

Week of November 2nd – Matthew 5.1-12

- Read each daily Devotional Reading using the SOAP method and Daily Devotional to help you reflect.
- Read the article below prior to group
- Think through the small group and accountability questions after the article

Devotional Readings

Sunday	Revelation 7:1-17
Monday	Psalm 34
Tuesday	1 John 3:1-10
Wednesday	Matthew 5:1-12
Thursday	Deuteronomy 28
Friday	Luke 6
Saturday	John 13

Article: The Beatitudes - Matthew 5.1-12

by N.T. Wright from *Matthew for everyone, Part 1* (England: London : SPCK, 2002.), 34-38.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the hillside, and sat down. His disciples came to him. He took a deep breath, and began his teaching:

Wonderful news for the poor in spirit! The kingdom of heaven is yours.

Wonderful news for the mourners! You're going to be comforted.

Wonderful news for the meek! You're going to inherit the earth.

Wonderful news for people who hunger and thirst for God's justice! You're going to be satisfied.

Wonderful news for the merciful! You'll receive mercy yourselves.

Wonderful news for the pure in heart! You will see God.

Wonderful news for the peacemakers! You'll be called God's children.

Wonderful news for people who are persecuted because of God's way! The kingdom of heaven belongs to you.

Wonderful news for you, when people slander you and persecute you, and say all kinds of wicked things about you falsely because of me! Celebrate and rejoice: there's a great reward for you in heaven.

That's how they persecuted the prophets who went before you:

Many years ago there was a dramatic movie about the first test pilots to break the sound barrier. No plane had ever flown faster than the speed of sound. Many people didn't believe it was possible. Some thought the plane would disintegrate under the forces that would be generated. Eventually, in the movie, various pilots took their planes over the magic figure of 735 miles per hour, only to have the planes disintegrate with the huge vibrations, or to crash. The controls, it seemed, refused to work properly once the plane came to the sound barrier.

Finally, at the climax of the movie, another test pilot figured out what to do. It seemed that when the plane broke the sound barrier the controls began to work backwards. Pulling the stick to make the plane bring its nose up sent it downwards instead. Greatly daring, he flew to the same speed. At the critical moment, instead of pulling the stick back, he pushed it forwards. That would normally send the plane into a dive, but his hunch had been correct. The nose came up, and the plane flew on, fast and free, faster than anyone had travelled before.

The story is not historically accurate. Chuck Yeager, the first human to move faster than the speed of sound in real life, was often asked whether he'd done it the way it was shown in the movie, but he insisted it wasn't like that. However, the story gives a graphic illustration of what Jesus is doing in these apparently simple words. He is taking the controls and making them work backwards.

The only explanation seems to be that he thinks he is taking God's people through the sound barrier — taking them somewhere they'd never been before. The one thing most people know about planes going through the sound barrier is that you hear a loud explosion. Many of Jesus' contemporaries would have said that this was a good picture of the effect he had.

Jesus wasn't simply a great teacher, and if we try to describe him like that we will misunderstand him. This passage is the beginning of the famous 'Sermon on the Mount', which runs through chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew's gospel, and sets out, in Matthew's presentation of it, the main themes of Jesus' proclamation. People often say what wonderful teaching the Sermon on the Mount is, and that if only people would obey it the world would be a better place. But if we think of Jesus simply sitting there telling people how to behave properly, we will miss what was really going on. These 'blessings', the 'wonderful news' that he's announcing, are not saying 'try hard to live like this: They are saying that people who already are like that are in good shape. They should be happy and celebrate.

Jesus is not suggesting that these are simply timeless truths about the way the world is, about human behavior. If he was saying that, he was wrong. Mourners often go un comforted, the meek don't inherit the earth, those who long for justice frequently take that longing to the grave. This is an upside-down world, or perhaps a right-way-up world; and Jesus is saying that with his work it's starting to come true. This is an announcement, not a philosophical analysis of the world. It's about something that's starting to happen, not about a general truth of life. It is gospel: good news, not good advice.

