

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Micah 6:1-8

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

February 1, 2026

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are several ways in which one could receive and interpret the Sermon on the Mount today. How one receives and interprets the words of Christ reveal much about the theological framework adopted by the hearer. The Beatitudes are the introduction to the sermon which covers several chapters in Matthew. It is so well-known as a portion of scripture that it can easily be reduced to a series of clichés. The words may be taken as pleasant sounding ideals that we are not expected to follow. Others can take the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, to be a radical list of standards which are to shape our behavior. There is also a case to be made that the opening verses serve as a prescriptive and proscriptive set of principles indicating what we ought to be, but not what is. Still others will contend the Beatitudes are descriptive, outlining the reality of life in the Messianic Age. While each of these views has some grounding in truth, they fail to capture what we can see with a broad perspective, that the Sermon on the Mount is a Messianic proclamation of what the Messiah came to be. It is also a description of what, by extension, the Church is to be in Christ for the sake of the world. So, today, we will work toward resolving this question: Which side of the mountain are you on?

The immediate context of the Sermon on the Mount is our starting point. How would the original hearers respond to such a message? Additionally, we can explore how the earliest readers would have understood what Matthew captures in this most famous homily. Just before the Beatitudes, Jesus is found preaching repentance and proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God. He calls the disciples as those who were living in darkness but had seen a great light – the light of the Messiah had dawned.¹ The calling of the disciples, at least in part, was to point to the ingathering of the people of Israel prophesied in Zechariah 10: “I will whistle for them and gather them, because I have redeemed them... I will bring them back from the land of Egypt and gather them out of Ashur. I will bring them into Gilead and Lebanon until there is no room for them.”² The followers of Jesus would be fishers of men, catching men alive for the Kingdom. The Kingdom was to extend beyond the traditional borders, with the chosen people of God dwelling in Israel and what is present day Jordan and Lebanon. Also, before the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is performing signs and wonders, healings, and exorcisms. With God in charge, the present order of darkness and chaos would be overthrown, and Edenic peace would return. When God is here as King over creation, creation itself starts to look more like it did in the beginning.

Jesus walked up a hill to deliver this famous sermon in Galilee, which would call to mind another significant mountain in the history of Israel, Mount Sinai. The emphasis is intentional. In Deuteronomy, God told Moses, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my

¹ Isaiah 8:23; 9:1-2; Matthew 4:15-16

² Zechariah 10:8-10

words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.”³ The Sermon on the Mount is intended to bring the prophecy given to Moses into view. Jesus is the prophet like Moses, who, like Moses, revealed the Word of God from a mountain in the wilderness. Also, like Moses, Jesus led a miraculous feeding of the people in the wilderness. And, like Moses, Jesus was liberating the people from various forms of suppression, from demons and blindness and lameness and deafness.

Within this context, Matthew is pointing to an expectation of what the Messiah would be, and a major fulfillment is to be a prophet like Moses. An additional expectation is that the Messiah would bring about a spiritual renewal. Regardless of which perspective one takes on the Sermon on the Mount, what is clear is that Jesus is speaking to something beautifully ideal. The juxtaposition of Jesus and Moses brings into sharp relief, not only the similarities, but the differences as well. Moses was the founder of the political nation of Israel, and he received a divine teaching, the Torah, which he passed on to the people. Jesus, in contrast, teaches as one who has no need of revelation. So, from the mountain, He speaks as the One doing the revealing which only the One with the divine prerogative could legitimately do.

So, how are we to take the words of Christ in this case? One way is to view them as ideals that we are not really expected to follow. If there is one thing that we should be able to agree on it is that when God says we are something, it is because He has made us to be just that. Blessed are the poor in spirit and the meek... sure, unless it is time for my favorite team to play their rival. Blessed are the mourners, the merciful, and the pure in heart... sure, unless the mourners are from the opposite side of the political aisle or a different religious tradition. Blessed are the peacemakers... oh yeah, especially if it is my guy making peace at the barrel of a gun. Such equivocating undermines the reality of what Jesus is teaching us about what He has called us to be. This puts us on the wrong side of the mountain. If we view the standards of the Beatitudes as impossible, unrealistic, and even unwise, then we are looking at them as an unachievable peak. We give up without even trying.

