

## Prelude—Going Up the Mountain

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:”

Matthew 5:1-2



Photo by Wesley T. Allen

As this is a study on meditative fiction writing, one might expect the scriptural focus to be on *stories*. So why is this study focused on Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount? For two reasons.

First, it’s because Jesus’ teaching discourses are the most *direct* ways to communicate Scripture through a photograph. A narrative about people going up and down mountains can be difficult to express in one image, but “Blessed are those who mourn” is rather pointed.

Second, the “Sermon on the Mount” is one of the major ways the Gospel

of Matthew places Jesus against the wider backdrop of the Bible. Jesus was doing some pretty interesting things, and folks wanted to see what this man was about.

When he saw the crowds, however, Jesus actually drew *away* from them and headed up what Matthew calls a “mountain.”

It probably wasn't an actual “mountain.” Rather, the land in Northern Galilee, which is the setting for Jesus' teaching, was extremely hilly. It rose sharply from the Sea of Galilee and created a nice natural amphitheater—but there's no specific *mountain* which he ascended to teach.

So if that's the case, why did Matthew go out of his way to call this a “mountain?” This is how Matthew places Jesus inside the Biblical story. He uses an image which ties Jesus to *Moses*. In many ways, in fact, Matthew wants his readers to understand Jesus is like a *new* Moses.

The opening chapters of Matthew, right through the Sermon on the Mount, re-tells Israel's story with Jesus taking on the identities of both Israel as a whole, and Moses in particular. Jesus came up out of Egypt, just like Israel did. Moses led the twelve tribes of Israel, Jesus guides his twelve main disciples in his ways. Moses performed great miracles which overwhelmed the spiritual forces opposed to God, Jesus does likewise through miraculous signs. Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years and was repeatedly tempted to turn back to Egypt—after his baptism Jesus wandered in the desert for 40 days and was tempted by Satan.

The key link between Moses and Jesus, however, might be in Jesus' teaching discourses. The first five books of the Bible are frequently called “the books of Moses.” And there five times in Matthew when Jesus is depicted spending significant time teaching. The first of these, the Sermon on the Mount, forms the basis of this study. And Matthew points out that

Jesus, much as Moses did when he went up a mountain and brought down the Ten Commandments, went up a mountain to make his pronouncements about what God wants from his people.

After Jesus went up he sat down. Sitting was the normal posture for teaching in Jesus' day, so when one's rabbi sat it signaled to his disciples to gather near to hear what he was about to say. And this is what it shows in Matthew five. When they saw their master sit on the mountain his disciples came to him and gathered close enough to hear his voice.

That's what this study is meant to do. As we pair Jesus' teaching to both the visual imagery of photography and our own imaginations we are drawing close to Jesus. Paying attention to his message in a way we may have never experienced.

I hope the journey is profound.

## Week 1 – Standing Low

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matthew 5:3-4



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In our world strength is seen as a *virtue*, but the opening line of Jesus' sermon reveals this "virtue" to be nothing but a lie.

In Jesus' day Rome was the biggest and baddest bully on the block, and the best way to make sure you didn't struggle under the weight of Rome's incredible strength was to be as close to its power as possible. Rome, in fact, went out of its way to celebrate its might—and not without reason! Rome created roads throughout the Mediterranean world, and expanded both security and trade to levels previously unheard of. Traveling *was* still

dangerous, and banditry abounded, but Rome had reduced it significantly—which led to an explosion of movement. So confident of the benefits and virtues of its strength, the Roman Empire actually built monuments to the salvation they brought to the regions they conquered.

Things are much the same today. We have, in our culture, the opinion **strength** is the way to experience blessing. This is not only true at the level of nations, but also in our personal lives. In American society presenting ourselves as being “all together” is an absolute necessity, and may even be considered a moral imperative—and to be “all together” one has to be *strong*.

Unfortunately, this attitude has serious consequences. It’s been harmful to soldiers returning from war because a number of men and women have hidden their suffering from PTSD because warrior culture shames those who have been broken. For a similar reason it’s why many police, and other first responders, never seek counseling for their own emotional struggles. “Warriors” don’t break, they are strong so they persevere. It’s also why so many addicts never seek the help they need—being “weak” is something to be ashamed of.

