

Matthew 5:1 – 16

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² He opened his mouth and began to teach them, saying,

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 gentle, 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 have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Historical and Cultural Background:

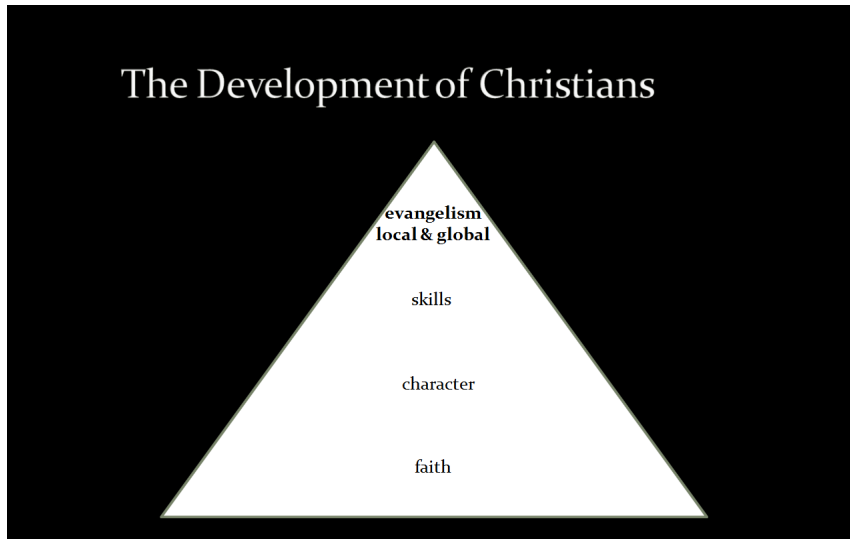
- *Israel's Exile*: The Jewish people knew that they had sinned and were in exile. This exile began with Babylonian captivity in 586 BC but it continued under the Persians, Greeks, and Romans.
- *The Kingdom of God*: The Old Testament expressed unflinching hope that God would rescue Israel and restore them to His reign. This was called 'the kingdom of heaven' or 'kingdom of God'. Almost all Jews interpreted this to mean a military Messiah (anointed king) who would unite Israel and defeat the Romans. Jesus, however, understood these passages to mean a deeper and more profound transformation in human nature, which he had to accomplish first in himself (Mt.3:13 – 4:11), and then in his followers. Jesus had just announced 'the kingdom of heaven' (Mt.4:12 – 25), triggering all kinds of questions, hopes, and expectations.
- *The Beatitudes*: Recall that in Matthew 5:1 – 12, Jesus is describing one person, not eight different people. He is describing a sequence of how he transforms our character through our faith in him. Now, Jesus will talk about influencing others using this language of being salt and light in the world.

Guiding Questions

1. What kind of influence does Jesus expect his followers to have?

Questions

1. (optional) Recall the pyramid of personal development we're using:



2. How does the salt and light passage connect with the beatitudes before them?
 - a. First, what are salt and light? How much salt do you use to season your meal? How many light bulbs do you need to light a room? They are small quantities that exercise influence in the world around them.
 - b. What does this suggest about how a small number of Christians can influence the world around them?
 - c. Give an example: A friend of mine lived in a fraternity house and was the only Christian. He made a commitment not to swear or use hard language. Over the course of one year, there was a marked change among the men who lived in that frat house. They became cleaner in their speech. They swore less. They answered the phone more politely.
 - d. Why would this have been exciting to the disciples at that time? Is it exciting now?
 - e. What about a 'city on a hill'? What is that? A city on a hill does not dominate the landscape. Yet it gives you something to orient yourself by. In that specific context, I think Jesus was speaking of Jerusalem. Jerusalem had the physical Temple building, which once housed the presence of God. But now, Jesus was saying that his community of followers was the new Temple of God, housing God's presence by his Spirit! They would be the reference point by which other people oriented themselves.
3. Why would these character qualities in v.3 – 12 be so influential with people?
 - a. Because people don't like to pretend they're something they're not, so the fact that this whole thing begins with 'poor in spirit' and 'mourning' gives us the space we need to admit things aren't right with ourselves.
 - b. Because people desire to be 'clean' or 'righteous' before God deep down inside.
 - c. Jesus says that we will be influential for him NOT by being rich and famous, and then 'leveraging' that influence 'for his sake.' True influence comes from being faithful. Otherwise, it's misleading. You get the impression that what's really influential is wealth, fame, and power, so you strive for those things, and the striving for them ruins your character and your witness. You'll be too busy to be kind, have a conversation, and be articulate about how Jesus is transforming you.
4. Why would this transformation of character NOT be influential with people?
 - a. Sometimes people react to you as if you're judging them, even though you're just allowing Jesus to transform and heal you. They do sense a judgment on sin of some sort, even though you don't intend to communicate that personally. Of course we have to be tactful and communicate our love for them. But this feeling is unavoidable. Paul said, 'For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from

death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.’ (2 Cor.2:15) Jesus does say (in v.10 – 12) that his disciples will be persecuted, after all!

