

Many of you will remember the meteoric rise of the Butler Bulldogs a little more than a decade ago. They took a chance on hiring an inexperienced 30-year-old coach named Brad Stevens, a guy who left his job at Lily to take an unpaid role on the team just to get his foot in the door. He was young and inexperienced, and the broader sports world thought the school was crazy. That is, until his unconventional approach led the team to a thirty-win season, something the school had never experienced before. In no time, he led them to two national championship games, blowing everyone's expectations out of the water! People wanted to know what made this coach so different, what was so special about him. He attributed everything to what he called "The Butler Way," a different way of building a program, developing talent, and fostering a culture than other teams were focusing on. He wasn't recruiting future first-round draft picks; he was recruiting for humility, integrity, and work ethic; he was looking for guys who would be great teammates. A brand-new leader with a brand-new philosophy and a brand-new way of building a team transformed the DNA and the legacy of the program, and the entire nation tuned in to follow along.

I don't want to make too much of our local sports, but it's a good example of what it was like when Jesus began his ministry. Before Jesus came, there were many other religious leaders who had spiritual influence who were teaching God's people, coaching and instructing them how they were supposed to live. There were four different camps:

- Pharisees—become religious
- Sadducees—become political
- Essenes—become pious
- Zealots—become aggressive

These were the leaders who were teaching and influencing God's people, training them how to embody the Scriptures, how to live a faithful life, but for different reasons, every one of them got it wrong. Then comes Jesus, and he offers an entirely new, radically unexpected way of being God's people: he teaches about a life different than anyone thought possible before. His vision of what it really looks like to live for God is found in the Sermon on the Mount, the passage we are getting ready to spend the next four weeks studying. If coach Brad Stevens had a philosophy called "The Butler Way," the Sermon on the Mount could be called "The Jesus Way." We can add to our list "Jesus—Become Christ-like."

That is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about—how to live like Jesus. It is widely considered the most influential and important message ever preached. We are going to kick off our study of the Sermon on the Mount by diving into the first sixteen verses to see the kind of people Jesus celebrates and the kind of witness Jesus desires.

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:1-16)

This is one of my favorite passages in the entire Gospel of Matthew. It begins with a section called the Beatitudes, in which Jesus commends and celebrates a very unexpected group of people. Nine different times in this passage Jesus says that a certain kind of people are “blessed.” The Greek word is “makarios,” which means, “favored, fortunate, lucky.” It means “happy” or “congratulations.” These are the kind of people who are honored, celebrated, and championed. Jesus tells us which kind of people he celebrates. It’s not the kind people expected. When Harvard’s admissions counselors go through applications, they are looking for the best and brightest. They celebrate the 4.0 GPA and the 36 ACT. It’s the elites, the powerful, the influential, the connected who get in, just like you’d expect for the most prestigious institutions. But Jesus welcomes in and celebrates an unlikely group of people. Let’s look at them.

First, he says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Spiritually speaking, there are people who think they have something to offer, and there are others who know they have nothing to offer. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs not to those who have a high and lofty opinion of themselves, but to those who know their only standing ground before God is the ground of his sovereign grace. Jesus gives a perfect illustration of this in Luke 18:9-14.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Think about the difference between John the Apostle, and John the Baptist. John the apostle said, “I want to sit at your right hand and rule with you in your kingdom.” John the Baptist said, “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie your sandals.” To be poor in spirit means we have no pride, no presumption, no confidence in what we have to offer, just a humble spirit, grateful for the Lord’s mercy.

Next Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). This is a very strange quality for Jesus to be looking for and celebrating. Why would Jesus celebrate those who mourn?

