

Sermon on the Mount - Character (Part 1)

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, tonight we are going to continue our study on the Sermon on the Mount. We started this a couple of weeks ago just with an introductory talk where we really set out the basic framework for our study of the Sermon on the Mount. And as you can see from the back of your hand and from the diagram on the screen, our series is called Disciples Trained by King Jesus.

And then these are all the various aspects that the Sermon covers and which we are going to look at together over the coming weeks. But the reason we have chosen this title, Disciples Trained by King Jesus, is because for two reasons. One, as we said, this is what the Sermon on the Mount is. It is training for Jesus' disciples, training for those who are part of God's kingdom. As we were saying, the Sermon on the Mount is not explaining how we become Christians. It is telling us how we live as Christians. So it is a training school, an education for disciples. So it's what the Sermon is. And it is also what we want to be. Because our great aim in studying the Sermon on the Mount is that we would be disciples who are trained by King Jesus. We don't simply want to come to faith and then not make any progress in our spiritual lives. But rather we want to be trained and equipped and changed and helped so that we become everything that Jesus wants us to be. So we're going to look at all these things together tonight. We are going to start looking at the first one of these, character. And this is the main theme of the verses that we read, which are commonly known as the Beatitudes. Matthew 3, 5, 3 to 12. Blessed are the poor in spirit, 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 and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who have persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you and others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. When we come to think about God's kingdom, which is the great topic of the Gospels and of the Sermon of the Mount, we are immediately struck by the question, what kind of person is Jesus looking for? Jesus is beginning his ministry, he is about to call people into his kingdom and the question naturally arises, what kind of people does he want? What are the characteristics of the followers of Jesus? What kind of people are qualified to enter this school of discipleship, this training for disciples? What kind of person is Jesus looking for? Well, when we ask that question, I think it's very, very easy to become discouraged because we ask ourselves, what kind of person is Jesus looking for? And we immediately think, well, I'm guessing we've already immediately think, well, not me. And we look at ourselves and we think, I am so, so far from what I should be. And the phrase, disciples trained by Jesus, can almost be intimidating because you hear that phrase and you, I am quite sure immediately hit by thoughts of guilt and of feelings of inadequacy and thinking to yourself, well, I'm going to fail no matter what. And so we feel like before we even start, we're going to be a let down. Thomas is talking all about being disciples trained by Jesus, but I am just not going to match up. I am not going to be good enough. And I'm quite sure the reason I'm saying this is because if I was listening to me saying all this, I would be sitting thinking, yeah, but I'm so far from what I should be. So it's easy to be discouraged before we even start. Well, if you feel like that, or if you have felt like that in your life, or you feel that you are just a let down from the word go, then this is the moment where we see that Jesus is the greatest preacher who has ever lived because the opening lines of the sermon on the mount, I think is the greatest opening to a sermon ever because we are standing at the starting point of a course in discipleship. We are feeling inadequate. We feel unqualified. And we probably think we are guaranteed to fail. And we think to ourselves, I am the last person that Jesus would want in his training school. And then we come to his sermon and we read the glorious words, blessed are the poor in spirit. For there is the kingdom of heaven. So who is disqualified for the kingdom of heaven? Who is it who makes good disciple material? Is it the strong? Is it the confident? Is it the experienced? Is it the capable? Is it the successful? No. It's the poor in spirit. And so qualification number one for God's kingdom has been totally aware of the fact that you are utterly, utterly dependent on that you are pure, that you are weak, and that you are going to need his help. So if if that phrase and this that diagram to cycles trained by King Jesus, if that makes you feel a little bit intimidated, it might even freak you out. If you feel worried because you think

I don't have the right characteristics, then the truth is you are exactly the kind of person that the sermon on the mount is for. And that should be a huge, huge encouragement to us because as we look ahead to learning all of these different things, Jesus wants to take those who start off poor in spirit, and he wants to teach them about their character, their witness, their obedience, etc, etc, so that we become everything that he wants us to be. So we should be really, really encouraged by the first six words of the sermon on the mount, because the poor in spirit are those who are qualified to participate in this.

