

# The VIPs of the Kingdom

Well I hope all of you are doing well. My name is Kent, if we haven't had the chance to meet yet. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to **Matthew 5**. If this is your first time with us, we are about five weeks into a **series** where we're walking through the book of Matthew in the bible, which is a sort of early biography of Jesus.

And this morning, we're making our way into the **opening lines** of some of perhaps Jesus' most famous teaching, known as "the sermon on the mount." I personally prefer the title *Jesus' manifesto for the inbreaking kingdom and a whole new way to be human*, but that's a little long, so we'll go with "sermon on the mount." But if you were here last week, we actually jumped ahead into *some* of this teaching—today we'll cover the opening lines of it.

But first off, Matthew (the author) gives us some **context for where and how** this teaching from Jesus was given. So let's pick it up on the *last* verse of chapter *four*, and then we'll move right into chapter five. Chapter 4, v. 25 says this:

*[25] And great crowds followed him (that's Jesus) from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan (in other words, from all over the ancient world). [1] Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain [hence the "mount" part of the "sermon on the mount"], and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. [2] And he opened his mouth and taught them [hence the "sermon" part of the "sermon on the mount"]—*

So there we have the context. From there, Jesus begins to teach. And the part of his teaching we're going to cover today is what people historically have called the **"beatitudes."** That word comes from the Latin translation of the word "blessed," which is the word used over and over again in these verses we're about to read. So it would seem that **if we're going to wrap our minds around what Jesus is saying in these verses, we need to first understand what that word "blessed" means.** That word gets repeated in every single verse that we just read, so it seems like if we're going to get anywhere with this passage, we're going to need to know what Jesus means when he uses that word.

The word in Greek here is the word **makários**. And it can be translated "blessed," or "fortunate." But probably **my favorite translation is the phrase "to be envied."** I think that last one does the *best* job capturing what Jesus means. Because when he says

certain people are “blessed,” he’s saying that they are in a fortunate, *enviable* spot in life. That *they’re* right where *all of us* truly want to be. It might help to think about it this way: **blessed people are the people that we refer to with the phrase, “must be nice.”** “*Must be nice* to have a pool.” “*Must be nice* to have a lake house.” “*Must be nice* to have children that don’t scream like crazy all the time.” “*Must be nice* to *not have* kids and just get to do whatever you want.” Do you hear what we’re saying when we use that phrase? **What we’re saying is that those types of people are “to be envied.”** And *that sentiment*, I think, minus the snarky passive-aggressiveness, starts to capture what the Scriptures mean by the word “blessed.” Blessed people are the people that we look at and go “yeah—*they’re* living the good life. *They’re* in a good spot. It must be nice to be *them*.”

A buddy of mine who’s a pastor actually wrote out what he thinks the **modern American beatitudes** are. And I wanted to share them with you because I think they’re pretty spot-on. If we today were to articulate the type of people *we consider* to be blessed, I think we’d say something like this:

*Blessed are the rich and the financially independent, for they can do what they want. Blessed are you when you accept yourself, for you will find inner peace. Blessed are the sexually and romantically fulfilled, for there is no other path to joy. Blessed are those who eliminate negative people from their life, for they have done the right and necessary thing. Blessed are those who believe in themselves, for they will accomplish all their goals. Blessed are the influencers, the trendy, and the popular, because everyone wants to be like them. And blessed are those who are rising in their careers, no matter the cost, for they are the truly fortunate.*

That about **sums it up**, doesn’t it? Those are the types of people that we just inherently think of as “blessed” in our society. And similarly, **there were certain types of people that were assumed to be blessed in Jesus’ day.** There were certain cultural assumptions about the types of people that God favored, and certain assumptions about the types of people God *didn’t* really favor. **Most everyone assumed that God blessed the well-to-do, the put-together, the well-liked—those that had good reputations and plenty of resources and connections.** The consensus was that God *gravitated* towards people like that, and *didn’t* really gravitate towards people who *weren’t* like that.

But with **Jesus’ own list** of the “blessed,” he is going to draw the circle of who God favors a lot wider, and in the process, challenge everyone’s notions about the types of people God works through.

