

The Irony of the Good Life **Matthew 4:23-5:3a**

Why Study the Sermon on the Mount?

- **It is the most studied and talked about part of Scripture.** How can we not study something so important?
- **It is familiar to everyone.** Who has not heard of the golden rule? “Do unto others as you would have done unto you.” Or, the Lord’s Prayer. Or, “Judge not, lest you be judged.” All of these sayings and many more that you with which you are familiar are found here.
- **It crosses the lines of religion.** No matter if you are a Christian, Hindu, Muslim or a secularist, the Sermon on the Mount strikes a chord deep within all of us. Ghandi, the great Hindu political and religious leader said this portion of Scripture “went straight to my heart.” Leo Tolstoi, the famous Russian author of War and Peace based his entire understanding of Christianity on the ethical ideal of the Sermon on the Mount.
- **It is universally misunderstood.** While there may be no more familiar part of the Bible, it is also fair to say that there is probably no more misunderstood part of the Bible. Are we to simply do what the SOM says? Is it that easy? Or, is it an impossible ideal and so we shouldn’t try to obey it, but let it drive us to mercy from God? Is the answer somewhere in between? These questions have dominated the discussions on what Jesus teaches here.

Truth be told, the Sermon on the Mount is the manifestation of Jesus Lordship or Kingship. As we see in verses 23-25 of chapter 4, Jesus has just announced the coming of the Kingdom with his arrival. He is the presence of the Kingdom. This announcement is confirmed by his miraculous healings and his casting out of demons. His deed ministry proves his divine authority. Yet his teaching proves his divine authority too. He not only has the authority over the natural realm; he has authority to interpret and define life within the natural realm. His deeds are authoritative over life and His teaching is authoritative to interpret life.

Yet at root, Jesus teaches us what he does because he loves us and wants us to experience the blessed life of the Kingdom. The question is will we submit ourselves to the ironic character of the good life that he holds out for us? Or, will the inertia of this world keep us in the crowd and merely pretend as though we are interested. In other words, will we remain outsiders or will we become disciples?

Make no mistake about it; Jesus is out to make disciples of the ironic good life which he promises comes with him!

Yet it is its ironic nature that we need to think about this morning.

1) It challenges our *allegiance/obsession* to what a blessed life looks like!

Make no mistake about it; Jesus holds out for his people a wonderful life! Yet the character of that wonderful life is counter to our cultural understanding of it. Jesus uses the word “blessed” to describe the life of the Christian in the Kingdom of God. There are lots of words that we use to describe Christian, but how often is happy one of them? Tragically, I think the words someone spoke to Hannah Whitall Smith, the author of the book, The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life, ring true to many of us, “You Christians seem to have a religion that makes you miserable. You are like a man with a headache. He does not want to get rid of his head, but it hurts him to keep it.” Yet Jesus challenges such notions no matter how tenacious we hold them. He portrays life in the Kingdom as “happy” or blessed!

In the Greek this word can be translated “happy” in the sense of a privileged or fortunate life. From a secular perspective this word entails all of the “blessings” this world has to offer: health, wealth, security, family, comfort, authority, influence, education and ease.

Yet it is not in this secular sense that Jesus uses the word. Instead, Jesus takes this otherwise secular concept of happiness and injects it with his **particular kingdom-centered perspective**. For Jesus, blessedness is the happiness of **being in the Kingdom and living life according to the pattern of the Kingdom. It has all-together different character.**

Here Jesus promises that a deeply satisfying and profoundly wonderful life is to be found in the pursuit of what he says matters most—the Kingdom! Yet that is the catch or this is what makes this happiness ironic. Happiness comes along Kingdom lines. It challenges a “this worldly” approach to happiness.

He tells us to do the very things that we think work against having a good life!

- Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.
- You can't serve God and money at the same time.
- Seek the Kingdom first instead of earthly necessities and comforts.

The blessedness of the Kingdom is a direct assault on the happiness of the world. Jesus' understanding of blessing brings us to a crossroads. It confronts us with what form of happiness are we really after? Jesus does not deny us happiness. Far from it, instead he promises it. The question then becomes which happiness do we value most—happiness as he gives or happiness as the world gives?

2) It challenges *our presumption* that leads us to secure a blessed life through our own efforts!

Jesus not only challenges us as the **character of the good life**, he also challenges **how we get there**. How many business leaders have you heard say something like, “Hard work and education are the keys to advancement in this world.”