Follow me, Jesus said to the first disciples; because in him the living God was doing a new thing, and this list of 'wonderful news' is part of his invitation, part of his summons, part of his way of saying that God is at work in a fresh way

and that this is what it looks like. Jesus is beginning a new era for God's people and God's world. From here on, all the controls people thought they knew about are going to work the other way round. In our world, still, most people think that wonderful news consists of success, wealth, long life, victory in battle. Jesus is offering wonderful news for the humble, the poor, the mourners, the peacemakers.

The word for 'wonderful news' is often translated 'blessed', and part of the point is that this is God's wonderful news. God is acting in and through Jesus to turn the world upside down, to turn Israel upside down, to pour out lavish 'blessings' on all who now turn to him and accept the new thing that he is doing. (This list is sometimes called 'the Beatitudes', because the Latin word 'beatus' means 'blessed') But the point is not to offer a list of what sort of people God normally blesses. The point is to announce God's new covenant.

In Deuteronomy, the people came through the wilderness and arrived at the border of the Promised Land, and God gave them a solemn covenant. He listed the blessings and the curses that would come upon them if they were obedient or disobedient (chapter 28). Now Matthew has shown us Jesus, coming out of Egypt (2.15), through the water and the wilderness (chapters 3 and 4), and into the land of promise (4.12—25). Here, now, is his new covenant.

So when do these promises come true? There is a great temptation for Christians to answer: in heaven, after death. At first sight, verses 3, 10 and 11 seem to say this: 'the kingdom of heaven' belongs to the poor in spirit and the persecuted, and there's a great reward 'in heaven' for those who suffer persecution for Jesus' sake. This, though, is a misunderstanding of the meaning of 'heaven.' Heaven is God's space, where full reality exists, close by our ordinary ('earthly') reality and interlocking with it. One day heaven and earth will be joined together forever, and the true state of affairs, at present out of sight, will be unveiled. After all, verse 5 says that the meek will inherit the earth, and that can hardly happen in a disembodied heaven after death.

No: the clue comes in the next chapter, in the prayer Jesus taught his followers. We are to pray that God's kingdom will come, and God's will be done, 'on earth as it is in heaven. The life of heaven — the life of the realm where God is already king — is to become the life of the world, transforming the present 'earth' into the place of beauty and delight that God always intended. And those who follow Jesus are to begin to live by this rule here and now. That's the point of the Sermon on the Mount, and these 'beatitudes' in particular. They are a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God's promised future; because that future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth. It may seem upside down, but we are called to believe, with great daring, that it is in fact the right way up. Try it and see.

About the author: N.T. Wright is Bishop of Durham (Church of England) and was formerly Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey and dean of Lichfield Cathedral. A graduate of Oxford University, he previously taught at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), and *The Resurrection and the Son of God* (2003) are the first three volumes of his projected six-volume series entitled *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (SPCK/ Fortress Press). Among his many other published works are *The Original Jesus* (1996), *What Saint Paul Really Said* (1997), and *The Climax of the Covenant* (1992). He is the author of the For Everyone commentary series.

Small Group Questions

Accountability

Apostolic Mission - Are you learning to be intentional about sharing Jesus with neighbors? Are you praying for a 3:1:M friend? How are they doing? Are you reaching your group and individual goals in this area?

Open / Scripture

1. What is your favorite Suspense or Mystery Book or Movie?
2. What do about suspense stories do you enjoy the most?

Observation

1. What does it mean to be poor in spirit, or what would someone who was that look like?
2. Why would Jesus say it was blessed to be someone who mourns?
3. What does it mean to be meek, and why would Jesus say that they would inherit the earth?
4. What might Jesus mean that one would inherit the earth?
5. If you were to put together a list of things that our culture would say are signs of blessedness, how would it compare with the list of things Jesus states?
6. With this list that Jesus gives of people who are blessed in his Kingdom in mind, read Luke 22:24-27. How do these characteristics match with Jesus' example of living?

Apply

1. Where do you find yourself described in this list of attributes? Where do you find your manner of life in most contrast with this list?
2. If these attributes describe those whom the Kingdom of God exults, how does your vision or understanding of the Kingdom contrast with this?
3. This week start each day asking God to not only enable you to understand what the Kingdom of God looks like but also for the freedom to live it out each day. Spend time mediating on Jesus' teachings and example.
4. This week, ask God to give you an opportunity to demonstrate His kingdom living through your actions alone to someone who is far away from God and difficult to love.