So let's see how he does that. Let's **read through the entire thing**, all the way through v. 10, and then we'll go back and chew on each verse a little. Starting in v. 3:

[3] "Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for **theirs** is the kingdom of heaven. [4] "Blessed are those who **mourn**, for they shall be **comforted**. [5] "Blessed are the **meek**, for they shall **inherit** the earth. [6] "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for **righteousness**, for they shall be satisfied. [7] "Blessed are the **merciful**, for they shall **receive** mercy. [8] "Blessed are the **pure in heart**, for they shall **see God**. [9] "Blessed are the **peacemakers**, for they shall be called **sons of God**. [10] "Blessed are those who are **persecuted for righteousness' sake**, for **theirs** is the kingdom of heaven.

Alright, so that's **a bit of an odd list** if we're being honest, right? Because Jesus takes this word *blessed* (fortunate, to be envied), and he attaches it to all these types of people and experiences that don't really seem very blessed at all—at least to us, right? So the question is what is Jesus doing here exactly? What does Jesus mean by calling all these types of people *blessed* in the kingdom of God?

Well before we get into what Jesus *is doing* here, let's rule out one thing he's *not* doing. **He's not giving commands**. It might be easy to think that with this list of people who are *blessed*, Jesus is giving us things to *aim* for—virtues for us to *pursue*. But I don't think that's what he's doing. Now *coincidentally*, some of them *are also* commands or virtues in *other places* in the bible. We are told elsewhere to "be merciful." We are told elsewhere to desire *justice*. But I don't think that's primarily what Jesus is doing *here*. I mean after all, some of them wouldn't even make *sense* as commands: "**okay go out and do your best to mourn!**" Mourning is a *response* to a situation, not a command. "**Okay guys, do your best to go out and be persecuted!**" Despite how it might *look* like some Christians are trying to get persecuted by saying and doing dumb things—that's actually not a command. Believe it or not.

So they aren't commands. **They're descriptions**. So what I want us to do is work *through* these descriptions to figure out what types of people Jesus is talking about exactly. And then we'll talk for a bit at the end about why they might be considered *blessed* in God's kingdom. Sound good?

First, Jesus says that the "**poor in spirit**" are blessed. There were **two different words in the Greek** language that are translated *poor*. One means lower-class,

paycheck-to-paycheck, poor. The other one is the word for when you have absolutely *nothing at all*. That is the word Jesus uses here. It's the word *ptochoi*—and it's an onomatopoeia (if you sleep through grammar in high school, I'm here to help you out). Which means the word *sounds like* what it means. When you say the word *ptochoi*, it sounds like you're spitting—*pTOchoi*. And that's because it described the class of people that were *spit upon* in Jesus' day. They were the despised, *contemptible* poor.

But then Jesus **tags on to that** the words **"...in spirit"**—he says the poor *in spirit* are blessed, which might make us think he's using the expression *figuratively*. But what you have to realize is that in Jesus' day, the *ptochoi*, and the *ptochoi in spirit*, were often one in the same. There was a lot of overlap between those two groups. In a day where having financial resources was often seen as evidence of God's favor, being materially poor often *meant* you were spiritually poor, and vice versa. There often wasn't a ton of *difference* between these two groups of people. This is likely why, in *Luke's version* of the beatitudes, he leaves off the words "in spirit"—because it doesn't really change the meaning all that much to leave that off. The *poor*, or the *poor in spirit*, are *blessed*.

Next Jesus brings up **"those who mourn."** Which raises the question, "...mourn *about what?*" Like does *anything* count? If I am crying about my dog being lost, does that count? Well not exactly. The idea Jesus gets at here is **those who are disproportionately impacted by grief and brokenness on planet earth.** When I think of "those who mourn," I think of those who seem to experience loss after loss. Illness after illness. Miscarriage after miscarriage. Those who feel like they are forced to do more grieving and mourning than the average person does. Those who are dialed into brokenness in a way that surpasses the average person's experience. People who are *familiar* with it. *Those* people, Jesus says, are *blessed*.

Then Jesus mentions the **"meek."** That's probably a word you haven't used lately. And to be honest, it's a difficult word to translate. Most literally, it just means "mild," but it usually refers to "those who don't *dominate*." So the "meek" might be **the shy kid in class. The soft-spoken co-worker who almost always gets steamrolled or drowned out by other people in the room. It's the people without dominant personalities. It refers to those who often get overlooked, forgotten about, or not listened to because they don't command as much attention as other people.** Those people, Jesus says, are *also blessed*.