But this is a lie. The reality is a preoccupation with strength is *not* a virtue. It wasn’t back in Jesus’ day, nor is it now. The preoccupation may actually be a sign of deep psychological issues—exemplified so well in the way our political discourse has travelled over my lifetime. Our culture is sick from this desire to *appear* strong.

But then there’s Jesus, who declares those who are in a *weak* position are the ones who are blessed. With those words Jesus expresses a new ethic—The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the “poor in spirit.” This refers to someone who assumes a posture of humility before God. A person who is “poor in spirit” considers God’s will as an intimate aspect of their life. They

do this not because they have strength to *impress* God, but because they know they do not. Such people will live lives marked by a posture in which they recognize their own weakness.

This posture of recognized weakness is highlighted in the very next beatitude when Jesus says those who mourn will be comforted.

People in mourning find themselves at one the weakest moments of human life. Grief is the maelstrom which forces us to remember this life will come to an inevitable end. But our culture, enamored with strength and fearful of weakness, doesn't know how to respond to death. When planning a funeral service the most common refrain I hear from people who are asked to speak is, "But I'm afraid I'll cry." People are embarrassed by this because it betrays *weakness*. Public weeping exposes how, in the depth of sorrow, we do *not* have it all together. My response to this worry is always the same, "It's a funeral, there *should* be tears. And the only thing people will say if someone cries at the podium is, 'What a beautiful service.'"

It's only as we reveal our weakness in grief that we can receive comfort—not only from our neighbors, many of whom will see our pain and respond, but also from the Lord of all Creation. God sees our anguish and washes over us with a comfort which helps us come to grips with the pain of our grief.

So Jesus blesses those who both assume a posture of weakness and those who have weakness thrust upon them through grief. When we embrace this blessing something wonderful happens. Our weakness can become a gift to our world.

Why? Because embracing weakness demonstrates to the world a better way to live. A way in which comfort and belonging are divine blessings

which strengthen communities even in their weakness.

## Week 2—Unassuming Righteousness

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Matthew 5:5-6



Photo by Wesley T. Allen

We live in a society which believes a desire to wield power is a worthy calling. Sacrificing both ethics and morality to achieve power is considered a reasonable price to pay in order to gain a seat at power's table. It is the powerful who "get things done," therefore one needs to be as close to power as one can get.

In our current climate we have seen Christians offering up this sacrifice as they brush off the vile and nonsensical behavior of Donald Trump's party, lost in his promises of power and influence. In order to achieve the power to "get things done" Evangelical scholars and church leaders have abandoned their claims of



years past, which demanded only moral Christian people were acceptable as president. And this is not just a “conservative problem.” The Democratic party is every bit as willing to take short cuts to achieve power, and this is too often celebrated by those who feel a more progressive movement is what God wants. Whether progressive or conservative, Christians are siding up to power in order to make certain when the chips are cashed in their voices will be the ones heard so their agenda will be implemented.

But Jesus doesn’t side up to power, nor does he call his disciples to do so. In fact, he lays out a path which *opposes* the quest for power when he utters the words, “The meek will inherit the earth.”

Now, “meek” does not mean “doormat.” Rather, it refers to someone who is unassuming. That is to say they are not self-promoting, nor are they infatuated with the trappings of privilege. Can meek people point out injustice? Certainly. Do meek people need to accept abuse heaped on them and never say, “This is not OK?” Of course not. Being “meek” does *not* mean being a victim. Nor does it mean sitting back while other people are victimized. It’s an understanding that when we stand before *God’s* throne “smelling ourselves” is not a good idea.

It’s interesting to note the earliest extra-canonical <sup>1</sup> Christian writing we have, called the “Didache,” contains a direct reference to Matthew 5:6. This book was probably an early Christian discipleship tool written around the year 100, and in its third chapter the unknown author says “...be humble <sup>2</sup>, for the humble shall inherit the earth (Did 3:7).” This direct reference is then followed by some exposition on what it *means* to be humble/meek. This exposition reveals the

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<sup>1</sup> An extra-canonical book is a writing the Church embraces, but isn’t treated as scripture in Worship.

