

The Sermon on the Mount #1

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[0 : 00] As with the beginning of any new year, it's worth looking back to look forward. Are you the sort of person who makes resolutions? Actually, I'm interested. Hands up if you make resolutions.

Just a few of you. Okay. Get fit, break some annoying bad habits are the sort of top ones, I think. And at this time of the year, apparently the big sellers online are exercise machines.

And if you're going to invest in one of those, I'd wait about six months because people give up on them and then you're probably going to get it cheaper. Dumbbells, weight plates, pull-up bars, basically get fit and healthy.

A six-fold argument has been proposed in favour of preparing New Year's resolutions, regardless of whether you achieve them. So here's the sort of reason why you might sort of rethink about setting a resolution.

Number one. Preparing resolutions requires taking stock of the previous year, and that's usually a beneficial thing. Number two. Preparing resolutions involves pondering the good for your body, soul, mind and relationships.

[1 : 07] And that's always a beneficial thing. Number three. In life, there are just three modes to choose from. Decline, maintenance or improvement.

I don't know which one I'd like to choose. Any improvements, number four, will benefit those around you. Setting goals is potentially a kindness to others, actually.

And sure, we may only, 67%, accomplish a mere 75% of our resolutions. But number five, that's still a pass. And six, writing resolutions is an expression of hope.

And hope is better than resignation. As we head into 2022, it's on the back of two years of pandemic, which was preceded by three years of drought, water restrictions, catastrophic bushfires and dust storms.

And these last two years have also included floods and mouse plagues. I've got family that live on the land in parks, and they've felt the brunt of all this. In light of all these events that are so far out of our control, it's worth pausing and asking, with life so unpredictable, how now should we live?

[2 : 19] I've done the maths. With 168 hours in a week, and hopefully you get at least eight hours sleep a night if you're lucky, that means we're awake for 112 hours a week.

In that time, there are so many voices vying for our attention, telling us how to live. If we come to church once a week, or we're viewing online, and we're in a midweek Bible study group, and we read the Bible daily, I'm pretty sure that will still only add up to maybe three, four, five hours of your waking week, which is only about 3% or 4% of your week.

So what voice do we listen to? If we really want to know how to live God's way in God's world, we need to go to the Maker's Manual, listen to God's Word, and look to Jesus.

As we begin a new year, a summer series from the Sermon on the Mount, this sermon flips the expectations of society upside down, as Jesus invites us to participate as members of the Kingdom of Heaven.

And that's the right side of history, by the way. You hear that term a lot these days. A couple of years ago, someone made a beautiful banner that hung outside their church where everyone could see it.

[3 : 42] It depicted a thick, sluggish green caterpillar crawling up a twig, at the top of which hovered a beautiful, iridescent butterfly. And the caption based on Ephesians 4 verse 15 was simply, If a caterpillar could see a butterfly and knew it was possible to be one, it would yearn to change.

How joyful to emerge from a chrysalis, stretch those soggy wings in the warm sun, and to sort of heights never dreamed of. And yet the metamorphosis cannot take place without a time of darkness, and a struggle to be free from all that keeps one earth bound.

Transformational change is what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 5. Surely, heading into 2022, with some honest self-reflection, and in comparison to Jesus' life, there is only one conclusion we

can come to.

Our New Year's resolution will involve change, to be like Jesus. The number of books written on the Sermon on the Mount would fill a library. There is something attractive and compelling that has driven numerous authors to seek further understanding of this most famous of sermons.

John Stott says of the sermon, It describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God. The opening address of the Sermon on the Mount is also referred to as the Beatitudes.

[5 : 15] Beautiful attitudes. The statement, blessed, is like an exclamation of congratulations to those who have the complete attitude of Jesus.

And the author of this gospel, Matthew, was someone changed and transformed by Jesus. Matthew would have originally been hated by his fellow Israelites, as tax collectors were notorious for skimming a little bit off the top for themselves, and as they sided with the Romans, they were considered traitors.

Change for Matthew began with a simple command from Jesus. Follow me. What joy for the despised outcast to be forgiven and accepted by the Son of God.

