve the task of memory There are other parts of the Sermon on the Mount that seem to have a similar purpose

[4 : 22] The Lord's Prayer has poetic elements that once again seem to be designed for memorisation and repetition There are affinities between Jesus as he's portrayed in Matthew And Moses and the law Jesus goes up on a mountain He's teaching from a mountain He's teaching concerning the law Much as Moses was associated with Mount Sinai And the various events upon it Jesus ascends a mountain on various important occasions in the Gospel In the temptation account In the feeding of the 5,000 The Mount of Transfiguration The Olivet Discourse The Great Commission On each of these occasions Jesus is associated with a mountain As the site on which he's delivering a body of teaching Or some significant event is happening Another thing we might notice is that there is a movement through Israel's history in the story of Matthew Peter Lighthouse has argued that Matthew works through the entirety of the Old Testament Recapitulating, playing out again the story of Israel step by step

Begins with the patriarchal era With Abraham With the story of Joseph leading them down into Egypt and his dreams Then the exodus from Egypt Now Sinai And then there's wilderness wanderings The 40 day period There's the entrance into the land The early kingdom Solomon and the parables of the kingdom Elijah and Elisha Joash Jehu The later monarchy Jeremiah and the prophecies That he gives The new covenant And the resurrection of Israel And then finally return from exile All of these themes are playing out in the story of Christ Christ holds Israel within himself So Matthew is a very carefully structured book for this reason We also notice things that bookend the entire narrative So it begins with a reference to the very beginning of Genesis or to the very beginning of 1st Chronicles And ends with the final verse of 2nd Chronicles being alluded to And then there are bookended themes on either side of the book as well Jesus as the king of the Jews and the son of God at both ends of the book

Jesus and the Gentiles Angels and women present Joseph and Mary's at both ends New tomb A virgin's womb Dreams and warnings All of these things bookend the account of Matthew And we'll also see the way that these beatitudes mirror the woes that we find later in the book The beatitudes themselves may be alluding back to passages such as Isaiah chapter 61 Which is a programmatic statement for Jesus in the Gospel of Luke for instance The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me Because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted To proclaim liberty to the captives And the opening of the prison to those who are bound To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour And the day of vengeance of our God To comfort all who mourn To grant to those who mourn in Zion To give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes The all of gladness instead of mourning The garment of praise instead of a faint spirit

That they may be called oaks of righteousness The planting of the Lord That he may be glorified They shall build up the ancient ruins They shall raise up the former devastations They shall repair the ruined cities The devastation of many generations The first of the beatitudes ends with the words Theirs are the kingdom of heaven And then the last of the beatitudes in verse 10 Ends with For theirs is the kingdom of heaven These beatitudes ultimately are about the reception of the kingdom And they divide into two sets of four With 36 words in both sets There's a structure to them as well As we go through we might be able to see It's important not to detach these from their historical context The people to be blessed are not blessed because these things are effective in themselves Rather they're blessed because God is going to act on their behalf We should be careful not to read the beatitudes as if they were an implicit set of imperatives too

God isn't just saying do these sorts of things Note the presence of persecution for instance Rather the point is that these are the things that characterize those people that God is going to act on behalf of God has visited his people in Jesus Christ And now it's a time in which the redemption and the salvation of these people is dawning And they can take comfort and assurance Knowing that these situations that they've wrestled with These troubles that they've experienced These ways in which they've been persecuted and experienced all these things against them That these things are going to be overcome That the kingdom of God is about to dawn in their context Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven The in spirit is a sort of qualifying phrase But there is a connection between material poverty and spiritual neediness A connection that is clearer within the Gospel of Luke But it's important here as well

[9 : 27] Those people who are actually materially poor Are better able to see their dependence upon God and God's goodness towards them This may be quoting in part or alluding in part to Isaiah chapter 66 verse 2 This is the one to whom I will look He who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word There's the force of the present tense to this There's is the kingdom of heaven This is anticipating what will be given to them But it has the surety of them already possessing it now Later on in chapter 23 Jesus will speak about those who shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces And this is characteristic of the scribes and the Pharisees It's the first woe And they do not have the kingdom of heaven And they keep other people out The next beatitude is those who mourn That they will be comforted And the emphasis upon mourning is something we've already seen in Isaiah chapter 61 That God will comfort those who mourn

Those who mourn the sins of Zion Those who mourn its state of being alienated from God's blessing and presence And in contrast to this We can see the characters of the scribes and the Pharisees in chapter 23 They devour widows' houses So not only do they not mourn They destroy and feed and prey upon the mourners The next one The meek shall inherit the earth Once again Jesus is alluding to the Old Testament In Psalm 37 verse 11 But the meek shall inherit the land And delight themselves in abundant peace This contrasts to kingdoms obtained through force of arms And it also contrasts with the corresponding woe in chapter 23 The scribes and Pharisees travel on sea and land to make converts And they make him a child of hell So rather than inheriting the earth He's become a child of hell One who will inherit hell itself The next beatitude Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be satisfied

Righteousness here I think is deliverance or salvation Or God's will more generally It includes personal obedience But I think it's more than that It's also referring to God's action in history It's about God setting things right It's about God coming on the scene And justice being established Not just justice against our enemies But justice in our own lives That we would have holiness and righteousness That we would be people that conform to his desire for our lives And the contrast with this is In the scribes and the Pharisees They're swearing by the temple or the altar And seeing those things as less than the gift upon it Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy And the contrast again with the scribes and Pharisees They tithe mint, anise and cumin But they forget the weightier matters of the law Justice, mercy and faithfulness And the people who understand these weighty matters of the law Who show mercy to others

