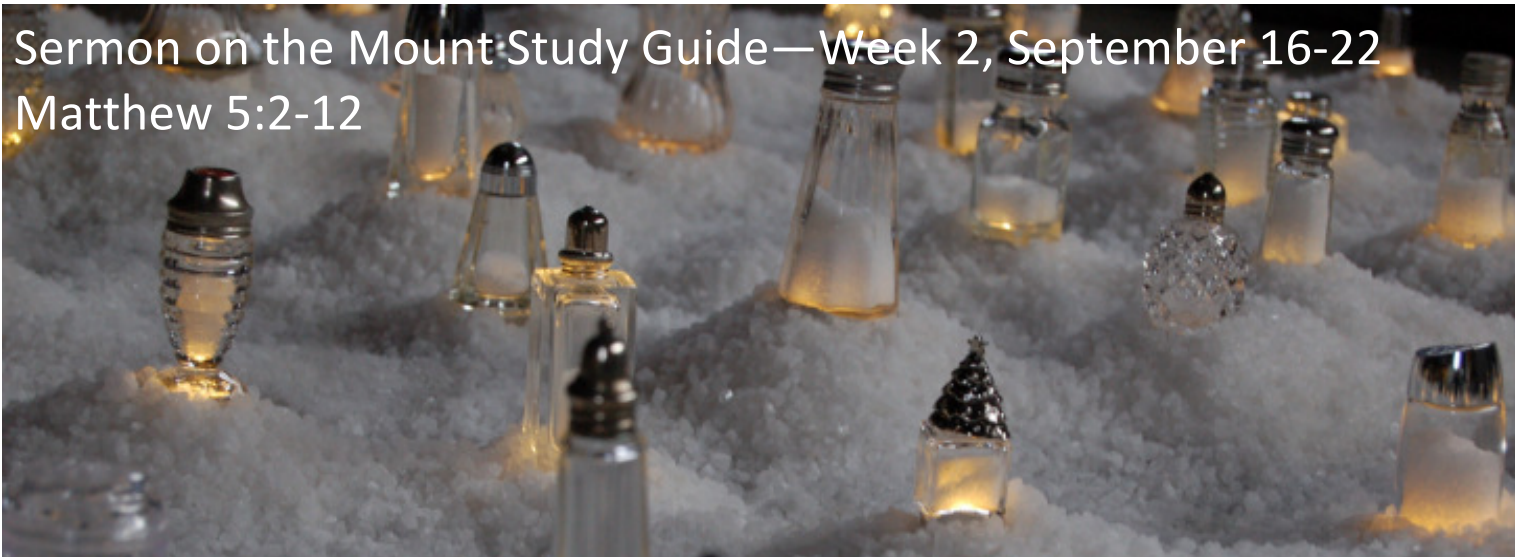


Sermon on the Mount Study Guide—Week 2, September 16-22

Matthew 5:2-12



- I. “Now, when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.” (Matthew 5:1-2)
- II. Opening prayer for Illumination
- III. Read Matthew 5:2-12
- IV. Stott Study Guide: pp. 10-13
- V. *The Divine Conspiracy*, pp. 97-122:

Contrary to how many people have interpreted the Beatitudes over the years, and indeed the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, Dallas Willard argues that:

The Beatitudes, in particular, are not teachings on *how* to be blessed. They are not instructions to do anything. They do not indicate conditions that are especially pleasing to God or good for human beings.

Nor are the Beatitudes indications of who will be on top “after the revolution.” *They are explanations and illustrations, drawn from the immediate setting, of the present availability of the kingdom through personal relationship to Jesus.* They single out cases that provide proof that, in him, the rule of God from the heavens truly is available in life circumstances that are beyond all human hope. (106, emphasis Willard’s)

Thus, Willard maintains that it is crucial to avoid interpretations of Matthew 5:2-12 that imply either:

- 1) That people who are *not* traditionally associated with the conditions listed in the Beatitudes (the rich, powerful, influential, satisfied, etc.) are thus not part of the Kingdom of God.
- 2) Or that one would *have* to be poor, mourning, persecuted, etc. to be blessed by God.

