The Upside Down Kingdom
Matthew 5:1-5

This morning we're going to start looking at the Sermon on the Mount, which is probably one of the most famous passages in the Bible. It's one of those passages that people as diverse as Ghandi and Marx quoted from. And you may know very little about Jesus, but still have heard of this Sermon.

And it begins with what are called the Beatitudes – which comes from the Latin word for *blessed*. And as we read it, you'll see why.

But before we do, let me ask you a question: what does it mean to be 'blessed'? Maybe you've seen that word 'blessed' used as a hash tag on Facebook, or used it yourself, along with a photo of your family, or a date night, or a beautiful sunset. Or maybe you've seen jewellery with that word engraved on it, or a t-shirt with it as a logo. *Blessed*.

But what does a blessed life look like? And what if God were to see it differently from you?

Matthew 5:1-5

We're going to look at three things: leaving the crowd; upside down blessing; and the one who brings it.

Leaving the Crowd
Now at the end of chapter 4, Matthew says that Jesus is in Galilee and, chapter 4:25, 'Great crowds followed him.' And they came to see him heal and listen to him preach. And Matthew tells us what he was preaching, Matthew 4:17, 'repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'.

But now, Matthew says in v1, 'seeing the crowds, [Jesus] went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him.' So, from within these great crowds of people, some heard Jesus' call to repentance, separated themselves from all the rest, and drew closer. So there are the crowds, and then there are his disciples. So, which group are you in?

You see, you can't be a follower of Jesus and stay a member of the crowd, and your life be indistinguishable from the crowd, can you? It's one or the other. And like in Jesus' own day, you have to decide, am I going to stay as one of the crowd, enjoying what he has to say, enjoying being part of the crowd, but not really committing? Or, am I going to step out of the crowd and come to him in repentance and faith?

And it was people like that who had made that decision and repented, who were now sat around Jesus feet. And knowing that helps you understand what Jesus is saying here.

You see, the Sermon on the Mount is not a list of requirements that you have to fulfil to enter the kingdom of heaven. Now, I don't know how many of you have ever investigated what it takes to get Swiss citizenship, but there are numerous hoops you have to jump through. You've got to have lived here for so many years,

and you've got to have lived in your present commune for so many of those years, and you've got to be proficient in one of the languages, and show how well you've integrated, and get the approval of your commune, and show you understand the culture and the history and the politics. And the danger is you come to the Sermon on the Mount and you think Jesus is Swiss – and here are all the rules I have to obey, here are all the hoops I have to jump through, here are all the things I have to prove myself good at, if I'm to stand a chance of becoming a citizen in God's kingdom.

But if you think like that you'll either drown in despair or give up and turn away. Because as you hear what Jesus says later in the sermon about loving your enemy, or turning the other cheek, or being blameless when it comes to anger or lust, and you reflect on your own heart, you know you can't do it. Now you can try… but how long does the trying last?! Or you can convince yourself that you are doing it, but those around you might see things a bit differently! And so, when you realise the standard Jesus is requiring here, you know that your heart would have to be totally transformed for you to live this way.

So, if you think the Sermon on the Mount is like multiple gateways into the kingdom, you'll discover they are barred and bolted gateways, impossible to climb over.

But Jesus is talking now to those who have left the crowd and turned away from their sin, and come to him. And so these aren't the things you have to do to deserve God's grace, this is about what will mark the lives of those who have already received God's grace, whose lives have been, and are being transformed by that grace. It's about what will characterise the lives of the people who gather around Jesus, who have repented of their sin and walked through the gateway God has opened in Christ into his kingdom.

But what is so remarkable is that the values of his kingdom are often the opposite of those of the crowd, and the opposite of what the world thinks a successful, blessed life looks like.

Upside Down Blessing

Kate Bowler, professor of divinity at Duke University, has written a sociological study of the prosperity gospel in American churches. And the prosperity gospel teaches that God wants you healthy, wealthy and happy now, and if you're not, you've got a problem. And Bowler titled that book, 'Blessed.'

Now, you may not subscribe to that, but what do you think of when you think of what it means to be blessed? And does it look so different from the prosperity gospel? Financial security? A great holiday? Healthy and happy family? Lovely house? Perfect spouse? And you look at your life, and you feel good about life, and you think, 'I am so blessed.'

But when Jesus begins each of these beatitudes with that word, he is not referring, first off, to how you and I see our lives, or feel about our lives, but how God sees them. And to be blessed in Jesus' eyes is to be someone who is standing

under the smile and the approval and the favour of God. So this is something objective, not subjective. It's about how God sees you, rather than how you see the circumstances of your life.

