



## **TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE-DOWN**

Question: what does it take to be powerful?

We live in an age of wannabe emperors and empires. Of people who want to control this world for their own ends – and oppress and exploit those weaker than themselves to get it. A 'might makes right' view of the world.

That's the way the world was 2000 years ago, too. And it's against this backdrop that a certain carpenter from Nazareth stepped onto the pages of history and offered us a different way of looking at things. A vision of a very different kingdom. The kingdom of God.

And over spring this year we're going to look at one set of Jesus' teachings, containing some of the most famous sayings ever. We know them as the Sermon on the Mount. And we begin with the opening section:

### **Matthew 5:1-12**

Jesus' ministry has begun; He's gathering followers – a lot of them; and He parks Himself on a hill on the Korazim Plateau in Galilee, and He begins to teach them.

Teach them what? What the kingdom of God is all about. And what He, the king of kings, is all about.

Now to Jesus' original audience, the kingdom of God would have seemed a very distant, unobtainable thing. Politically, Israel at that time was under the

thumb of imperial Rome – and heavily taxed for the privilege. And spiritually, they were on the receiving end of a whole heap of accusation from their religious leaders – the Sadducees and Pharisees – who blamed *them* for Israel's plight.

Jesus, however, comes with a very different message – which brings us to the opening section. We call them the? Beatitudes, from the Latin word *beatus* or 'blessed' (the Greek *makarios* means the same). But in Jesus' original Hebrew it's the word *asher*, meaning 'happy' or 'lucky' (which might seem ironic, given the content).

Bearing all that in mind, let's look at them again:

- **Happy are the poor.** The spiritually deficient – those who have been told that the reason they're poor is because they've sinned and God is angry.
- **Happy are the mourners.** Those whose hearts and lives have been broken by the evils of this world, by oppression and exploitation and injustice.
- **Happy are the meek.** Not the weak (though in the eyes of the world they might be), but those who choose to do right, regardless of their circumstances.
- **Happy are the hungry.** Those who are desperate to see justice (which is what righteousness in the Bible really means) prevail, to see God's will done.
- **Happy are the merciful.** People who are honest enough to recognise their own need for mercy – and reflect that in their relationship with others.
- **Happy are the pure.** Those who are honest and willing for God to do His refining work on their hearts and minds, on their passions and motives.
- **Happy are the peacemakers.** Not just those with a dislike for conflict, but people who would rather build bridges than walls between others and God.
- **Happy are the persecuted.** Those suffering verbal, psychological and physical abuse because of their faith in Jesus and their refusal to deny Him.

Now, over the centuries some have taken the beatitudes out of context, 'spiritualised' them, and missed the point of them. And as a result, they've robbed them of their power.

So, what is the point? What is Jesus saying here?

**1) There's a reward to claim.** How does Jesus round off each beatitude? With "theirs is the kingdom of the skies" or "they will inherit the earth", etc. I.e. these things are promises, guarantees – not maybes. And why is Jesus able to speak so confidently? Because He comes from outside of time and

space, He's the king of eternity, and He – and He alone – has full possession of the facts.

Jesus can make such claims because He knows how this is going to wrap up. That those tables are going to turn.

**2) There's a reversal to grasp.** What do you notice about these 'happy's? They are, in the eyes of the world, examples of weakness – of situations and experiences that are the polar opposites of power and importance. But Jesus here turns the world on its head and says, "God is close to the powerless." Because powerless people are more likely to seek God's help. To seek God Himself.

Yes, the power of God's presence lies, not with the most powerful, but with the least (as evidenced even today).

**3) There's a reality to seek.** In addition to the previous points, Jesus is presenting His audience with a clue as to how to experience something of the kingdom of God, now. Every pronoun He uses of His followers is? Plural. Now I might be reading into this, but I think this is a point in itself. That it is as community, showing love, mercy and grace, that we know – and make known – the kingdom.

Which means that, instead of living isolated, individualistic lives, we need to learn to work and worship. Together.

### **Power To The People**

So, Jesus is saying, to this bunch of nobodies, "There's a new world coming. And regardless of what Rome or Jerusalem says, I'm here to tell you: it starts with us. With you and Me." And that message is still the same today.

But what does that mean, for the 21<sup>st</sup> century west? Well, praise God, it doesn't mean if you have power, wealth and influence, you're stuffed. But it does mean if you don't have such things, you're more likely to get what Jesus is saying than if you do. And if you do have such things, Jesus expects you to do something with it, for Him (and in case we miss it, Jesus says the same thing again and again, throughout this sermon and the rest of the NT).

A final point: the majority of Jesus' audience hadn't chosen to be in the position they were in. But Jesus is saying, "You have a choice as to what you do with that. How you respond."

And that's where true power lies. Your attitude has the potential to not only shape your view of the world – it has the potential to shape your world. Because if this world is going to change, it's going to change, not through those with the biggest armies and resources and earthly power. It's going to change with us allowing God to do His transforming work in us. And through us.

And *that's* the message of the beatitudes.