

LESSON 2

INTRODUCING THE KINGDOM

BIBLE READING

Matthew Chapters 5-7



TEACHING POINT

Jesus explains what life in the new Kingdom is like.



LEADER'S PREPARATION

The Sermon on the Mount is a very well known part of the Bible and rightly so, because it provides some very important teaching. To attempt to study it all in one session seems like trying to climb Everest in that short time between afternoon tea and dinner time. It would be absolutely impossible; there are entire sets of studies just on these chapters. If it would help your group to slow down and take in more of the Sermon then feel free to do so. Our aim in this study is to pick out some of the big themes to show how the Sermon on the Mount fits into Matthew as a whole. We will concentrate on 5:1-20 and 7:13-29.





QUESTIONS

Read 4:23-25 What was Jesus doing?

These verses set the scene for chapters 5-7. Jesus is going throughout Galilee preaching 'the good news of the Kingdom' and healing people. Large crowds follow him to listen to his teaching and be healed.

How did this demonstrate that he is the promised King? (Isaiah 35:5-6; 61:1)

These verses were recognised by the Jews as referring to the promised Messiah. Messiah would make the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and the dumb speak. He would also preach good news to the poor.

In 5:1 we read that Jesus, seeing the crowds, goes up a mountain side to teach. He sits down, like a traditional Jewish Rabbi, and begins to teach his disciples, presumably with the crowds pressing in on every side to listen in. (A 'disciple' was a learner, i.e. someone who was following at that moment in time. It does not imply commitment.)

During the 400 years between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New, the teachers of the Law had developed the rabbinic code until it was impossible to keep. The people's lives were bounded by the scribes' interpretation of the Scriptures. Jesus uses the sermon to correct their wrong impressions and beliefs.

Structure of the Sermon – see Information Box (pages 40-41).

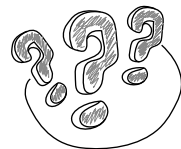
Read 5:1-12

What are the Christian characteristics described in these verses? What qualities does the world value rather than these?

Fill in the table:

(Answers supplied but your wording will differ)

Characteristic	Meaning	World's Values
Poor in spirit	Recognising our own spiritual bankruptcy	Self-promotion and DIY spirituality
Those who mourn	Grief over sinfulness	How dare you call me sinful?
Meek	Humble and ready to put others first	Grabbing what you can
Hunger and thirst for righteousness	Considering righteousness as vital	Righteousness an optional extra; life's too busy
Merciful	Compassionate to the helpless (i.e. like us)	I'm not like them, why should I care?
Pure in heart	An inward desire to be holy	It doesn't matter, my inner attitudes affect no one
Peacemakers	Puts ego aside and loves peace for God's sake	My 'rights' come above the need for harmony
Persecuted because of righteousness	Do all of the above and expect a hard time!	Try to avoid being noticed, then you won't suffer





'Blessed' – to be blessed is more than being happy. It means most to be congratulated, to find approval. In the Old Testament the word is used to refer to God's salvation.

The beatitudes are a description of what it means to live under Jesus' kingly rule. They are *not* a list of entry requirements, which is how they are often interpreted.

The second halves of the first and last beatitude are identical (v.3, 10), called inclusion (a stylistic device to show that everything in between follows one theme).

What things stop me living this way? How does it help to know that God is a gracious God?

The Beatitudes describe the norms of the Kingdom, not a list for Christians to pick from. They are not easy reading, but complex and hard-hitting. When teaching this lesson we need constantly to remind ourselves and the group that the characteristics described are not requirements for entry into God's Kingdom, but those to be increasingly displayed by people God has already blessed through the gospel.

It helps to know that God is gracious because we cannot, in this life, achieve the perfect character. We need constantly to approach God for forgiveness. Because God is gracious he will go on forgiving us and slowly changing our character (a process the Bible calls 'sanctification' which means being made holy).

Believers are witnesses for the Kingdom (5:13-16). What two metaphors does Jesus use?

Salt and light are both metaphors to do with Christian witness in the world.

Salt gives flavour and was used as a preservative. Without a Christian presence, the world would become even more rotten.

Light – Christian witness should act as a transforming power in society.

Both salt and light can only have an effect if they are distinctive from their environment yet involved in it. Both are no good if they do not fulfil their function. The righteousness of the life you live attracts attention, even if it is only opposition.



What does Jesus say about his relationship to the Old Testament? (5:17-18)

Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, (the Jewish Scriptures), because they pointed towards him (v.17). He was also the only one who could keep the Law completely. He had definitely not come to abolish them and did not see himself in opposition to the OT. To understand how Jesus fulfils the OT we need to understand how the OT prophesies (Matthew 11:12-14).

Some prophecies are predictive, looking forward to Messiah, e.g. Micah 5:2. Some are the history of the Jews pointing forward, e.g. Hosea 11:1 refers to the Exodus but is used in Matthew 2:15 to refer to Jesus. The Israelites spent forty years in the desert (Deuteronomy 8) and Jesus spent forty days in the desert (Matthew 4:1-4), where he quoted from Deuteronomy 8:3.