<sup>2</sup> This is the same word used in Matthew 5:6 for meek.

attitude our early brothers and sisters in Christ had about their relationship with power. Being “meek” meant *not* associating with the lofty, and refraining from either becoming arrogant about one’s position or exalting oneself in shameless self promotion. In short, it is the *opposite* of the current Christian penchant to court those who wield cultural power. In the 15th chapter of the Didache the idea of being meek/humble appears again, this time to describe an attribute which is an *absolute necessity* for someone who is called as an overseer of believers. Jesus’ words were something which our early brothers and sisters held on to with vigor, because they believed that was the path to true inheritance.

But if the deepest desire of someone who is meek isn’t power or security or authority or wealth—which are the dominant desires of our culture—what *is* it? It’s the desire expressed in the very next beatitude in Matthew 5:6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

Righteousness is often confused for “personal morality,” but in reality it is a different animal. Righteousness is a reference to establishing “right relationships” between everything in the created order one to another, and between the created order and the God who made all things. A person can have a strict and untainted *personal* morality, and still be unrighteous in the way they neglect both God’s creation and God’s image.

Meek people must inevitably “hunger and thirst” for righteousness, because a righteous world calls people *to* the humility of meekness. Against the backdrop of corruption of wealth and power it may sometimes seem as though righteousness is a lost cause and meekness is doomed to abuse. But Jesus disagrees, he says that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be *satisfied*. To those who understand the insecurity of hunger the promise to be filled to the point of satisfaction, so they won’t go to bed with their being demanding sustenance, is *huge*. And what is true for physical food is every bit as

true for righteousness.

You see, there's something interesting about power. Both the desire to obtain and the desire to hold on to it can do terrible damage to our souls. When we seek power, we begin to discover *enemies*. Throughout history these enemies have been labeled as sub-human, a threat to societal stability, and as objects worthy only of vengeance. In my country this has been seen over and over. The enslavement of black people and the ejection of indigenous peoples both display the worst what corrupting power can do to people—and the dehumanization of divine image bearers is disturbing. This continues into our day as well. Police abuse authority, politicians use their office to settle political scores, neighbors turn ugly as they defend the sovereign borders to their property, and violence erupts when the powerless fight for the scraps dropped by the powerful.

These are the types of things which happen when we become infatuated with our own status. In the halls of political power—and all the way down to our local churches, clubs, and civic organizations—people who fight their way to the top inevitably try to clear the field of all challengers. They think *then* they'll be satisfied. The problem is, there's always another challenger. So the search for satisfaction becomes an endless game of "king of the hill." And satisfaction never comes.

Contrast the desire for power and control with Jesus' words. People who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" have *ceded* all authority to the Lamb who sits on the throne—Jesus Christ. And, because of this, when new people enter our field of view we aren't meant to see *challengers* to our grasp on power. Rather, we see people for whom Jesus has died, and who bear God's image. Rather than try to defeat them as threats, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness instead seek to invite strangers to experience the "Joy of the Lord."

*This* is how the Church grew in the first centuries of its existence. The earliest

Christians were a minority sect in a minority religion, Judaism. But they didn't keep to themselves. They held no power, nor did they have hopes of obtaining it. And they *did* suffer under Roman hostility. But they thrived *anyway*. They saw in the strangers of the Roman Empire the very people for whom Christ came to earth—Roman officials, slaves, women, Jews, pagans, and even barbarians were invited to experience the incredible fruits which Jesus' teaching and sacrifice had borne into the world<sup>3</sup>. And, despite being politically and militarily powerless, the Church **grew**—expanding both throughout the Roman Empire and beyond its borders. All the while declaring the *meek* would inherit the earth.

Maybe, for this culture to heal, more meekness and hungering and thirsting for righteousness are the tonic we need.

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<sup>3</sup> You may wonder why “women” are in that list. The early church was rather radical for its day, as it held that women could take their own spiritual paths.

### Week 3— Bridge Builders

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Matthew 5:7-9



Image by [wal\\_172619](#) from [Pixabay](#).