Those who mourn are those who have looked at the pain and brokenness inside of them, and the pain and brokenness in the world, and have made themselves vulnerable to it. When Peter denied Jesus three times, heard the rooster crow and then looked up and locked eyes with Jesus, what did he do? Shrug it off and say, “We all make mistakes; it’s no big deal”? No! The Bible says he went outside and wept bitterly. He cared deeply. When Jesus showed up at his friends’ house and saw everyone grieving because their brother Lazarus had died, what did he do? Shrug it off because there was nothing practical he could do to help? No, he wept. We live in an interesting moment in time, one in which we hear not only about tragedies in our community, but about tragedies all over the world: war raging in Ukraine, war between the Jews and Palestinians, a truck running over people in New Orleans, a woman getting burned on the subway in NYC, a school shooting in Michigan—there is always a heartbreaking story somewhere. Our tendency is to read the news, learn about the latest calamity, and then get on with our day. Jesus is looking for people who, when they encounter brokenness in their life, or brokenness in the life of their community, or brokenness in the world at large, know that it matters to God, so it matters to them, and they respond with tenderness and compassion.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). In the first century, this word was used to describe three types of animals: elephants who had been tamed, horses who had been broken, and guard dogs who had been trained. The concept is of a person who has great power, who has substantial influence, and yet who is humble and gentle. As I’ve observed, there is a certain demographic of people who embody this adjective perfectly. Anyone want to guess who they are? Grandfathers! I regularly see men in their 50s and 60s who are powerful and accomplished, leaders of companies with respect and affluence and dignity, but put them around their grandchild and they are crawling on the floor, making baby sounds, letting themselves be spit up on. Great power but channeled through gentleness. Jesus would say, “Blessed are you when instead of using your position or your influence or your power to get others to serve you, you use all the resources at your disposal to serve others.” That’s the type of person Jesus is looking for on his team. It’s like he said in Mark 10:45, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.” That’s what Jesus celebrates.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6). Jesus is talking about our desires, the things we crave. We all know what it’s like to have a craving come on us! When Keren was pregnant, sometimes she would get a craving for nachos. Sometimes I get a craving for the biscuits at KFC. I’ll drive twenty minutes to get some biscuits. What is the one food you crave the most? Turn to someone and tell them what it is. We all know what it’s like to desire something, to want something badly, so badly that it almost has control of us and takes over our operating system. Jesus says, “Blessed are you when, more than anything else, you are controlled and driven by your desires for righteousness.” Congratulations! When you hunger and thirst for righteousness, you will be filled!

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). Technically speaking, to be merciful means that when you encounter someone who is hurting, you meet them where they are. One of the clearest pictures of this in the life of Jesus is when he is in the temple, teaching a group of people, and suddenly, his message is interrupted by a group of Pharisees who bring a woman in front of the entire crowd and declare that she was caught in the act of adultery. The law required that both she and the man face the death penalty for their crime. There she was, likely barely clothed, full of shame, thrown at Jesus’ feet, everyone wondering what Jesus was going to say, what verdict he would issue. You might remember his response. He looked around and said, “If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to cast a stone at her” (John 8:7). He met her right where she was. He didn’t give her what she deserved; he was merciful and gave her what she needed. Jesus says that you are blessed when you do the same. Jesus doesn’t celebrate people who are so “wise” and so “mature” that they can find fault and scrutinize and critique others; he celebrates those who are compassionate, who come alongside the hurting and walk with them filled with grace.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8). God is not interested in how we look on the outside; he’s interested in how we look on the inside. That is radically contrary to the values of our culture. Last year in our country, we spent over 40 billion dollars on plastic surgery, Botox, and hair extensions alone. Tens of billions of dollars to put artificial products on us or in us, so that we have the appearance we desire. I’m not saying whether that’s good or bad, simply that focus on our outward appearance is of undeniable importance to us. It doesn’t matter at all to Jesus. He looks at the heart, and what he’s looking for is purity. He won’t be fooled by the masks we wear, by the words we say, by the spin we put on things—he knows! He sees the reality of our thoughts and desires, and he congratulates those whose hearts are pure.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). As a father, there are few things I enjoy more than watching my children play well together—sharing toys, working on a project, making each other laugh. There’s nothing like it. Conversely, there are few things that bring me greater disappointment and heartache than when my children fight. My kids aren’t old enough to be truly mean, but they can antagonize, they can tease, they can be selfish, they can bite. Their fighting robs peace in our home and drains the joy from our family. The same is true for the family of God. God is our father, which makes us all brothers and sisters. Few things bring God greater joy than when we are united and filled with grace, warmth, and love toward one another. Few things cause him greater heartache than when we are angry, bitter, distant, or unkind to one another. That’s what Jesus celebrates in his kingdom.