[7 : 23] But of course, at the same time, this should challenge us and all these characteristics should challenge us because these are the things that Jesus wants our personalities to reflect. These are the kind of people that Jesus wants us to be, and therefore these are the things that we should aim at. So we are being encouraged and we're being trained at the same time. And so Jesus gives a list of eight things, which we're going to look at in a wee bit of detail over the next couple of prayer meetings. And I couldn't get through it all in one night, I'm afraid, so we're going to do it in two halves. But just a couple of introductory thoughts. Jesus basically presents to us eight bits of information, and they all follow the same pattern. He basically follows a pattern which answers three questions.

What are these people, who are these people, and why are they like that? You can see an example of it here, who are these people, the answer is they are blessed. Then who are they? And in each of the cases he identifies who they are, whether it's the poor spirit or whatever else. Then he gives the reason, you've got this word for, you can also translate that to be cause, therefore it's giving a reason, and this is the why section because there is the kingdom of heaven. So each of the attitudes in three parts, what, who and why. And so we can look at these together as a kind of framework. We'll spend most of our time probably on this one, but we'll mention the others as we go. So Jesus tells us what these people are, and as you can see it's the same in every single verse. What are these people? They are blessed. And that's why they're called the Beatitudes because it's from the

Latin word, Beatitude. I didn't learn Latin in school, I wish I had learned Latin there, I really do. There's nobody here in school, but I wish I had learned Latin. Maybe one day I'll get the time to. But yeah, Beatitude or blessed. Now that's a very, very familiar word. We hear the word blessed all the time, don't we? But what does it mean? What does blessed mean? And that's, it's one of these questions that is so simple and yet in many ways so hard because sometimes it's hard to actually define what do we mean by blessed?

Sometimes it's translated happy. And so you read some versions and they'll say happy are the pure and spirit happy are those who mourn. And at one level that's helpful because it's expressing something positive. Obviously happy is to be happy is something positive. So at one level it's helpful, but I'm trying to be polite towards those translations. Really I don't think it's the best translation at all because the word blessed is much deeper than simple happiness because in particular it's expressing the idea of being in a relationship with the king, being in a relationship with God. And so it's not simply a case of being happy. It would be better to translate to understand it in terms of being privileged or being approved or being specially favoured by God. That's how various commentators have done, have tried to capture this term. And it's the idea of the fact that we are privileged, approved and favoured by God, which as you can see is bigger and deeper than simply being happy.

But really I think the best way to understand the word blessed is to think of it in terms of its biblical opposite. Sometimes you can only describe something, I can only describe something by describing its opposite. So what's the biblical opposite of blessed?

[11 : 37] Cursed, exactly. And I think when you think of being blessed in those terms it's easier I think to understand just what it means. Blessed is the opposite of being cursed. Blessed is to enjoy special favour with God, to be in a relationship with Him and to be and to possess everything that God intends for us. Blessing to be blessed is the complete opposite of being cursed. And so I think that whenever we read that word blessed we need to have this twofold emphasis of blessing and cursing in our minds. Now when I say the words blessing and cursing that should make us think of a key biblical theme, a big important theological word, blessing and cursing. What word should we think of? Any thoughts? I'll give you a comment. Covenant. Exactly. Covenant. Blessing and cursing is at the heart of a covenant relationship. Faithfulness to God's covenant brings blessing. Abandonment of God's covenant brings a curse. That's exactly what happened to Adam, wasn't it? He was very blessed, very privileged and then he disobeyed and he bore the curse. So to be blessed is to be in a covenant relationship with God where he is our God, we are his people. That points us straight back to Genesis 12. The Lord said to Abraham, go from your country to your kindred and to your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you, I will curse and then you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. God of course was entering a covenant with Abraham and at the heart of that is blessing and cursing. So blessed means much, much more than simply being happy. It refers to being in a covenant relationship with God where he is our God, he is our King and we are his people. We are loved, cherished and favored by him and we glorify and enjoy him forever. But who are the kind of people that enjoy this status? Who are those who have this privilege of being blessed by God? Well this brings us to the specifics of what Jesus says and he identifies eight characteristics that his disciples should have. He says it's the people who are pure in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sakes. Now we are going to look at them in a wee bit more detail shortly but before we look at them in more detail the key point to notice and this is really the point I really want to drum home is that all of these things are the opposite, the opposite of what the world usually admires. Imagine

