

## **“Garden Life”**

*Reading: Matthew 5:1-12; 7:7-12, 21-29*

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In Matthew’s account of the gospel, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God at His baptism by John the Baptist, then He begins His ministry by retreating into the wilderness for a time of testing. After His forty days of testing, He begins preaching by continuing the message began by John: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” So we see that the content of Jesus’ message is the call to repentance, to turn away from your sin and come to God, coupled with the announcement that God’s kingdom has arrived. The summary of His actions, we then read, is that He preaches this message across the land, He heals the sick, and He casts out demons. And then we turn the page and we come to one of the largest continuous bodies of Jesus’ teachings: the Sermon on the Mount.

His actions so far have started drawing people to Him, and before long He starts heading up the side of a nearby mountain to preach. What that crowd probably doesn’t realize is that they’re seeing a reenactment of one of the most important chapters in our story so far. There was another time when a large crowd was gathered at the foot of a mountain listening to the teachings of God’s messenger, another moment when God’s plan of redeeming His creation took a huge leap forward, another explanation of what life ought to look like for those who want to live in God’s garden. The first time was when Moses led the people of God out of slavery, into the wilderness, to the foot of Mt. Sinai, where God met them. Moses brought them over 600 laws from God, a code for life that covered everything from marriage to getting along with your neighbors to what to eat to how to worship God. We’ve probably all at least heard of the Ten Commandments; those were the starting point, and everything else expanded on how to live them.

Now they’re gathered around a different mountain over a thousand years later. Now they’re gathered around the feet of another person who might just be a savior sent by God. And Jesus begins to teach. So far, He’s preached John the Baptist’s message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” Now, He’s going to explain to them what repentance looks like, and what the character of that kingdom is. Moses laid out the foundations for life in the community of God’s people Israel. Jesus is going to recast that community into the kingdom of God, forming a new community based on a different sort of sacrifice than the animal sacrifices instituted by Moses.

And from the very start, Jesus challenges His hearers, both then and now. Whereas Moses began with the Ten Commandments, the timeless list of “thou shalt nots” — thou shalt have no other gods before me, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not covet your neighbor’s wife — Jesus begins with the Beatitudes. Rather than “thou shalt not,” we have “blessed is the one who...” The poor in spirit are blessed, Jesus says. The peacemakers. The mourners. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The meek. The persecuted. This kingdom Jesus is calling us to doesn’t seem to be reachable just by doing certain things. It has some pretty challenging values.

Apparently the United States government knew I was preaching on the Sermon on the Mount today and decided to give me a perfect illustration of just how contrary the Beatitudes are. As I’m sure you know, we’re in the midst of a particularly bitter fight between Congress and the President. Peacemakers do not seem to be in abundance these days. Mercy is not highly regarded. Meekness does not, apparently, qualify you for public office. We all have our opinions about who’s to blame and

what needs to be done, but the point for our purposes this morning is how thoroughly our world's understanding of power differs from Jesus' definition of blessing.

The world, by and large, concerns itself with pragmatic, utilitarian views of how to build a kingdom. You determine your goal, and while you might be guided by some principles of what behavior is acceptable and what isn't, for the most part our world focuses on achieving whatever goal you have, whether it's power, happiness, wealth, or whatever else. That's kind of the default form of ethics we use: what do I want, and how do I get it? And we're very good at coming up with all sorts of ways to justify whatever actions we take, when in reality consistency is very hard to come by. It's the type of ethics we use all the way from childhood — how do I get the cookie out of the cookie jar without getting in trouble? — to the halls of government — how do I get the other side to let me win a fight over the budget so that I can get re-elected? You can immediately see the flaw with this sort of thinking: if we're all after our own gain, there are no standards for behavior, and we can begin justifying some truly horrible things.

Moses gave us a better way of going about things, I would say. He gave us a body of laws from God that guided the behavior of God's people, and therefore certain behaviors were better than others because God commanded them. He gave us instructions to show us what sorts of things God values. If you get into a conflict with your neighbor, you're not guided by what you want to do, which might be doing something dreadful to your neighbor, you're guided by God's command to love your neighbor, and here's how you work through your disagreement. If you want to know what to eat, you look it up in the law. It's good, because it points us in the direction of some deeper principles for how to live our lives in harmony with one another and with God: God cares about the poor in society, and so you leave some of your crops out in the field for them to pick up. God cares about you, and so He gives you a Sabbath rest. God cares about creation, and so He gives the land a rest every seven years, too. So, how do we live? We look it up in the law, where we read "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not."

