



“Jesus: The New Moses”

Matthew 4:23-5:16

Who but God can speak with the authority of God?

God led the Israelites to Mt. Sinai after their flight from slavery in Egypt. There, Moses ascended the mountain and received the Law from God. He then came down the mountain and presented God’s Law to the gathered people of God. Though we often refer to this Law as the Law of Moses, that is really a bit of a misnomer, for it is God’s Law, not Moses’s. He is the official spokesman, but it is the Law of God. Similarly, though Moses is the one who is chosen to be the agent of God’s work,

it is God who frees the Hebrew slaves and it is the Spirit of God, in the fiery pillar, who leads them to Mt. Sinai.

The parallels between Jesus and Moses are so striking that we often describe Jesus as a new Moses. But even this goes only so far. Yes, Jesus leads his disciples up a “mountain” to teach them, but he does so with the authority of God, not that of a mere spokesman or prophet. Jesus speaks and acts as if he is God! The Sermon on the Mount is spoken with the authority of God in every word.

The Sermon on the Mount

Spanning three chapters, the Sermon on the Mount is the largest and longest block of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew’s Gospel. Though we may not realize it, much of the Sermon on the Mount is familiar even to Christians who don’t read the Bible. In it we find the Lord’s prayer, the Beatitudes, the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” lust in the heart¹, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, “love your enemies,” “do not judge, so that you may not be judged,” the narrow gate, wolves in sheep’s clothing, houses built on rocks v. houses built on sand – all this and much more. With so much here, the obvious question is what do we do with it all? How do we begin to make sense of it?

Because there is so much in the Sermon on the Mount that seems far removed from the “real world,” many Christians tend to see the Sermon as an impossible ideal reflecting a world that will be great when it comes . . . but has very little to do with the lives we lead right now! Even when we correctly understand that the Sermon is about the Kingdom of God, we think of the Kingdom as some future-only reality, rather than remembering that the Kingdom is present-but-still coming or already/not yet, to go back to last week. In the end, reading the Sermon on the Mount as if it is a wonderful, but impossible, ideal is the one thing we cannot do.

Training in the Kingdom of Heaven²

Richard Hays³ notes that Jesus as an authoritative teacher is a dominant theme of Matthew’s Gospel. The church is seen as a community of disciples, of those being taught to be evermore Christ-like. In this light, we see that the Sermon on the Mount is training in the Kingdom of God. Jesus provides the disciples plenty of on-the-job training as they carry out Jesus’ ministry. But Jesus also trains his disciples as a Jewish teacher would – by sitting them down and talking to them about the nature of the Kingdom. So it is no surprise that the Sermon opens with Jesus reminding his followers that they are the “light to the world” – the training has a purpose that goes beyond these individuals. Likewise, Jesus closes the Sermon with a call to obedience. What is the point of training if there is no action?

The Sermon on the Mount is not about how well we can conform to a set of rules. Rather, it is about our character, for our actions flow outward from our character. Selflessness is a matter of the heart, not a rulebook. But you might ask, isn’t what Jesus is asking of his disciples unrealistic and impossible? Jesus’ answer is “no.” We have been born from

¹ In 1976, presidential candidate Jimmy Carter gave an interview to Playboy magazine in which he said that though he had never had an affair, he had “lusted in his heart.” This got a lot of public attention at the time (he dropped 15 points in the polls), but Carter was only striving to be true to Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, though why he chose that forum in which to bear his soul always puzzled me!

² Matthew’s Gospel is the most “Jewish” of the four Gospels in the NT. Respecting the sensibilities of his Jewish readers, Matthew refers to the “Kingdom of God” as the “Kingdom of Heaven.” God’s name, even the word “God,” was so sacred to many Jews that they would not say it aloud. Even today, you can find ultra-orthodox websites that will only spell out “God” as “G-d”!

³ Hays’s very important book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

above (John 3); we are new creations. With God, all things are possible. With faith, nothing is impossible. By virtue of God's creative work in our lives, the seemingly impossible becomes possible.

The Beatitudes

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.” These are straightforward declarative statements of what is. Indeed, Eugene Boring goes further.⁴ He notes that the Beatitudes do not merely declare what it 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! 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.

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!⁵ All the rest of the Sermon on the Mount has to be read in this bright light.

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 genuine disciples. These aren't merely words to live by” in the world at large; they are what characterizes those who enjoy the kingdom of God. Here are some thoughts on each Beatitude.

- Those who are “poor in spirit” are those who know that they are dependent in 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 live in the kingdom of God realize how far short of God's hope for 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.
- 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 training of his disciples moves them toward “Christ-likeness,” 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.

⁴ 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*.

⁵ 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 do not need to get too literal here. God does not have a face like you, or I do. But just reflect for a while 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.