



# “Rerouting: The Kingdom of Heaven”

*John 14:1-7; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Matthew 5:3-16*

***It is time for us to begin to prepare ourselves for Easter.***

Lent is the season in which we prepare ourselves for Easter, not in triumphalism but in contrition and contemplation as we repent of our sins and pray for rescue from the darkness. Our sermon series this Lent is titled,

*Rerouting*, for that is the essence of repentance: utterly changing the direction we are heading and moving in a new direction. Jesus is the Way, but there are so many other ways that call us, offering us bright lights and gaudy bangles. How can we hope to find our way to Jesus?

First, we need to know what we are looking for. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount begins with a portrait of God’s kingdom, i.e., Jesus’ kingdom. The Beatitudes offer us a beautiful picture of that which we seek. But how do we reroute? How can we find our way in a world that is constantly offering us other paths, even directing us onto them? Perhaps we need a compass and a map and some navigators as we reroute.

## ***The compass***

I learned how to use a compass in Scouts. One of the main things I learned is that a compass is always true. It will always point us in the right direction. As Christians, Jesus is our compass. It is in our imitation of Christ, our apprenticeship of our Master, that we stay on the road toward the good life. We could do far worse than to check the progress of our trip with a simple, “What Would Jesus Do?” Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. But I also remember from my Scout days that I could reach my destination a lot easier with a compass *and* a reliable map.

## ***The map***

In 2 Timothy, Paul urges Timothy to remember what he has learned from childhood and who he has learned it from. Like most Jewish boys, Timothy had been steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures from a very early age. Paul reminds him that those sacred writings are able to instruct Timothy and make him wise for salvation in the faith that is in Jesus Christ. We need to remember that the writings Paul refers are only the writings of the Old Testament. Though some of the New Testament writings existed and were circulating among the churches, they had not been collected and canonized. Just as the Jews had a tradition of sacred and inspired writings, so would the Christians come to understand that the writings of the Old and New Testaments were inspired by God in a way unlike any other literature. Paul puts this quite bluntly when, in v. 16, he refers to the sacred writings as *theopneustos*, literally “God-breathed.” Though the process of inspiration is a mystery, God is the source of these writings. When we read the pages of scripture, when we open this map, we hear God speak.

Because the scriptures are “God-breathed,” Paul reminds Timothy that they are “useful” – teaching us, rebuking us, correcting us, and training us. In his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders Paul’s words this way, “Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live in God’s way.” This is pretty much how we learn anything important. We have to be shown the path forward, we have to be shown when we have fallen off the path, we have to be shown how to get back on the path, and then we have to be trained so we can stay on the path. What a map!

Regrettably, sometimes we try to turn the Bible into the sort of book that we think God ought to have given us rather than the one he did. We might try to turn it into a rule book, as if it is no more than a list of do’s and don’ts. Sometimes, we try rearranging the Bible into a systematic book of right beliefs. Or perhaps we simply

try to turn the Bible into a magic answer book. But instead, in his wisdom, God has given us a book of stories about God's relationship with his people. The Bible is the dramatic story of God's journey with the people of God, a journey that we are very much a part of today. Even in the writings that don't seem to be stories, like Paul's letters to Timothy, we can probably hear God more truly when we listen for the underlying narrative.

### ***Navigators***

Even though the Bible is "God-breathed," it is still not always easy to read, understand, and interpret. Thus, Christians have always held that the Bible is Scripture for the believing community. We read and interpret the Bible with the help of Christians living now and those who have come before. In our trip metaphor, it is as if the car (back to the road trip) is full of sincere, knowledgeable, caring people who want to help us reach our destination with as few miscues as possible. None of us are on this journey alone. Not only is God's Spirit guiding us forward, opening the meaning of Scripture to our minds and hearts, but we are also blessed to be accompanied by many other Christians, such as all the wonderful people here at First UMC. They are along as my navigators; I am along as theirs. This is part of the reason that having a relationship to the church, to a church somewhere, is necessary, not merely optional. God knows that the journey of our lives, this journey to the abundant life that is in Christ, is fraught with difficulties and peril. By his grace, God has given us not only a compass and a map, but a carload of fellow navigators.

And so, we make our way forward, with all the inevitable detours and enticing exit ramps, seeking to be people of the Kingdom. What is the Kingdom of God like? Let's take a look.

### ***The Beatitudes***

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not a new and more stringent system of rules nor is it an impossible ideal. Rather, when Jesus sits down to teach his followers, he is training them in the Kingdom of God. These nine beatitudes, with which Jesus begins his teaching, are not simply an introduction to what follows – they are its very foundation. These are not "entrance requirements" to God's Kingdom. They are not conditional – none of them say "if you will x, then y." They are not "attitudes."

Rather, these are straightforward declarative statements of what is. Indeed, Eugene Boring goes further.<sup>1</sup> He notes that the Beatitudes do not merely declare what is; they bring it into being – much like an umpire crying out "strike" or a minister pronouncing a couple husband and wife. The Beatitudes are Gospel – they proclaim to the world the Good News!