And then he mentions "those who **hunger and thirst for righteousness.**" Now when we hear the word righteous, we probably think of someone who is very *moral*—someone who has good *ethics*. But **in the bible, that is only half of what it means to be righteous.**

The other half of it is to be personally and radically committed to *justice*. “Righteous” people not only did what was right *individually*, but also pursued justice *socially*. Jesus says people who *hunger and thirst* for all *that*, are blessed. Now think about this, if you are hungry and thirsty for something, what does that mean? It means you don’t currently *have* it. And the language used here for “hunger” and “thirst” are very strong words. So **the type of people Jesus is describing here are people who are desperately longing for righteousness and justice to be done, in their individual lives, and in their world at large.**

So it’s hard to read this and not think of the **black men and women** across our country right now who are crying out for *justice to be done* in regards to personal and systemic oppression against them. It’s hard to read this and not think of the #MeToo movement where men and women are calling for justice to be done in response to sexual abuse and harassment. It’s hard to read this and not think of the people fighting against sex trafficking and the exploitation of children both here and abroad. Those people are all hungering and thirsting for righteousness, and Jesus says that they are *blessed*.

In v. 7, Jesus pronounces a *blessing* on the “**merciful**.” A **merciful person is someone who readily offers forgiveness for guilty people and compassion for needy people.**

<sup>1</sup> We might use a word like *empathetic* or *tender-hearted*. To be merciful is to be full of empathy for people needing it. So when I think of a merciful person, it’s someone who has an abnormally long fuse in their interactions with people. **It makes me think of my brother, who for as long as I can remember, has just gravitated towards people who are hurting. And he has this supernatural, otherworldly patience with them. He shows them grace upon grace, and gives them chance after chance. He does it in a way that I don’t think the vast majority of people I know would be able to. We’d probably give up on those people a lot sooner than he ever does.** That is a picture of what it means to be *merciful*.

Next, in v. 8, Jesus blesses the “**pure in heart**.” The pure in heart are the people that mean what they say and say what they mean. They’re the few completely *genuine* people you come across—where you always feel like they *are* exactly the person they *seem* to be on the surface. There’s no “I wonder what I don’t know about them.” Jesus says *those people are blessed*.

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, p. 286

Then he brings up the **peacemakers**. Now, notice that Jesus doesn't say "blessed are the *peacekeepers*." **Peacekeepers and peacemakers are not the same thing.** *Peacekeepers* are people who try and pretend there's nothing wrong, that just do their best not to rock the boat. That's the one objective of *peacekeepers*: don't change anything, don't upset anyone, and don't rock the boat. *Peacemakers*, on the other hand, are *willing* to rock the boat if it means that things get set right that need to be set right. Whether that's at an interpersonal level, or at a societal level.

So, **Martin Luther King, Jr.** was a *peacemaker*, which meant in many ways he *wasn't* a *peacekeeper*. The late statesmen and civil rights leader John Lewis was a *peacemaker*, not necessarily a *peacekeeper*. Rosa Parks was a *peacemaker*, not a *peacekeeper*. There are *often* times that in order to *make peace*, you have to disrupt the status quo. You have to be willing to navigate directly into uncomfortable conversations and uncomfortable spaces in society. And that's what those men and women did. Those types of people, Jesus says, are *blessed* in the kingdom of God.

And finally, Jesus mentions "**those who are persecuted** for *righteousness' sake*." Now most of us probably know what *persecution* means—it's when you experience some sort of opposition for doing the right thing. And that's true. But what we need to realize is that back in Jesus' day, "persecution" was not just people making fun of you, excluding you, or being passive-aggressive towards you, or anything like that. *Persecuted* meant you might be actively oppressed, beaten, imprisoned or *killed* for following Jesus. It was a little more severe than any persecution that most of us experience in America today. And *those* types of people, Jesus also says, are blessed.

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So **that is a fly-by**—and I very mean an absolute *fly-by*—of what each of these mean in the passage. And I know probably those last five minutes or so felt like drinking out of a fire hydrant, and I'm sorry for that. But I wanted you to at least get a birds eye view of what Jesus meant by each one of them. And hopefully you're starting to get a glimpse at just how *counterintuitive* and *unexpected* the people mentioned on this list were. For just how strange it was for Jesus to say that *these types of people* were *blessed*. Because again, they weren't the types of people that really *anyone* would've thought of as being blessed in that day and age.

