

THE STORY OF JESUS' MINISTRY

The people of God's kingdom, *Matthew 5:1-12*

A tendency exists to interpret Jesus' life in terms of his birth, death, and resurrection. However, the gospels dedicate considerably more time to Jesus' ministry than his birth and death. In fact, two of the four gospels do not even record Jesus' birth. While volume alone does not determine significance, it does contribute to how we assess importance. Given the weight the gospels give to the long middle section of Jesus' ministry, we began a short series two weeks ago exploring the message of the kingdom driving Jesus' ministry. This lesson concludes the series by considering the people to whom Jesus grants kingdom citizenship.

"...for theirs in the kingdom of heaven"¹

- Jesus focused his ministry on announcing the arrival of God's kingdom in the world and his identity as the one God appointed to rule it (*cf. Matthew 4:17, 23; 28:18-20*).
- Kingdoms need populations, so Jesus also identifies those to whom he grants citizenship. However, Jesus did not define kingdom citizenship in the way his Jewish audience anticipated. Consider two passages, both placed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, that offer insight into his understanding of citizenship:
 - Matthew pairs the launch of Jesus' ministry with the Sermon on the Mount, a lengthy section of teaching Jesus introduced with a portrait of those who find citizenship in "the kingdom of heaven" (*Matthew 5:2-11*).
 - Luke connects the beginning of Jesus' public ministry with a sermon he delivered in Nazareth's synagogue. In his speech, Jesus claimed to fulfill the rescue the prophet Isaiah said would accompany God's promised messianic king and kingdom, a rescue he reminded his listeners God extends to powerless and unclean foreigners rather than to the Israelites (*Luke 4:16-27; cf. Matthew 8:11-12*).
- Jesus' teachings about the kingdom and its citizens surprised and angered his audiences (*Matthew 7:28; Luke 4:28-29*). Their reactions raise questions about how he identifies the kingdom's citizens. Consider, therefore, two insights from the Sermon on the Mount.
 - First, Jesus connects citizenship to life circumstances (*Matthew 5:2-10*).
 - "The poor in spirit" (*Matthew 5:3*) pairs with Luke's parallel ("the poor," *Luke 6:20*) to refer to more than merely 'humble' people, but instead those considered destitute both spiritually and financially ("poor" translates the Greek word *ptochoi*, which refers to those we would consider desperately poor).

¹ *Matthew 5:2, 10*. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.



- Passages like Deuteronomy 28:1-68 prompted people to consider the “poor” with suspicion (a response that persists in our society).
- Jesus, however, called the poor “blessed” and said they possess the kingdom of heaven (*Matthew 5:3*).
- Jesus’ emphasis on the poor dovetails with his comment that “only with great difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of God” (*Matthew 19:16-25*).
- Second, Jesus explicitly ties citizenship to obedience (*Matthew 5:17-19; 7:21-23*).
 - Jesus held people accountable to an exacting standard of obedience to the law (*Matthew 5:19*).
 - Jesus connected God’s “commandments” to his “words,” expecting people to listen to him and obey him (*Matthew 5:17-48; 7:24-27*).
 - Jesus also distinguished between religious actions and obedience, between obeying the law and obeying the will of God (*Matthew 5:20; 7:21-23*).
- While tension might seem to exist between circumstances and obedience, that tension offers an opportunity to reflect on their relationship. Consider:
 - Obedience is primary (*Matthew 5:17-19; 7:21-23; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10*).
 - Obedience is defined not merely by actions but also by motivations and intentions (*Matthew 7:21-23; 23:23*).
 - Obedience changes one’s life circumstances (*cf. John 15:18-21; 2 Timothy 3:12; Luke 12:13-34; Acts 2:42-47*).
 - Conversely, life circumstances impact obedience (*Deuteronomy 8:1-20; Matthew 16:19-25*).

Applications

- We live in a world broken by sin; only those who recognize their brokenness find their way into Jesus’ kingdom (*Matthew 9:9-13; 11:25-29; 23:37-38*).
- Unfortunately, we often need suffering to recognize our brokenness (*cf. Deuteronomy 8:1-20*).
- The healing offered by Jesus’ kingdom is consequently not marked by health, wealth, and happiness but by total reliance on God (*cf. Matthew 6:19-33*).
- Too often, we define citizenship in terms of our preferences (*cf. Luke 4:16-27*). Citizenship in Jesus’ kingdom requires us to reset our preferences to match his teachings.
- The beatitudes, Jesus’ description of those who find citizenship in his kingdom, should motivate us to consider our relationship with marginalized, powerless, outcast, and suffering people (*cf. Matthew 5:2-11*).

May God help us meet the requirements for entrance into the kingdom He has entrusted to Jesus.