Donald Trump is choosing a new whatever it is that he has in the White House, a new Secretary of State or Attorney General or whatever all these people he's been choosing. Imagine he's choosing a new executive for his team. What kind of person would he want? Well I think he would want someone who is strong in spirit wouldn't he? And he wants someone who is positive thinking, somebody who is living for the moment, that's the kind of thing that the world admires. He'd be looking for someone who's tough, who's thick skinned, that's the kind of person who will win the apprentice or who will get to the top of an organisation, somebody who hungers and thirsts for power or for success or for profit. That's the kind of thing that the business world is looking for, somebody who's hard and ruthless when they need to be, somebody who looks good and somebody who's got a good public profile, someone who will fight against any foe and who will stand up for themselves, someone who is admired in the eyes of the world. That's the kind of characteristics that the world looks for. And in the Beatitudes, Jesus is telling us that in his kingdom and in you and in me, he is looking for the complete opposite. So everything that impresses the world, everything that gets you far in corporate life, everything that gets you to the top of politics in the world that we live in is the opposite of what Jesus is looking for.

And that's why John Stott is so accurate when he calls the sermon on the Mount a Christian counterculture. Cultures go in that way. Jesus is pointing us all in the opposite direction.

The kingdom of God is gloriously and glaringly different from what the world usually seeks and admires. And we have to be that as well. So let's look at these things in a little bit more detail. And you can see on your sheets that I've just summarized those points. What the world says, the world says happy are all those that Jesus says, what Jesus is looking for is different. So first of all, the world says happy are those who are strong in spirit.

Isn't that true? People who are self confident, they're the ones who get far, people who are successful, who are powerful, who are resourceful, and who just seem to have all no end of confidence and no end of absolute assurance of their self worth and the fact that they are just something special, people who are strong in spirit, people who are successful in the world's eyes. Because if you look so many people's emotional well being is tied into what they have. So people have to have the job, they have to have the salami, they have to have the house, they have to have the car, but everyone else, maybe people are looking for this status that shows that they're strong. But Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit.

[18:13] And thank God that Jesus said these words. Because it immediately throws open the door for the kingdom of God, for people like us, for everyone of us, because it removes any qualification in terms of spiritual capability or success. Isn't that too so often you think to yourself, oh, well, God's going to be interested in the people who are really, really, really doing well. And Jesus is saying, this is the first thing that Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit. And the whole point of that word poor is that it teaches us that we are in need and that we are independent. If you are poor, then you are lacking. You are not self sufficient. You are not well resourced. You are not in a good position. And so in spiritual terms, Jesus is calling the people who can come to God and say, I can't manage on my own. I desperately need you. And that is the absolute core of being a disciple. Lesson number one that Jesus is teaching us in this training for discipleship is that we are in total dependence on Him. And of course, that makes perfect sense. Because everything in the Christian life is by the grace of God. We come as those who are pure. And of course, the focus is not on material poverty, but spiritual poverty. The one who is poor in spirit looks at himself and he says, there's something wrong. I am not what I should be.

Many people go through life as boosters. You see with children, you see that in school and they come and they talk about, I've done this, I've done that, I've done the next thing.

And sometimes it can be quite entertaining and ridiculous. You even get it with adults. I remember going to a job in Barra. We were involved in replacing fuel tanks at the power station in Barra. And there was a fellow there who was working there. He had been contracted in to oversee the project. He's a very nice guy. But he had this sort of overwhelming need to kind of boast about all the things that he had done. I've done this, I've been there, I did that, I did this, I've done that. And so often you come across that people try to boast because they think it's going to impress. People try to boast about what they've done, about what they've achieved. And you come across it everywhere. I'm sure you know people like that at work who love to boast because they think it's going to impress.

But Jesus is giving us a glorious reminder that we do not come to God as boosters. We come to God as beggars. We come in our poverty. And we say, Lord, I am so far from what I should be. Please help me. And the result is we're blessed because God is a generous given and he longs to be gracious. So at the heart of our character, the kind of people we are should be a constant sense every day of the fact that we are dependent, completely dependent on our King. And of course, it all makes perfect sense because if you know that you are pure in spirit, it means you know just how much you need God. And that's a good way to go through life. And Jesus tells us that it's to these people that the kingdom of heaven belongs. Pure weak stragglers like you and like me. Yours is the kingdom of heaven.