So all this brings us to the **question, why (and how, exactly) are these people blessed?** Because to use our definition from earlier, they're certainly not blessed because *we envy* them in the here and now. They're certainly not blessed because they are elevated and



revered and looked up to in our *society*. So how are they *blessed*? Well, a couple reasons. First...

**These are people for whom the kingdom of God is particularly good news.**

So here's what I mean by that: the coming kingdom of God, **in some ways**, is **equally good news** for everybody. We are all in *need* of it, and it is good for anyone who accepts it. But at the same *time*, there *are* certain people who have an easier time *perceiving* its value, and people who have a *harder* time perceiving its value.<sup>2</sup> **All of us need the kingdom of God—but not all of us are equally aware of our need for it.**

And what Jesus is saying is that **these people**—those on this list—are in a place where **they are perhaps the most aware of their need for the kingdom of God**. And because of that, the kingdom of God will be *especially sweet* for *them*. I think that is what Jesus is getting at with the **second half** of all of these verses:

- Blessed are the poor, for *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for *they shall be comforted*.
- Blessed are the meek for they shall *inherit the earth*.
- Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, *for they shall be satisfied*.

Do you hear this? What Jesus is saying is that **these people are blessed because the kingdom of God is the fulfillment—the satisfaction—of the very things that they so desperately long for**. These are the people who can most clearly *perceive* the good news of the kingdom. That's why they are *blessed*. They will be able to experience the kingdom of God in ways that others *won't*. They will appreciate God's goodness in ways that other people *won't*. **They are the VIPs of the kingdom of God.**

And here's the thing: no doubt, there are **people in the room right now** who fall in some or all of these categories. There are likely many of you who listened as we unpacked what they all were and went "yeah, that sounds like me. *I*, often, feel disproportionately impacted by grief and brokenness. *I*, often get overlooked. *I find myself, often*, hungering and thirsting desperately for righteousness and justice." There were probably plenty of us in the room who felt like Jesus was describing *us*.

And because of that, here is **what Jesus is saying to you** through this passage: *You are included in my kingdom. And not just included—you are blessed. You are preferred, you*

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<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 19:23-24 where Jesus says it is "*difficult* for a *rich* person to enter the kingdom of God."

are desired, you are wanted in my kingdom. You may not feel wanted or valued anywhere else in the world, but you are here. He wants you to know that **your value comes, not from what the world around you thinks or doesn't think about you, but from what God himself thinks about you.** And though others may look down on you, we in the kingdom of God look *up* to you. You are *our heroes, our VIPs*. In the kingdom of God, the greatest are the least, and the least are the greatest. So though you live in a *world* that does not always see your value, God sees and we see it. *We accept you. We want you.*

And not only that, but **we have a lot to learn from you. We have a lot to learn from you about life in God's kingdom.** We have a lot to learn from you about what it looks like to long for and desire the kingdom of God. We have a lot to learn from you about why and how the good news of Jesus is indeed good news—because you likely see it more clearly than the rest of us do. So to you, I want to say repeatedly and emphatically: *you are valued, included, and prized* in the kingdom of God. And to that end, secondly...

**These are the types of people that should be prized in our communities.**

Because I know our church, I'm also well aware that there are quite a **few of us that don't really fit many of those descriptions** at all—or even *any* of them. Many of us *aren't* the down and out. We *aren't* really the marginalized, or the poor, or the overlooked. In fact, probably a lot of us are on the **opposite end** of the social spectrum from all that. *We are somewhat popular, we are well-liked. When we speak, people listen. When we share our opinion, people value it. When we lead, people follow. That's probably where a lot of us are at in this room.*

I realized this about our church one day, about a year ago, when **I was eavesdropping at a local coffee shop** (hey—don't judge me: let he who has never eavesdropped at a coffee shop cast the first stone, okay?). But there I was, hanging out, getting some work done. I had my earbuds in, but at some point I had paused the music playing on them for something, and was so in the zone that I had forgotten to turn it back on—you ever do that? But while the music was off, I could hear two young women at a table behind me talking about local *churches*. So I basically *had* to listen in—it's basically part of my job as a pastor.

