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The Revised Common Lectionary Notes

October 1, 8, 15, 22, 29, and November 5
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October 1, The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 21:23–32

Matthew 21:23–27 describes the first of five controversies (21:23–22:46) between Jesus and the religious leaders of Judaism, presented in the form of questions and answers.

V. 23, Most likely, the reference to *these things* pertains to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, His attack on the Temple's "salvation marketing system," and His healing actions there (21:1–14).

Vv. 24–25a: Jesus responds to their question with a counter-question—a practice that was common in rabbinical debate. His question relates to the source of John the Baptist's authority. Was John's authority of divine or human origin?

Vv. 25b–27b: The religious leaders know full well that Jesus has cornered them! If they respond that John's authority was of *heavenly* origin, Jesus will say to them, "Then why did you not believe him?" If they say that John's authority was of *human* origin, the crowds will respond in anger, for they regarded John as a prophet. So they show themselves incapable of speaking with authority, with the result that Jesus refuses to discuss with them *the source of His own authority*.

Vv. 28–30: The parable that Jesus tells in these verses could point merely to the difference between saying and doing—a theme of great importance in Matthew's Gospel. However, it is given a more specific application by the addition of vv. 31–32. The two sons represent, respectively, the religious leaders and the religious outcasts who followed John's call to repentance. The religious leaders condemn themselves by the answer they give to Jesus' question.

V. 31: Jesus states, "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." Most likely the meaning is, "They enter. You do not!"

V. 32: Several interpretations are possible: John himself was righteous, that he taught

righteousness to others, or that he played an important role in relation to God's plan of salvation.

October 8, The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 21:33–46

In Matthew 21:28–22:14, Jesus attacks Jewish *political and religious leaders* (note carefully: *not all Israel*). In doing this, He tells three parables that expose their greed and failure to practice justice.

In Matthew 19:1 we read of Jesus leaving Galilee, and then of him standing on the Mount of Olives to the east of Jerusalem in 21:1. After entering the Temple, Jesus attacks its “sin management system” or “salvation marketing system” (21:12–13). Immediately after doing that, Jesus heals the blind and the lame (21:14). (Note: After capturing Jerusalem, *David had the blind and the lame put to death*; see 2 Samuel 5:6–10.)

With regard to the blind and lame: The Qumran community (Essenes), where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, believed that when the Messiah came, He would host a banquet. Who would participate? The Essenes taught that no Gentile and no Samaritan would be present—only the Jews, who kept the Jewish laws in the very precise, narrow fashion that these Essenes prescribed, would eat at this table. Furthermore, no one with any physical imperfection or impediment would be welcome. The text reads:

Then the Messiah of Israel shall come and the chiefs of the clan of Israel shall sit before him, each in the order of his dignity, according to his place in their camp and marches And no one is going to be allowed in who is smitten in his flesh, or paralyzed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish. (*Messianic Rule, 1QSA, 2:11–22, tr. G. Vermes*)

The radical Jesus heals those whom the Essenes, and others within Judaism, despise!

Matthew 21:18–22: The day after Jesus attacks the Temple system, He curses a fig tree (a symbol of Israel, Micah 7:1–7; Jeremiah 8:13), which immediately withers and dies (21:18–22). When the chief priests and elders question Jesus' authority (21:23–27), He tells the parable of the Two Sons (21:28–32). The parable of the Wicked Tenants follows (21:33–36). In this parable there is a close correspondence between the details of the story and the situation that it illustrates: God's dealings with His people.

V. 33: In Isaiah 5:1–7, the vineyard symbolizes Israel planted by God. The tenants, those responsible for caring for the vineyard, are the Jewish leaders.

V. 34: The produce of the vineyard is to be used to pay the rent. Fruit represents the good works of obedient living. The message to Jesus' hearers is that the produce is the good works demanded by God, and His claim to them is total.

Vv. 35–36: The series of slaves sent to collect the rent represent the prophets whom God has sent—but whose mission and message the Jewish leaders rejected—and continue to reject (Jeremiah 7:25; Amos 3:7). They beat, kill, and stone them.

Vv. 37–39: When the landowner sends his son to collect the rent, the tenants throw him out of the vineyard and kill him. In Mark, the son is killed and then thrown out of the vineyard (Mark 12:8). Some scholars suggest that Matthew’s order points to Jesus being crucified outside Jerusalem’s walls.