The Beatitudes, up to this point, have called Jesus' disciples to express values which are *alien* to this world's typical desires, and point to a new world. These values may hold a certain appeal for those who desire a different path, but what tangible actions can this new world be brought into our present reality? For people to *see* this new world a bridge must be built, and Jesus' beatitudes in Matthew 5:7-9 function form the span. The previous beatitudes reference attitudes and desires, but those found in verses 7-9 reference *actions*.

The support for this bridge is a “pure heart.” At least, that’s what Jesus says in verse 8 when he points out, “The ‘pure in heart’ will see God.”

It’s a fascinating statement. What does Jesus *mean* by “pure of heart?” In his day the idea of “purity” would have almost certainly have drawn people’s attention to the Temple, and the ritual purity required to participate in worship there. But in the Temple very few people could go into the holiest places, and only one man could get into the *holiest* place—and if anyone was going to see God, according to a ritual mind-set, it would be in those places. Jesus’ Beatitude seems to imply *many* people would be able to “see God,” regardless of their social class or distinction. So what does he mean?

Well, Jesus seems to be using “pure in heart” in much the same way we’d use it today. A person who is “pure in heart” hasn’t just said all the right things, they are morally and ethically upright.

Jesus did not discover the link between purity and morality. You can find this connection throughout the Old Testament, but an especially poignant example can be found in Psalm 24:3-6. In these verses the psalmist asks, “Who may climb the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his Holy Place?” The answer comes back,

“Only those whose hands and hearts are pure,  
who do not worship idols and never tell lies.

They will receive the Lord’s blessing  
and have a right relationship with God their savior.

Such people may seek you and worship in your presence,  
O God of Jacob.”

In order to illustrate the nature of his Kingdom, Jesus reached back into Israel's history to highlight how moral/ethical purity was every bit as essential as ceremonial purity. But what does this *look* like? What type of life would Jesus describe as "pure in heart?" And how does this create a bridge between Jesus' Kingdom and our present reality?

*Mercy* is the key.

Mercy is an offered chance at redemption for someone who *deserves* judgment. If life were a fight, mercy is a pause which allows someone to stand back up after being knocked over. And in all of our cultural touchstones—TV shows, movies, and sports—mercy makes no sense. When you have someone down, the reasoning goes, you don't give them a chance to stand up and restart the fight. The message from these cultural touchstones can be translated into "regular life" in toxic ways. The call to be merciless tells our culture that when people are your adversaries they **deserve** to experience nothing but the force needed to keep them down. It tells us that mercy puts people in immediate danger from an obvious threat because it's too weak to "do what is necessary." Against the backdrop of our cultural education mercy is just seen as weak—it's considered *naive*.

But what if mercy is something else entirely? What if mercy is one's trust in God put into action? Mercy is neither weak nor naive. It is an offer for people to turn away from actions and attitudes which do harm to their souls and seek something *better*. It is an invitation to discover a window, however small, through which their very existence may be *transformed* into something which better images the God who created them. Will most people see the window mercy offers them? Probably not. In fact, this why our culture views mercy with such disdain. But some *will*, and those lives will be changed. More important, when we show mercy to others, and give them space to realize there may be a better path, *God* sees it. Mercy is a

deliberate action offered by those who are “pure of heart.” And the end goal of mercy is *peace*.

I find it fascinating how, in the very opening of his Kingdom ethic, Jesus acknowledges this world is filled with violence. He doesn't hide from this violence, nor does he call his disciples to hide from it. In fact, the violence prevalent in this world would lead to his sacrifice on the cross.

And the prevalence of violence is *why* peacemakers are needed. Peacemakers, who will be called “God's children,”<sup>4</sup> carry Jesus' message of reconciliation into this world. A reconciliation which requires an offer of mercy.

And peace isn't a simple absence of conflict. It references a world in which righteousness flows, relationships are healed, mercy is evident, and wholeness is cherished. In Hebrew, the word for this type of peace is *shalom*. And when Jesus' disciples work for this blessed wholeness God's shalom can touch this world, bringing it into contrast with the violence upon which this world seems to thrive.

