Invitation to the Table

International educator Sir Kenneth Robinson (no relation) tells about a six-year-old girl in a drawing class. She rarely paid attention, but that day, she was focused, so the teacher went to her and asked, "What are you drawing?" and the little girl said, "A picture of God."

The teacher said, "But nobody knows what God looks like." And the little girl smiled and said, "They will in a minute."

Kids will take a chance. If they don't know, they'll have a go. They're not afraid of being wrong.

Robinson said, "If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original. If you're not prepared to be wrong; and by the time we're adults most people have lost that capacity."

We become afraid of being wrong, and we run our businesses that way—and we run our churches that way: we stigmatize mistakes. And most education systems are run so that the worst thing you can do is make a mistake. The result is that we're educating people out of their creative capacity, and many brilliant, highly creative people think they're not.

Robinson concludes: "We have to be very careful to see our creative capacities for the richness they are and our children for the hope that they are. Our task is to educate the whole person."

And that'll preach. I'd choose today's epistle reading and I'd use the J.B. Phillips translation: *"Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all God's demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity."*

I don't know what the little girl's picture of God looked like; but at this Table a loaf and a cup remind us of one who bears a strong family resemblance.

Our Communion Hymn is #427, "Loving Lord, As Now We Gather."

Pastoral Prayer

Lord, through Jesus you promise to be where two or three are gathered together in his name; and here we are: together, seeking an awareness of your presence. And in that presence we come seeking your blessing. Bless us, we are bold to pray. Bless us in the moments when we are poor in spirit, or in grief. Bless us in our moments of meekness; and in those times we hunger for justice, bless us with your mercy, so we may be merciful. Bless us with pure hearts and make us peacemakers.

When the world outside gets to big and the challenges are overwhelming, bless us with strength of character and with courage to meet those challenges.

Thank you for the gifts we receive from you, gifts of service that enable us to bless others in their need. May we use our gifts to be a blessing to those who feel cursed by trials and tribulations, burdened by the cares of this life.

Bless us in our struggles to be faithful witness to you, and send us out from this time of worship to be a blessing in your name to all whom we meet. Amen.

MATTHEW 5:1-12 (NRSVUE) *When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.*
2 *And he began to speak and taught them, saying:*
3 *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
4 *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*
5 *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*
6 *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*
7 *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*
8 *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*
9 *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*
10 *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
11 *"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* 12 *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

***

The Word of God for the people of God!

Today I'm beginning a series of ten sermons on the Beatitudes. It's difficult to avoid the socio/religious shades of obsession in some Christian groups with putting the Ten Commandments, religious symbol, on display in publicly funded, tax supported places—Ten Commandments but not the Beatitudes.

One reason may be "commandment" vs "blessed." But here's the thing: the word, commandment, is never used in Hebrew Scripture to describe the covenant given to Moses at Sinai. There are only three references: Exodus 34, the original account of Moses on Sinai, Deuteronomy 4 and Deuteronomy 10, where Moses recalls the Sinai covenant. And each reference concludes: ***He declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is,*** —in most English translations—***that is, the ten commandments,*** —but in Hebrew it's "'aseret ha-devarim," the ten words.

In the 2nd century BCE the Hebrew Scripture was translated into Greek—the Septuagint, and the Greek wording is **δέκα λόγους**—again, "ten words." It was not until early Latin translations in the 4th century that a sense of statutory decree was added, which led to the 16th century English translation, "commandments."

What is presented at Sinai as ten life principles describing God's intentions for human life and relationships with God and with each other, through four levels of translation, is now misread as statutory requirements. Commandments.

And yet, in the context of Matthew, it's difficult to address the Beatitudes apart from the Ten Commandments, because Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses. In Matthew the life of Jesus mirrors the life of Moses several ways:

- Pharaoh orders the slaughter of Hebrew boys; Herod orders the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem.
- Both Moses and Jesus find safety in Egypt and later leave it.

- Moses takes the children of Israel to the Jordan River; Jesus enters the waters of the Jordan—completes the journey—at his baptism.
- Moses is 40 days on Mount Sinai; Jesus is 40 days tempted in the wilderness.
- Moses goes up a mountain to receive the Ten Words; Jesus goes up a mountain to deliver the Beatitudes.
- While at Sinai, Moses gives organizational structure to Israel; Jesus' Sermon on the Mount reinterprets many principles of Mosaic law: ***"You have heard that it was said (to your ancestors), 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also…"*** **(MATT. 5:21)** *[another reason for prioritizing the Ten Commandments over the Beatitudes.]*
- Moses appoints 12 princes to lead the community of Israel; Jesus chooses 12 apostles to lead the new community of faith.
- In the wilderness, the children of Israel are miraculously fed with manna from heaven; in the wilderness, Jesus feeds a multitude with five loaves and two fish.

