

A BASIC ASSUMPTION

Most of us, whether in this room or our living rooms, operate under a fundamental assumption about life. We assume that we live in a world in which God rules. We believe that God reigns over the daily and global affairs of our planet with personal intimacy and assured purpose. And, we believe that submission to his reign leads to the abundance of life. In other words, we believe God's ruling is not only true but also good and beautiful.

It is this assumption that God rules, which compels us to strive for the "biblical ideal of human life." To seek after an "individual and corporate human existence lived freely and intelligently from a hand-in-hand, conversational walk with God...a life of free-hearted collaboration with Jesus and his friends in the kingdom of the heavens."¹ "free-hearted collaboration with Jesus and his friends in the kingdom of the heavens," is Dallas Willard's favorite way to describe a life lived under God's rule. The very reason we seek to [Hear God](#) more consistently and clearly. "kingdom of heaven" is also the gospel writer Matthew's favorite way of expressing the fundamental assumption about *where* we live out our daily existence.

D.A. Carson points out, "Matthew was like many Jews of his day," in that he "would avoid using the word 'God.' They felt it too holy, too exalted,"² for the common tongue. So, they found other words, like "heaven," to point out the reality of God's sovereign rule, God's kingdom. So, when you read the "kingdom of heaven," as we will over and over again in the coming months, think God's intimate and purposeful rule over creation.

ENTERING THE KINGDOM

Strictly speaking, God's sovereignty extends everywhere and over everything—whether seen or unseen. As Creator and sustainer of life, there is nothing in existence that does not fall under his purview. Either his graces or his judgment. And yet, Jesus—who certainly knew the limitlessness of God's rule—begins his vocational ministry declaring that we must "repent," turn from and let go of allegiance to an alternative kingdom, and enter into the "kingdom of heaven," for it "is at hand," now open to entry ([4:17](#)). So, while we, by merely existing, find ourselves under the sovereignty of God, there is something more to the being in the "kingdom of heaven" than having a heart that beats and lungs full of air.

Jesus would say, in the text that will take our attention for the next several months, that "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven," ([7:21](#)) and those who do "enter the kingdom of heaven" do so only by exceedingly different righteousness ([5:20](#)). While the entry requires distinction, its accessibility is global—"many will come from the east and west," says Jesus, "and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." ([8:11](#)).

¹ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: developing a conversational relationship with God*, 14-15.

² D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: an evangelical exposition of Matthew 5-7*, 11.

So, there must be a difference between the reality, the truth of God's sovereign rule, his kingdom *existing*, and his kingdom, his intimate and purposeful rule, *experienced*. To **enter** the kingdom of God **is to experience** the realities of God's authority to the fullest.

To "enter the kingdom of heaven," as Jesus puts it, is to move from existing in a world in which God rules, and living that existence to the fullest. "To enter the kingdom of God," argues Carson, "is to enter life."³ To experience life in harmony, in happiness, with purposefulness, and forever. To enter the kingdom of God is to experience the fruitfulness and effectiveness of faith in Jesus, as Jesus' disciple, Peter would later remind his faith family ([2 Pet. 1:1-11](#)). To enter the kingdom of God is to enter experience life in a harmonizing relationship with the giver of life and with the clear-eyed sight from the light of the life of himself ([Ps. 36:9](#), [Jn. 1:4](#)). To enter the kingdom of heaven is to experience everyday relationships, responsibilities, and roles in awareness of and submission to God's intimate and purposeful rule.

Kingdom life, as Jesus will instruct us in the [Sermon on the Mount](#), is a life lived in response to God's good, accompanying, and accomplishing rule, rather than a reactionary life, a rejoinder to the stimulus of our daily existence. One of my favorite authors and pastors, Eugene Peterson, describes Jesus' teaching on the difference between living and existing in [Matthew 5-7](#) this way,

"Jesus is instructing us in what it is like to live in the world where God rules. He is training us to live not in reaction to our sin and guilt, not in response to people stronger than we are, not in desperation by any means at hand, not to survive the sea of cynicism and malice, and certainly not to live egocentrically with the self as the center and master. He is training our minds and our emotions [through descriptive behaviors] to live [behave] in response to the realities inherent in the kingdom of God: to live by faith [hope] and love..."⁴

In what we call so commonly know the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus lays before his disciples a picture of the experienced, abundant life with God and God with us. The picture painted by Jesus is not an ideal image but one that is raw and real, physical and emotional, intellectual and relational, personally religious and communally responsible. In other words, it is an **earthy picture**. A picture of God's kingdom come, his will being done on earth as it is in heaven ([6:10](#)).