The NT interprets OT verses pointing forward to Christ and the blessings he brings (Hebrews 9:8-10; 10:1-4). So Jesus fulfils the OT Scriptures in many ways and, because they point towards him, he has not come to abolish them.

Jesus is upholding the reliability and truthfulness of the written text. Although in verse 18 he says, 'until heaven and earth disappear', meaning 'never, until the end of time', he qualifies this with 'until everything is accomplished'. Therefore, detailed prescriptions, e.g. food laws, the sacrificial



system, (that we do not observe as the Jews did) may well be superseded, because what is prophetic must, in some sense, be provisional.

How do we relate to the Law? (5:19)

Jesus has already fulfilled the Law and made salvation available through God's grace. Our job is to live in obedience to the King, hence Jesus' command to do what he says at the conclusion of the sermon (7:24-27).

The Law and the Prophets prophesy until John the Baptist (Matthew 11:12-14), after which the Kingdom advances. Jesus turns from talking about the Law and prophets to the Kingdom. 'These commandments' is not referring to the OT Law, but to the commands of the Kingdom found in Matthew 5-7.

Christians are not exempt from keeping the Law. The Christian should seek to live in conformity with God's will in gratitude for what God has done in salvation, not to earn his way to heaven. In the remainder of the sermon, Jesus teaches that the proper way to obey God's commands is not through legalistic rule-keeping, but by wanting to please God from the heart.

How can our righteousness surpass that of the Pharisees? (5:20)

The entry requirements for the Kingdom are strict. The Pharisees (so often the 'bad guys') kept the Law meticulously, which would be commendable if it were not just legalistic rule-keeping. The only way the Christian's righteousness can exceed that of the Pharisees is by confessing our spiritual bankruptcy and casting ourselves on God's mercy (see Romans 3:21-24) – there is a righteousness apart from the Law).



Conclusion (7:13-29)

In 5:17 – 7:12 Jesus is explaining the standards required to enter the Kingdom and live as members of it – standards no one can ever reach (5:19-20). The sermon is not telling us what we have to do in order to become members of the heavenly Kingdom, rather, it drives us to God for the grace we need, not just for conversion, but also to live as his people day by day.



Read 7:13-27. What are the four paired alternatives? What does each one teach about following the King?

7:13-14	Two paths
7:15-20	Two trees
7:21-23	Two claims
7:24-27	Two houses

Don't worry if the group uses slightly different wording for the pairs.

Two paths.

There are only two paths. The broad way accommodates many people, is well-travelled, but ends in destruction. The narrow way is found by very few, but ends in life (a synonym for the Kingdom). The significance is not the path itself, but its destination.

God's way is not spacious but confining. Prayer is not easy; righteousness is not easy; achieving transformed, God-centred attitudes is not easy. All these are impossible without God's



grace. However, the joy of knowing God through Christ, of Christian friendship, and the liberty of having sins forgiven make the confining aspect seem nothing.

God's way can't be discerned by appeal to majority opinion. We can't travel the narrow road while we are motivated by a desire to please men.

Two trees.

The prophet is a messenger. False prophets appear to be genuine, but they distort the truth. But how can we recognise them? A false prophet doesn't advocate the narrow way of v.13-14. He leaves out the difficult parts of the gospel and his life doesn't match up with Jesus' teaching in chapters 5-7.

Jesus may have been thinking of buckthorn, which had small, black berries easily mistaken for grapes. There was a certain thistle with a flower which, from a distance, could be mistaken for a fig. False prophets, from a certain perspective, can look like true ones, but the nature of their fruit can't be hidden forever. There is an indissoluble link between belief and conduct.

Two claims.

The first group approaches Jesus reverently on judgment day and calls him Lord. Their belief was probably orthodox and they had an impressive record of spiritual experience – prophesying, exorcising demons and performing miracles. Jesus doesn't deny their claims but still calls them evil-doers (those who practise lawlessness).

Genuine disciples are those known to the Lord and who 'know' him (have a relationship with him). Acceptance by God does not depend on what we say or do, but on what Jesus has done on the cross. Obviously, we must also bear in mind that 'faith without works is dead' (James 2:26), so real faith is demonstrated in obedient lives. The essential characteristic of the true believer is obedience to God's will.

Two houses.

The difference between the wise and foolish builders is subtle. Both hear, but only the wise obey what they hear. They put Jesus' words into practice (cf. the fruit of verses 16-20). 'Therefore' (v.24) makes the link to what has gone before. Entrance to the Kingdom depends on obedience, not to earn brownie points, but which bows to Jesus' lordship in everything and without reservation. Such obedience blends with genuine repentance. The focus is on the builders, not the foundations. Only those who do the will of the Father will enter the Kingdom.



Conclusion

There are only two ways. Jesus' way demands repentance, trust and obedience.