And that matters because, on the surface, in the circumstances of your life, things can be going badly. Stuff can be happening that you would never post on Facebook, or put the hashtag 'blessed' to. But at that same time, in the midst of all that, God could be looking on you as one who is *really* blessed. And we'll say why in a minute.

But simply knowing how God sees you, also has this power to transform how you see life, doesn't it? You see, when you know – and I mean *really* know - that God loves you, that he accepts you, that he looks with favour upon you, that can bring you this deep inner sense of well-being, can't it. Regardless of the circumstances.

You see, there are plenty of things in life that can make your life miserable, but ironically, right high up the list is religion. Because it makes your inner happiness dependent on your performance, or on things that are totally outside of your control: I mean, religion demands of you: is your faith large enough, or your passion strong enough, or your works good enough, or your character pure enough, for God to love you and bless you? For you to feel good about yourself?

But Jesus says there is a state of well-being in God's eyes, that leads to inner well-being in your own life, that has nothing to do with your level of faith or your moral performance. Instead, it's God's gift to those who repent, and turn to Christ, and look to him for life.

But in saying what he says, Jesus turns the world's idea of well-being on its head.

Just look at **the first beatitude**, where Jesus says, v3, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' Now what does it mean to be poor in spirit? Well, think what it means to be poor. It mean that you don't have the minimal financial resources you need. And to be poor in spirit is to know that you don't have the minimal *spiritual* resources you need, that you're spiritually powerless. That when you come to God, you bring nothing to bargain with. Not your moral record, not your spirituality, not your great level of faith, not your nice character, not your good works. The poor in spirit know that before God their bank account is empty. And if being accepted by God was something you had to buy, the spiritually poor know that they have absolutely nothing to buy it with.

Now you might hear that and think 'that's the opposite of being blessed!' I mean which of you when you haven't got money in the bank to pay the bills, have felt good about it? 'Yippee! The account is empty and the credit card has bounced. I am so blessed!' So why would that be the case spiritually? Well, because Jesus says, v3, 'for theirs is the kingdom of God.'

So Jesus says, you can know that you have nothing to bring to God's table spiritually, but know that God looks with favour upon you, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to you, because God has made you a citizen of his kingdom.

You see, just listen to what the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, 'For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, *and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit*." (Is 57:15) And then, "This is the one to whom I will look: *he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word*." (Is 66:2).

So, the kingdom of God does not belong, and God does not dwell among, and he does not look upon with favour, the powerful, the wealthy, the successful, or those with a 'right' racial background or political voting record. The kingdom of God belongs to the poor in spirit – to those who know they only have God's mercy to stand on, and who know that God has been unbelievably generous to them, even though they don't deserve it.

And so, on the one hand, you know you are spiritually poor, but you also know you are fabulously, spiritually wealthy. That on the one hand you have absolutely nothing, but on the other you have absolutely every spiritual blessing in Christ.

And so whilst being confident in yourself, or being self-seeking, or self-righteous, or boasting in yourself will leave you spiritually bankrupt, knowing you *are* spiritually bankrupt, leaves you rich beyond measure. Because in God's kingdom, the last are first and the first are last, and he resists the proud but gives grace to the humble, and if you try and save your life you'll lose it, but in loosing your life that you save it. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', Jesus says, 'for theirs is the kingdom', the upside down kingdom, 'of God.'

That's the first Beatitude. What about **the second**? Verse 4, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.' Now, when you see someone dressed in black, weeping and mourning, do you think, 'they are so blessed!'? No, you pity them.

But Jesus is not, primarily, talking about the loss of a loved one. And he is not saying, 'happy are the unhappy'. Rather, you can realise you're spiritually powerless, but it's all a bit intellectual. You know it in your head, but you don't *feel* it in your heart. But when you do, and you realise the depth of it, and you see your sin, or the brokenness of your life, or others' lives, you don't just regret it, you grieve over it.

Or at least we should. But let me ask you, in your pursuit of the good life, and pleasure and fun, do you mourn over sin and evil? Do you see something of the beauty and holiness and glory of God and something of the ugliness of sin? Do you grieve over injustice? Or lament at events like Orlando, and the state of our world and our hearts that makes such an event possible? You see, Jesus says, those who do, are among those who are truly blessed, because, v4 again, 'they shall be comforted.'

Now, did you notice the change in tense there? The first beatitude talks in the present tense: 'theirs *is* the kingdom of God.' This is true of them *now*. But the next six are all future: 'they *shall* be comforted'. And that tells you two things. First, it reminds us of the 'now' and the 'not yet' of the kingdom. Those who

repent and put their trust in Jesus are made citizens of his kingdom and are adopted into God's family, now. Theirs is the kingdom. But there are some blessings we will only experience in their fullness when Jesus returns and makes everything new.