In relation to the tenants’ plan to kill the son to gain the inheritance: If a Jewish proselyte died without an heir, the tenants of his land had final claim on it.

V. 40–41: The landowner then has the rebellious tenants put to a wretched death, and leases the vineyard to others who will pay the produce/rent at the proper time.

V. 42: The psalm quoted in this verse (118:22–23) was used in the early church as a prophecy of Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7). It is a psalm of thanksgiving for rescue from enemies—and here is applied to Jesus whom the leaders reject.

V. 43: Jesus does not proclaim judgment on all Israel. He states that God’s Kingdom will be taken away from the Jewish leaders of His day and given to a people that will produce the proper “Kingdom fruit”—to believing Jews and Gentiles, to Jesus’ believing community.

V. 44: Many manuscripts omit this verse. However, throughout the parable, the tenants themselves are to blame for the catastrophe that will overtake them—even as those who rejected Jesus’ message and ministry were to blame for the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. They brought it upon themselves!

V. 45–46: The Jerusalem leaders reject Jesus’ condemnation of them as greedy, murderous thieves. They do not repent. They do not understand Jesus as God’s agent and Son. Eventually, they attempt to do what the tenants did (vv. 37–39).

October 15, The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 22:1–14

The Parable of the Wedding Feast contains many allegorical elements, e.g., the burning of the city of the guests who refused the king’s invitation (v. 7). This image corresponds to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70, an event seen as God’s judgment on Judaism’s unresponsive leaders. It contains details that resemble those found in the previous parable: the sending of two groups of servants (vv. 3–4), the murder of the slaves (v. 6), the punishment of the murderers (v. 7), and the entrance of a new group into a privileged situation of which the other invited guests had proved themselves unworthy (vv. 8–10). The parable ends with a section peculiar to Matthew (vv.11–14), which some interpret as a distinct, separate parable.

In this parable, Matthew presents God's kingdom as something already present that one can enter in the here and now (vv. 1–10) and as something that only those who can stand the scrutiny of the final judgment will possess (vv. 11–14). Note, however, that God's people are never saved *by* works; they are saved *for* works. God's *free forgiving grace* calls people to *costly discipleship*.

Vv. 1–2: Already in the Old Testament, final salvation is portrayed in terms of a banquet (Isaiah 25:6). Here, the reference is to a wedding banquet—that of the king's son.

Vv. 3–4: The slaves represent both the Old Testament prophets and those whom Jesus sends forth to bear witness to Him.

Vv. 5–6: Some ignore the slaves; in doing so, they shame the king. Others mistreat and kill the slaves. The treatment they mete out to them enrages the king.

V. 7: The king has those who murdered the slaves put to death, and burns their city. The reference is to what would take place in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and killed hundreds of thousands of Jewish people.

Vv. 8–10: The king now commands his slaves to go out into the streets and invite all, both good and bad, to the wedding banquet—with the result that the wedding hall is filled with guests.

Vv. 11–14: The message of these verses is: Repentance, the complete change of heart and mind that is the condition for entrance into God's Kingdom, must be followed by a life of good deeds devoted to copying Jesus in servanthood. The reference to a person not wearing the appropriate wedding garment has nothing to do with the possibility that the rejected guest might not have been able to afford one. Rather, it describes the person who wishes to participate in God's banquet of grace, but has no desire to respond with servant discipleship.

October 22, The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 22:15-22

In these verses, Matthew resumes the series of controversies between Jesus and the representatives of Judaism.

Vv. 15–16: The Pharisees are mentioned in v. 15. The Herodians are added to the list in v. 16; they are supporters of the Herod family and allies of Rome. The Pharisees objected to having to pay taxes to the Romans; The Herodians did not.

The question that the Pharisees pose is intended to force Jesus to take a position contrary to that held by the majority of Jewish people, or one that will bring Him into conflict with the Roman authorities.

The statement of the Pharisees in v. 16 is saturated in sarcasm. They deny that Jesus is sincere and that He teaches the way of God in accordance with the truth.

The term *plot* in 22:15 recalls the plan to kill Jesus referred to in Matthew 12:14. Opposition to Jesus is on the increase!