So, you see, there are connections, and we'll deal with them over the next nine weeks; but how do we move into the Beatitudes as a unit?

In the 1978 movie, "Heaven Can Wait," Joe Pendleton is QB of the Los Angeles Rams. While riding his bicycle, his overzealous guardian angel (it's his first assignment) sees a large truck approaching Joe. Assuming Joe's about to be killed, he plucks Joe out of his body early, to save him from any suffering.

At the pearly gates, Joe refuses to believe it's his time, and an investigation, finds that the truck was going to just narrowly miss him; he was not destined to die for another 50 years. Unfortunately, his body's already been cremated, so a new body must be found for him. Eventually, he enters the body of a multimillionaire industrialist who's just been drugged and drowned in his bathtub by his cheating wife and her lover, who are then thoroughly shocked to see him still alive.

The plot gets complicated, but long story short, Joe ends up buying the Rams and quarterbacking them to a Super Bowl victory.

Yes, it's a silly, trivial movie; but in its triviality there's a parable that, without trivializing heaven, or eternal life, affirms the value of human life on earth.

Most Christian teaching today focuses primarily—in some cases exclusively—on getting to heaven when we die. And that teaching generally represents earthly life as irrelevant—just a burden to be borne until we get to heaven.

A late friend from high school—a pastor—refused to vote or participate in any political activity because he said, "There's nothing we can do. The world is controlled by Satan, and nothing will change until Christ returns."

While Jesus clearly spoke of eternal life (however you interpret that); 80%

of his teaching in Matthew is about ethical relationships here and now. And Jesus was politically involved, confronting the power structures that created and maintained the systems that kept poor people and marginalized people in their place.

Salvation, heaven, eternal life is more than getting your ticket to heaven punched; it's a mental, emotional, relational, spiritual condition that is "realized," "accepted," and "lived," starting here and now, because "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2). And the nature of the kingdom is about being made new—transformed, from the values of empire to the values of the kingdom.

Jesus faced a dilemma like ours; a faith system only partially and selectively rooted in Scripture. Between the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes, the priests and scribes developed volume after volume of laws interpreting what was meant by the ten words from Sinai. By the time of Jesus there were 613 laws—scroll after scroll, gathered into the "Mishnah." Today, depending on the publishing format, between 22 and 44 volumes, divided into six thematic sections and 63 subunits which are further split into chapters and individual legal paragraphs.

What does it mean to honor the Sabbath? What does work mean? Even murder—you'd think that's pretty cut and dried. Volume after volume exploring intent and culpability, varying degrees of premeditation, rules of evidence, the judicial process for capital punishment… on and on.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus—the new Moses—restores the simple, descriptive intent of the words given to Moses; and in the Sermon on the Mount that follows he describes a system of kingdom values and relationships that challenge the legalism of Jewish laws. And here's the difference: kingdom values describe who we are as people of God. The law is something other than—something outside—ourselves.

Brian McLaren writes: "To place perfection, salvation, or moral clarity outside oneself is to fragment the self, elevating an image or ideal while diminishing (denying) one's own potential. Worship becomes an act of surrendering accountability and responsibility and not cultivating *[our true nature as beings created in the image of God]."*

McLaren argues that salvation is not a transaction in which we do or say things in exchange for heaven; rather, it's an internal transformation of the way we understand and interact within this present world, because the kingdom is at hand. Faith is not an either/or thing. Paul would later write, ***"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth"*** (ACTS 17:24). Faith is a both/and act in which the present earthly life is our expression of faith in the eternal.

The Beatitudes describe life after a genuine encounter with God, a transforming experience that replaces worldly values of empire and leads to fresh encounters with others, encounters that reflect kingdom values of love, compassion, peace, justice, and the shared mission of "joining God in healing the world".

Meanwhile, as important as it is, heaven can wait. Pray with me.

Links to Video Clips

https://s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/pastors.ai/sp_caption_462100_Mt-PAeJ04PI_4309_1.mp4

https://s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/pastors.ai/sp_caption_462100_Mt-PAeJ04PI_4002_2.mp4

https://s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/pastors.ai/sp_caption_462100_Mt-PAeJ04PI_3928_4.mp4

Sermon Summary

The Beatitudes begin a way of seeing Jesus as the new Moses. Matthew places Jesus on a mountain, as Moses stood on Sinai, not to add another crushing legal code but to speak the life of God into a people. The ten “commandments” were, in the Hebrew and Greek texts, the ten words: life principles revealing God’s intention for human relationships with God and with one another. Later translation turned those words into statutory decrees, and religious systems piled interpretation upon interpretation until 613 laws could obscure the heart of the covenant.