When Jesus said, follow me, where would this lead him? He didn't know. But how now would he live? Matthew knew that whatever it took, it would involve change.

The Beatitudes listed by Jesus were to his followers as he commenced his public ministry. How now shall we live in 2022 and beyond? Jesus teaches us how to live as subjects in the long-awaited kingdom of God, even though it may make us stand out, even though it may put us at a disadvantage in our current society and culture.

[6 : 41] If we're to be followers of Jesus, we must listen to Jesus' words and obey them. The Sermon on the Mount is challenging, as it asks us to make significant changes, to live opposite to the way the world thinks, as Jesus calls us to live, for all intents and purposes, for a completely upside-down kingdom, and involves the beautiful attitudes of Jesus.

Verse 3, Matthew chapter 5. Jesus said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. In the last few years, they've been pretty full-on.

And if they haven't taken their toll on you, I'd be really surprised. Disheartened, dejected, lonely, broken. Jesus says, Blessed are those who are poor in spirit.

But why? Because the poor in spirit know how much they need God and recognise how much they rely on God. Instead of self-belief, which the world advocates, we need to take an upside-down approach.

Which the world doesn't agree with. We need to depend on God, who is in control. I've heard it said, This makes God a crutch to lean on.

[8 : 03] Well, the sick need a crutch. I haven't met one person who is not broken in some way, carrying some untreated pain, some kind of unresolved relationship, or unaddressed guilt.

To all those who are poor in spirit, Jesus reminds me in Matthew 11, Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I'm gentle and humble in spirit, and you'll find rest for your souls. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they will call on the name of the Lord Jesus and be saved, and theirs will be the kingdom of heaven.

Verse 4, Jesus said, Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Cut off from friends and family in lockdown, unable to attend funerals, there has been widespread grief, locally, nationally, and there's been an outcry globally, as tears have been shed.

I think the latest counts, nearly five and a half million deaths just from COVID. What hope is there without Jesus? Even Stan Grant made note of this in a recent ABC article.

[9 : 23] He begins by acknowledging that growing up, surrounded by Christian family members, he felt blessed at Christmas, as it was a time of prayer and hope. But as our society is turning its back on the Christian message, he notes, Our world is immeasurably poorer for the loss and derision of faith, and the substitute of cynicism.

In other words, this equals, people are living without hope today. Blessed are those who mourn, and turn to Jesus, for they will be comforted.

We're reminded of Revelation 21, where Jesus says, Behold, I am making everything new. It's a real, tangible, physical place, where God himself, we read, will wipe every tear from our eyes.

It's such a beautiful image as a parent when you wipe the tears from your children's face. God himself will wipe every tear from our eyes. There'll be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the old world of things will have passed away.

God promises He will comfort those who look to the hope of resurrection, where all things will be made new. This hope is upside down to the secular view in our society, where death is final, and there's nothing beyond.

[10:43] Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Verse 5. Jesus said, Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

There's a bit of confusion about the word meek, so I've got a definition here for you. It means slow to anger, gentle with others, someone who is strong, but chooses to use their strength to help others.

God has a special blessing for those who are humble, and put others first. Have you ever noticed how our modern depiction, one of the modern depictions of Jesus, is that He was a real softy? Just a bit wussy, actually. But a quick clarification on this misrepresentation. When Jesus saw injustice, He turned tables. He really stuck it to the religious elite.

The cross epitomizes meekness. Which is truly a demonstration of Christ's strength. What Jesus endured, the betrayal, false trial, the mocking, the scourging, the beatings, ultimately the crucifixion, if we were there at that time, just as Peter denied Christ, if we were put under that sort of pressure, we would capitulate.

[11:59] We'd give up. At any given time, Jesus could have bailed out. He had the power and strength to call on the heavenly host.

He could have said, come and save me. And by the way, strike down all these people who are giving me grief. Instead, in His meekness, He faithfully sought God's will and used His strength to help others.

He died for us, absorbing God's judgment so that we can be forgiven. Even declaring of His enemies, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.

How upside down is that? Laying down your life for others, not self-promoting, rather using His strength to help others. In fact, the scriptures remind us, while we're still enemies, so He's using His strength to help enemies, Christ died for us.

