

Matthew 5

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Preacher: Fergus MacDonald

- [0 : 00] I'd like you now to turn again to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5 and page 968 of the Bible, reading at the beginning.
- Now when he, that is Jesus, saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him and he began to teach them.
- I'm sure some of you may have heard in a series of broadcasts on Radio 4, BBC Radio 4, just before Christmas, John Humphreys interviewing a number of people about God.
- He, although he still remains at least an agnostic, if not an atheist, he was very impressed by the volume of mail that he received from believing people throughout this country.
- And he wrote yesterday in the Daily Telegraph a two-page feature, which is entitled The Return of God? Question Mark, in which he reflects on the fact that he thinks something is happening spiritually in this country.
- [1 : 21] And in fact he quotes some intellectuals as believing that what is happening today, a resurgence of interest in religion, could be as significant as the conversion of Constantine in the early centuries.
- Now, that be as it may, it's interesting that John Humphreys has identified that something is stirring across the face of our nation.
- And so he asks whether religion, is religion in this country staging a comeback? He's currently writing a book, he tells us, the title of which will be In God We Doubt.
- So what's happening? Well, I think that two basic things are happening. One is that the materialism, the whole question of living according to material things, is terminally ill in this country and throughout the Western world.
- This view that regards the only reality as that which you can see and touch, the only reality as that which science can investigate, and those things that can be rationally proved beyond question.
- [2 : 47] From such a reality, God is excluded. We're witnessing today the breakdown of that philosophy which has influenced our thinking in this country and throughout Western Europe and probably to a lesser extent in the United States of America for the last hundred years.
- Alongside this, we're finding a resurgence of interest in spirituality. It's cool to be interested in spirituality today. Now much of this interest is focused on things like yoga, on neo-paganism, and this reflects a wider significant shift in the way that people think, which is sometimes described as a subjective turn that is taking place.
- People are looking into their own experience more. People are searching for answers which science and materialism cannot provide, however important science and material things may be in the order of creation.
- People are searching for spiritual answers. Now the fact that many of them are looking in yoga and in resurgence of Celtic paganism and North paganism and so on indicates that to a large extent this search is so far focused in the self and it's not focused in a transcendent other who is above and beyond us.

It is not focused on God. Many people who are thus searching are not coming to church. They're going elsewhere. They're looking elsewhere. But they're looking for a spiritual meaning.

[4 : 31] They're looking for a spiritual thread for their lives. And we're seeing illustrated before our eyes in this development the truth of what the writer of Ecclesiastes says when he declares that God has placed eternity in our hearts.

And there is this eternal dimension, the spiritual dimension in everyone that materialism cannot satisfy. Now this is a great opportunity for us today.

It is an opportunity that is out there. It is not an opportunity that will come to us. It's an opportunity we must go out and grasp. It's an opportunity but it will also involve conflict because we are living today at a particular juncture in the history of the Western world where there is a tremendous struggle going on.

There's a great deal of antagonism being expressed towards Christianity. And it may be that the powers of darkness are anticipating that there may well be a resurgence of religion, of true religion.

And in order to try to thwart this there is this sort of massive attack upon biblical Christianity.

[5 : 55] John Humphreys, in his article which was published yesterday and which I had the good fortune of reading on the train coming up last night says that he attended a meeting in Central Halls in Westminster either last week or the week before.

And one of the speakers there was an American philosopher called William Lane Craig. Some of you may have heard of him. I have to confess that I haven't. And he had an interview.

John Humphreys had an interview with Craig in Humphreys' own kitchen. So obviously he had invited him to his home. And Humphreys himself gives the impression sometimes that he is searching and that he is part of this spiritual resurgence that he is identifying.

Who knows? We pray that he may be. But he quotes William Craig as saying to him The average Christian does not realise that there is an intellectual war going on in the universities and in the professional journals and scholarly societies.

Christianity is being attacked from all sides as irrational or outmoded. And millions of students or a future generation of leaders have absorbed this viewpoint. This is a war we cannot afford to lose.

[7 : 13] And Craig goes on to tell Humphreys that he fears that churches are filled with Christians who are idling in intellectual neutral.

I like that phrase. Idling in intellectual neutral. As Christians he says their minds are going to waste. Their minds are active in their work.

Their secular work. But when they come to church their minds somehow or other atrophy. And he said their Christian minds are going to waste. And he says if ordinary Christians do not become intellectually engaged we are in danger of losing the next generation.

Now that I think is a very helpful background to the relevance of the Sermon on the Mount. Because the Sermon on the Mount really illustrates to us what it means to be a disciple.