Matthew strengthens the connection between Moses and Jesus all through the Gospel. Moses and Jesus are both threatened in infancy, both find safety in Egypt, both pass through the waters, both spend forty days in wilderness, both stand on a mountain, and both help form a people. Jesus also takes the old words and presses them deeper: “You have heard that it was said,” but then, “I say to you.” The Sermon on the Mount names a kingdom life that cannot be contained by legalism.

The kingdom of heaven describes who people of God are, not merely what rules they must keep. Law can stand outside a person, demanding compliance, while the kingdom works within a person, making that person new. Salvation is not a transaction by which somebody says or does the right things to get a ticket punched for heaven. Salvation is transformation: a changed way of understanding and living in the world God made.

The image of Heaven Can Wait helps bring the point down to earth. Heaven is not trivial, and eternal life is not denied, but earthly life is not irrelevant baggage to be endured until death. Jesus speaks about eternal life, yet much of Matthew concerns ethical relationships here and now. Jesus confronts the powers and systems that keep poor and marginalized people in their place.

The Beatitudes describe life after a genuine encounter with God. The kingdom has come near, and its values replace the values of empire. Love, compassion, peace, justice, and participation in God’s healing of the world become visible in present life. Faith is not heaven or earth. Faith is a both-and act in which present earthly life becomes an expression of faith in the eternal. Heaven can wait, because the kingdom is meant to be seen here.

Key Takeaways [numbers in brackets are the related time reference in the worship video]

- **1. The ten words invite transformed living.** The Sinai covenant begins as words of life, describing God’s intention for human life and relationship. Legal systems can be necessary, but they can also become so detailed that the living heart of God’s desire disappears beneath the paperwork. The Beatitudes call people back to the kind of life those words were always meant to form. **[58:23]**
- **2. Jesus restores the heart of covenant.** Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, but Jesus does not simply repeat Sinai. Jesus brings the old words into the depths of the human heart, where anger, mercy, enemy-love, and reconciliation matter. The kingdom is not satisfied with outward compliance while the inner life remains shaped by empire. **[69:28]**
- **3. Salvation is more than a ticket.** Salvation cannot be reduced to a transaction for a future destination. God transforms the way people understand, receive, and inhabit the present world. Eternal life begins where kingdom values become real in the mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual life of a person. **[70:46]**
- **4. Earthly life expresses eternal faith.** Heaven does not make the world unimportant. Jesus treats relationships, injustice, poverty, and oppressive power as matters that belong to God’s kingdom now. Faith becomes visible when earthly life reflects confidence that the God of heaven and earth is already at work. **[71:23]**
- **5. Kingdom values replace empire values.**The Beatitudes name the life that follows a genuine encounter with God. Love, compassion, peace, and justice are not religious decorations added to private belief, but signs of a people being made new. God’s healing work becomes visible through fresh encounters with others.

Daily Devotionals

Day 1: From Stone Tablets to Heart Transformation: The Beatitudes' Call

The Ten Words given to Moses were life principles, not rigid statutes. Over centuries, translations distorted "words" into "commandments," shifting focus from relational intent to legal obligation. Jesus reclaims this original vision in the Beatitudes, offering a covenant rooted in internal transformation rather than external compliance. The kingdom of heaven begins when God's desires become our deepest motivations, reshaping how we live with God and others. This shift from rule-keeping to heart-changing invites us into a faith that breathes, not one that merely obeys. [59:26]

"And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments." (Exodus 34:28, ESV)

Reflection: Where have you substituted rigid rule-following for genuine relationship with God? How might the Beatitudes soften your heart to live beyond mere obligation?

Day 2: Jesus as the New Moses: Kingdom Values on the Mountain

Matthew paints Jesus as the second Moses—delivering God's heart from a mountain, facing wilderness testing, and leading a new exodus. But where Moses brought laws etched in stone, Jesus offers blessings etched in grace. The Beatitudes reframe Sinai's covenant, replacing "thou shalt not" with "blessed are those who hunger." This isn't a rejection of the past but a fulfillment, inviting us to see God's kingdom as a living story we inhabit, not a contract we sign. [01:00:46]

"Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them…" (Matthew 5:1–2, ESV)

Reflection: What "mountain" in your life is Jesus inviting you to climb to receive His kingdom vision? How does His grace reframe your understanding of obedience?