V. 17: The question the Pharisees pose is designed to trap Jesus. If Jesus says, “Pay the tax to the Romans,” they will accuse Him of unfaithfulness to the Jewish people and their cause. If He says, “Do not pay the tax,” they will report Him to the Romans in the hope of getting Him into serious trouble.

“Is it lawful . . . ?” The law to which they refer is the law of God *as they understand it*.

Payment of taxes signified submission to Rome and provided the Roman elite with great wealth. Roman coins were handheld billboards or tokens of imperial propaganda, with busts of imperial figures and inscriptions.

V. 18: Naturally, Jesus sees through the trap that the Pharisees are setting for Him and addresses them as “hypocrites.”

Vv. 19–20: The coin that the Pharisees show Jesus is a denarius with the head of the emperor on one side. Law-abiding Jews are not supposed to have such coins in their possession; they have an image on them! However, it seems that the accusing Pharisees used such coins and are complicit with the Roman administration in Palestine!

Vv. 21: The emperor depicted on the coin is Tiberius, who ruled AD 14 to 37. Those who willingly use a coin that is Caesar’s should repay him in kind. Jesus’ answer avoids taking sides in the lawfulness of the tax. Instead, He raises the debate to a new level. Those who have hypocritically asked about tax in relation to the law of God should be concerned rather with repaying God with the good deeds that are His due (21:41, 43).

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees avoids the “either-or” answer that His opponents were seeking. The two clauses in Jesus’ response are not equal. Those who pay taxes to the Romans do not necessarily approve of Rome and the imperial system. However, Jesus’ disciples are to be loyal to God above all else and are to be committed to God’s empire—an empire that will eventually destroy Rome. In the meantime, Jesus’ followers are to live an alternative servant lifestyle marked by faithful, non-violent resistance.

V. 22: When Jesus’ audience hears His response they are amazed—and leave Him. However, Jesus proves to be the winner in that verbal exchange.

October 29, The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 22:34–46

or Reformation Sunday: John 8:31–36

Matthew 22:34–46

In the Marcan parallel to this incident (12:28–34), we read about an exchange between Jesus and a scribe who is impressed by the way Jesus conducted himself in the previous controversy, who compliments Jesus for the answer He gives him and who is said by Jesus to be “not far from the kingdom of God.” In Matthew’s version of the incident, the questioner is the representative of other Pharisees; he tests Jesus by his question, and both his reaction to Jesus’ reply and Jesus’ commendation of him are not referred to.

Vv. 34–36: When some Pharisees note that Jesus emerges the winner in a confrontation with the Sadducees, they come to Him—not to applaud, but to test Him. One of them poses a question concerning which commandment in the law is the greatest.

For the devout Jew, all the commandments were to be kept with equal care. However, in Jewish sources there is evidence of preoccupation with the question put to Jesus.

Vv. 37–40: Jesus responds by referring to “loving God with all your soul, heart, and mind,” and “loving your neighbor as yourself.” However, in Jesus’ teaching, these two commandments are to be understood as a single command. Jesus’ brothers and sisters love the almighty but invisible God by loving (i.e., serving) the visible neighbor beside them. The two are inseparable. The love of God must engage the total person (heart, soul, mind). What follows is a paragraph from the lead article in a CI promotional mailer.

Within Christian circles, we often hear reference to the *Golden Rule*: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It is significant to note how the implications of this statement expand as the biblical narrative unfolds. It is quoted for the first time in Leviticus 19:18 where the spirit of the message is, “Do not seek vengeance or bear a grudge”—the *Silver Rule*, perhaps. And yes, Jesus does refer to the *Golden Rule* on several occasions (e.g., Matthew 22:34–40). However, Jesus finally gives His disciples His *Platinum Rule*, “Love one another *as I have loved you*” (John 15:12, 13). The implications of Jesus’ *Platinum Rule* are enormous. The model for the godly life is not a *code of laws*, but the *life of Jesus Himself*.

Central to Jesus’ ministry and teaching is the breaking in of the Kingdom of God—of which H.G. Wells wrote:

This doctrine of the Kingdom of God, which was the main teaching of Jesus, and which plays so small a part in the Christian creeds, is certainly one of the most revolutionary doctrines that ever stirred and changed human thought.

The following quote, also from H.G. Wells, is included in several of CI's study manuals; it describes the challenge that Jesus' Person and ministry continue to pose to God's people. Its implications are timeless.