Throughout his book, Willard contends that such readings only serve to distill Jesus’ words into a new kind of legalism, when, in fact, that’s the last thing he intended. Rather, Willard suggests interpreting the Beatitudes as Jesus’ announcement that the Kingdom of God is now available through reliance on Jesus himself. Jesus makes this clear in the Beatitudes, says Willard, by taking those who, from a human point of view, are thought to be the farthest from God’s blessing and instead lifting them up as examples of God’s “touch and abundant provision from the heavens” (108).

“Thus, by proclaiming blessed those who in the human order are thought hopeless, and by pronouncing woes over those human beings regarded as well off, Jesus opens the kingdom of the heavens to everyone” (119).

To further familiarize ourselves with the Beatitudes, please read “The Puzzle of the Beatitudes” on pages 97-98 in *The Divine Conspiracy*.

VI. Questions of 1st Importance:

1. Questions for the Text

- i. Read Luke's account of the Beatitudes (6:20-26). Take a few minutes to contrast the two passages. What's different about them? What's similar? What do we think each is trying to emphasize about Jesus' message?
- ii. The Greek word for "blessed" (*makarios*) carries connotations of happiness and joy. How does this affect our understanding of what Jesus is saying in the Beatitudes?
- iii. Willard states that in order to understand what Jesus is saying in the Beatitudes "we should assume that his teaching in the Beatitudes is a clarification or development of his primary theme in this talk and in his life: *the availability of the kingdom of the heavens*" (99, emphasis Willard's). Does this resonate with us? How are the Beatitudes descriptions of the kingdom of God? Do they seem available to us in the here and now?
- iv. Verses 11 and 12 has been used from time to time as a justification for passivity in the face of Christian persecution. Should we accept persecution without resistance? How does Willard's understanding of the Beatitudes (see summary of Willard above) argue against such a reading?

2. Questions for the World

- i. Willard writes a list of Beatitudes that we might consider today:

"Blessed are the physically repulsive,
Blessed are those who smell bad,
The twisted, misshapen, deformed,
The too big, too little, too loud,
The bald, the fat, and the old—

For they are all riotously celebrated in the party of Jesus" (123).

Who do we normally exclude from "the party of Jesus"? Who else might we add to the list? What does this tell us about the nature of the Kingdom of God?

- ii. Related to his modern list of Beatitudes, Willard writes, "The Beatitudes are lists of human 'lasts' who at the individualized touch of the heavens become divine 'firsts.' The gospel of the kingdom is that no one is beyond beatitude, because the rule of God from the heavens is available to all....We respond appropriately to the Beatitudes of Jesus by living as if this were so, as it concerns others and as it concerns ourselves" (122). How does our being made in God's image play into this understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven? How are we to extend beatitude to those we meet? How does this reading of the Beatitudes fit into the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a whole?

VII. Questions of 2nd Importance:

1. Questions for the Text

- i. The Greek word for "righteousness" in verse 6 (*dikaioσύνη*) can also be interpreted as "justice." How does this nuance our reading of righteousness?
- ii. Do verses 11 and 12 encourage escapism—the idea that we don't have to worry about anything in this world, because we'll eventually flee to heaven? What else might these verses be saying?

2. Questions for the World

- i. Responding to the prevailing assumption of some that the Beatitudes favor the poor or "have-nots" of the world *over and above* the rich and the "haves" who live in comfort, Willard points out that, "It is crucial to note here what Jesus did *not* say. He did not say that the rich cannot enter the kingdom. In fact, he said they could—with God's help, which is the only way anyone can do it" (108, emphasis Willard's). What do we think about this? In what ways is this a corrective reading of the text? In what ways does this make us uncomfortable? Why?
- ii. Still writing about the relationship of rich, poor, and God, Willard continues, "So being rich does not mean that one is in God's favor—which further suggests that being poor does not automatically mean one is out of God's favor" (108). In what ways does this upset our prevailing cultural assumptions about the Kingdom of God? How does this challenge false versions of the Gospel, such as those that emphasize Health and Wealth?

VIII. If so desired, watch Monday's chapel on this week's text at:

IX. Suggested Spiritual Discipline for this week: Celebration