Day 3: Heaven Can Wait: Embracing Earthly Kingdom Work

A 1978 film's trivial plot—a man reclaiming earthly purpose after a heavenly mistake—holds a profound truth: God cares about this life. The Beatitudes aren't escapist theology for a future heaven but a manifesto for healing a broken now. Jesus' confrontations with power systems, his feeding of multitudes, and his attention to the marginalized reveal a kingdom already unfolding. Eternal life begins not at death but in joining God's repair of the world today. [01:05:01]

"From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" (Matthew 4:17, ESV)

Reflection: What earthly injustice or pain stirs you to act? How might your daily choices reflect the "nearness" of God's kingdom?

Day 4: Beyond Legalism: The Simplicity of Kingdom Ethics

The Mishna's 613 laws turned the Ten Words into a labyrinth of technicalities. Jesus dismantles this complexity, restoring the Beatitudes' radical simplicity: blessed are the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart. His sermon on the mount confronts legalism's obsession with "how little can I do?" by asking "how fully can I love?" Kingdom ethics flow from identity, not obligation—a call to be human, not just moral. [01:08:45]

"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." (Matthew 5:17, ESV)

Reflection: Where has religious complexity drained joy from your faith? How might Jesus' focus on heart-posture simplify your walk with Him?

Day 5: Earthly Life as Eternal Faith's Expression

Paul declares God as "Lord of heaven and earth"—not one or the other. The Beatitudes anchor eternity in the soil of today, making faith a both-and journey. Salvation isn't a ticket to heaven but a transformation that reshapes how we live here. To hunger for righteousness, show mercy, or make peace isn't preparation for the afterlife—it's the afterlife breaking into the present. [01:11:44]

"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything…" (Acts 17:24–25, ESV)

Reflection: What ordinary moment today can become an eternal act of worship? How does your daily life already reflect the kingdom's "now and not yet"?

Bible Study Guide

Bible Reading

- Matthew 5:1–12
- Exodus 20:1–17
- Matthew 5:17–48
- Acts 17:24

Observation questions

- In Matthew 5:1–2, where does Jesus go to teach, and who comes to him before he begins speaking? What earlier biblical mountain story does this setting bring to mind? [01:00:59]
- What kinds of people and actions are called “blessed” in the Beatitudes—such as the meek, merciful, peacemakers, and those who hunger for righteousness?
- What comes before the instructions in Exodus 20:3–17? How does God’s statement, “I brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” shape the way the rest of the passage is heard?
- In Matthew 5:21–48, what pattern does Jesus repeat when he addresses murder, adultery, oaths, retaliation, and love for enemies? [01:01:31]

Interpretation questions

- Matthew places Jesus on a mountain as he begins the Beatitudes. How does this connection with Moses help explain why Jesus is not simply giving another list of religious rules, but describing the life of God’s people? [59:57]
- Exodus begins with God’s rescue of people from slavery before naming the ten words. What does that order suggest about the relationship between God’s grace, human freedom, and faithful living?
- Jesus says he fulfills the Law and then moves from outward actions into anger, lust, truthfulness, reconciliation, and enemy-love. Why might Jesus care so deeply about the inner life as well as outward behavior? [01:09:41]
- The Beatitudes promise both “the kingdom of heaven” and that the meek “shall inherit the earth.” How do these promises challenge the idea that faith only matters after death? [01:11:49]

Application questions

- The ten words describe God’s desire for life with God and with one another, but rules can become a substitute for a changed heart. Where might you be tempted to measure faith mainly by outward compliance rather than by love, mercy, honesty, and reconciliation? [59:20]
- Jesus connects worship with making things right with another person. Is there a strained relationship, unresolved hurt, or conversation you have been avoiding? What could a faithful first step toward peace look like this week?
- The kingdom’s values stand against the values of empire—power, status, self-protection, and keeping vulnerable people in their place. Where do you see those values at work around you, and how might you respond with compassion, justice, or practical care? [01:06:27]
- “Blessed are the peacemakers” is more demanding than merely avoiding conflict. In one current conflict at home, work, church, or community, what would it look like to help bring truth, dignity, and peace rather than taking sides carelessly?
- Salvation includes God’s transforming work in a person’s mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual life. In what part of your present life do you most need God to replace fear, resentment, selfishness, or hopelessness with kingdom life? [01:11:02]
- Earthly life is an expression of faith in the eternal. What ordinary part of your week—work, spending, voting, caregiving, rest, or a difficult relationship—could more clearly show trust in the God who is Lord of heaven and earth? [01:11:34]