It's to this preached picture, a sermon "considered the epitome of the teaching of Jesus, and therefore...the essence of Christianity,"⁵ that we turn our attention for the next several months. A guiding picture we need right now, at the moment in our nation's history when we need a picture of another way. A guiding vision we need today, at the season in our nation's lifecycle, where we are asked to choose the possibilities of what is next collectively. A guiding image we need at a time when we are most confused—at least unsteady—in how we are to live together. We need the actionable picture of life in response to realities inherent in the kingdom of God. I know I do.

³ Ibid., 12.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, "Jesus Went Up the Mountain," in *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, 238.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, quoted in *The Sermon on the Mount Through the Centuries* (ed. Greeman, Larsen, & Spencer), 13.

AN EARTHY PICTURE

The long time biblical expositor and pastor to London's All Souls Church, John Stott, once said of Jesus' paramount homily, that,

“The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably, it is the least understood, and certainly, it is the least obeyed. It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers to be and to do.

It portrays the repentance (the complete change of mind) and the righteousness (good relations) which belong to the kingdom. That is, **it describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God.**

It depicts behavior which Jesus expected of each of his disciples, who is also thereby a citizen of God's kingdom.”⁶

The Sermon on the Mount is an earthy picture of life in God's kingdom. **A life in response and reception of all that God offers to those who live in-step with his presence and intent.** The Sermon on the Mount, however, does not paint a picture of idolized life with God. It does not depict a utopian vision, a world without tears or pain or sorrow or conflict or oppression or troubles. Our faith has that vision, that picture of “new heavens and a new earth,” that spring forth at the return of Jesus and the end of rebellion and evil. This vision of a day of justice and eternal goodness captures our imagination and imprisons us to hope. Yet the Sermon on the Mount offers us something different, something for the in-between now and that day.

The Sermon on the Mount paints the picture of a garden growing and spreading amid chaos, and therefore one that has weeds and thorns and tares within its cultivated and fruitful beauty. The image we have of the person who lives the spirit and letter of the Sermon on the Mount is one who finds herself attentive to wisdom and inclined to understanding ([Pr. 2:2](#)). And, one who finds himself at the very heart of redemption happening in the political, economic, circumstantial, and relationally clutter of our everyday.

Jesus would later say to those same disciples listening to his sermon, that all he had made known to them about our heavenly Father, his kingdom, and their entry and place within, was so they might have *peace* through him. Yet he added this to the thing which we all seek and which he said is ours to possess, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” ([Jn. 16:33](#))

The Sermon on the Mount portrays the portrait of the life experienced in God's kingdom amid the mess of our world. A picture of how we are to behave and believe as citizens of heaven *and* members of the American constituency. A depiction of how we can enter in, experience within in our homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, relationships, responsibilities, callings, and communing with God; the life our Father has freed us to live through Jesus, the life we are after in our seeking God in the first place.

⁶ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 15, 18, 24.

FINDING WHAT WE ARE SEEKING

The Sermon on the Mount sketches the image of a “perfect” life ([6:48](#)), which is life at *peace*, within unsteady times and relationships. The Sermon on the Mount assumes what we all experience at different points throughout our existence:

- that there will be reasons to mourn ([5:4](#))
- that we will experience rejection, stereotyping, and vicious words ([5:11-12](#))
- that we will have conflicts, divisions, hurts, and wrongs in our most intimate and everyday relationships ([5:21-42](#))
- that we will have enemies (5:43-48)
- that we’ll have mixed up motives that impact our relationship with God ([6:1-34](#))
- that we’ll try (even as Jesus followers) to control our little worlds, exercise more authority than we possess, and share life with those we think are with us but are (for a variety of motives known and not) against us ([7:1-27](#))

The Sermon on the Mount assumes all this that we can verify in our daily existing. It also assumes that we are, amid these evident assumptions: happy! “Blessed,” already happy, are the receipts of life experienced in the intimate and purposeful rule of God today. Isn’t happiness what we want in life? Not a shallow happiness that fades whenever the show ends, the stimulate wears off, the relationship wears thin, but a lasting, deep, resilient joy?

Well, listen to the experience of those who have entered into the kingdom of heaven. The sermon begins in the “Beatitudes,” with the very image of those whose character is shaped from the life they’ve received. Is this not the very life that we are after today? A...

- full life that is more than existing,
- comfort in affliction and disappointment,
- a way of life in tune with the rhythms of creation,
- satisfaction within our relationships,
- mercy when we need it, when fail and struggle and wantonly screw up,
- the ability and opportunity to see God, know him concretely,
- heirship and inheritance of all the promises of God, and
- connection into a long history of faith.

