

What is a Christian? (Part 1)
A Sermon for January 29, 2017
Matthew 5:1-12
[Lansdowne UMC](#)

What does being a Christian look like?

As I thought about this question this week in light of the scripture, I ran across something that John Stott, a recently-departed evangelical anglican said:

No comment could be more hurtful to the Christian than the words, 'But you are no different from anybody else.'
For the essential theme of the whole Bible... is [for God] to call out a people for himself; ... [whose] vocation is **to be true to [their] identity...** to be 'holy' or 'different' in all [their] outlook[s] and behaviour.¹

And yet how often is that exactly the critique that the world gives of the church: you are no different from anyone else. Or worse, the church is more judgmental, more hypocritical. Lord have mercy.

Perhaps a better question than "What does being a Christian look like?" is "what does Jesus say being a Christian looks like?" Or simply, "What is a Christian?"

¹ John R. W. Stott and John R. W. Stott, The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 17.

The heart of a good answer is provided by Micah 6:8. Jesus would absolutely affirm that his followers are required to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” We work for justice, meaning we see those who are hurting and we strive to fix the root of the problem. We love kindness, meaning we meet their immediate needs like giving them food when they’re hungry, a drink when they’re thirsty, a welcome when they’re a stranger. And we walk humbly with our God; we realize that we do nothing to deserve God’s gracious love. I am not an equal to God. Jesus is not my co-pilot. Jesus is my pilot-- my master, my lord. I go where he goes. I walk *humbly* with him.

That would be quite a good answer to the question “What is a Christian?” and one that we need to keep in mind.

But my plan for today is to begin a four week sermon series, diving deeply into Matthew chapter 5. We’ll strive to use Jesus’ words to answer the question “What’s a Christian?” If we were to add chapters 6 and 7 to our study as well, we would cover the entirety of what is usually called “the Sermon on the Mount,” but I don’t think we’ll make it that far on this go around.

One of the main things that we need to get out of Jesus’ teaching is that Jesus’ followers are to be different from the rest of the world. At every stage of the sermon on the mount, there is a distinction drawn between the way that the world is and the way that Christians are to be-- the difference between the kingdoms of the world, and the kingdom of God. If that doesn’t match our reality, then perhaps we haven’t taken the teachings of Jesus seriously enough.

What is a Christian?? I want to submit to you that here in the first twelve verses of Matthew, we have Jesus' most condensed answer to that question.

Let me explain. At the end of Matthew chapter 4 we're told that Jesus' fame had spread through all of Syria, and so *large crowds* were following him. Jesus withdraws from the crowd and goes up a mountain so that he can teach his disciples. In verses 3 through 11, we hear the beginning of his teaching, which we just read. It contains 9 statements where Jesus says "blessed are...." These proclamations are known as the Beatitudes. And in the Beatitudes, Jesus is describing the fundamental character of a Christian.

Jesus' assumption is that he is speaking to those who have already committed themselves to him. Their lives need to take on a certain character-- the character of these beatitudes-- before they actually have a chance of fulfilling the instruction of the sermon on the mount more broadly. And so in some way, the Beatitudes are the heart of the Christian life.

There are people that believe that the Sermon on the Mount is too lofty. It's unattainable. And so it's only purpose then is to drive us to the forgiveness Christ offers at the cross. Wrong, I say.

We must take Jesus seriously. We must hear what he has to say. Certainly *part* of what the message of Jesus does is to drive us to realize that, before God changes us, we can't be obedient, even when we want to be. Certainly *part* of what it does is to cause us to recognize that in Christ, there is forgiveness of sins.

But the danger is that we stay in that place of helplessness. To use the traditional Methodist language, the danger is that we only seek out God's justifying grace without recognizing the availability of God's regeneration and sanctifying grace.

Apart from the presence of Jesus in your life-- apart from a consistent, humble walk with your God-- to pretend that you live as Jesus commands *is* hypocrisy. It can't be done. That's not how we're wired in our fallen humanity. But to want to be a Christian it to have the hope that the Holy Spirit will *rewire you*.

So as we progress through this series, let's be open to believing that the sermon on the mount isn't a round-about way of driving us to seek forgiveness. Rather it's describing what happens when humanity comes under the gracious rule of God's kingdom.

Let's look at the first three beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, and blessed are the meek. These are situations of spiritual desperation.

The term "poor in spirit" was used in the Old Testament to describe people who, although they experienced material poverty, were held up as God's faithful people. As one scholar puts it, they were absolutely dependent on God's "protection in the face of the oppression which they endure[d] from the [rich and] ungodly."² Jesus says the poor in spirit are blessed.

² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 165.

Someone who is poor in spirit walks humbly with their God. This is the person whose spiritual poverty makes them desperate. The poor in spirit sing in their hearts the song we sang last week

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

This person says “I don’t have anything to bring to you, God. I’m done wearing my mask. I’m done acting like I’ve earned your blessing. You know that I struggle not to do things that are wrong. You know that even the good things that I do, I do with mixed motives. Create in me a clean heart and put your Holy Spirit within me!”

The Christian also mourns. Jesus is not wishing on us that one of our loved ones die so that we can mourn. But if you find yourself in that state, and you’re one of Jesus’ disciples, Jesus offers you words of assurance: you will be comforted.