The world says happy and strong in spirit. Jesus says, blessed are the pure in spirit. Secondly, and we're only going to do the first four tonight because we'll do the first four tonight and the second four next time. The world says happy are those who have positive those who don't let the world get you down. And we just focus on the moment live for the day laughter, enjoyment, pleasure, fun, don't let things get you down. Be positive. And what I'm not saying that that's wrong. A lot of people think that that is the key to happiness to go through life. I have somebody I know who has suffered a lot of loss in his life. And yet you watch on and he deals. He's dealt with it by laughing and socializing and thinking and and you can see that there's this front of of supposed pleasure. And underneath the dog is miserable. And I'm sure you know people like that as well. And so the world says happy are you if you're positive, if you're happy, if you're living for the moment, but Jesus says, blessed are those whom more. Now, when we see that word more, we immediately think of of a death. But really, the word is wider than that. It's not just referring to when somebody has died. It's really a general term that expresses a sense of sorrow, of sadness and of grief. And Paul uses the same word in second Corinthians 12 21. I feel that when I come again, my God may humble me before you. And I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented. So Paul is talking about mourning, but it's not in relation to a death. It's in relation to people's sin. And the emphasis is on this grief and sorrow due to the sin and the wickedness in the world. And at the heart of this is a really, really important point. Jesus is saying, I am looking for the kind of people who are affected by what is happening around you. That's really what mourning is, isn't it? Something has happened and it has affected you. And that's why we mourn at a death because it affects us so powerful. It's left us deeply, deeply saddened. And so when the world is saying eat and drink and be happy, don't let it bother you. Who cares? Jesus is saying, blessed are you. When you look at the world and you think to yourself, I wish it wasn't like this. How many people in our country are thinking like that after what happened yesterday?

[25 : 35] And Jesus is saying, that's exactly the way I want you to think. To mourn at the sin that is in the world. And all of this is a great, great reminder that we want to ensure that in terms of our character as disciples that we never, ever become numb to sin. Now it's very, very easy to become numb to sin. You know the way when you get numb, you're really cold, your fingers, you lose the feeling in your fingers. Sometimes if I sit on my leg in the wrong way, you get up and it's even no feeling. It's a very weird feeling. You can become numb. We can become numb to sin. And I'm saying this to myself before I say to any of you. If you look in the media, full of sin, we're so exposed to it, we become numb to it. In the workplace, people can be nasty to each other, can be horrible to each other, but people can become numb to that. And even in a church, we can become numb to things, numb to things that God has told us not to do. And that's why our prayer should always be, Lord, make me sensitive to sin. It's a really, really important prayer. Make me sensitive to sin because we don't want to be numb to sin. We want sin to make us more because sin is a horrible thing. And this is where I stop when I ask myself, how does blasphemy make me feel? I hear it all the time. It should make us more. How does gossip make us feel? I hear it. Very often I've done it. That should make us more. And many other things. Impatience. How does impatience make us feel? It should make us more. And Jesus is glorious promises that those who are affected, grieved and saddened by all that is evil in the world, they are going to find comfort in God's kingdom. That's why following Jesus is such a brilliant thing. So the world wants us all to be happy and laughing and having fun. Not that these things are wrong in the right place, but in terms of the wickedness of the world, we don't want to take pleasure in sin. We want to be more at sin. Thirdly, the world says, happy are those who are tough, those who are thick skinned, and those who can stand up for themselves. Not through, again, going back to school, it was the hard nuts who always seemed to get on well. I was never one of those, as I'm sure you can guess. And so often we see that in work, don't we? People climb the ladder when they're tough, they're ruthless, they're hard, they're harsh. In politics we see it, people can be quite ruthless. And that seems to be how the world works. And that seems to be what the world is looking for. And so often at work, you're dealing with people who are hard, hard, and Jesus says, blessed are the meek. Now, meek basically means to be gentle, to be mild, to be soft. And it's the complete opposite of the harsh, tough, aggressive mindset that seems so dominant today. And Jesus is emphasizing the fact that he's looking for people who are considerate and who are kind. And I think this is not a very profound thing that I'm going to say here. But I think that the words of verse five are summed up beautifully in a lovely little word that I think gets maybe overlooked. Blessed are the meek, I think that's