And what William Craig was saying to John Humphreys is that as Christians we've got to become disciples again. We've got to take our faith much more seriously than we do. We've got to grapple with the issues both in the scriptures and in the world and in society in which we live.

[8 : 29] and seek to become witnesses for Jesus Christ who are able to articulate our faith in relation to these particular issues that are concerning so many people today.

And so here in this sermon we have a message which is intensely relevant to us today. If we're going to get out of idling in intellectual neutral as William Craig says back into discipleship then this message the message of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is of crucial importance.

This is where we must begin. This is a summary of the teaching that Jesus gave to his disciples. This is what it means to grapple with the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So for a few moments this morning I would like us to look at some aspects of this sermon. But first of all I would like to emphasize the authority of the preacher here.

The preacher of this sermon speaks with a unique authority. Notice that we read in the opening verse that he sat down. He went up to the mountainside and he sat down.

[9 : 42] And when a rabbi sat down he taught or he taught when he sat down or when he taught he sat down. a rabbi spoke authoritatively when he was seated.

And so the reference the fact that Matthew tells us that Jesus sat down is significant. What Matthew is saying here this what follows here is really important. This is if you like in summary the core of the message of Jesus.

And so we see the authority he speaks with authority. We also read that he began to teach them. Literally he opened his mouth.

William Barclay who was a New Testament scholar in Glasgow in the second part of the last century has said that this phrase which is omitted in most modern translations is in fact very significant.

It's more than decorative he said. In the Greek he said his use of a solemn grave and dignified utterance was used when someone was opening his heart and pouring out his mind to them.

[10 : 54] It was the phase for the great occasion. And this would suggest that what we have here is the core curriculum if you like of our discipleship.

And again the authority of the preacher is emphasized by the fact that Jesus went up on a mountainside. and this was not simply done as an advantage to give him some height so that he might be seen.

This was symbolically very important because he's here as it were becoming or demonstrating that he is the prophet of whom Moses spoke.

Moses you remember received the commandments of God on Mount Sinai. And Moses spoke of another prophet who would arise. And Jesus is here again in the mountain and he is presenting his teaching to us here.

In fact Matthew underlines this point by bringing the teaching of Jesus into five different blocks of teaching in his gospel. And many people think that resonates with the five books of Moses in the Old Testament to underline that Jesus is that prophet, Jesus is the great teacher who would come that Moses anticipated.

[12 : 25] And so what we have here is a presentation of a preacher who is a unique authority who speaks like no other preacher, who is someone who literally comes from God and who speaks with a unique authority.

And further down in the gospel in this verse we read of Jesus contrasting the teaching of the scribes and of the Pharisees with his own teaching. He said they say that I say.

They say that I say. He's emphasizing his unique authority. And right at the beginning of our discipleship we're going to get out of intellectual neutral then we have to recognize that this involves committing ourselves to Jesus Christ.

He has a unique claim upon our lives. He is the Son of God who has come to us in his mercy and in his grace and he demands of us a surrender a submission that is total and that is complete.

But then secondly we notice not the authority of the preacher but the centrality of the message here. This message is a message of the kingdom of heaven.

[13 : 41] If we look at the verses which are called the Beatitudes from verse 3 to the end of verse Mark 10 these verses are in an envelope as it were.

Put in an envelope by the phrase the kingdom of heaven. It comes in verse 3, it comes again in verse 10. and this emphasizes I think that what Jesus is expressing here are the values of the kingdom of heaven.

But his main message was in fact the kingdom of heaven. And the kingdom of heaven in the teaching of Jesus is not something geographical, it is not something territorial, it is rather something spiritual.

It is the kingship of God. It may be more helpfully translated. It is his kingship, his sovereignty in creation, his sovereignty in history, his sovereignty in salvation.

He is sovereign, he is the king. And that is the core message of Jesus. That's what he is emphasizing here.

[14 : 52] His message is the kingdom of God. The previous chapter, verse 17, Matthew describes the beginning of Jesus' public teaching ministry in these words, From that time, Jesus began to preach his message, Turn away from your sins, because the kingdom of heaven is near.

Now Matthew uses the phrase the kingdom of heaven, while Mark and Luke use the phrase the kingdom of God. They basically mean the same thing. What we have here then, are the values of the kingship of God.

And if we're going to be disciples, if we're going to get out of idling into intellectual neutral, then we have to recognize that this involves acknowledging his kingship, not simply in my life, not simply in my interiority, but in the whole of life.

