

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 13 – The Message of Jesus

Key Questions:

- What did Jesus teach? How can a person be part of the Kingdom of God?

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

Jesus taught a great deal about the Kingdom of God. In Matthew's Gospel it is most often referred to as the "*Kingdom of Heaven*". The two phrases mean exactly the same thing.

Jesus declared that the Kingdom of God was present (Matthew 4:17)

Jesus began His public ministry by boldly declaring that the Kingdom of God was near and that people must repent to get ready for it. This was the message that John had preached (Matthew 3:1-2), and Jesus was continuing on from John's ministry. However, as Jesus continued to teach and began to perform miracles He also claimed that His miracles, and especially His ability to cast out demons, were proof that the Kingdom had come (Matthew 12:28). Although Jesus fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies about the coming King and His teaching and miracles were evidence of His authority, it was not until shortly before His death that Jesus stated directly that he was the "*King of the Jews*" (Matthew 27:11). During His ministry He wanted people to realise this for themselves.

Jesus revealed what the Kingdom of God is like (Matthew 5:3-10; Matthew 13)

The "Sermon on the Mount" (Jesus' longest recorded teaching found in Matthew chapters 5-7) is a manifesto for how people should live in the Kingdom of God. The opening verses of the Sermon describe the kind of people who make up the Kingdom of God – the kind of people Jesus was interested in reaching. The list is amazing, describing exactly the opposite of the kind of people the world thinks are powerful! Jesus says that "*God blesses those who realise their need for Him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is given to them*" (Matthew 5:3). **To be part of God's kingdom you must first realise that you need God (without Him your life is not complete) and that you need His forgiveness for your sin.** The Kingdom of God is upside down compared to other kingdoms – the humble, small people are the greatest people in God's Kingdom because they are the most available to God (see Matthew 18:4). Jesus also told many parables to help people understand God's Kingdom. Many of His parables open with the words, "*The Kingdom of Heaven is like ...*" Matthew chapter 13 records seven parables of the Kingdom.

Jesus showed us how we can enter the Kingdom of God

On several occasions Jesus taught important truths about how people can enter God's Kingdom:

1. *We cannot be good enough on our own to enter the Kingdom* (Matthew 5:20) – in this verse Jesus says that we must obey God even better than the Pharisees did. Of course, this is impossible as the Pharisees were very strict about obeying God's Law. Jesus' point is that we must realise that we can never fully keep God's Law – we have all sinned and therefore need forgiveness to be part of His Kingdom
2. *To enter the Kingdom we must do what God says, not just act the part* (Matthew 7:21-23) – Jesus warns us that even some people who say they are His followers will not enter the Kingdom. Many people claim to follow Jesus, but they don't take His teachings seriously. They believe they can choose some of His teachings that suit them and forget others. Jesus says they won't be in the Kingdom.
3. *To enter the Kingdom we must humble ourselves like little children* (Matthew 18:3) – Jesus is not saying that we should act immaturely like little children, but that we must realise that before God we are just like little children, and that we are completely dependent on Him. We cannot make ourselves good enough to enter the Kingdom; we have to depend on God to make us right.
4. *Other things, like possessions, can distract us from the Kingdom* (Matthew 19:24) – this warning comes just after a rich young man came to Jesus. Jesus told him to sell his possessions if he wanted to have eternal life, but the man wasn't prepared to do this. The fact is that to enter the Kingdom we must make it our number one priority.
5. *Even sinners can enter the Kingdom if they repent* (Matthew 21:31-32) – in this passage Jesus is speaking to the chief priests, and his words would have been extremely shocking to them. He says that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the Kingdom before these well educated religious leaders. How could this be? Why would God accept people who were well known for their sins before highly religious men? The answer is simple – these people had heard John the Baptist preaching and had repented from their sins, but the chief priests were so full of pride that they didn't think they needed to repent. Any person can enter the Kingdom, but only if they are prepared to admit that they have sinned and ask God to forgive and lead them.

The teaching of Jesus – the highest standard of ethics

The teaching of Jesus was unique, and set a higher standard than any other teacher the world has ever seen:

1. Jesus' teaching fulfilled the Old Testament Law of God

The Old Testament Law showed the people of Israel what was right and wrong in God's eyes and how to live as His special nation. Jesus said that He had come to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17-20), meaning three things:

- a) *That Jesus Himself kept the whole Old Testament Law, since He never sinned*

- b) *That His teaching restored the Old Testament Law to its original standard and purpose*
 c) *That His death as the one perfect sacrifice for sin would meet the Law's demands and fulfil its imagery*

In Matthew 5:21-48 we have six examples of Jesus teaching about Old Testament laws. The Jewish teachers (Rabbis) had changed the standard of the Law in three ways:

- By focusing on actions and ignoring the heart* – Jesus taught that the attitude of our heart is just as important as our actions. Sin is not just the wrong actions we commit, but the wrong desires of our hearts.
- By limiting its requirements to "religious" activities* – they acted as if God was involved in some parts of life but could be left out of other parts of life. Jesus showed that God knows and cares about every part of our lives.
- By limiting their responsibility just to people who they thought deserved it* – anyone who wasn't good enough (including prostitutes, tax collectors and anyone who wasn't Jewish) did not deserve anything good from them, and in fact was an "enemy" who should be hated. Jesus showed they were wrong when He told a story about a Samaritan man (the Samaritans were the natural enemy of the Jews) who showed love to an injured Jewish man (see Luke 10:25-37). This story shows that our neighbour is not just the person who would naturally be our friend or who can repay us with his friendship. All human beings are our neighbours and the Old Testament command to love our neighbour means that we must show love to everyone as God enables us.

The result was that the Pharisees believed that they were acceptable before God and missed the amount of sin that was in their own lives. They didn't realise how much they needed God's forgiveness. Jesus restored the Law by showing that the three limitations the Pharisees had placed on the law were wrong and by showing that we are sinful before God and need Him to forgive and lead us (this was why the Law was given by God). The people recognised that Jesus taught as if He had authority, unlike the usual teachers of the Law (see Matthew 7:28-29). They merely taught from what had already been written, but Jesus had authority to say exactly what the Law meant.

2. Jesus' ethical teaching is summarised in the "Golden Rule"

One of the most famous statements Jesus made was this:

Do for others what you would like them to do for you. This is a summary of all that is taught in the law and the prophets (Matthew 7:12)

Interestingly, there are similar rules in many philosophies from all over the world, including Confucius, who said: *"What you do not want done to you, do not do to others."* The fact that similar rules were recognised in so many places is evidence for the fact that God created mankind and gave us the same sense of right and wrong (our conscience). However, Jesus' statement sets a higher standard than any of the other philosophies. They all say that we SHOULD NOT do what we don't want others to do to us, but Jesus' statement is positive, that we SHOULD do what we would like other people to do for us. Jesus' teaching is the purest, highest ethical standard.

3. Jesus demanded a response to His teaching

The central claim of Jesus' teaching was that God's Kingdom was being revealed and that people must decide whether to repent and become part of it or not. In other words, the ethical teaching of Jesus is for those people who recognise God as their King and have the new relationship with Him that Jesus came to make possible. At the end of the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus challenged His hearers about how they would respond to His words (Matthew 7:13-27). He is the King, and He had just presented His manifesto for His Kingdom, and now they had to decide whether or not they would submit to His rule. Jesus used three pictures to describe this choice:

- Narrow and wide gates* (verses 13-14) – His words are like a narrow gate that leads to life and few people will enter by it, whilst the majority of people are heading for destruction
- Good and bad trees* (verses 15-23) – there are false prophets whose teaching leads to bad results (bad trees producing bad fruit), but Jesus' teaching will lead to good results (good fruit). He warned that these false prophets will deceive people and that they will claim to be His followers although in fact they are not.
- Wise and foolish builders* (verses 24-27) – this story presents those who obey Jesus' teaching as wise people who have found a solid foundation for life. Their lives will never be destroyed.

Parables – everyday stories with spiritual meanings

Jesus often taught using parables (stories about everyday life that teach spiritual truths – see *Module 2 Study Aids* for a table of Jesus' parables). Some parables are easier to understand than others. In fact, some parables were designed to make it difficult for people to understand. In **Matthew 13:10**, Jesus' disciples asked Him why He always used parables. Jesus explained that some people were open to His teaching – they would keep thinking and seeking understanding from God until they got the message of the parable. Other people were not really listening, and they would never get the message. Jesus only wanted to reveal the truth about His Kingdom to people who were really serious about seeking God.

One of the best known parables is the Parable of the soils (or sower) in **Matthew 13:1-23**. This parable speaks about four different responses people make to the message about the Kingdom of God:

- **Seed on the path** – people who don't understand the message – Satan snatches the seed away
- **Seed on the rocky soil** – people who initially receive the message but turn away when it becomes difficult
- **Seed on the thorny ground** – people who initially receive the message but are distracted by other concerns
- **Seed on the good ground** – people who really receive the message and produce real fruit as a result

The Bible tells us the good news that God's Kingdom is here and we can be part of it if we repent (turn from our sins) and trust in Christ to forgive and lead us. People still respond in the same four ways today. For each person the question is: **What kind of soil are you? How will you respond to the message of God?**

Key Lesson: Jesus taught us what God's Kingdom is like and how we can be part of it

Jesus was the greatest teacher who ever lived. He showed us what the Kingdom of God is like but also how we can be part of it through repenting and trusting in God. He demanded a response to His teaching and said that only those who build their lives on His teaching will survive the future judgement. How will you respond to His teaching?