Look at the state of this world. We see the rise of demagogues who prey on people's fear and hatred. We see how endless war is causing a refugee crisis like the world has not seen since WWII. This crisis has, in turn, stoked the flames of both racial hatred and reactionary extremism. Anger and fear, in my country, is dividing the populace to the point where we can't even agree to *combat a pandemic*. Now, more than ever, we *need* peacemakers.

And peacemakers aren't people who prop up the status quo. Rather, they call upon those who are participating in social, military, and political conflict to see their adversaries *as the image of God*. Their efforts may fail,

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<sup>4</sup> Literally “sons” because in Jesus' day men inherited property. We got better.



because violence and power are difficult drugs to kick, but God claims peacemakers as *children*.

## Week 4—On His Account

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:10-12



Photo by [Daniel Páscoa](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Last chapter we pondered the bridge building through which Jesus blesses his disciples. This week we explore how the blessings of Jesus still exist even when those bridge building efforts seem to *fail*. Even when those who strive for righteousness face violent opposition, they are blessed.

But there is some confusion among religious folks regarding the blessing which comes with persecution. It's not just those who are persecuted, who are blessed. Jesus narrows down the blessing to those who are suffering because they are living in a way which reminds people of, and calls people

to, *righteousness*— to a life which is “right” before both neighbor and God.

The idea that someone who was persecuted could be blessed by God didn't jive with Jesus' contemporaries. Consider the history of his people for just the few centuries before Jesus was born. Their Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were carted off to exile. The exiles returned and rebuilt the Temple, but were eventually ruled by a wicked king who wanted to exterminate both their religion and race. The Jews fought back and ruled their own kingdom for a while, only to have it handed over to Herod as the Roman Empire moved in. What do you think Jesus' audience might have thought when they, who were living under Rome's thumb, heard, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness?” Maybe he got an eye-roll or two? Common sense said that the “blessing” of persecution wasn't worth all that much.

But Jesus never concentrated on the nature of *this* world's blessings. He didn't promise those who were persecuted for righteousness' sake power or control or prestige. He said, “Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

And the symbol of that kingdom, is a *cross*. Is that enough for us to continue striving forward, willing to suffer for others while reaching toward peace?

## Week 5—The Tradition

Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:11-12



Photo by Wesley T. Allen

The opening section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount ends with an interesting statement,

"Rejoice and be glad because your reward will be great in Heaven. For thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

This statement summarizes the *entirety* of the Beatitudes, and from this we see something *fascinating*. Jesus' believes his disciples are part of the

prophetic tradition.

There is a great deal of confusion about how the Bible understood the office of prophet. The prophets of old were *not* the sooth-sayers or fortune tellers of popular imagination. Typically, they functioned as God's witnesses regarding the relationship agreement the people had with the LORD of Israel. When the people broke that agreement, the covenant, the prophets called people to return—the technical term is “covenant prosecutor.”

In that prosecutorial role the prophets insisted the LORD *alone* was God, and following the LORD's commands was the way forward for their people. This touched both “religious” and “everyday” life—holding people to an ethical standard which may have seemed to threaten people's security. Through their proclamations the prophets pointed people toward an entirely new way of thinking about the world, and they were *often* not appreciated because of it. The prophets in the Old Testament were ridiculed, hated, had murderous plots aimed in their direction, and wept in anguish. All because they insisted the promises of the LORD were *worth* something.

And Jesus believed his disciples were supposed to live out a similar calling. *Imagine* what we'd look like if we embraced the ideas which are found in the Beatitudes en masse. Imagine if we lived out the humility of being poor in spirit. Imagine if we could filter out the overwhelming flood of horror in the world and actually *grieve* for the suffering we experience in this world. Imagine if we never expected accolades or awards, but served this world in meek humility. What if seeing people treat each other *righteously* was our deepest passion? What if mercy and peacemaking were our truest calling cards throughout this world? What if we did experience persecution because we point people toward *better* things which they

didn't want to hear about?

Jesus' disciples would look so different! But isn't that what Jesus said his Kingdom is—"A kingdom not of *this* world?"