

## “FOLLOWING THE KING - 10”

### *Matthew 5:1-12*

We're back in Matthew's Gospel this morning after a couple of weeks' break, and things are starting to get going for Jesus' ministry. Last time we looked at this book, Nick Nicholls helped us to see that Jesus – the Kingly Messiah promised by God and prophesied by the preachers of the Old Testament – was now starting to give people glimpses of this amazing Kingdom of God which is at the heart of his mission. Jesus had begun to preach about the fact that Kingdom was now about to be inaugurated. He had gathered a small group of interested people and called them to commit themselves to following his Kingdom rule of life. And he had demonstrated in his healing of the sick and liberation of the demon-possessed just what kind of Kingdom this was.

Now he calls together his new disciples to tell them just what this is really all about – what the implications will be for them. It's maybe difficult for us to imagine what it must have been like for Peter, Andrew, James and John when they encountered Jesus. They have fallen under the spell of this charismatic preacher, who has backed up his words with powerful actions. They've left the tools of their trade – their fishing boats and nets – on the beach at Capernaum, and set off with him. But there hasn't really been time to find out where all this is leading, to discover what it's all going to mean for them. What is it like to be a follower of Jesus?

So Jesus sits down on the hillside (rabbis would always teach seated), calls them around him and sets out this Kingdom Manifesto. Matthew records it over the next three chapters and we know it as *The Sermon on the Mount*. It's been amazingly influential over the centuries and people have responded to it in all kinds of different ways. It's seen as the very heart of Jesus' teaching and part of the foundation of the Christian faith in terms of its ethical implications. We looked in some detail at this sermon a couple of years ago, so if you want to refresh your memories you can look back at the sermons of the website (they start at No. 274). This morning we are going to look at the first section, which is possibly the best known.

These opening words from Jesus are known as “The Beatitudes”, which is a word derived from the Latin words “*beatus*”, meaning “*blessed*”. Jesus gives us a series of couplets all beginning with that word. Most translations of Matthew's Gospel keep that word “*blessed*”, but some translators try to find a different word which might convey a bit more of just what this word means. It's a word – like so many others that we use in our talk of Christianity – that is very common, but not always understood. One or two translations use the word “*Happy*”, which completely misses the point, so don't be fooled by that. William Barclay expresses it with “*What bliss it will be ...*”. Tom Wright's translation has “*Wonderful news for ...*”.

I was rather dismissive of “*Happy*” as it seems almost to trivialise the meaning behind this word – a bit like those people who see a small child or a kitten doing something cute and say “*Ah! Bless!*” “*Blessed*” isn't about some sort of inner feeling, a kind of emotional high. As with so many of these translations from Hebrew and Greek, there's an awful lot more to it than that. Barclay's “*bliss*” goes a bit further maybe, but even that cannot capture all the nuances of this word. Even “*joy*” seems to be inadequate. I suppose that we could say that this is all about complete well-being – body, mind and spirit – with quite a bit of the concept behind the Hebrew word “*shalom*” thrown in. But it's a well-being that is obvious, that other people can see. It's a kind of radiant sense of satisfaction with life. Really, it's about being just as God wants you to be – and showing it. In these little sayings, Jesus is making it clear that God will help you in your poverty, your sadness, your humility and so on. Those who are blessed are those in whose lives God is clearly at work, despite the difficulties and problems that come our way by virtue of our being fallible and fragile humans. It may *include* health, material wealth, success and so on, but being blessed certainly doesn't mean those things have *got* to be there. And very often, those who are clearly being blessed by God have none of them.

In a sense, these sayings are all about the way we approach life in God's Kingdom. There is plenty in the rest of *The Sermon on the Mount* about the behaviour of those who follow Jesus, but these are about a state of mind, a perspective on life, about attitudes. So we could say that they are the "Be-Attitudes", the attitudes of those who want to be a part of the Kingdom, who want to live under the Kingly rule of God. And this morning I'd like us to consider just one of these Beatitudes, the one which seems to sum all that up, which is key to all the others and key to our own participation in the Kingdom of God. It's the one in v6, at the heart of this short section – "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.*"

This is about people who are desperate for righteousness, who have a real appetite for it. William Barclay points out that this is "*not a vague desire for a mid-morning snack*". In our culture, where we never have to worry about food – where it's coming from, how we get it, whether we'll have enough – we have probably cheapened these words "*hunger and thirst*" and we do use them when what we mean is we haven't had a bar of chocolate for couple of hours, or we could do with a third pint down the pub. In Jesus' day, as he spoke to people who were effectively subsistence farmers and fishermen, he knew that his listeners had a very good idea what real hunger and thirst were all about. It really does mean a desperate desire. When they got it, they wanted to gobble up the stuff as if there's no tomorrow.