Blessed are the meek, for they will use their strength to help others. Verse 6. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

[13:09] I've found this one of the most misquoted of the Beatitudes. It often is quoted as, blessed are those who hunger and thirst. And then they stop there.

I'm not sure whether it's a ploy for us to say, blessed are the poor, those who are homeless or downtrodden, because of the state they find themselves in. And as a result, there's no obligation for us to help, because apparently they're blessed.

Or maybe it's because if we leave out, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, if we leave that bit out, then there's no compulsion for us to get our lives sorted with God.

I'm not sure, but let's read it into its entirety. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. In other words, we're blessed if our greatest desire is to be right with God and live our lives worthy of His upside-down kingdom.

God has a special blessing for those whose greatest desire is to seek God's will. God first, followed by loving, selfless servanthood.

[14:17] As we put God first and seek His kingdom, we pray, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The trappings of the world will just not deliver or satisfy.

I'm reminded here of Jesus' words in John chapter 6, verse 35, when Jesus said, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled when they come to Jesus in repentance and faith. Verse 7, Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Mercy is the compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within our power to punish or harm. If you notice, we live in a really unforgiving, harsh, ruthless age in history, polarising political tribalism, a cancelled culture dividing us, religious bigots with the freedom of faith bill on the table.

God will be kind and show mercy to those who show mercy and kindness to others. Those who show compassion who don't close their eyes to human suffering and pain and reach out into the

world with Jesus' hands filled by God's spirit to be a blessing to others.

[15:51] Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us, and we know it from the Lord's Prayer, which was shared with us with the kid spot, but he says this, For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father also will forgive you.

But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Verse 8, Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. God has a special place for those who have pure thoughts, words and deeds, for one day they will see God.

I'm not advocating here being completely naive or gullible, but there's some things it's better not to see or ever to know about. We're living in an age where immorality is at our fingertips, where instant gratification, self-indulgent individualism is the norm.

We hear the catch cries, whatever makes you happy, as long as it's not hurting anyone, or if it feels good, do it. In Proverbs 4 verse 23, we're reminded, Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

[17:11] We need to take care, be self-controlled. What's in our heart flows out into how we live. It actually shapes our thoughts, our actions, our habits, and our character.

So blessed are the pure in heart, those who have a heart for God and for others, for they will see God. Verse 9, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Those who try to bring peace to a situation will be God's children, they'll be called God's children.

Peacemakers in Matthew is closely related to love of neighbour, and so we're to make peace and to be peace-loving, forgiving others and showing kindness, even if they're our enemies.

In contrast, the world is vengeful, stirring up trouble, causing fights and dissension, holding grudges, bitterness and resentment, factional, warring.

In fact, when we watch movies and the villain gets it in the end, we kind of cheer and there's a bit of a hooray. Do you know someone who is always causing a drama? God's upside-down kingdom is marked by peacemakers.

[18:27] Congratulations to those who make peace. Verse 10, Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This is counterintuitive and sounds masochistic, but God has a special blessing for those who are insulted or persecuted for Jesus. Heaven is theirs. While we don't like being persecuted, we will suffer if we identify as being Christian and as followers of Jesus.

And in this, we're to be rejoicing because we're being faithful and our reward will be in heaven.

Now, there's a whole other sermon here and I'd actually like to explore this a bit more next week.

So stay tuned. And it's going to be a bit heavy. The Sermon on the Mount is all about the complete attitude of Jesus. And I heard this story recently and it involves a baseball illustration.

So I'm hoping you understand baseball. Basically, there's nine innings and one innings is when three people get out and the other team, three out. I'm hoping you've got a bit of an idea of the game. So in Brooklyn, New York, excuse me, Cush is a school that caters to children with developmental and learning disabilities.

[19:42] At a Cush fundraising dinner, the father of a child delivered a speech that would never be forgotten by all who attended. After praising the school and its dedicated staff, he cried out, where is the perfection in my son's shire?

Everything God does is done with perfection, but my child cannot understand things as other children do. Where is God's perfection? The audience was shocked by the question, pained by the father's anguish instilled by the piercing query.