fundamentally telling us all that Jesus wants us. Jesus is saying, my kingdom is for people who are thoroughly nice, nice to each other and nice to outsiders. And that of course is what Jesus wants. He was nice to leper. He was nice to women who had got into all sorts of problems in their private life. He was nice to people who were oppressed by demons who were sick, who were ill, who had made mistakes in their lives. Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart. And he's telling us that meekness, niceness is to be a defining characteristic of every disciple. What makes a good church member? Great theological knowledge, brilliant singing voice, able to pray a really robust prayer, able to get into really, really good debates in a discussion. Nothing wrong with any of those things. Good church members can use thoroughly, clearly, consistently nice. Blessed are the meek. And that's a great comfort to us because of course this is something that we can all achieve and in fact you have already achieved it. Everybody here is nice but it's not some kind of elite characteristic that only the gifted few have. It is something that we can all attain to. And it's a reminder that your gentleness, your gentleness at work tomorrow or in whatever you're doing, your gentleness is an incredibly precious thing in the eyes of God. But of course it's also a challenge because it is something that's neglected. That's what I said, it's a little word nice. We kind of think that that word's just a bit too soft and superficial to apply theologically. It's not. Jesus is saying, blessed are the meek. Qualification number three for my kingdom, niceness. And yet we neglect it because often Christians are not nice. And I hope that we all recognize how absolutely unacceptable that is. Totally unacceptable. Now, I don't know about you but quite often we have the idea in the world that the nice guy comes last. You're nice, you're soft, you're meek, you're not harsh, you're not tough and you're just going to get moaned out by this world. Corporate world in terms of hierarchies at work, bosses, pressures, targets, blah, blah, blah, blah, all these things. You're going to just get swamped and if you're nice, you're going to just be left at the bottom of the ladder. You're going to be overlooked for worldly recognition and in the world's eyes, you're going to come last. But in God's kingdom, the meek shall inherit the earth. And that is an incredibly big promise from God. He is saying, my whole creation, the work of my hands is going to be your inheritance. And so meek, nice people most definitely don't come last in God's kingdom. And so that's why that's a priority that we should try and seem to focus on in our own characteristics. Be nice, that's a great theological lesson. Okay, last and briefly, the world tends to admire those who are hungry and thirst for power, for success, and for profit. Isn't that true? People like,

I want to get to the top, I want to succeed, I want to be the boss, I want to be this, I want to be that. That's what the world is looking for. They want ambition, don't they? People who are really ambitious, really capable and who have got the drive to make it. That's what the world is looking for. That's what the world admires. People say, I've got to have it. I've always wanted this. This is my dream. And when they get there, they say, I've lived my dream. This is what I want. I've made it. That's what people hunger and thirst for. But Jesus says, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteous. Now notice something really important. Jesus does not say blessed are those who are righteous. Because Jesus knows better than anyone that on and on, we are far from righteous. But we are blessed if we long for righteousness. That's exactly what the image of hunger and thirst is emphasizing. Because if you are hungry, or if you are thirsty, then you desperately need something. And you know that you need it. So Jesus is looking for people who know that they aren't righteous because they're aware that they are pure in spirit. And he's looking for people who know that the world is a mess. That's why they are mourning. And they are also longing, longing, longing for the righteousness of God. And of course, our longing for righteousness is just simply a longing for God himself because it is God who defines righteousness. God is righteousness. He is the one who shows us what is right and wrong. He alone is righteous. And so the kingdom of God is for the people who just long for

God and for his ways, for his perfect ways. And this is a reminder of the fact that the world is ultimately a dry, parched land that is full of empty promises. It's full of false hopes. It's full of bitter, bitter disappointments. And we've probably all experienced that at different times. The world can promise so much and it delivers so little. And Jesus is saying, if you have lost your appetite for this sinful world, and instead you have a burning hunger and thirst for righteousness, then he's making you a promise because he says you shall be satisfied. And that's an amazing thing. When you look at the mess that the world is in, and we long for something better, Jesus says, you will be filled totally and perfectly satisfied. So our prayer should always be Lord, give me that hunger and Lord, give me that thirst. So that's our first four characteristics that Jesus is looking for.

Not what the world wants, but he wants people who are poor in spirit. He wants us to be those who mourn. He wants us to be those who are meek. And he wants us to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Thanks be to God that that's the kind of people he wants. Let's pray.