That desperation is conveyed even in the actual grammar used here, so please forgive a short lesson on Greek declension. Usually, when people write or spoke about hunger or thirst in Ancient Greek, the object of their hunger would be in what we call the "genitive" case – in English we'd use "of". So we might usually find that this phrase could translated, "*Blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for a bit of righteousness*" – a "*bit of ...*", not all of it. But here, unusually, "*righteousness*" is in the "accusative" case, which means we need to recognise that we are talking about those who "*are hungry and thirsty for all of it*" – they won't be satisfied until they've got all of it. This is a real desperation, a real hunger. Let me illustrate with a short cameo from the dinner table at the Manse. Sally has cooked up one of her excellent evening meals and in the middle of the table there is a large pot of pasta. In come the girls and express the fact that they are hungry – "Ooh, great. Pasta. I'm really hungry for pasta" – and they each take a plateful: part of the pasta. On occasions, Erik gets there first. He may have just returned from the gym or one of his insane runs or cycle rides. "Ooh, great. Pasta. I'm really hungry for pasta" – and he eats the lot before anyone else gets there! (It has happened, folks!) Jesus is talking here about his followers who have an Erik-like desperation for as much of this righteousness as they can possibly get, not a girly toying with a little bit. As Rob Warner puts it in his book on *The Sermon on the Mount*, "*Jesus is not commending a vague and general preference for goodness, but rather a central, pivotal, consuming and urgent priority*". Let me ask you, are you desperate for righteousness?

"Well," you may understandably respond, "I think I might be, but I'm not really sure what you mean by 'righteousness'". And we bump up against the same problem we had with "*Blessed*" – a word we use an awful lot in Christian talk, but we're never entirely sure what it means. Just what is "*righteousness*"? It's variously translated as "*goodness*", "*justice*", "*correctness*", "*godliness*" amongst many, many other things. It's not helped by the fact that it seems to be used in different ways in different parts of the Bible. And once you get theologians and scholars talking about it, you find it all gets very confusing. If you ask two theologians what it means, you'll get at least three answers. Just thinking about its use in this verses here, Donald Hagner writes that it clearly means social justice and can't possibly mean personal aspiration, whereas Dick France writes that it clearly means personal aspiration and can't possibly mean social justice. And when you get to the use of the word in the wider New Testament, publishers start to rub their hands with glee as eminent Christians argue about it in print: John Piper and Tom Wright seem to have been keeping SPCK and IVP profits going in recent years with their arguments and counter-arguments.

I don't want to go into all the ins and outs of it this morning. If you want to find out more, you can get the books yourselves. I'd like to suggest a summary definition that encapsulates all the other views (I think) and probably makes it a bit easier for us to get a handle on it. Basically, righteousness is about things being done God's way. It's about God's will being done. And if you take that line, you can apply

it in a personal way and in a wider way, as we'll see. This is about the values of the Kingdom of God, about the values and attitudes of those who want to follow King Jesus. What do I mean by that?

Righteousness on a personal level is about listening to God, trying to discover what it is he wants in your life. He wants you to be reconciled to him, which is where all the righteousness talk about Jesus in Paul's letters comes from. Jesus' death on the cross has made it possible for each of us to be put right with God, to live as he wants free from the consequences, the effects and the power of sin. And as we listen to God – in prayer, in reflection, in reading and studying the Bible – so we start to find out just what God really wants for each and every human being: a life lived according to his instructions, the Maker's Instructions. So it's not just about listening to God, it's about living for him, too – about putting into practice all that stuff we read in the Bible, applying this amazing teaching of Jesus to our own lives. It actually includes the other things in this list of beatitudes – things like mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking and so on. Are you desperate for that? Do you really want to have things done God's way in your life? That's what *"hungering and thirsting after righteousness"* means.

But we can also see how this works in a wider way as well. Doing things God's way is also to do with justice. Because if we are all personally doing that, living out the values of the Kingdom, then it will affect the wider world too. God's way is about ensuring that the huge inequalities between the rich and poor are reduced. It's about ensuring that human beings are not sold like commodities so that men can have cheap sex. It's about ensuring that development and aid money are not lost in the deep chasms of corruption. It's about ensuring that the rich do pay their taxes in a way which helps others to develop – indeed, to survive – rather than filling their own offshore bank accounts. It's about standing up to dictators and speaking out on behalf of the disadvantaged, dispossessed and destitute. It's about hospitality and generosity and all those things that can help to improve the lot of our fellow human beings – human beings for whom Jesus died and whom God wants to enjoy the benefits of his Kingdom. Those are the values that King Jesus is trying to expound to his new disciples and values that he continues to look for in his followers today. When you read of injustice, are you desperate for God's way to be followed? Are you really wanting to see God's values, the values of his Kingdom, informing the decisions and actions of the governments and multi-nationals and NGOs of this world? That's what *"hungering and thirsting after righteousness"* means.