The Sermon on the Mount assumes that we can live a happy life, a life of resilient joy from all that God gives us in his kingdom, *TODAY*. “Blessed,” already happy, is the image of the new creation on earth, even when the earth has not yet been made new. It is the resilient joy—the blessedness of the mournful and meek, the pure in heart and the peacemakers who hunger and thirst after living rightly with God and neighbor—that help

makes the world a different and better place. While the Sermon on the Mount does not assume that we can completely overcome the objectors of peace—those who think it is achieved by other means than God’s rule, are opposed to it altogether, or betray it for their personal and temporary gain—it does assume Jesus has. So we can, therefore, share the peace in which we live, “passing the peace,” if you will.

Look for a moment at [Matthew 5:13-16](#). Here we are imagined to be salt within the systems and citizenry of this world, and a light from outside it, illuminating something different in the surrounding darkness. We are called the “salt of the earth,” (5:13), the very substance that preserves life and draws out the fullest flavor in the dead and the dying (that which (has and) will pass away—systems and cultures and nations and institutions and causes) so that they might find their fullest and most tender use. We are “the light of the world” (5:14), the instrument by which a different way can be seen so that all should reach repentance ([2 Pet. 3:9](#)). We are “A city set on a hill” (5:14), a unique vision, **a picture, of life together with God as it can and should be.**

It is in understanding what Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount as a whole that will keep us on point through the series, and faithful to picture Jesus is inviting us to live. Understanding that Jesus is “training our minds and our emotions [through descriptive behaviors] to live [behave] in response to the realities inherent in the kingdom of God.” And that he is painting a portrait of “what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God,” will help us not get lost in the forest because of the trees.

There will be, in Jesus’ paramount preaching, injunctions, commands, particular depictions that seem impossible, absurd, even offensive to our ears. We will, at moments, want to idolize a specific demand, make a specific depiction “the image” of what life should be—holding ourselves and others to its standard. And at other moments, we will want to “put down or throw,” out or re-interpret a specific portion of the picture because “the truth is too close for comfort and” we “are uncomfortable.”

In those moments of confusion, aspiration, and conviction, we must remember what Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount as a whole. He is painting a portrait and representation of the kingdom of heaven experienced on earth. He is not offering a new set of ethical codes. Instead, Jesus is bringing into the present life an ancient way that is not hidden, though often ignored and just as often misapplied ([Matt. 5:17-20](#)).

We have a picture of those entering the kingdom as images of their Creator, walking steadily and in-step with His just decrees ([chapter 5](#)). These kingdom citizens are aware of his continual presence and their heart’s motivations ([chapter 6](#)). They do all things in an intimate relationship with their heavenly Father. Embodying the Spirit’s wisdom, they participate in economics, politics, ecology, and all of life on earth, knowing it will one day be washed away ([chapter 7](#)).

When we can remember the whole picture, we can, as Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once suggested, “sit under the judgment of the Sermon on the Mount,”⁷ recognizing like those who first heard it, the astonishing authority it commands ([7:28-29](#)). We can let Jesus through the Holy Spirit and in our community, bring clarity to our confusion. Allow him to bring maturity to our aspirations. And see transformation through our conviction as we come to believe, accept, be conformed to the picture of the Beatitudes: one’s already blessed and in possession of the life of the kingdom.⁸

⁷ Lloyd-Jones, 22-23.

⁸ See Lloyd-Jones, 16-17.

THE COMMITMENT

To this end, can I ask you to do something with me and for one another while we are in this series? Can I ask you to **commit to reading the entire Sermon on the Mount three times a week during the series**? It takes about 20 minutes to read through from [Matthew 5:1-7:29](#). I'll include in this week's "[Pastoral Note](#)," some suggestions ways to read this text regularly while keeping it fresh. But would you commit to that, to immerse yourself in the portrait of life with God experienced here and now?

A CONCLUDING EXHORTATION

One of the men listening to Jesus' mountainside portrait, speaking into his mind and heart the vision of the kingdom of heaven on earth, was Peter. In the second of his letters to his faith family, Peter reminds them of the "qualities" of life with God, which allow us to experience the fullness of life under God's rule. I believe he had this sermon of Jesus on his mind as he wrote these words to his "friends in the kingdom of heavens," including you and me,

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

(2 Peter 1:8-11)

So faith family, may we be diligent in *practicing* these qualities. May we possess in our imagination this picture and increase our living out the picture Jesus paints of the experience of God's kingdom come, his will done, on earth—in our homes, in our city, in us—as it is in heaven.

Let's pray.