So there's no area of life, there's no area of my existence, there's no area of our culture of which Jesus Christ does not claim to be Lord. He is Lord of all.

He's not simply Lord on Sunday, he's Lord on Monday, Monday to Saturday as well. He's not simply Lord in churches, Lord in the factories, Lord in the offices, Lord in the sports stadium. He is the Lord of all.

[16 : 16] The kingship of God. The kingdom of God has come in the Lord Jesus Christ and we are called to acknowledge that. We are called to affirm that and we are called, as we shall see in a moment, to demonstrate that.

And so what we are given here are the core values of the kingdom of God. But first of all, before we can exhibit these core values, then we must be willing to live in submission to God.

He is our king. He is the great king king, as we have it put in the Psalms and some of the prophets in the Old Testament. The phrase the great king was borrowed from the great empires of the ancient world in the ancient Near East, the great emperor of Babylon, the great emperor of Assyria.

But the prophets and the Psalms say God is the great king, not simply of Babylon, not simply of Israel, but of the whole earth, of the heavens and the earth. He is the one who holds the whole world in his hands.

And it's so crucial, it's so important that that is our world view. And that we recognize that the world in which we live is a world which has been created, is being sustained by God, and a world in which his sovereignty is being worked out.

[17 : 36] Although often it is incognito, often we cannot see it. It's like, as I've said to you before, it's like the seed in the parable, the short parable of the seed growing secretly.

It's growing underground, we cannot see it, but it's growing. It's there. And we're called to affirm it by faith. And that kinship will one day be demonstrated for all to see at the end of history and at the beginning of the new order in the kingdom of God.

And so the kingdom of God has come, and yet it has not fully come. That's the focus again and again in the gospels. It has come, but it is still coming. And that's what we have to affirm by faith, the comingness of the kingdom.

It has come, but it is still coming, even if at times we cannot see it. We live by faith believing that it is coming, that God is operating incognito in our world, often incognito at least, in our world.

That's what we're called upon to affirm, if we're going to make an impact upon our generation. And so we have here the authority of the preacher, we have the centrality of the message, the kingship, the kingdom of the kingship of God, but thirdly we have the activity of the audience.

[18 : 56] Jesus, when he told, when he preached, didn't expect his audience, his congregation, to be simply sitting back passively.

Jesus anticipated an active audience that would be either following what he was saying or rebelling against it. Apathy was simply not an option.

And so each time we hear the message of the gospel, we are called to be participants. So often it's easy for us to think of coming to church as going to watch a football match, which there's just a few people playing and the rest of the people are spectating.

And it's so easy for us, when we come to worship God, to think of ourselves in a spectator role. But that's not the pattern that Jesus sets for us. Jesus calls us to follow him.

key verb in the gospels to describe discipleship are those who follow, are those who are active in demonstrating the kingdom of God.

[20 : 06] Ian Hunter, who was a professor in this university in Aberdeen for a number of years in the last century, wrote a little book about the Sermon on the Mount.

He called it Design for Life. And that's precisely what Jesus has given to us. He's given us design, for life. His design, God's design for life.

And so he's calling us to live our lives according to this lifestyle that is being demonstrated here to us. We are to exhibit God's kingship in our lives individually and corporately.

And the details of how we are to do this are found in this sermon. We just might look very briefly at the Beatitudes themselves. These Beatitudes encapsulate the values of the kingdom of God.

I like the way that the contemporary English version translates the Beatitudes. It translates the introductory phrase as God blesses people who are poor in the spirit. God blesses people who mourn.

[21 : 13] And it's more active. and it describes the fact that Jesus is calling upon us to be poor in spirit.

He's calling upon us to mourn. He's calling upon us to be meek. Not simply to nod our heads and to assent to what he is saying. So we are called to exhibit the values of the kingdom of God.

To express and to exhibit that poverty of spirit which acknowledges that we are sinners. Which acknowledges that we are weak. Which acknowledges that we need God.

And that we in and of ourselves have no hope. We're called to mourn. To mourn for our sins. To mourn for the state of injustice.

To mourn for those who are suffering in the world today. We're called upon to be concerned and to be active. Trying to alleviate misery famine and hunger and injustice around the world.

[22 : 19] Not to sit back smugly and self-satisfied but to mourn for those who suffer. To mourn for those who die prematurely. To be involved as God's agents for good in this fractured world in which we live.

We're called upon to be meek and to recognize that the most important thing in life is not always to win. To recognize that self can become a tyrant.

To recognize that we're called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. And to demonstrate the meekness of the kingdom of God. We're called upon to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

righteousness. To have a real hungry appetite. To have that sense of being starving for the values of the kingdom of God.

