

If I were to ask you why God the Son, Jesus, took on flesh and blood, how would you respond? What would you say? Undoubtedly, because we are a Protestant, Evangelical church, many among us might say something like, “*Jesus was born to die. At His birth He was placed in a cradle, at His death He was nailed to a cross. Jesus was born to die.*”

And if I pressed you a little further and asked you to define the “gospel”--the good news of Jesus Christ--I suspect many of us might say something like: “*Jesus took on our flesh and blood, He died on the cross for the sin of the world, and everyone who receives His forgiveness will go to heaven when they die.*”

I want to draw your attention to both answers and make one single observation: *these answers have more to do with death than life.* Please don't misunderstand me, Jesus' death and resurrection is central to the New Testament--knowing why Jesus died is of utmost importance. But, but, it's only part of the story--isn't it also important to know *why* Jesus lived? To know *how* He lived? To know *who* He was living for?

If Jesus was simply born so that He could die, then the 33 years between cradle and cross don't matter very much--it's interesting but unnecessary, it's filler, it's fodder, and the same could be said of our own lives. To use the language of John 3, if being born again (spiritually reborn) is primarily about securing our ticket to heaven, you would think that God would send the shuttle bus the moment we became a Christian.

Dallas Willard once joked that Christians are like vampires--they only want Jesus for His blood.¹ Saying that Jesus was born to die might make for a good bumper sticker, but it's lousy instruction for living. Jesus' death tells us something important about dying; Jesus' life tells us something important about living.

For the last five weeks, we've been talking about Jesus' *Sermon*. His *Sermon* is about life. It's about God's life. It's about aligning our lives with the life of heaven. Jesus had a particular way of speaking about this kind of life; He referred to it as the kingdom of God.

In Mark 1:15, Jesus said, “*The time has come...The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the **good news!***” In other words, “*God is King, can't you see that He's ready to lead? So put on the brakes! Reverse your direction! Come and follow Him towards life.*”

As I begin this morning, I want to take a minute to summarize where we've been since we opened Jesus' *Sermon*. In Matthew 5:3-12, Jesus blessed certain character qualities, *kingdom-character-qualities*. These qualities aren't entrance requirements, in fact, they're not even natural human qualities--as we follow Jesus, our life takes on His shape, and His character qualities are birthed within us.

And as Pastor Keith explained last week, Jesus intends for His followers to have an influence wherever they live. Those who are meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the pure in heart, the merciful, the one who pursues peace-making--they will be salt and light in our world.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life In God*, 403.

Think about where the world would be without salt--a preserving agent--or without the Sun--a light that brings life. A city devoid of Jesus is a city moving towards decay; a city devoid of Jesus is a city moving towards darkness. Your life matters to both Jesus and to the North Shore. “Remember,” says Jesus, “*you have a role in this city--you are both salt and light.*”

When our city stumbles around us, rather than asking “*what’s wrong with the world?*,” we need to be asking, “*where can we be salt and light?*”

This morning we’re going to turn our attention to the next section of Jesus’ *Sermon*; let me encourage you to open your Bible with me to Matthew 5:17-20--you can follow along as I read.

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

One author refers to this passage as the “theological hinge” in Jesus’ *Sermon*.² If the beatitudes describe kingdom-*character*, and Jesus’

salt and light metaphors describe kingdom-*influence*, then our passage this morning prepares us for what will pervade the rest of Jesus’ *Sermon*: kingdom-*behaviour*.

And while these 4 verses act as a important theological hinge, they are the most difficult words to understand in Jesus’ entire *Sermon*. So here’s what I’m going to do: I’m going to walk through verses 17-20 and explain what Jesus says; then, I’ll get to the **application** in verse 20.

What does Jesus say?

So what does Jesus say? Vs. 17, “*I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*”

It’s important to recognize that Jesus considered the life He lived just as important as the death He died. Yes, the cross is necessary for salvation--sin and death could not be defeated apart from Jesus’ death and resurrection--but Jesus saw the life He lived as a necessary part of the Law and the Prophets being fulfilled.

The question is, what did Jesus mean by “*the Law and the Prophets?*,” and how did He fulfill them?

Quite simply, when Jesus used this phrase, “the Law and the Prophets,” He was referring to the entire Old Testament. But what Jesus said about fulfilling the Law and the Prophets was either extraordinary or ridiculous--either earth-shattering or utterly unfounded.

² Darrell Johnson, *The Sermon On The Mount* (class at Regent College), 18.

Up until this point in the *Sermon*, Jesus' words have been externally focussed, pointing away from Himself to the Father: the pure in heart will see *God*, the peace-makers will be called children of *God*, as the world sees our good deeds they will praise our *Father in heaven*. But now comes a radical shift--Jesus becomes the subject of His own *Sermon*. "*I haven't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them.*"

If you were to ask any ancient Jew, they would tell you that the Old Testament was much more than a loose collection of personal stories, prayers, history, and law. They would tell you that the Scriptures contain the personal revelation of God--who He is, what He's like, and what He's done. They would tell you that the Scriptures offer wisdom and direction for life.