But this mourning is more all-encompassing. First there is mourning that comes with earnest repentance. Those who mourn deeply *regret* the ways that they’ve harmed God and harmed others. They weep over it. If you find yourself in that situation today, take heart. If you want Jesus to be your Lord and your Savior then blessed are you. You will be comforted. If you wait patiently, God’s Spirit will communicate

forgiveness to your heart and you will have the peace that passes all understanding.

But what if you aren't mourning in that way? Jesus says you need to mourn anyway. There is a different type of mourning for all Christians. It's a mourning that doesn't come from loss, but from love. Mourn the fallenness of the world. Don't grow cold to the hurting in the world, like the world does. Weep over it.

- Mourn those who go through life without the assurance that their sins are forgiven. Weep for them.
- Mourn the hungry, the homeless, and the hurting. Weep for them.
- Mourn the victims of war and of violence at home and abroad who have no place to find refuge, and whom the world so frequently turns their backs on. Weep for them.
- Mourn that so many who call themselves the followers of Jesus don't do what Jesus says. And then recognize how often you're among them. Weep for them. Weep for yourself.

Blessed are you that mourn. One day God will wipe away every tear from your eye. One day there will be no more pain. There will be no more sickness-- no more death. Blessed are you that you will one day experience the fullness of God's kingdom come to earth.

Blessed are the meek. Meekness is related to poverty in spirit. It's the opposite of arrogance and oppressiveness. The narcissist is self-centered, but the meek person is God-centered. That means that meek people have a realistic view of themselves. And that realism moves them to be realistic and generous toward others.

Like all of the Beatitudes, being meek is not valued by the world. Living by the Beatitudes is living the path to the cross. Meekness gets trampled on by the world. But those who are meek have a great inheritance coming to them in God's kingdom.

Poverty in spirit, mourning, and meekness: three traits of desperation that Jesus teaches are part of what it means to be his disciple.

Discipleship begins by having the desperation of being in the ditch, left for dead in the gutter. *Someone* can put you there, as happened in the parable of the Good Samaritan. *Circumstances* can put you there, as happened with so many people in whom Jesus worked miracles. Or you can put *yourself* there. The message of the first three beatitudes is that desperation is where the blessing of Jesus begins.

That was just the first three! But don't worry. The rest go quicker. Let's take the next three: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart."

Jesus' disciples don't have a vague hope to become better people. They desire so deeply in their being to imitate Jesus... they have such a longing for God to be glorified in their lives, that it can only be described as being hungry and thirsty. The world will laugh at you for your hunger. They'll say it's unhealthy. They'll tell you that you're who you're meant to be already. But hunger and thirst for righteousness, Jesus says, and you will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful." To follow Jesus is to be merciful to others. Followers of Jesus "love kindness." They love first and ask questions

later. The world is quick to condemn others. The world is content to describe people by their worst actions. Someone is “a murderer,” “an adulterer,” “a drunkard,” “a liar.” But Jesus’ disciples are to be merciful. They walk humbly with their God, and so they know how great their own shortcomings are apart from God. God is still working on Jesus’ disciples. And so disciples understand that God is still working on others as well. Blessed are they. They will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart. In other words, Jesus’ disciples aren’t to have any deceit about them. What you see is what you get. They’re the same on the outside as they are on the inside. In other words, they are not hypocrites. As John Stott said, they are “true to their identity.” Disciples of Jesus are to be the same people whether they are with other believers or having dinner with their family or alone in the middle of the night. God’s grace cleanses their hearts so that they don’t need to wear masks. They are genuinely themselves. They will see God.

When we look back at the first 6 beatitudes we see what is to have the heart and the character of a disciple of Jesus: Someone who is poor in spirit, who mourns, who’s meek, who’s hungry and thirsty for righteousness, who’s merciful, who’s pure in heart.

And moving very briefly to the last three. They are what happen when we follow logic of Jesus’ life and teaching. Beatitudes 7 through 9 come about in a person because 1 through 6 are true.

Blessed are the peacemakers. When two sides are in conflict, Jesus’ disciples are the mediators. They don’t overcome evil with evil; they

overcome evil with good. They ask themselves, “How am I going to be a reconciling presence for my neighbor today?”

But because the beatitudes are the path of the cross, the path to being a peacemaker is also the path to persecution. When humanity chose to be an enemy of God, God makes peace. But that peace came through the blood of the cross. And the servant isn't greater than the master.

The world doesn't want to make peace. The world just wants their way at any cost. Peacemakers, on the other hand, “do justice,” as Micah says. They bring the concerns of the weak to the powerful. They mediate between parties. And so the world hates them.

But blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake-- for doing the right thing. Blessed are you when you're resented and called names because you're actually doing the things that Jesus does. The world does not reward you. But God will reward you.

The beatitudes *are* the gospel. In every one there is a cross and a resurrection-- a shunning by the world, and a vindication by God. This is the story of Jesus. He's poor in spirit as it takes the sin of the world. He mourns the world in Gethsemane. He's meek as he is accused and doesn't open his mouth. We're told he thirsts on the cross. He's merciful, saying, “Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.” He's pure in heart in his single-minded obedience to God-- “not my will but your will.” He's a peacemaker between God and humanity. And he's persecuted to the point of death.³ The beatitudes are Jesus' story. And Jesus wants them to become ours too.

³ See Sam Well's sermon on January 30, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElxYQZWZGh4>

This is what it is to be a Christian. Blessed are you.