Last, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). Persecution is not a fun or exciting topic to discuss, but we have to remember that the life Jesus lived didn’t end up with his being voted Times’ Man of the Year, or his being elected President. They arrested him, tried him, and crucified him. Every one of the apostles was arrested, most multiple times, and 11 out of 12 of them were killed for their faith because the way of Jesus is not the way of the world. When you say there is such a thing as absolute truth, that there is only one way to heaven and that is through placing your faith in Jesus Christ, that marriage is between one man and one woman, that there is such a thing as sin, and if we continue in sin, we are storing up God’s wrath against us on the day of judgment, those are not popular things to believe or say. When Christians believe them and say them, there are oftentimes relational, social, professional, or political consequences. Jesus says that’s okay. The world may reject or persecute you for righteousness, but Jesus celebrates it. That’s what matters; those are the people he welcomes into his kingdom.

The power of these Beatitudes isn’t found in studying each of them individually, but in looking at them as a whole. They are meant to work together. These eight Beatitudes are like eight piles of paint on a pallet. An artist takes his brush, dips it in each of them, then lays it across the canvas—and there is a picture of Jesus. You want to know what it means to be poor in spirit? Look at him: though he was rich, he became poor, so that through his poverty, he might make many rich. You want to know what it means to be a peacemaker? Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross, using the agony in his body to put to death the hostility between God and man. You want to know what it means to be pure in heart, to hunger and thirst for righteousness? Look at the Christ. In the kingdom of heaven, Jesus is the King, and every citizen is called to look like him.

When we do, when we follow the Jesus way, it changes the world! Listen to what Jesus says next:

You are the salt of the earth.
You are the light of the world.

These are such powerful and insightful metaphors because both salt and light dramatically alter their environments. A little salt on your plate transforms the flavor profile of a meal. A little light changes an entire room. Jesus says this is what you are! But there is a threat associated with each of these. First, don’t

lose your saltiness. Chemically speaking, salt can't become un-salty, but it can become contaminated and lose its purity. If you take salt and mix it with dirt and sand, it loses its saltiness and can't be used for anything. Jesus says if you are my followers, don't compromise and lose your distinctiveness. A few years ago, a researcher named George Barna asked several thousand non-Christians who had close, Christian friends if they noticed any difference in the lifestyle of their Christian friends and their non-Christian friends. How many do you think said yes? Fifteen percent. That's because so many Christians believe in Jesus, but they aren't actually following Jesus! His research concluded that if you had a room with 200 people in it, with 100 Christians and 100 non-Christians, there would be nearly zero distinguishable difference between the two. Jesus says: "Don't lose your saltiness. Follow me. Stand out. Be different, so that you can change the world."

Jesus also says: "Don't hide your light." People don't light a lamp only to put it under a bowl. They put it where the light can shine! We are supposed to be a city on a hill that people can see from miles away. This means we have to engage deeply and relationally with people who are not walking with Jesus. 1 Peter 2:12 says, "Live such good lives among (non-Christians) that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." Live among non-Christians in such a way that even though they think what you believe is crazy, and you are narrow-minded and believe a fairy-tale, they can't deny the power and the beauty of your life, the love and kindness they see in you, and sooner or later, they want what you have, and put their faith in the God who made the difference for you. We need to hear this today, because I know a lot of mature Christians, and the primary people they spend their time with and desire to spend even more of their time with are other mature Christians. I get it—it's wonderful to be with like-minded people with whom you share much in common. But Jesus didn't call us to be a holy huddle, a thousand Christians in a room with the door closed, enjoying all the light. He says we are supposed to shine our light into the darkness, spending our time, sharing our lives with people who don't yet know him, so that they can come to know him. That's what Jesus is calling us to.

In this beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, we see a picture of the kind of people who are welcomed into the kingdom, and we see the sort of impact we can make by the power of Jesus.