And they wouldn't neglect to tell you that the Scriptures promise that one day God will rescue His people, He will come in strength, in love, and He will make right all that is wrong with the world.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of this day saying, "*Be strong, do not fear; your God will come...he will come to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert...those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will*

overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."³ It sounds amazing doesn't it?

The prophet Isaiah is pointing to a future, this-worldly-reality, that can only be described as "heavenly." What Jesus tells us is that He doesn't have any intention of *abolishing* what God has promised to do. Instead, Jesus steps up to the microphone and says, "*Humanity's deepest hopes and longings, all of God's promises, point towards Me--they've been waiting for My arrival. And now that I'm here, fulfillment is coming.*"

Understood in this light, verses 18 and 19 make a lot more sense. On the one hand, the Old Testament Scripture is forever, every word, every letter is permanent, right down to the dot on the top of an 'i'. But on the other hand, since Jesus is the fulfillment of these Scriptures, every word, every letter, every dot on the top of an "i," must be understood in the light of His coming.⁴

Who is the one who will be called *great* in the kingdom? Who is the one who will be called *least* in the kingdom? The one to be called *great*, is the one who will keep the law "as it is now interpreted by Jesus".⁵ The one who will be called *least* is the one who will ignore Jesus' instructions.

In just a few moments, I'm going to get to the application in vs. 20, but first, I want to draw your attention to the last line of verse 20.

³ Isaiah 35:4-6, 10.

⁴ R.T. France, *The New International Commentary Of The New Testament: The Gospel Of Matthew*, 186.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

Jesus said, *“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

The *“kingdom of heaven”* is a curious phrase isn’t it? The question is, what does it refer to? What does Jesus mean? Is Jesus referring to the place Christians go when they die? Is He talking about heaven?

When you are reading the Scriptures and come across something you don’t understand, our first impulse should be to stop and read it again. If our second reading doesn’t bring clarity, we then widen our focus to the surrounding context. What we find is that Jesus has already used this phrase, *“the kingdom of heaven,”* twice, in the preceding 16 verses.

Take a look at Matthew 5:3, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* Now take a look at Matthew 5:10, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* We’ve already been over this ground, but let me ask again: in these beatitudes, is Jesus describing heavenly entrance requirements? No, He’s not describing heaven at all, He’s describing kingdom-character-qualities.

As you read through Matthew’s historical record, what you’ll find is that Jesus uses the terms *“kingdom of God”* and *“kingdom of heaven”* interchangeably. The kingdom of God is less of a place and more of a lived reality, the kingdom exists wherever (and in whomever) God is honoured and followed as King.

My dear people, listen closely because I am about to say something really important, something I don’t want any of you to miss. Christianity isn’t primarily about eternal life, it’s about life with God, and that life begins now. In vs. 20, Jesus isn’t talking about how to get into heaven; He’s not talking about who’s in and who’s out.

The first 4 or 5 times I read vs. 20, all I could see was the warning, but the more I read it the more I began to see Jesus’ promise. The kingdom of heaven is both a present and a future reality--we enter into this kingdom, we participate in it, as we align our life with God’s life, as we say “yes” to His will and His way. What Jesus is saying is that there is a quality of life that we can enter into right now, if we would only turn to Him, surrender to Him, follow Him, and obey Him.

Do you know this quality of life? What’s holding you back? Will you turn, surrender, follow, and obey? Let’s get to the application.

Application

As I began my sermon I said that knowing why Jesus died is of utmost importance, but, it’s only part of the story. It’s also important to know *why* Jesus lived, to know *how* He lived, to know *who* He was living for. It’s important because the life of Jesus is the pattern for our living.

Dallas Willard points out how strange it is to trust Jesus with our eternal destiny, but to ignore His instruction about life in the here and

now.⁶ Jesus' *Sermon* is about life. It's about God's life. It's about aligning our lives with the life of heaven here and now.

Jesus took on our flesh and blood, entering into our human story. When we look at Jesus we see God's intention for humanity, we see what it means to be made in the image of God. In Jesus we see the fullness of kingdom-character-qualities, the fullness of kingdom influence, the fullness of kingdom-behaviour. Jesus is the One to whom the entire Scriptures point--all of God's plans, purposes, and promises are fulfilled in Him--and for this reason, we can trust Him on how to live in the here and now.

In one important sense, the kingdom of God is an invisible kingdom, marked out by invisible boundaries, and ruled by an invisible King. But in another important sense, the kingdom of God is plain for all to see because *kingdom-character* is revealed by **kingdom-behaviour**; *kingdom-influence* is extended through **kingdom-behaviour**.

illus: I wonder, is there any more immediate measurement than our own behaviour? Some of the things we say or do may well be "out of character," but once we speak or act, our behaviour is there for all to see.

