

Character of the Kingdom

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Today we begin a new series in the Sermon on the Mount, and over the next two months will focus on its introduction, The Beatitudes, taking one each Sunday. Many have lauded this sermon for its impeccable moral punch. Richard Dawkins: “Jesus was surely one of the great ethical innovators of history. The SOM is way ahead of its time.” Ghandi: “*If then I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, 'Oh, yes, I am a Christian.' But negatively I can tell you that in my humble opinion, what passes as Christianity [today] is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount.*” You see the SOM has been used to guide humanists and to judge Christians. It’s a very puzzling. It has been said that it is the most well known yet least understood sermon in history. Let’s try to understand it. We’ll look at three views on the SOM and give aspects to it? 3 views on it, 5 aspects to it.

3 Views on the Sermon on the Mount

As I read and prepared for this series, I was moved to heights of joy, walked the valleys of my brokenness, and circled about in the wilderness of confusion. “What is the SOM,” I kept asking. While impossible to distill all the literature and opinion, three main views emerged: *The Beatitudes as a mirror, an elite code, or a mild suggestion*. The **mirror**. The Beatitudes offer a purview on the character of God that is so stunning, we shy away, like meeting royalty. Seeing his Moral Perfection creates an awareness of our own imperfection. This can be quite disturbing, like realizing your self-perception has been about as accurate as a carnival mirror. In this sermon, Jesus lifts up a mirror to show us our true selves. The mirror view is meant to show us how great God is and how bad we really are. Trying to close the gap, St Francis strived for what Andrew Sullivan calls “a religion of unachievement.” St. Francis purportedly so denied himself physical comforts that on his deathbed he angrily rejected a pillow offered by a friend. Who’s up for this view?! The second view is of an **elite moral code**. A new 10 Commandments, issued by Jesus, to the following few. After all, his disciples are crowded around to hear him teach. The SOM is only for spiritual elite: pastors, missionaries, leaders, elders, deacons. I can imagine someone coming up to me after reading it and saying, “I’ve read the SOM and I just can’t bring myself to adopt this way of life. Do I really have to be poor, sad, and weak to be a Christian?” This is a code for the elite, but not me. The final view is as a **mild suggestion**. The SOM offers a profitable moral compass, a loose guide to living, but not what’s really expected of a Christian or if it is, this character preceded by grace, so Jesus doesn’t really expect us to live this way. It’s a mild suggestion because of what he’s done for us in the gospel. We’re forgiven right? Here we feel the sting of Ghandi’s statement, “*Christianity is a negation of the SOM.*” It is precisely because so many Christians have taken the SOM as a mild suggestion that so many people find the church and Christianity distasteful. I was reading an interesting article by a professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, who both affirmed and challenges this view. He essentially says there are churches that have utterly blown the SOM, but then writes: “*these churches have also been central in sustaining the traditions of thought and practice that transformed Jesus’ passionate but enigmatic teachings into coherent and fruitful moral visions. They have been the air —*

however polluted — that has fed the fire of his message. This secular philosopher goes on to insist that **there is no SOM without the church.** It is up to you to join the many who have made his teachings into “coherent and fruitful moral visions.” **We are to be oxygen to the fire of Jesus’ message.** When you hear the SOM, and the cognitive dissonance hits, which view do you reach for? Which will you take? Mirror, code, or suggestion? How will you justify your present morality with this picture? I’ll tip my hand and say there are bits of truth in all of the views, but even all of them together don’t get it right. **Because the SOM is not essentially a moral code; it is the character of the kingdom,** character in the sense that it describes the kingdom of heaven as it breaks into earth, making her citizens. **It shows us what its like to be in the kingdom of God.** The Beatitudes are framed with kingdom citizenship: “[Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.](#)” “[Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.](#)” It’s realistic and otherworldly, blessed are the persecuted for theirs is the KOH. So if you want to be part of the kingdom, you need to get this, you have to get this.

5 Aspects of the Kingdom

Let’s look at five aspects to KOH/SOM/Bs. First, it is **essential.** Jesus opens his mouth and speaks both to the crowds and to the disciples. He does not restrict his teaching to a sidebar conversation with the elite. He preaches open air to all who will hear. All are to be poor in spirit, to be meek, to be peacemakers. These are not personality types or spiritual gifts; they are essential character traits for Christians. **It is a description of what you are meant to be if you are in the kingdom of God.** America stands for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We expect that of all her citizens. We are outraged by miscarries of justice and restriction of liberties. So also we should expect the character of the kingdom to show up in all her citizens, from meekness to mercy. Now, it is true that some of these traits will show up more in some than others, but that is not by design, that’s by flaw. When the kingdom has come fully, we will be full of this character. People won’t just major in areas. We’ll all be meek, merciful, pure, etc. *We’ll be full of this character because we will be full of Christ.* Second, the SOM is **moral.** Well, then, is poverty morality? While not purely literal, these sayings do have moral bite. The pure in heart will have pure hands. Those dealt injustice will be satisfied. The sinfully angry will face the holy anger of God. Jesus is addressing *real sin and real joy.* Each beatitude is prefixed by “blessed,” a word that means more than happy. It is much deeper. He is saying that *the person possessing the character of the kingdom is possessed by the joy of God.* Real sin and real joy are on the line. *This sermon removes all complacency and insists that no matter how far we have gone along the Christian road the sermon tells us that there is more ahead of us.* More sin to fight, more joy to have. It should *not* be spiritualized or explained away; there are real moral imperatives and real promises of joy. The difficult thing is that many of our cultural values are in conflict with the character of the kingdom. *Instead of being poor in spirit, we are wooed to build a platform in the flesh, climb the ladder, prove our worth before man not acknowledge our poverty before God.* Instead of mourning our sin and failure, cultural tides push us out to distraction and happiness at all costs. Keep things light. Don’t pander the heavy. **So, I have to ask you, “Do you see this character as a threat to your happiness?” Or a basis for joy?** How do you know? If you’re authentic answer is, “Yes, I’d rather ____.” Then your idol is in the blank. You wanna know whats keeping you from the kingdom, from the blessed