- b. As an example of this, consider what happens when a person comes to Jesus and decides they don’t want to get drunk at parties anymore. Sometimes their drinking buddies will feel resentful, even though their friend still cares about them and wants to continue in friendship. But this is not the fault of the Christian. Although this may sound unkind, it is their problem. The same thing has happened, in my observation, with people who become less greedy and careerist because of Jesus. Or with people who become less co-dependent because of Jesus. When I moved into an inner city area to live with Mexican immigrant families, out of Jesus’ sense of love and mercy towards them, my mom hated it and disowned me for a while, primarily because she didn’t like my Mexican neighbors and friends.
5. STATE: This is where I think the posture of Christian ‘culture warriors’ in the U.S. is misguided. They think that Christians need to take control of government, media, schools, and companies in order to exercise influence in this culture. What would Jesus have to say about that, based on Matthew 5:1 – 16? Is spiritual influence really based on having some formal position of power and prestige?
- a. No!! It is based on Jesus transforming our character through the sequence in v.3 – 12.
 - b. Illus: After my freshman year of college, I went to be a Christian camp counselor at a week-long family camp. I was a counselor for rising seniors in high school, boys. This was through my home church, a Japanese American church, and a few sister churches on the West Coast. It was also one of my first experiences in ministry, so I was a little nervous. But the boys, who were wanna-be Asian gangsters, seemed to respect me. Even late at night when I would tell them to go to bed. Now it seemed to me like they respected me for fairly superficial, fleshly reasons, like the fact that at the time I drove a car that they liked, or that I had a cool jacket, or that I went to Stanford. They didn’t really care much about my experience with Jesus. But at the time, I didn’t mind, because it helped me get some sleep! I had the chance to meet up with some of them a couple weeks later at a post-conference rally. I talked with one of the boys. I asked him how it was going. He said fine. I asked how he was doing spiritually. He said, “Well, I’d like to be a good Christian, but I don’t think I can.” I asked him why. He said, “Because I can’t be a really good student.” Deep in my gut, I wanted to say, “But you don’t have to be a really good student to be a good Christian,” but I didn’t know how to say it at the time. On my way home, I felt like God helped me piece it together. He was saying, “I can’t be a good Christian, because I can’t be successful like you.” I said back to God, “But I never said that.” God seemed to say in reply, “You didn’t have to. It’s still in your heart. You value Jesus AND success equally, and here is a pivotal point – what do you really value?” I went home and cried. That was a real shock to me. It might be a real shock to you. So often we think if we have Jesus AND are part of the successful group, we’ll be better off. Don’t get me wrong: It’s good to come to Jesus if you’re powerful. It’s good to come to Jesus if you’re wealthy. It is bad when Christians cannot let go of the privilege or power, and instead protect it using a kind of faulty theology.
 - c. STATE: We can connect this with Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. Jesus refused to turn stones into bread, implying having some ability to buy people’s votes by giving them food. He refused to jump off the Temple tower and have angels catch him before he fell, implying having the power to do miraculous stunts and be spectacular. He refused to share in Satan’s authority over the nations, implying sheer power for its own sake. Jesus refused to lead men and women out of an ego-boosting posture. Even efficiency was not the most important criterion for Jesus, because efficiency tends to enshrine power, celebrity, and wealth to accomplish an end supposedly superior to those means. But in the process, efficiency always becomes its own god, even when it promises to point to another. For example, someone might argue that we should first evangelize powerful, attractive, rich people because they will have more influence over other people than do disenfranchised, lowly, and poor people. Put so bluntly, the elitism and enshrining of power, celebrity, and wealth become obvious. Yet most of the time, we only think such things quietly to ourselves, afraid to face the absurdity of our own thinking. However, Jesus’ effectiveness and that of his people does not ultimately depend on power, celebrity, and wealth. **IT DEPENDS ON THE HEALING AND TRANSFORMING POWER OF JESUS, AT WORK IN OUR LIFE AND CHARACTER.**
6. Application points:

- a. We sometimes think that we lead people to Jesus by inviting them to a church meeting. That can happen, but thinking intentionally along those lines is FAULTY. We must do character-based evangelism, starting with being 'poor in spirit'. We must lead people to Jesus by showing and articulating the impact his kingship has had on our character. We do not lead others in a Christian sense by being superior to and more powerful than them.
- b. How can you see Jesus' definition of blessedness/happiness as having an impact on the people around you? Who in particular? Why?
- c. Who are the non-Christians in your life that you may have the chance to impact? Pray for them and pray for a chance to share part of your spiritual life story with them.