That might be starting to make some sense, but there may still be a question in your mind about it all. And that question, like so many others to do with the Christian life, can be summed up in one word – Why? Why bother with all this righteousness stuff? Well, it takes us back to the very beginning. Those who are desperate for things to be done God's way will be blessed. Michael Green, in commentary on Matthew's Gospel, writes this (but rather unfortunately, in the light of what we said earlier, uses the word *"happy"*): *"If we have a passionate desire to be right with God and stay that way, he is going to meet that desire to the full, and we are going to be happy."* In other words, if you're really serious about this, then you'll find God does lead you down that path of well-being, of radiant satisfaction.

Start cultivating that appetite for righteousness and you will find that your life begins to feel more fulfilled. You will have a purpose in life. You will start to see things about life you've never seen before. You will know a closeness with God and see other people in a new light. Your priorities will change to those of the Kingdom of God and you'll start to feel less frustrated with life. Praying, reading the Bible, listening to God will help you to find direction and re-order the agenda of your life. And involving yourself in issues of justice – through prayer, through lobbying or campaigning or giving or whatever – will help you to feel less frustrated with what you see going on around you. Are you desperate to see things being done God's way? Can other people spot that in your life – and spot the blessing that you are starting to experience? Is there that radiant sense of being in tune with God's will that helps others to glimpse something of him?

If there is stuff going on that others can see, Jesus is quite realistic and says that other people – those who don't share your values, who don't want to see things done God's way – may well start to take it out on you. Look at *v10*. Finally, you're living out those Kingdom values. And there's an awful lot more of it

look forward to in the long term – look at vv11,12. God’s going to help you and encourage you as you “*hunger and thirst for righteousness*”.

But there’s one final answer to that question of why we should be doing all this. It’s not explicit in these verses, but it’s woven throughout the pages of this Gospel – indeed, throughout the pages of the Bible. And we’re reminded of it once again this morning in these symbols that are on the table behind me. We’re not doing it to work our way into God’s good books. We’re not doing it to try and curry favour with him. We’re doing it because we’re already in his good books, because we already can be assured of his favour. We’re doing it because God loves us and sent his Son, the Kingly Messiah Jesus, into this world to show us what life in the Kingdom is like and to make it possible for us, through his death and resurrection, to be reconciled with a God whom we had abandoned. That was the ultimate act of righteousness. That was the definitive demonstration of what God wants. As you take this bread and wine this morning, it won’t satisfy your hunger and thirst on a physical level, but pray that it will stimulate your hunger and thirst for righteousness. And resolve, with God’s help, to live as he wants you to.

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These opening words of The Sermon On The Mount are known as "The Beatitudes", which is a word derived from the Latin words "*beatus*", meaning "*blessed*". "*Blessed*" isn't about some sort of inner feeling, a kind of emotional high. We could say that this is all about complete well-being – body, mind and spirit – with quite a bit of the concept behind the Hebrew word "*shalom*" thrown in. But it's a well-being that is obvious, a radiant sense of satisfaction with life. It's about being just as God wants you to be – and showing it.

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This is about people who are desperate for righteousness, who have a real appetite for it. That desperation is conveyed even in the actual grammar used here. "*Righteousness*" is in the "accusative" case, which means we need to recognise that we are talking about those who "*are hungry and thirsty for all of it*" – they won't be satisfied until they've got all of it. This is a real desperation, a real hunger.

Just what is "*righteousness*", though? It's variously translated as "*goodness*", "*justice*", "*correctness*", "*godliness*" amongst many, many other things. It's not helped by the fact that it seems to be used in different ways in different parts of the Bible. Basically, righteousness is about things being done God's way. This is about the values of the Kingdom of God, about the values and attitudes of those who want to follow King Jesus.

Righteousness on a personal level is about listening to God, trying to discover what it is he wants in your life. And as we listen to God – in prayer, in reflection, in reading and studying the Bible – so we start to find out just what God really wants for each and every human being: a life lived according to his instructions, the Maker's Instructions. So it's not just about listening to God, it's about living for him, too.

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But why bother with all this righteousness stuff? Those who are desperate for things to be done God's way will be blessed. In other words, if you're really serious about this, then you'll find God does lead you down that path of well-being, of radiant satisfaction. Start cultivating that appetite for righteousness and you will find that your life begins to feel more fulfilled. You will have a purpose in life. And we're doing it because God loves us and sent his Son, the Kingly Messiah Jesus, into this world to show us what life in the Kingdom is like and to make it possible for us, through his death and resurrection, to be reconciled with a God whom we had abandoned. That was the ultimate act of righteousness. That was the definitive demonstration of what God wants.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. What do you understand by "*blessed*"? Do you feel blessed? How would it be obvious to others?
2. What do you understand by "*righteousness*"? Give some examples of righteousness that you have seen.
3. Are we really desperate for things to be done God's way? What can prevent that being the case in our own lives?
4. What can we do about justice in our world? What might happen if all Christians were desperate for justice? If Jesus is going to return and sort it all out anyway, why should we bother?
5. Why might people be "*persecuted because of righteousness*" (v10)? What can we do to support and encourage them?