life, then look in the blank. And to want to get to joy, you can't just fill in the blank, you gotta take what's in the blank, out. It cannot be the definer of happiness. And it only comes out by sorrowful confession—blessed are those who mourn—and true turning, to fill in the blank with Christ and his character—they shall be comforted. *Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet (Watson)*. See, we have to remember, in all our moral reflection, that Jesus is still here. But you must get him in the blank; you must come back to him. If you want real joy, exchange it for real sin. Your platform building for poverty of spirit; your love of distraction for sorrowful reflection. **You must look in the mirror before you can take in the image of Christ.** Third, the Beatitudes are **progressive**. There is a certain logic to how they progress. We will not mourn our sin until we see our poverty of spirit, our total lack before God. Until we admit we are empty handed before God, we cannot mourn our loss. **And until we mourn our loss, our active complicit sin, we will not be humble.** We must slow down long enough to *see* our sin, *mourn* our sin, before we *love* our Savior (Fight Clubs). Once we are humble, we will hunger and thirst for righteousness; Christ will be our very food, and for justice for others. This will move us to mercy, not judgment of others, because we know how much we deserve God's righteous judgment. Eventually you end up in the crosshairs of the Enemy of the Kingdom, who will pull all his strings to persecute you. Why? Because now you have taken in the character of the kingdom, and the power of the King is in you, so you're a threat to the enemy. But if you're just seeking fill in the blank happiness, you're not much of a threat. Honestly, Satan's got you right where he wants you. Fourth, it is **eschatological**. I hesitate to use such a theological word, but is it not fitting we would have bigger words to talk about bigger things, that when talking about God's kingdom we would reach for otherworldly vocabulary? The word refers to the realm of God's rule and grace which reach back from the future to bless us. It is the heavenly part of the kingdom. Perhaps you noticed the shift in tense in the Beatitudes? It sets off with a present tense promise, "**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,**" promising the kingdom to us *now*. (ALREADY) But moves into future tense promises: "**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**" (4-6), promising comfort, the earth, and satisfaction *in the future*. (NOT FULLY) And here some of the confusion comes in. If I take on the character of the kingdom, do I have to wait for these things? How are we to make sense of the SOM? **We must see the present in light of the future. Already and not fully.** If we go all earthly, we miss the heavenly. If we go all heavenly, we're not earthly good. But if we follow Jesus closely, if we see the present in light of the future, we will take on the character of the kingdom. Faith in the King of that future kingdom is what unlocks the Beatitudes. Faith in God's future to become our present. Richard Dawkins was right. The SOM was *way* ahead of its time. Because its come from the future. When I see my sin & evil through the eyes of my savior, the comfort of heaven overlaps the sufferings of earth, and I take heart, because I have seen with the eyes of faith, a world, a kingdom, and glory not of this world. Then, and only then, will we give the world a *coherent and fruitful moral vision*. We will put the future on the present, and people will see the character of the kingdom ahead of time. Remember, Jesus is not just the preacher; he is present. He gives the word and he is the Word. And if you'll fill in the blank, he'll put his word in you, the future in the present. So we get to taste the future promises of comfort, satisfaction, being the sons of God in the present. **When we believe**

the promises of God, we put on the character of his kingdom. At the end of his sermon, Matthew notes: *“And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching” (7:28)*. Can I ask you, **“Are you astonished at Jesus?”** Lawgiver and law performer. The one who deals in real sin and real joy, who swallows your sin to give you his joy. Because until you’re astonished with Jesus, you will not fill in the blank with Jesus. You will settle for your fleeting happiness. You will see his joy as a threat to your happiness. You will reduce his Sermon to a mirror, elite code, or a mild suggestion. The final trait of the Sermon on the Mount is **missional**. Jesus concludes the Beatitudes with a call for his followers to *not lose their saltiness in the world, a city set upon a hill, a light shining into the darkness*. If you accept the character of the kingdom, light will pour out, spill out of you into the city. Looking intently at Christ, you will reflect Christ throughout the city. You will provoke questions that demand gospel answers. **Will you keep the beatitudes to yourself or will you bless the city?** The Sermon on the Mount is essential, moral, progressive, eschatological, and missional; it’s meant to move out in mission and renew the city, people and problems. And if we take it in, it will lead to deep spiritual revival. Let’s make the SOM not just the most well known but the most understood sermon as we explain it to our city.