I remember in Seminary, while I slaved at the book Tara slaved at the office of the Washington University's Business School. Part of her job was to organize events with high profile graduates of the school to raise funds and make the mouths of prospective graduates water. I remember one such event held in an exclusive hotel in west St. Louis. The school was honoring some of its most distinguished graduates, the founder of Southwest airlines, a prominent business executive and the billionaire, thrill-seeker Stephen Faucett. Faucett, if you will remember is regularly in the papers for flying across the world in a hot air balloon or breaking some speed barrier. I can't remember everything Faucett said, but I can remember the essence of his remarks. Life is about the efforts of our hands. Life is about our own accomplishments. It was very clear to me and to all of those in the room that Mr. Faucett thought of himself as the sum total of his accomplishments. This was and is the driving motivation.

And of course, this is exactly what most of us naturally conclude about how the blessed, successful world works. It comes to those who **work hard for it!**

Yet, Jesus challenges **our presumption**. Next week we will talk about Jesus' first beatitude which teaches, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In one fell swoop, Jesus undercuts the American proverb that teaches God helps those who help themselves. Instead, he teaches us that **grace is the cornerstone of Kingdom blessing**. Kingdom blessings come not to those who have earned them, but to those who recognize they can never be earned but must be received as the hand of a gracious and wonderful King.

- Secular self-effort: Somehow, Jesus challenges our resourceful, self-reliant spirit which imagines that we are what we achieve. Jesus says almost the polar opposite. Blessing comes to those who renounce their abilities, who don't pony out their accomplishments and who let others move to the front of the line. What in the world is he talking about?
- Religious self-effort: This is not only true in the secular realm, but particularly the religious world. How many of us have thought that blessings come to those who work the hardest for them. God loves us because we have first obeyed. Yet Jesus challenges such notions.

In their place, he puts grace, the blessing of those who have come to the end of themselves. If we take grace out of the SOM, we rob it of the most foundational value of the Kingdom. It is not based on merit, but on grace.

3) It challenges *our confusion* about the nature of grace which imagines forgiveness can be received without an accompanying transformation of life!

But it is precisely here that we are most in danger of misunderstanding the teachings of Jesus. In challenging what we presume is way to blessing—self-effort—Jesus is not denying the importance of the **effort of obedience**. **Grace is not a reason for selfish indulgence**. Jesus is the one who helps us discover that self-indulgence or the enslavement to the self is the essence of a life poorly lived. **The blessed life is a life liberated by grace to fulfill God's commandments**. As a result, grace is not in opposition to obedience, but it has become the means by which I obey.

The Good-Life includes a life which seeks to honor the commandments Jesus gives us here:

- How many of us have known the blessings of someone else's sacrifices?
- How many of us have seen the love displayed when someone turns the other cheek?
- How many of us have seen the power to overcome estrangement when forgiveness dawns where before had only existed hate?
- How many of us have seen the purity that comes that radiates from inside a person and not some outward, mechanical righteousness?

There is something beautiful, dare I say more blessed, whose life is seasoned not with accomplishment, but with grace and love!

Jesus challenges all **easy compromises which lead us to think that the sacrifice of obedience is unnecessary**. **In its place he puts an ideal that drives us to both grace and effort—strenuous effort!** The Sermon on the Mount will not allow us to be confused about what God requires. Grace requires obedience!

4) It challenges our conception that a life devoid of suffering is a happy life!

But lest we still think we can control the outcome of the "Good Life," Jesus reminds us throughout that the blessed life will be one that encounters hardship and persecution. So many of us have fallen prey to the prosperity preachers who teaches that a life sold-out will be a life filled with earthly prosperities devoid of disease, relationship estrangements, unemployment, etc. How contrary to Jesus words!

Jesus teaches us that the Good Life encompasses:

- The life of mourning over the brokenness of this world—disease, abuse, disappointment, etc.
- The life which experiences persecution

World Magazine recently highlighted the story of *The Lost Boys*, roughly twelve thousand boys whose families had been murdered at the hands of the radical Islamic Sudanese military. Their lives had been one of starvation, disease and temporary dwelling as they traveled hundreds of miles by foot between Sudan and Ethiopia, for wherever they could find people who would not kill them. In one such attack by the Ethiopian government, military officials began shooting at them to cross a crocodile infested river. More than 2000 were lost to either by bullets or by crocodiles on that day alone.

Finally peace slowly began to arrive for the Lost Boys of Sudan. In the 2001 several were planning on coming to America. Yet one week before one of these boys, Aloung, was to leave for America five gunmen heard him celebrating the grace of God in his tent while listening to some music. They came and gunned him down. Aloung was killed because he was standing at his door singing and offering food to his attackers.

Even so, it was this same boy who had encouraged the Lost Boys when he was only nine. Then, he had told them that some of them would die, but some would live long, good lives. I would suggest to you that this young man already knew about the Good Life. His life was testimony to it!

Ah, the good life—one that encompasses the horrific persecution and poverty of Christians in Sudan! Can it be?

What hardships do you know in your life? Why are you trying to escape it? Perhaps the Lord is at work in the midst of it!