Jesus was too great for His disciples. And in view of what He plainly said, is it any wonder that all who were rich and prosperous felt a horror of strange things, a swimming of their world at His teaching? Perhaps the priests and rulers and rich men understood Him better than His followers. He was dragging out all the little private reservations they had made from social service into the light of a universal religious life. He was like a terrible moral huntsman, digging mankind out of the snug burrows in which they had lived hitherto. In the white blaze of His kingdom there was to be no property, no privilege, no pride and no precedence, no motive and reward but love. Is it any wonder that men were dazzled and blinded, and cried out against Him? Even His disciples cried out when He would not spare them that light. Is it any wonder that the priests realized that between this Man and themselves there was no choice, but that He or their priestcraft should perish? Is it any wonder that the Roman soldiers, confronted and amazed by something soaring over their comprehension and threatening all their disciplines, should take refuge in wild laughter, and crown Him with thorns and robe Him in purple and make a mock Caesar of Him? For to take Him seriously was to enter into a strange and alarming life, to abandon habits, to control instincts and impulses, to embrace an incredible happiness. Is it any wonder that to this day this Galilean is too much for our small hearts? (*The Outline of History*, Vol. 1, pp. 425–6)

Vv. 41–42: Jesus now throws a question at the Pharisees—a question that has to do with the identity of the Messiah. “Whose son is He?” They reply, “David’s.” The Pharisees’ answer reflects their understanding of Isaiah 11:1–9, Jeremiah 23:5, and Ezekiel 34:23.

V. 43–44: Jesus responds by referring to Psalm 110:1—accepting the Davidic authorship of the psalm, a common view in His day. The psalm was probably composed for the enthronement of a Davidic king of Judah. Matthew assumes that the Pharisees interpret it as referring to the Messiah, although there is no clear evidence that it was interpreted this way in the Judaism of Jesus’ day. It was widely used in the early church as referring to the exaltation of the Risen Jesus.

V. 45: Since Matthew presents Jesus as both Messiah and Son of David (1:1; 16:16), the question is not meant to imply Jesus’ denial of Davidic sonship. Most likely, it means that although Jesus is the Son of David, He is someone greater: Son of Man and Son of God, and recognized as greater by even the great king David who calls Him “my Lord.”

V. 46: The Pharisees now adopt the policy, “No more questions.”

George MacDonald, a former President of Harvard University, once wrote:

They were all waiting for a king,
To slay their foes and raise them high.
Thou cam'st a little baby thing
that made a woman cry.

To which we might add two more lines:

Though cam'st to do Thy servant thing,
On cruel cross to die.

The implications of those last two lines are enormous! Jesus' crucifixion was His coronation. His resurrection constituted His vindication as conqueror of the powers of Satan, sin, and death!

October 29, Reformation Sunday: John 8:31–36

8:31–33: Abraham is mentioned no less than 11 times in the rest of this chapter. He was chosen by God to become the father of a great nation (Gen. 12:21). The Jews were proud to be called the children of Abraham, and proud of their status as God's specially chosen people. Little wonder, then, that they bristle at Jesus' invitation to them to become *His disciples* and to accept the truth—His truth that will set them free. No doubt His hearers think, "What an insult to suggest that we are slaves and not free!"

The contents of 8:31 are significant. They refer to "the Jews who had believed in Jesus." However, in 8:37 Jesus refers to His Jewish hearers/opponents as those who want to kill Him! In vv. 31–32, Jesus states that what He teaches is true and will free people from sin. It would seem that some of Jesus' Jewish hearers interpret His message as having to do with political freedom, and boast that while other nations have dominated them (as Rome was doing at the time), they have never been willing subjects of any foreign power. They take great pride in being "sons of Abraham."

8:34–36: However, Jesus is talking about people's slavery to sin; see Romans 6:31. Sin is a terrible master to work under. It drives us more and more into seeking our own will, and all along the way brings us into a collision course with God. Jesus uses an image to show what freedom means; for other images, see John 3:8, 29; 4:35–36; 10:1–15; 11:9–10. A slave can always be tossed out of his master's house; not so the son. Jesus is the Son in the household of God. If His hearers believe in Him, He will make them free children of God. As His forgiven brothers and sisters, they will find freedom in devoting life to glorifying God by serving others. Only when they do that will they be true children of Abraham.

