

### Background to Matthew

As we read and reflect on the beatitudes, it's important to remember they do not stand alone. They are the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, and part of the gospel of Matthew. Matthew provides us with one of the fullest accounts of Jesus' life. We aren't sure about the identity of the author. It may have been Matthew the apostle, who was a tax collector, whose name Jesus changed from Levi to Matthew meaning 'gift of God'. Tax collectors were hated by the Jews; they were collaborators with the occupying Romans, known for bribery and extorting their own people. The gospel has a huge amount of Jewish material, and is full of Old Testament references. It was most likely originally written to Jewish converts, probably before the term 'Christian' came into usage. Non-Jews (gentiles) would have also been in Matthew's original readership. These combinations of new followers of Jesus from different backgrounds were struggling to follow Jesus and be distinct from both the Jews and the pagan gentiles. It is for this reason that Matthew deals with the theme of discipleship and so arranges his gospel with 5 blocks of teaching interspersed with narrative accounts. The first half (to 13.58) deals with Jesus in Galilee and rejection there, the remainder dealing with Jerusalem with the forming of the new Israel that will include the gentiles. In the teaching and accounts of miracles, people etc Matthew lays out what it means and looks like to follow Jesus. Jesus is at the centre of everything, Matthew takes effort to show Jesus as fulfilment of the Old Testament, laying out the life of discipleship, the kingdom, the end of the world and emphasising that the gospel is for all people.

### Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is the first teaching block in Matthew. Fresh from his baptism and temptation Jesus launches his public ministry, continuing that of John the Baptist, with an emphasis on Jesus continuing that which had gone before (OT and John). Jesus preached (proclaimed and challenged with authority), taught (explaining, discussing and unpacking preaching) and healed all kinds of sickness, giving an insight into the holistic nature of the kingdom which Jesus was proclaiming. As Jesus taught the kingdom was near, Jews and especially those tired of Roman rule thought of God's kingdom in a geographical sense, of liberation from the Romans, the return of an independent Jewish nation. Jesus was calling people to repent (change direction); justice and peace were on their way so those who have twisted those things better watch out! As he taught and healed in the most densely populated region of the Middle East, news about him spread. He was achieving celebrity status. God and the prophets had been silent for 3-400 years, miracles had not been seen for centuries, the excitement and expectation was palpable in the air. This makes Jesus opening words all the more shocking. Jesus wants to spell out exactly the sort of kingdom he is talking about, and what the inhabitants of that kingdom are like. At the beginning Jesus lays it on the line – a new age has dawned, to follow Jesus means a totally different way of life, with radically different values and ambitions.

The Sermon on the Mount is characterized by contrasts – with the religious, and with the pagans. (Matt 6.8 'Do not be like them'). Moses went up Mt Sinai to get the law from God and give it to the people, now his great successor goes up a mountain to receive from his Father and transmit the way of God's kingdom as it breaks into history. Jesus sits in the style of a Rabbi to teach. The beatitudes are the cornerstone of the whole sermon, the character of the citizens of the kingdom is the building block of all that follows

### The kingdom of heaven/kingdom of God

This term is used throughout the gospels, and often we are confused as to what it actually means. Saying heaven instead of God reflected the Jewish practice of not using God's name out of reverence. The kingdom expresses God's sovereignty (or rule) over his world – people, values, earth, everything. As we enter the kingdom and become a child of the kingdom, we receive the kingdom by surrendering to God and his kingly rule, looking forward to the day when the kingdom is consummated (when Jesus returns) and God's will is fully done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus brought the kingdom as he taught and showed authority over sickness, death, evil and ultimately defeated Satan and bought our forgiveness and new life through his death and resurrection. So the confusing bit is that the kingdom is here, but not fully. We live in in-between times. The kingdom is both now and not yet.