I believe, the father answered, that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that he seeks is the way people react to this child. He then told the following story about his son, Shire.

One afternoon, Shire and his father walked past a park where some boys Shire knew were playing baseball. Shire asked, do you think they'll let me play?

And Shire's father knew that his son was not all athletic and that most boys would not want him on their team. But Shire's father understood that if his son was chosen to play, it would give him a comfortable sense of belonging.

[20:51] Shire's father approached one of the boys in the field and asked if Shire could play. And the boy looked around for guidance from his teammates and getting none, he took matters into his

own hands and said, we're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth innings, which is near the end of the game.

I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him into bat in the ninth inning. So Shire's father was ecstatic. As Shire smiled broadly, Shire was told to put on a glove and go out and play short center field.

In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shire's team scored a few runs but were still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shire's team scored again and now with two outs and the bases loaded with the potential winning run on base, Shire was scheduled to bat.

Would the team actually let Shire bat at this junction and give away the chance to win the game? Surprisingly, Shire was given the bat. Everyone knew it was all but impossible because Shire didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it.

However, as Shire stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps to lob the ball in softly to Shire so he could have a swing at it and make contact. But he missed.

[22 : 08] The first pitch went past him as he clumsily swung and one of Shire's teammates came out and helped him hold the bat as they faced the pitcher who then took another step forward to toss the ball softly towards Shire.

As the pitch came in, Shire and his teammates swung at the ball and together they hit a slow ground ball straight back to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the ball and he could have easily thrown it to first base and he would have been out.

But the pitcher took the ball and he threw it in a high arc over into the outfield. Everyone started yelling, Shire, run to first base. Never in his life had Shire run to first base.

He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base the right fielder had the ball and wasn't sure what to do with it but cottoned on pretty quick and he threw it over the third baseman's head and they said, run to second, Shire, run to second.

He ran to second. By this stage it ran to third and finally both teams run for home and they were cheering him on. As Shire ran from home 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero as he'd just made his first home run and won the game for his team.

[23 : 24] That day, said the father with tears rolling down his face, those 18 boys knew God's perfection as they did what Jesus would have done.

blessed are the meek they'll use their strength to help others. Like those boys needing their strength to help others, blessing and congratulations go to those who have the complete attitude of Jesus.

We can't have one or a couple where to have the whole package listed in the Sermon on the Mount. The demands on us to be kind of blessed and fortunate are high.

If we think of it like a checklist, oh yeah, I was meek today or I've been a peacemaker, I've shown some mercy or I've been pure in heart, tick, I've done all that, we could easily be discouraged because actually we don't get there all the time and our puny attempts to change can often be fought with setbacks and failures and could result in us actually giving up.

The Sermon on the Mount sets out an impossible righteousness, a standard that only Jesus fulfilled. It cannot be a checklist of things to do, but a reminder of Jesus' righteousness where we need to place our trust in God and in his calling to be like Jesus.

[24 : 51] In a society wandering further from God, demanding our allegiance, whose blessing do we seek? Whose voice will we listen to? Does God's blessing mean more to us than the approval of our culture or even our loved ones?

How now should we live in 2022? We have choices to make this new year and each and every day of our lives, how we react, how we respond, how we step out, how we initiate.

Like caterpillars longing to be butterflies, blessed are those who walk in the steps of Jesus and emulate his behaviour. Remembering being like Jesus doesn't save us, but as we place our faith and confidence and trust in Jesus, as we've been shown mercy and are saved by grace, we are then blessed to do the good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do.

Blessed are those whose resolution is to seek God's upside down kingdom and in God's strength, spirit filled, display the beautiful attitudes of Jesus as they are being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we just thank you that you've revealed yourself to us fully through your word, through your creation and through Jesus. Your word became flesh and Lord, as he lived

amongst us and endured what we endured and walked in our shoes, he showed us how to really live and to live life.

[26 : 28] Just pray now for each and every one of us that we choose life and we choose this year to walk in Jesus' steps, to honour you and to reflect those beautiful attitudes in all we do and say.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.