Indeed, Jesus is the only real Son of God! Only He can emancipate spiritual slaves by delivering them from the power and consequences of sin. Physical descent from Abraham is of no avail!

November 5, The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 23:1–12

or

All Saints Sunday: Matthew 5:1–12

Matthew 23:1–12 consists of denunciations of the scribes and Pharisees. The chapter concludes with a lament over Jerusalem, a city that has repeatedly rejected and murdered those whom God has sent to it (23:37–39). Most of the materials in this chapter are peculiar to Matthew. (But note Mark 12:38–39 and Luke 11:37–52 and 13:34–35.) In Mark 12:38–40, Jesus utters one sentence critical of certain scribes; in Matthew that one verse becomes the nucleus of an entire discourse. In 23:1–12, the focus is on preaching without practicing (v. 3); aggression toward pupils (v. 4); and love of flattery and prestige (5–12).

Although the tradition of deep opposition between Jesus and the Pharisees is well founded, some scholars suggest that the speech originates beyond the time of Jesus' ministry, and reflects the bitter opposition between Pharisaic Judaism and the church of Matthew (a "reformed Judaism") at the time when the Gospel was written. They also complain that the speech ignores the positive qualities of Pharisaism and its better representatives. True, but the complaint overlooks the circumstances that gave rise to Jesus' invectives. Furthermore, the speech is not purely or merely anti-Pharisaic. Matthew discerns also in his own church many of the same faults that he finds in its opponents, and he warns his fellow Christians to give much thought to their own conduct and attitudes.

V. 1: Jesus is speaking to the crowds and His own disciples. Note the switch in vv. 8–12 from "they" (scribes and Pharisees) to "you" (Christians).

V. 2, Moses' seat: From an early time, a real bench or seat, sometimes richly carved in stone, was reserved for the leader or teacher of the community at the front of a synagogue. Great teachers sat when they taught (note Mark 4:1–2). The scribes are pictured as continuing the unbroken chain of tradition stretching back to Moses.

V. 3: Because Jesus radically reinterprets the Mosaic law (5:31–42), He warns His disciples to be on their guard against the teachings of the Pharisees and denounces the Pharisees as blind guides in respect to their teaching on oaths (vv. 16–22). The commandment "do whatever they teach you and follow it" cannot be taken as Matthew's understanding of the proper standard of conduct for his church. The saying may reflect a period when Matthew's community was largely Jewish-Christian and was still seeking to avoid a complete break with the Jewish community. However, the crowds and disciples are exhorted not to follow the example of the Jewish leaders whose deeds do not conform to their teaching. When words do not issue in deeds, when high-sounding teaching and lofty slogans are contradicted by mean and low behavior, the result is hypocrisy. Christian preachers and teachers are to show their hearers and students the mind and manner of the servant Jesus they speak about.

V. 4: “They tie up heavy burdens” (see Matthew 11:28). In place of the yoke of the Jewish law, complicated by scribal interpretation, Jesus invites the burdened to take upon themselves the yoke of obedience to His call to servant discipleship, under which yoke they will find true rest.

V. 5: To the charge of preaching but not practicing (v. 3), Jesus adds that of doing things in order to earn praise.

Phylacteries: The Mosaic law required that, during prayer, small boxes containing parchment on which verses of scriptures were written be worn on the left forearm and the forehead (Exodus 13:9, 16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18). These boxes were held in place by leather straps.

Tassels: The Mosaic law prescribed that tassels be worn on the corner of one’s garment as a reminder to keep the commandments; see Numbers 15:37–39; Deuteronomy 22:12. Phylacteries were widened and tassels were lengthened to make evidences of piety more noticeable.

Vv. 6–7: Rabbi: literally, “my great one,” a title of respect for teachers and leaders. Jesus warns against the practice of teaching in a manner that hankers for notice and prestige.

Vv. 8–12: These verses warn against the use of various titles and are addressed to the disciples alone. While only the title *Rabbi* has been said to be used in addressing the scribes and Pharisees (v. 7), the implication is that the titles *Father* and *Master* were also used. Jesus forbids not only the use of these titles, but the spirit of superiority and pride that is shown by their acceptance.