But Jesus knew the problem that arose from that sort of legal understanding of morality, and maybe you know it, too. We have a law that we might not want to follow, so we push the boundary a little bit. Driving 45 miles per hour feels too slow, so I push it to 50. So in order to make sure we don't fudge on the original law, we make an even more strict law to keep us safe. The law says not to boil a young goat in its mother's milk, so therefore we're not going to ever cook meat and dairy together. And the law can become an impossible burden and a tool for the self-righteous to lord it over others. Besides, even with more than 600 laws, you just can't cover every possible ethical situation. How do you know what God wants you to do in the situations not mentioned in the law?

Jesus preaches a different way. Maybe we could call it virtue ethics: our behavior is guided by the type of character we want to be, rather than the actions we want to command or prohibit. "Blessed is the one who is like this" rather than "thou shalt not do this." It's not enough to follow rules, because morality has to do with intent as well as action. God cares about what's in your heart as well as what you do with your hands. What's in the heart will eventually come out, one way or the other. It's not enough to refrain from committing adultery if you're a lustful person at heart. Giving in to temptation to the point of desiring the sin, even without acting on it, is still letting yourself be ruled by sin. You can still hate your enemy without killing them. You can still be arrogant and selfish and self-righteous while still going to church and praying and giving to charity.

So Jesus points us to the importance of *being* a particular type of person, not just someone who does certain things. And the standards are quite high. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” He says. How on earth can we be perfect like God? Surely this is impossible. But this is what He calls us to: godly perfection, not just in action, but also in intent, in our essence, in our love for others and our humility toward ourselves. If this is the standard for entering the kingdom of heaven, then surely the kingdom is empty!

One solution often used is to say that this is simply the ideal, that love for enemies and never having lust in your heart and not judging others is something we should aspire to, but it’s just not always practical or realistic as the standard. But Jesus doesn’t leave us that escape. “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand,” He said. “Let your light shine before others,” He said. “A good tree bears good fruit.” “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” Jesus doesn’t leave us much room for viewing the Sermon on the Mount as only idealism. This is meant to be a part of your life, so much so that it can be seen.

But here’s the thing: Jesus isn’t just concerned with us living a moral, virtuous life. The Sermon on the Mount is not about ethics, not really. Jesus points us to certain virtues that we should aim our lives toward, but those virtues are not really the point. It’s about life in the kingdom of God. It’s about life in the restored garden of creation that God made in the beginning, that we messed up, and that He has been working to re-create in our midst for thousands of years. That kingdom is not made up of good, moral people, because it was not perfect morality that God created us for in the beginning. Perfect morality is not what He’s trying to restore in us. What He wants instead is people who are willing to trust Him and love Him. That’s the basis of a solid relationship, which is what He wants restored.

What God wants in us, what He’s calling us to repent and turn toward, what Jesus is preaching about in the Sermon on the Mount, is a radical trust in God’s faithfulness. We’ll see in later chapters of *The Story* that this is seen most clearly on the cross, a life lived self-sacrificially, trusting in God’s salvation. Don’t worry about things like clothes and food, Jesus says, but trust in God’s provision. Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Don’t worry about earthly treasures, because it is the treasures with God that matter. Jesus calls us to a sweeping refusal of seeking earthly reward in favor of heavenly reward; being admired by people is meaningless if it comes at the cost of honoring God. Trust God to the point of loving your enemies and refusing vengeance; leave justice in the hands of God. Have an eternal perspective rather than an earthly one; it’s better to cut off a temptation than to forfeit life with God. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

We so thoroughly minimize the impact of the good news of Jesus Christ when we try to turn it into a message of morality, of following laws, or of being a good person. He is calling us to nothing

less that the restoration of humanity and creation, brought back to radical reliance on God. He calls us to repent, for the kingdom of heaven has arrived!



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