Last Spring, I was running through one of the local trails close to my house; it was a beautiful afternoon and the trail I was on was being shared by people and dogs alike. As I was running down the trail, I saw two people and two dogs coming towards me--the two dogs were small, but both were off leash. I have learned through many, many such encounters that no matter how much an owner assures me

that their dog is "friendly," the wise runner will slow to a walk, allow the dog to sniff their hand and lose interest, before getting back to running.

And so I slowed to a walk, said "hello" to the owner, allowing her dogs to sniff my hand. As soon as her dogs lost interest in me, they continued in the opposite direction, and I picked up the pace and continued my run. You can imagine my surprise, just moments later, when one of her dogs caught up, jumped up, and sunk its teeth into my thigh.

The owner began to yell at her dog, but it wasn't until I threatened to give the dog a good, swift, kick that it began to back away. The owner rushed toward me, repeatedly assuring me that her dog "never bites"--well, "never" is a strong word, and teeth marks don't lie.

I don't know about you, but I would much rather have people measure my intentions instead of measuring my behaviour. *But I didn't mean to injure my opponent, when I tripped him in frustration. But I didn't mean to diminish you, when I made a joke at your expense. But I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, when I talked behind your back.* And of course, no one ever drinks and drives, hoping to slam into an unsuspecting family.

Our behaviour matters, our words matter, the way we live matters. But as we shall see in the weeks ahead, Jesus has more in mind than external behaviour--He's seeking to bring both our internal attitudes and external behaviour into alignment with the life of God.

⁶ Willard, 49.

“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter into the fullness of kingdom living.”

The Pharisees took obedience seriously, they knew every law off by heart, and took pride in making up new laws and keeping those ones too. Everyone saw them as the holiest people around; everyone that is but Jesus. Jesus knew that right behaviour doesn't always equal a right relationship with God.

Do you remember what Pastor Keith taught us a few weeks ago? He talked about the word “righteousness,” and while it does communicate a sense of “right” and “wrong,” it's also a relational word. The one who is “righteous” is the one who is rightly related to God, self, and others.

Over the next six weeks, we will be looking closely at Jesus' understanding of kingdom-behaviour; we'll discover that Jesus looks beyond our behaviour to see what lies in the heart.

We may not murder, but is there hate in our heart towards others? We may not sleep around, but are we fueling the fires of lust? Are we committing adultery in our hearts? We may not seek revenge, but do we pray for God's blessing on our enemies?

When I was younger, I saw Jesus' *Sermon* as a challenge to be accomplished; I see it very differently today. I know that I am not strong enough, pure enough, or faithful enough to live Jesus' *Sermon* on my own, in fact, Jesus is the only person who has ever lived up to the full measure of His own words.

And yet, I continue to hear Jesus' invitation to align my life with the kingdom of God. I continue to hear Him promise that He will be with me, that He will live in me, and that with His provision, His *Sermon* will live again in me, in you, in our city.

The kingdom of heaven is all around us; it belongs to those who recognize that they need God--utterly and completely. We enter into the fullness of kingdom living when we come humbly, asking for, and expecting to receive, God's grace and mercy. When we turn to God, knowing that He is strong, kind, and loving, we will find what we need for the life we've been called to live.

Pray

The Lord's Supper

As we come to the Lord's Supper this morning, we remember why Jesus lived and we remember why Jesus died--both are necessary to our life and salvation.

The Bible describes Adam and Eve as the father and mother of humanity. God created them to live in right relationship with Himself, their self, one another, and all of creation, but only three chapters into the story, we see our father and mother rebel against God--their rebellion brought sin and death into the world.

But God was not content to allow sin and death to reign and so He sent His Son, Jesus, to take on our flesh and blood and enter into our human story. In Romans 5, the Apostle Paul refers to Jesus as the 2nd Adam. Why the 2nd Adam? Because Jesus succeeded where the 1st

Adam failed. Adam disobeyed God and brought death, but Jesus obeyed God perfectly and in doing so brought life.

The death Jesus died on the cross, He died for us, with us, instead of us--our death became His so that His life could become ours.⁷ If, by faith, you have invited Jesus to forgive your sins and lead your life, then you have been united to Him, and the Scriptures tell us that everything that is Christ's has become yours. Grace. Mercy. Righteousness. Peace. Joy. Healing. All that we need is found in Christ alone.

If you are here today, and you are burdened by cares and worries, I invite you to come to the table and find your rest in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you are here today, burdened by a weight of sin, come to the table and meet Jesus; He is merciful, gracious, and forgiving. Confess your sin and receive His pardon.

If you are here today and you are hungry and thirsty for right, true, deep relationship with God, then come to the table and receive the love and life that only He provides.

*“The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” **25** In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”*

***26** For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”*

At this time I'd like to invite the servers to come and take their place.

⁷ Scott McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 107.