Although the NRSV uses the word *students* in v. 8, the Greek word is *brothers*. Jesus is to be the sole guiding mind of His new community. He is not an absence but a presence. He is not a dead figure of the past but lives forevermore in the midst of His own. The mission of Jesus is to teach His followers, His brothers and sisters, to live to serve each other (v. 11).

A point to ponder: Jesus blasts those who are peacocks of piety, who perform in hope of attracting admiring stares. When the day comes that I want people to notice me rather than Jesus, I have invalidated my ministry.

Matthew 5:1–12

These verses constitute the introductory section of what is referred to as “the Sermon on the Mount,” a title inserted by translators, but not included in the Greek text. The term *blessed* surfaces nine times in vv. 3–12. It is helpful to understand that the concept of “blessings and curses” is contained in the final section of the *Covenant of Human Obligation* (better, *Human Response to Divine Grace*) that God made with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai; see Deuteronomy 27:11–28:68. The sections that have to do with “curses” are quite brutal (27:11–26; 28:15–68). Furthermore, while the concept of “being blessed” in Deuteronomy 28:1–14 is linked to

material blessings, in the New Testament it is linked to reflecting Jesus' loving, serving mind and manner (Matthew 5:1–12).

As we shall see when analyzing Matthew 25:31–46 (November 23), Jesus teaches that, in a “Kingdom of God” sense, there are only two people on Planet Earth—Jesus and me. Jesus is all around me on Planet Earth in “distressing disguises.” He is the hungry one, the thirsty one, the stranger who lacks friends, the one who lacks clothing, the person who is sick, and the prison inmate. “Blessed” are they who devote life to serving Jesus by serving these needy people.

5:1: Jesus goes up “*the mountain*,” *sits down* (in Jesus' day, teachers sat while teaching), and His disciples come to Him. Matthew sees in Jesus a new Moses, who, on a new Sinai, defines the stipulations of God's new covenant with His people.

In Mark 3:12–19, we read of Jesus going up *the mountain* and calling the Twelve. However, Mark makes no mention of Jesus teaching on this occasion. In both Matthew and Mark, the mountain is not named.

In Luke 6:12, we read of Jesus going up *the mountain* to pray, and then descending to a level place where He delivered what is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain (6:20–49). Luke's discourse consists of 30 verses in contrast with Matthew's 109. However, both Gospels present love and servanthood as the fundamental guideline for the faith walk of God's people.

5:2: The statement, “Jesus began to speak,” implies that Jesus continued to proclaim the discipleship guidelines contained in chapters 5 through 7. It would seem, then, that, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew has put together collections of sayings that Jesus taught on various occasions to present the New Covenant guidelines for life as the perfect realization of the various Old Testament guidelines for life. The sermon concludes with a statement of the doctrine of the “Two Ways” and a description of two classes among Jesus' audience (7:24–27).

Matthew has organized his nine beatitudes into two stanzas of four verses each (5:3–6, 7–10), with the ninth beatitude (5:11–12) serving as a powerful *grand finale*. He opens and closes the initial series of eight with the same solemn promise: “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (vv. 3, 10). The concept of “the kingdom of heaven” is the central theme of Jesus' proclamation (4:17, 23), and the Beatitudes begin to flesh out what Jesus means by God's rule. Each beatitude reveals some aspect of God's astonishing claim to authority and power.

The concept of *kingdom* opens and closes the series, and at the heart of the message of the Beatitudes are the words *righteousness* and *mercy*—concepts that are basic to everything that Jesus has to say in Matthew's Gospel about the nature of God's rule. They stand at the head of the Sermon on the Mount like magnificent carved lions at the entrance to a sanctuary.

Each beatitude consists of two parts. Real surprises come in the first part of each, where Jesus names the beneficiaries of the promised blessings. The second half of each beatitude is couched in traditional language. The one indispensable fruit of the Spirit desired by Jesus is

righteousness, which may be defined as hearts focused on the will of God—on love toward God and neighbor (including the “enemy”). However, the reality of righteousness is complex and profound. Little wonder, then, that Matthew devotes 28 chapters to describing its contents and singing its praise.