Who are those who forgive others They will receive forgiveness And this theme is important within Jesus' teaching In the Sermon on the Mount Those who forgive will be forgiven Those who are merciful will obtain mercy The sixth beatitude The pure in heart shall see God Again these are words taken from the Old Testament Psalm 24 verses 3-6 Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord And who shall stand in his holy place He who has clean hands and a pure heart Who does not lift up his soul to what is false And does not swear deceitfully He will receive blessing from the Lord And righteousness from the God of his salvation Such is the generation of those who seek him Who seek the face of the God of Jacob There is a contrast here between true purity Which is inward, a purity of the heart And mere outward purity A purity that is just covering up what is truly inside And this again contrasts with the behaviour of the scribes and the Pharisees

And the woe that corresponds to that Is that they are people who cleanse the outside of the dish only They do not deal with the inside They do not deal with the situation of the heart The seventh beatitude Blessed are the peacemakers For they shall be called sons of God And sons of It means they are people who reflect God's own character And this is also something that's anticipating something in the future They will be called sons of God God will mark them out as his own children on that great day to come The contrast of course is with the scribes and the Pharisees Who appear beautiful on the outside But inside they are full of dead men's bones and uncleanness Rather than being heirs of the resurrection People who will be marked out as the sons of God They are people who are marked out by death Rather than by life And the eighth beatitude Those who are persecuted for righteousness sake Theirs is the kingdom of heaven They seek God's will on earth And those who do so Will face persecution in an unjust society

[14 : 35] And here once again we see a clear contrast With the scribes and the Pharisees in the corresponding woe They are the sons of those who persecuted the prophets And there's a shift in the final beatitude To address it to the disciples more directly Assuring them of the fact that they will be persecuted It's a repetition and an expansion of the eighth beatitude It's no longer in the third person And Luke has all of the beatitudes in the second person But this is in the second person Note the implicit parallel between For righteousness sake And on my account This is what it means To be a person of the kingdom Is to suffer Not just for righteousness sake In general But on the account of Christ And this connection Is a connection with Jesus And his disciples And the prophetic tradition They persecuted the prophets like this They're going to persecute the followers of Christ like this And again in chapters 23 and 25

There are associations between the disciples and the prophets The disciples are told that they are salt and light in the world They're told that they are these things Not how to become them And the strength of the statement is important You are the salt of the earth And the light of the world This is the calling that was given to Israel And it is being fulfilled in them as the true Israel The children of Abraham were to be like sand And like stars And now they are like salt and light Corresponding things Many people have wondered what the salt means here Some have pointed to the fact that salt preserves things Others have pointed out the way that salt can be a way of destroying land As we see in places like Deuteronomy chapter 29 verses 22 to 23 Salt is also associated with sacrifice In Leviticus 2.13 and Mark 9 Salt gives savour like a sort of solid fire that we feel upon our lips And we're told in Colossians 4 verse 5

To have speech seasoned with salt And the contrast is between tasteless salt And salt with saltiness Salt can't salt itself Salt is salt for something else And there's a vision of righteousness here I think There's a righteousness that is redemptive and outgoing Rather than just a self-focused righteousness A righteousness that is just about our personal standing Without concern for others This is something that we see throughout the Sermon on the Mount True righteousness is not self-focused It's a righteousness that goes out into the world That seeks to serve and to bless others Salt has numerous purposes And perhaps what we're supposed to see here Is something of those multitude of purposes Represented in the calling of the people of God The danger however is If we lose this purpose If we neglect it We will risk being trampled underfoot Israel as it rejects Christ Becomes like salt that lost its savour

And the result is being trampled underfoot That language I think Alluding in part perhaps To military occupation That later occurs Once again Jesus is drawing upon The language of the Old Testament These are things that we see in the book of Isaiah In chapter 42 verse 6 I am the Lord I have called you in righteousness I will take you by the hand and keep you I will give you as a covenant for the people A light for the nations And then in chapter 49 verse 6 Is it too light a thing That you should be my servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob And to bring back the preserved of Israel I will make you as a light for the nations That my salvation may reach To the end of the earth These are the people in whom God is working out His purpose in the world In the preceding chapter We've had a description of Christ As a light dawning And here we see that theme Applied to the church In its calling Jerusalem was the city set on the hill

We are supposed to be like a city set on the hill As Christ's disciples The lamp may be connected to that of the temple as well The disciples are to display light to the world They bring things to light They also cause people to glorify God Much of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount Will be concerned with the status And the keeping of the Torah The law And Christ begins by insisting upon his fulfilment Rather than abolition of the law of the prophets The law and the prophets refer to the entirety Of the Old Testament scriptures Christ fulfills the prophetic intent And the content of the law and the prophets Realising what the law itself did not yet achieve The law and the prophets are not abolished But fulfilled and accomplished They reach their intended destination They're not merely reaffirmed or reissued The truth and the divine authority of the law and the prophets Are underlined But in a way that reveals them to be transfigured in Christ Their fulfilment is not just their perpetual continuance

[19 : 42] But about their arrival at the intended destination And his statement makes clear that the law and prophets Were never a static and timeless body of revelation But were always straining forward towards something yet to be revealed And fulfilled The written law is a creation But even its smallest elements Have the same sort of continuance As heaven and earth themselves Note the parallels between heaven and earth And the law In places such as Psalm 19 The fulfilment of the law can then lead to a transformed relationship with And way of living out the law We can see indications of this within Jesus' teaching that follows The mission of the law is fulfilled in Christ The law dies and rises again And then the law can be lived out in a new way The law retains authority in the kingdom As we see in verse 19 This presumes that the law remains in force in some sense In the time of the kingdom There's a symmetry between the way that teachers handle the law And the way that they will be treated in the kingdom

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