### The Beatitudes

Although we are examining the beatitudes separately, they come as a whole. We are not to see 8 separate and distinct groups but rather 8 qualities of a group who are at the same time meek and merciful, poor in spirit and pure in heart, mourning and hungry, peacemakers and persecuted. These are not for an elite group but rather Christ's specification of what every Christian should be – all these characteristics are to qualify all the followers of Jesus. The 8 qualities constitute the responsibilities, and the 8 blessings the

## Notes – Background and Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

privileges of being a citizen of God's kingdom. Blessings or promises have a present and future fulfilment, we enjoy the firstfruits now, the full harvest is yet to come. Kingdom is a present reality, which we enter now, in this life we can have our hunger satisfied and thirst quenched, but in totality, and eternally when the kingdom is consummated in its fullness. 1<sup>st</sup> 4 look at us in relation to God, the 2<sup>nd</sup> 4 in relation to other people, and yet all 8 also flow into and out of each other.

Blessed does not merely mean happy. Happy is a subjective state whereas blessed is an objective state conferred on us by God – God's approval, therefore we have a deep joy.

### **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"**

*"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope, then there's more of God and less of you" The Message*

'Poor' in the OT meant literal need, but because those in poverty had no refuge but God, came to have spiritual overtones. Those who are in need, unable to do anything for themselves and look to God for salvation. The rich tended to compromise their faith, whereas the poor tended to stay faithful to God. So to be poor in spirit is to acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy before God, to constantly come to him for grace and power echoing the words of the old hymn: 'nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling', like the publican who cries 'God, be merciful to me a sinner'. See also Isaiah 57.15, 66.2. To those the kingdom is given, contradicting all human expectations. The kingdom is given to the poor, not the rich, to those humble enough to accept it, not those who boast in their own strength (which may be religious rules or political and military might). Often we convince ourselves that what we do makes God like us, and that his approval depends on what we are doing, that is not what Jesus says. All our Christian books, our tradition, denomination, worship CD's, number of Christian events we attend are all worthless if they cause us to be rich in spirit. We are reminded that those who lose their lives, will find true life.

Note – it is not false humility which is a very different thing.

### **Revelation 3.14-22 – the church at Laodicea**

Laodicea was a wealthy city famous for its banks, medicines and textile industry. The church was self-satisfied and complacent. Their trust in their wealth and own abilities 'don't need anything' was proof that they were rich, not poor in spirit. There are many things that we use to replace a need for God – sticking to the religious rules, money, success, popularity, image, buying things to make us feel better instead of going to the King.

The Laodiceans are called to be earnest (determined, with feeling), to repent, and to open the door to Jesus. Verse 18 is a play on the very things they were renowned for, replacing earthly treasure, clothes (echoes of Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4) and eye salve with spiritual wealth – refined by fire, robes of righteousness and clear vision to see God.

Poverty of Spirit can equate with intimacy with God, only when we acknowledge we need him, and invite him in will Jesus come in and enjoy that intimate friendship or communion with us.. If we feel far from God, could it be there are things which we aren't prepared to give to him and acknowledge how much we need him, instead of trying to sort them out ourselves?

Compare with Matthew 6:19-24 – if our vision and perspective is clouded by money, ambition and earthly treasure we lose sight of God and the life to the full he alone can give.

"It is addressed to churchgoers who do not enjoy the riches of Christ or the garments of Christ or the medicine of Christ because they keep the door shut to the inner room of their lives. All the dealings they have with Christ are businesslike lukewarm dealings with a salesman on the porch.

But Christ did not die to redeem a bride who would keep him on the porch while she watched television in the den. His will for the church is that we open the door, all the doors of our life. He wants to join you in the dining room, spread a meal out for you, and eat with you and talk with you. *The opposite of lukewarmness is the fervour you experience when you enjoy a candlelit dinner with Jesus Christ in the innermost room of your heart.* And when Jesus Christ, the source of all God's creation, is dining with you in your heart, then you have all the gold, all the garments, and all the medicine in the world.

How do you buy gold when you're broke? You pray, and trust the promise: "I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me." There is an intimate communion and fellowship with Christ, which many of us need to seek in earnest prayer. *Because when he dwells in the innermost room of our affections he brings the power we want more than anything -- the power to conquer selfishness and live for others."* John Piper

The rebuke may be severe but the promises of intimacy with Jesus and reigning victorious with him are immeasurable!