5:3: Blessed are the poor in spirit: Unlike Luke’s Gospel, which declares, “Blessed are the poor,” Matthew stresses poor *in spirit*. He sees in this beatitude special encouragement for people who see themselves as lacking in spiritual gifts and charismatic endowments. Others in the community, because they were rich in “display” gifts of the spirit—prophecy, exorcism, healing—were full of pride, puffed up, and acting as though their gifts were personal achievements (7:21–23; 1 Corinthians 4:6–7, 18–19; 13:4–5). Jesus expresses praise for those whose prime gift is an awareness of their own emptiness, whose one resource is God, who rely totally and always on the limitless grace of God. The word *blessed* expresses ultimate approval and endorsement.

5:4: Blessed are those who mourn: What do the “blessed” mourn about? The Roman occupation? Pitiful wages? Cruel taxes? Serious illness? The approach of death? Yes, all those things, but it is above all grief over sin. Because they know and love the will of God, they deeply mourn their own sin and the terrible reality of sin hanging like a weight on the neck of the world. Those who are truly aware of the nature and power of sin, and devote life to battling with and conquering those powers, “shall be comforted.”

5:5: Blessed are the meek: The Greek word translated as *meek* reflects the terms *gentle* and *humble* in 11:29 and 21:5. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, He did so as a King unlike any earthly sovereign, “meek and mounted on an ass” (21:5). Jesus comes to serve and refuses to live high at the expenses of others. And He calls us to reflect His mind and manner in all that we think, say, and do.

In his writings, Dr. Kenneth Bailey states that *meek* also connotes someone who has the *courage* to stand up for what is right, yet also the *wisdom* to act with restraint and not lash out rashly.

Israel of old was promised a land (2:21). Here Jesus transforms that ancient promise: God is preparing a new heaven and a new earth, and the meek are “first in line” to inherit that transformed creation.

5:6: Blessed are those who hunger: Luke 6:21 takes the beatitude only this far; he has meditated profoundly on how precious in the eyes of the Lord are the world’s poor and hungry. Although Matthew does not disagree, he shares the teaching of Jesus in a slightly expanded form. God’s favor leaps on those whose deepest *hunger* and *thirst* is for *righteousness*. They will be satisfied, filled, vindicated, and saved on that eternal day when God will richly supply every need.

5:7: Blessed are the merciful: To be merciful is to focus on the compassionate actions of

almsgiving, healing, and forgiveness. Those who live by mercy will at the end be astonished by God's mercy (23:23).

5:8: Blessed are the pure in heart: Jesus exalts purity of heart, which is a will and a mind that is neither divided nor confused in its affection, devotion, and commitment. The pure in heart have turned to God and they will see God. And God will see them, acknowledge them, and lift up His divine face upon them!

5:9: Blessed are the peacemakers: In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus pays particular attention to threats to the peace of the community. Some of the leaders are in love with their own titles and status, forgetting that all are equally sisters and brothers (23:8–10). Apparently, the same leaders are dishing out rough justice to straying "little ones," dismissing them from the community without a second thought (ch. 18). However, communities demonstrate and cultivate the peace of God when they cross borders established by culture and tradition, and when they befriend and love their so-called enemies. Blessed are they, for they shall be called children (sons and daughters) of God.

5:10: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. The pious, the wise, and the prophets who have—in every age—placed their lives at the feet of the Lord of the universe have always been vulnerable and never immune to contradiction and rejection. However, they bear their wounds as badges of divine approval—provided that those wounds are a result of their suffering for righteousness' sake. Jesus foretold heightened conflict, worlds in collision, as the old and fallen world gathered its forces to resist the breaking in of the new world of righteousness. However, blessed are those who are persecuted, for the new world of God's righteous and sovereign Son will come—and it will be theirs!

5:11–12: The ninth beatitude, although different in form, expands on the eighth, concludes the series, and prepares for what follows. The reader is not merely learning what Jesus once said long ago, but what Jesus is addressing to him or her in the present time. In this beatitude, Jesus focuses on the sad fact of persecution. He knows that people will *revile you, utter all kinds of evil against you, misunderstand you, resent you, publicly insult you, and accuse you in court.* Here Jesus refers to those persecuted *on His account*, while the preceding beatitude reads *for righteousness' sake*. Jesus and righteousness are linked together throughout the Gospel!

Jesus never advises anyone to seek suffering, but when it comes, disciples may still *rejoice and be glad*. Persecutions are signs that His brothers and sisters are not citizens of the *old* world but of the *new*, and that they are fellow citizens with those servants of God, *the prophets*, who hailed the new world long before it broke in fully in the Person of Jesus!