Similarly, if we view the Beatitudes as a radical list of standards, something new and exciting to strive for, we are standing on the wrong side of the mountain. Everything that Jesus outlines in the Beatitudes is not radical or new. It is simply an exposition of Torah ideals, repeated by the prophets, affirmed and fulfilled by the Messiah. The emphasis in the Sermon on the Mount is on true righteousness, which requires something deeper than perfunctory fulfillment without inward love. We are to view Jesus' teaching as direction for the shaping of our lives, and we are to be radically transformed by it, but the teaching itself is consistent with the beauty and perfection of God's Torah. The prophet Micah does not imply that God requires a radical morality. "God has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."⁴ What Jesus proclaims is not dissimilar and it is not radical. To view them as radical invites zealotry and competitiveness, as if others are passionately competing with us to achieve a righteous goal.

If we take Jesus' words to be prescriptive and proscriptive, a series of thou shalts and thou shan'ts, but not a description of what we actually are, then we are standing on the wrong side of the mountain. We might strive to work our way up this mountain of requirements, but we would only encounter others who

³ Deuteronomy 18:18

⁴ Micah 6:8

have also missed the reality of what Jesus said. We do not become the blessed by virtue of our poverty of spirit, our mourning, our meekness, or our mercy. The Sermon is not so much a question of becoming, but of being. The Sermon is a call to us to be what we already are, because Christ has made us to be so. And if the Church already is what Christ declares in the Beatitudes, then we need not force our way in a race up the mountain. We have already arrived.

Lastly, if we view the Beatitudes as descriptive of what life is to be in the Messianic age, then we are, maybe closer to the peak, but once again, standing on the wrong side of the mountain. This is because the perspective fails to put Jesus at the center of reality. Such a perspective neglects the reality of who Christ is and what He accomplished in His life, death, and resurrection. It puts the experience of the blessings off into some future time rather than being a present reality. Jesus is the Beatitudes, the perfection of the Torah, incarnate in the flesh and dwelling among us. And if we only focus on the Beatitudes as an unrealized potential, something we have yet to become, then we miss who Jesus is, and who He has made us to be in Him.

We have encountered Jesus at the peak. We know Who He is and what He has done. The peak of the mountain is Golgotha, where we encounter the crucified Christ: poor in spirit, mourning, meek, dying for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, making peace, and suffering the persecution of the promised Prophet like Moses. His is the kingdom, the comfort, the inheritance, the good food, the mercy, the vision of God, and the Sonship of God. And He has given them all to His Church. As His body, He has made us to be all that He is. We are one in Him. So, let us be as He has made us.

Having encountered the reality of Christ, and as He has revealed Himself in the Sermon on the Mount, in the blessings of reality, let us take our stand on the right side of the mountain. We are not those striving to become. There is no need for competition, especially among the body of Christ. What is left to compete for? Who is there to accuse us when we already are what He has made us to be? He has already blessed us with the fullness of His mercy, so we do not need to be like Esau begging for an additional blessing. We are to repent of the attitude which puts us into a zero-sum game with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Such petty rivalry is unbecoming of the body of Christ.

Which side of the mountain are you on? You are on the side of a true historical perspective. We need not see the life of faith as one of striving to reach Christ. From where we are in time, we can look back and see that we are on the downhill side of the mountain that Christ climbed in history. He climbed that mountain in grace and truth and love. And we are not called to climb that mountain again. We are called to move forward. Unlike the Jeffersons, we are not movin' on up. We go further down into the creation which Christ redeemed. The Church is Christ in the world for the sake of the world, and we are the blessed to be so. We are like Christ because we are one in Him.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.