The Upside-Down Kingdom

On the Beatitudes, Enemy Love, and the Chaos That Yields Only to a Dove

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Willingness as the Beginning

All wisdom starts with *willingness*. Listen to how John frames it:

"If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority" (John 7:17).

If your desire is to know, then you will know. It begins there. With a willingness to know the heart of God and the mind of God in relation to how he wants this world run. You cannot study your way into the knowledge of God without first being willing to obey what the knowledge will require of you. The willingness comes first. The understanding follows.

And the willingness is what Psalm 51 asks for. David's penitential psalm, written after Nathan confronted him about Bathsheba and Uriah, is one of the most piercing prayers in the entire Bible. Have mercy upon me, O God. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. And right at the center of the prayer, David asks for what the soul actually needs:

"Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit" (Psalm 51:12).

Uphold me by Your generous Spirit. That is the deep work that has to happen before any of the rest of it can happen. God's generous Spirit holds us up. And from that holding-up, the

willingness to obey emerges. And from the willingness, the obedience. And from the obedience, the knowledge of who he actually is.

Hallowed Be Thy Name

We have been talking for the last several weeks about the central petition of the Lord's Prayer that organizes everything else in it, hallowed be Your name. The life that we would live would honor you, Lord. That is the key. To honor the Lord with the life we are living, so that his name would be hallowed in front of the watching nations.

And Ezekiel 36, as I have noted before, names the failure to hallow God's name as the cause of Israel's Babylonian captivity. Because we did not hallow your name, the Babylonian Empire came in and took us captive and spread us all over the world. The diagnosis was specific. They had not hallowed his name in front of the surrounding nations, and so God acted: first by scattering them, and then by promising the unilateral renewal that would let them hallow his name correctly in the days to come:

> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

A new heart. Not tables of stone, not laws on tables of stone, but a heart that will do my will. There is the willingness. It takes a *gift of God* to produce the willingness, because the heart-of-stone is structurally incapable of generating it. *That is grace.* And the grace is *essential* for us to even be willing to take those first steps toward God. *It starts with just acknowledging.* Just opening the door an inch. *And then the floodgates open, and the blessings of God can come our way.* But the door has to be opened on our side, by a willingness that was itself a gift from him.

The Upside-Down Ways of the Kingdom

And here is what the willingness gives us access to. The ways of the kingdom of God are upside down from the ways of the world. We do not understand turning the other cheek. We do not understand giving to the poor. We do not understand what it looks like to be merciful and meek and humble. And then when we are reviled, we are not reviling back. When we are suffering, we are not threatening. It is hard to know how to do all of that. And it actually takes something miraculous in our lives, something spiritual to enter into us, before any of these kingdom-postures become natural rather than forced.

Listen to Psalm 51's diagnosis of the human condition:

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5).

From my conception I was born in sin. The deck was stacked against me from the day I was conceived. And anyone who has ever had a child knows the strangeness of this. I didn't teach him that, but he is just like me. He hasn't had time to pick up those traits, but it's like from nature, from birth. The character-traits show up early, before the child has had the chance to learn them from observation. And as parents we watch the patterns reproduce themselves in our children, and then in our grandchildren, and then we look up one day and discover that our children are now in their thirties, and our grandchildren are old enough to demonstrate the very patterns we had hoped would skip a generation. The deck is stacked. The words are spoken over us (oh, the little Irishman is coming out in him) and we begin to take the form of the words spoken over us, sent on trajectories whose direction the speakers never quite intended.

Because I am a broken parent, my kids are broken parents. They are going to screw up in different ways than I did. I screwed up in different ways than my parents did. It is just chaos.

And the only way the chaos becomes anything other than chaos is if the Lord's Prayer is actually answered in our midst. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. The only way to unlock the chaos is forgiveness.

A Letter to a Dead Father

And let me give you one concrete picture of how the forgiveness unlocks the chaos. *I knew a man (and I have known of several, men and women both) who carried so much bitterness toward his father. And the father was dead.* The man had been carrying the wound for years, and the bitterness had become a fixture of his interior life. *I don't know how to get past this,* he kept saying. The person who hurt him was no longer accessible. There was no possibility of confrontation, reconciliation, apology, mutual understanding. *The relational door had been sealed by death.*

His counselor finally said, write him a letter. Write a letter telling him how he hurt you. Write a letter saying how God has forgiven you, and how now you forgive him. And the man did. And something happened as he was writing those words. The act of writing the words, even with no possibility of the words ever being read by the recipient, unlocked a lifetime of bitterness and hurt that had been compounding in him for decades. The forgiveness was real, even though the one being forgiven would never hear it. Because the forgiveness was never principally for the forgiven party. It was for the forgiver. And the forgiver was being released, by an act of his own will exercised in concert with the Spirit, from a prison he had been carrying inside himself.