When we open God's word to have that sense of, you know, that if we've done without a meal for a couple of days, we're absolutely ravenous. Do we have that spiritual sense when we come to God's word or we come to church or we come to pray with others or by ourselves?

[23 : 39] To know that deep spiritual hunger, to know God in depth, to enter into communion with God in all its fullness, rather than simply to be paddling on the edge of a vast ocean, but to be able to go out into the great depths of God's grace and of God's mercy and our Christian experience.

We're called upon to be merciful, to demonstrate mercy. in a world. We're living in a society where people are claiming this and claiming that and claiming their rights.

We're called upon to be merciful to others, not necessarily always to claim our rights, but to demonstrate the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who although he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor.

We're called upon to be pure in heart. to ask God to purify us, to cleanse us, to make us holy, to have that sense of purity and of holiness that he alone can impart, which will enable us to enter into the depth of his presence through the Lord Jesus Christ.

We're called upon to be peacemakers, living in a world in which there which there is no peace. I think it was the last time I was here, I told you the story of Bishop Diniz Sangolani, the Anglican bishop in Mozambique, who quoted this verse to the leader of the Renamo guerrilla movement in Mozambique, and that stopped the war in Mozambique.

[25 : 21] He said, blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God. And the leader of the Renamo movement turned round when Bishop Sangolani spoke these words to him and back to the conference table and peace was secured.

We're called upon to be peacemakers, not to be stirers up of conflict, but to make peace, to help bring peace to our fractured world.

We're called upon to be peacemakers in the world in which we live. And we're even called upon to know the blessings and happiness of being persecuted because of righteousness.

And who knows, it may be that we may face that kind of persecution. It's not beyond the realm of possibility.

Many Christians are in the world today. They're facing persecution. And we need to express our solidarity with them and be willing to suffer with them if that is what the Lord's will for us is.

[26 : 24] And so we're called to exhibit God's kinship in our lives, by demonstrating these values. Now, that's just a very brief summary of the Beatitudes.

There's a tremendous amount that can still be found there. And there's the whole of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, all the rest that we've got in the four Gospels, what we've got in the epistles, we've got in the whole of the Bible.

There we have the values of God's kingdom. And we're called upon to exhibit these values in our lives, to be active. This is the activity that God calls us to, to be living, walking, breathing exhibits of the kingdom of God.

And in this way, we will extend the kingdom of God. I wonder, do we have a vision of extending the kingdom of God? I remember some years ago when I was visiting China and I was working with the United Bible Societies, meeting the Bishop of Shanghai, a man who'd been 23 years in prison for his faith, a man who was, he was an old man, he was very bold.

He could say anything, because he couldn't do worse to him than they'd done already. And I remember just before that, Madeleine Albright, the American Secretary of State, had been visiting China, and she insisted on having a meeting with the religious leaders, and she asked them, have any of you got any complaints?

[27 : 57] And not one said wondered, except Bishop Jin. And he spoke up, because he knew that whatever the authorities could do to him, they could not do worse than they'd done before.

And he said to me over a meal, he said, I want the whole of China to come to a knowledge of the Father. that was his vision.

And that was at a time when, at least ten years ago, when China was more difficult than it is today. That was his vision. He said, I want the whole of China to come to a knowledge of the Father.

I wonder, is that our vision for Scotland? Is our vision that God's kingship might be acknowledged in our land, and throughout the whole of the European Union?

God is calling upon us not only to be exhibitors of the values of the kingdom, but to be extenders of that kingdom. May God grant that we may respond to this sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, that we may get out of idling and intellectual neutral, and that we may become the doers of the word of God, the exhibitors of the kingdom, and the extenders of it too.

[29 : 16] Let's pray together. Our Heavenly Father, we come before you to thank you for the relevance of the message of Jesus. We thank you that it has so much to say to us today.

And we ask, O God, that we may, as we reflect again upon that message, not simply nod our head, but may we make a commitment, may we renew our commitment, may we give ourselves afresh to see the kingdom of God, of helping the kingdom of God to come.

We bless and we praise you that it has come in Jesus, and that it is still coming in a fuller sense. Help us, O Lord, to be helpers, to be facilitators of the coming of that kingdom, as you may use us and glorify your name through us, and help us, our Heavenly Father, to submit our lives, perhaps for the first time, or for many a time, to commit our lives afresh to him today, so that we may acknowledge that he is our Lord, and that you are our king, and that we are your people.

Amen. Amen.