Here is how NT Wright translates the Beatitudes in his *Kingdom New Testament*.

<sup>3</sup> 'Wonderful news for the poor in spirit! The kingdom of heaven is yours. <sup>4</sup> 'Wonderful news for the mourners! You're going to be comforted. <sup>5</sup> 'Wonderful news for the meek! You're going to inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> 'Wonderful news for people who hunger and thirst for God's justice! You're going to be satisfied. <sup>7</sup> 'Wonderful news for the merciful! You'll receive mercy yourselves. <sup>8</sup> 'Wonderful news for the pure in heart! You will see God. <sup>9</sup> 'Wonderful news for the peacemakers! You'll be called God's children. <sup>10</sup> 'Wonderful news for people who are persecuted because of God's way! The kingdom of heaven belongs to you. <sup>11</sup> 'Wonderful news for you, when people slander you and persecute you, and say all kinds of wicked things about you falsely because of me! <sup>12</sup> Celebrate and rejoice: there's a great reward for you in heaven. That's how they persecuted the prophets who went before you.'<sup>2</sup>

Because these are prophetic pronouncements they point us toward the teacher. They are not self-evident. It is Jesus' authority that makes the Beatitudes the foundation of the Sermon. Everything is changing, Jesus says. The world is no longer as it seems, for the Kingdom of God is arriving . . . and indeed it has. Already and not yet. The kingdom is both present and coming.

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<sup>1</sup> from Eugene Boring's excellent commentary on Matthew's Gospel in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Another excellent and readable commentary is by Douglas Hare in the *Interpretation series*.

<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 34–35.

## ***The Kingdom of God***

Each of the nine Beatitudes points us to God's Kingdom (the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew). They either mention the kingdom directly (the first and eighth Beatitude) or some aspect of it. In the kingdom of God, his people will be comforted and filled and shown mercy. They will inherit the earth. They will be rewarded in heaven. They will be called the children of God. They will see God!<sup>3</sup> All the rest of the Sermon on the Mount has to be read in this bright light.

So to reiterate, Jesus is again proclaiming the Kingdom is arriving and it is indeed wonderful news, the best news possible. With the arrival of the Kingdom of God, mourners will be comforted and the peacemakers will be called children of God. As Mary sings to Elizabeth before Jesus was even born, God is turning the world upside down (Luke 1:51-53).

### ***For whom is the Kingdom of Heaven?***

The kingdom of heaven is for the people of God. The people of God are those who place their faith in Jesus Christ, in God. Those who have faith in Jesus strive to be ever-truer disciples. Those who are disciples of Christ strive to be Christ-like, much as an apprentice strives to be like the master. In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches his followers about the characteristics of disciples living in the Kingdom -- even in the present. Here are some thoughts on each Beatitude.

- Those who are "poor in spirit" are those who know that they are dependent on God. As Boring puts it: "Persons who are pronounced blessed are not those who claim a robust ego and strong sense of self-worth, but those whose only identity and security is in God."
- "Those who mourn" doesn't refer only to the death of loved ones, but also to our lament for the condition of God's creation and his people. In other words, those who strive for the kingdom of God realize how far short of God's hope the present world falls.
- Like "poor in spirit," meekness (meaning gentleness and humility) flies in the face of conventional wisdom about what it takes to be "successful." Of course, Jesus also challenges us to reconsider what we mean by success! (see Psalm 37:9,11 also).
- "Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" are those who long for the coming of God's kingdom and the vindication of right. At the same time, we need to understand that Jesus brings comfort to those who are quite literally poor, hungry, and thirsty.
- Matthew chooses a Greek word for "mercy" that is not merely about having compassion for others -- the merciful are those who act on their compassion. As in feeding those who are poor, hungry, and thirsty.
- In v. 8, purity of heart goes beyond the avoidance of impure thoughts to a singleminded devotion to God.
- Many of Jesus' followers expected him to call for the overthrow of the Roman oppressors, by force if necessary. But Jesus disappoints them. The people of the kingdom are people of peace. In God's kingdom, swords are broken into plowshares.

Jesus knows that to the extent that his disciples move toward "Christlikeness," they will be increasingly out of step with the world around them. They will be reviled and persecuted as they shape their lives around the values of the kingdom. Jesus pronounces blessing on them and on their prophetic mission . . . our mission . . . to be the light to the world.

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<sup>3</sup> In Revelation 22:4, God's people see his face. Compare this with Exodus 33:20 where God warns Moses that he cannot see God's face and live. We don't need to get too literal here. God doesn't have a face like you or I do. But just reflect for awhile on this imagery and the promise that we will see God as Adam once did, when, in the evenings, God would come and walk in the garden with his children. The significance and comfort of what the biblical writers are trying to tell us ought to take our breath away!