And as they were talking, it became clear that young **woman #1** was new to Knoxville, and was asking the young **woman #2** she had recommendations for a church to attend. So at this point I'm *invested*, right? So young woman #2 lists off a few churches here in town as recommendations, and *then* she says "...but you should really come with me to



City Church.” *Surprise twist!* My eavesdropping paid off! And then she continued. She said, and I’m quoting here, “it’s really hip...there are tons of young people there, the boys are cute, and everyone there looks like they’re out of an Urban Outfitters ad.” Gonna be honest—that’s not where I saw that conversation going at all. So gentlemen in the room—way to go, I guess? And way to go everybody, for looking like you shop at an extremely overpriced clothing store?

But in all seriousness, when I heard her say that about us, I **felt a couple different emotions**. First, in *some* ways, I was **encouraged**. Encouraged because, as we’ve said to you guys often, the most unreached and unchurched demographic in our country is 18-30 year olds: students, young professionals, single people, families without kids. Those types of people generally don’t feel like they belong in the average American church. And for whatever reason, God has made us a place where those people *do* feel like they belong. And praise God for that. We have *never* wanted to be a church made up of *only* that demographic—we want to be multi-generational—but we do rejoice that God is using us to reach the unreached. So in one way, I was *encouraged* that this young woman at the coffee shop saw us as a church “of a lot of young people.”

But at the same time, I also felt really **challenged** by her statement. And here’s why (and this is where it connects back to our passage for today): because if the vibe that people get from our church is that we’re mostly young, hip, and well-dressed, **that means we are going to have to work overtime to include the type of people that Jesus included**. We’re gonna have to work really hard to welcome the types of people Jesus describes in the beatitudes. If that’s us, we’re going to have to go *out of our way* to make the *poor* feel like they belong. To make the *meek* feel like they belong. To welcome those who are *not* hip, who are *not* popular, who are *not* well-liked or accepted or cool.

It means that **when we see someone** come around our church who *doesn’t* fit that description (young, hip, and well-dressed), we are going to need to inconvenience ourselves to show them that they fit in here just as much as the next young, hip, Urban Outfitted person does. Does that all make sense?

**Biblically speaking**, that practice—the practice of going out of your way to make people who are different feel like they belong—is called **hospitality**. Hospitality means “love of the stranger.” It is **the immediacy with which someone feels like they belong here with us, even if they don’t look like us**. Even when their skin isn’t the same color, when they don’t dress the same way, when they aren’t in the same age range as us.

Hospitality is **the frequency with which** you seek out and develop relationships with the people mentioned in this passage. It is the quickness with which you walk to the other side of this sanctuary and introduce yourself to the person who doesn't look like you. It is the readiness with which you build friendships with people that you know don't feel like they belong. That's *kingdom hospitality*. And that's what we're here to do. So let's take cues from Jesus, and let's continue to become a community where the poor, the broken, the hurting, the neglected—all the people that the world leaves behind—get included and treated like family.

So **last question before we're done**: where does the ability to do that come from? Because that's very *contrary* to human nature, right? Generally, we're really good at welcoming and connecting with people who *are* like us, and really bad and slow at welcoming those who *aren't* like us. So where do we get the ability, as followers of Jesus, to go against that grain? To connect with those that we don't have that much in common with?

I want to read you a passage from **Colossians 1**—we'll put it on the screen. And it's a long passage, but I really want you to think about what's being said as I read through it for us. Here's what it says, talking about Jesus...

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him...*

I don't know if you've ever thought about it this way, but **none of us inherently "fit in" with the God of the universe**. There were **no "common interests"** between an eternally existent, perfect, God of the universe and a sinful, selfish temporary human being. Not a single one. But that eternally existent, perfect, God of the universe, took it upon himself to leave heaven and come to earth in the person of Jesus, and create a scenario where we *could fit in*—all of us. To *make a way* for us to belong, and for us to be "blessed." And

Colossians 1 says that that happened “through his death.” It happened by Jesus “making peace, by the blood of his cross.”

And the ability to include those who are excluded—**that ability can only come from understanding the lengths to which God went to include you.** And once you see the sacrifice that were made to make *that possible*, any inconvenience you have to endure to do that for others looks pretty small by comparison. And that’s not to say it won’t *cost you*, or that you won’t *feel* the cost—you will. But it does put it in perspective. And it gives you the willingness and endurance to do it.

So let’s continue **becoming a community** in which all these types of people (and more) are blessed. Let’s look to Jesus, and let his inclusion of us, lead to the inclusion of others. And in doing so, we become a community that looks more and more like the kingdom.

Let’s pray together.