But secondly, it also reminds us of the guarantee. Those who mourn *will* be comforted. Because that is what Jesus came to do. When he began his ministry, Luke tells us he stood up in the synagogue and read from the scroll of Isaiah. Isaiah 61, 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the broken hearted… to grant to those who mourn in Zion – to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit.' (Is 61:1, 3)

Now, on the surface, you'd think that mourning is a pretty poor pathway to joy, wouldn't you? But when you genuinely lament your sin and a broken world, and at the same time realise that the Son of God has done everything you need; that in him your forgiveness is full and free, and that the day will come when he will put everything right, you'll know the oil of gladness Isaiah speaks about. Because it's having experienced the darkness of the night that makes the sunrise so beautiful. 'Blessed are those who mourn' Jesus says, 'for they shall be comforted.'

But then Jesus tells **the third**: v5, 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.' Now if in our 21st century western societies we were to rate personal character traits, how do you think meekness would score? Self-promotion, self-advancement, flaunting what you have, these are the way of the world, aren't they, not meekness. And yet, even in the Christian world, meekness can be in short supply, can't it? And we can become angry and contentious and puffed up in the self-importance of our theological position. And yet, if you genuinely believe you are saved by grace alone – it should make you the humblest and most gentle person in the room. And the meek don't talk over others, let alone walk over others, even in debates about truth. And they don't push to get what they want, or have their way, or their say.

To be meek means to be gentle, and modest, and humble and quiet in spirit, even whilst you are firm in your convictions. Meekness is not *thinking* you're humble, it's knowing you're not. In James 3, James talks about the meekness of wisdom, and then in v17 he says what that looks like, it's 'first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.'

But being meek isn't just about how you treat others. Martyn Lloyd Jones made the point that being meek has a lot to do with how you respond to how others treat you. For example, you can say you mourn over your sin, but what happens when someone else, like your wife, or your husband, points it out to you? How do you react then? With humility or with pride?

And the battle against pride in our hearts is lifelong, which means that growing in humility and meekness has got to be lifelong as well. And those who understand that, Jesus says, are blessed because, v5 'they shall inherit the earth.'

And when he says that he is quoting from Psalm 37:11, 'But the meek shall inherit the land.' The Promised Land. But what's interesting about Psalm 37 is that it doesn't just mention that once, but multiple times, throughout the psalm, and who will and will not inherit the land. And the point the psalmist makes is it's not going to be the wicked. You see, when we try and push ourselves forward and promote ourselves and assert ourselves, we're trying to gain some advantage aren't we? When we act the opposite of meek, we do so because we want our stock to go up, or we think by doing this we'll reap some reward. But whilst we might achieve some fleeting gain, Jesus says that ultimately we lose. We miss the very thing we are trying to achieve. And it's the meek who will inherit the earth – the ultimate, eternal, Promised Land.

And yet none of us could ever claim to be meek enough could we? Or spiritually poor enough, or care sufficiently about our sin or our world, because the moment you do, you've disqualified yourself. Which is why we need someone else to perfectly meet these kingdom characteristics.

The One who Brings the Blessing

You see, when you look at the Beatitudes, and we'll finish them off next week, you realise that Jesus is the perfect example of every one of them. He is the one who made himself nothing and took the very nature of a servant, who did not think that equality with God was something to grasp. He was the one who could say, learn of me for I am gentle – I am meek – and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. And it was he who mourned over Jerusalem, and wept outside the tomb of Lazarus, and grieved over our sin in Gethsemane. And when falsely accused and reviled and crucified, he forgave.

And he is the ultimate blessed one, the one over whom the Father says, 'this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.' And that's what it means to be blessed. And it's as you come to him, and are united in faith with him, that God speaks those same words over you: 'This is my beloved son, my beloved daughter with whom I am well pleased.' And it's in being united with Jesus that you can know God's blessing: not the passing blessing of money, or fame, or position, or great holidays, but the real, lasting, never fading blessing of God delighting in you, and rejoicing and singing over you. That in Jesus, God's smile is turned toward you. That is what it means to be blessed: and the kingdom and the comfort and the earth come with it.

And how does it all happen? Well, Paul tells us in Galatians 2:20: 'The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave himself for *me*.' And because he loves you, by his death and resurrection, Christ has opened the gateway into this land of blessing for you. And it's as you live by faith in him, allowing him to change you ever more into his likeness, that you will grow in your knowledge of just how poor and yet how rich, how broken, and yet how loved, how humbled and yet how exalted you really are.