That is one small picture of how the Lord's Prayer's forgiveness petition actually operates in practice. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. The only way to unlock the

chaos is forgiveness. And the forgiveness moves outward from us in two directions at once: toward those who have hurt us, and toward ourselves for the bitterness we have been holding.

The Wilderness Battle Over Scripture

Now let me bring us into the broader Matthean context, because Matthew 5–7's Sermon on the Mount comes after Matthew 4's wilderness temptation, and the two passages illuminate each other. *Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted of the devil for forty days* (Matthew 4:1–11). And here is something I want you to notice about that wilderness battle. *It was a battle over Scripture.* The devil quoted Scripture at Jesus. Jesus quoted Scripture back.

Three rounds. Three temptations, each one calibrated to a particular vision of what kind of king Jesus was going to be. Would he turn stones into bread to feed himself? Would he throw himself from the temple pinnacle and let the angels catch him, to perform a spectacular sign? Would he bow down to the devil to receive all the kingdoms of the world and their glory? Each temptation was structured to invite Jesus into the kingdoms-of-this-world pattern of kingship: personal satisfaction, public spectacle, political power. And each temptation was a vision of a Messiah who would do for himself what the kingdoms of this world had always done for themselves.

And Jesus's response, all three times, was Scripture. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deuteronomy 8:3). You shall not tempt the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 6:16). You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve (Deuteronomy 6:13). Three quotations from Deuteronomy. Three refusals of three competing visions of kingship. Three commitments to a different kind of kingdom, one that does not seek personal satisfaction at the expense of others, does not seek public spectacle, does not seek political power as the kingdoms-of-this-world define it.

And after the temptation, Jesus came out of the wilderness preaching the gospel of the kingdom. The teaching of Matthew 5, 6, and 7 is meant to give *instruction to his disciples*, because we are going to read shortly in Matthew 10 that *they go out two-by-two into the communities around them, and they begin to testify of the gospel of the kingdom and call on the people to repent*. And Jesus says:

"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18).

Satan falling like lightning from heaven. Not by the swords of the disciples, but by the simple obedience and the willingness of the disciples to go out two-by-two into those areas and preach the gospel they had been entrusted with. That is the power that has been imparted to the people of God. Not innate to us. Given to us by God to restore the chaos of this world.

Two Visions of How Chaos Becomes Order

And here is something foundational about how chaos becomes order that the ancient world and the kingdom of God disagree about. The ancient Near Eastern myths believed that the heavens and the earth, the chaos that existed before creation, were brought to peace through violence. Through the killing of the beast. Through the sword cleaving the chaos-monster in half, as the Babylonian Enuma Elish described Marduk's defeat of Tiamat. That was the ancient Near Eastern theology of creation. Chaos was quelled through the sword. And the surrounding cultures' political imagination flowed downstream from that creation-account. Imperial violence was the path to order, because cosmic violence had been the path to creation.

And then God speaks his counter-narrative. Listen to Genesis 1:2:

"The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2).

And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. The Hebrew verb (merachepet) carries the sense of fluttering, brooding, hovering protectively, like a dove brooding over its nest. No sword. No combat with the chaos-monster. No violent dismemberment. God's Spirit fluttering gently over the chaotic waters, and God's voice speaking, let there be light, and the chaos yielding into order through speech rather than through violence. That is the Hebrew theology of creation. Different from the surrounding ancient Near Eastern cosmologies in every important respect. Chaos yields to a dove. Not to a sword.

And when Jesus comes up out of the baptismal waters, we are not surprised that a dove descends on him (Matthew 3:16). Here is new creation, the gospel writers are saying. Just like the chaotic waters that existed before the first creation, with the Spirit-dove hovering over them: now you have a new Man and a new creation, and the Spirit-dove descends again on the one who will speak the new order into being. The pattern is being repeated. The Spirit hovers. The voice speaks. The new creation begins.

And the disciples Jesus is now sending out two-by-two are participating in the same pattern. Their voices speak the gospel into the chaos. The chaos yields. And Satan falls like lightning from heaven. Not by violence. By speech. By proclamation. By the dove's hovering presence over the waters.

Simon the Zealot and the Dagger Men

And let me say something striking about one of the twelve disciples Jesus called, because the surprise of the kingdom shows up in his name. Simon the Zealot (Matthew 10:4). Do you know who the Zealots were? They were a politically zealous Jewish movement whose more extreme members were called the Sicarii: the dagger men. They kept daggers concealed in their cloaks. They would mix into crowds at festivals, and anyone considered a collaborator with the

Roman occupation (a publican, a tax collector, a Jewish political official aligned with Rome) would be stabbed and removed. That was their method of advancing the kingdom of God.

The Zealots came from a long line of Maccabean thinkers. The Maccabees were the Jewish revolutionaries who, around 165 BCE, had successfully fought off Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid king who had defiled the Jerusalem temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar and trying to forcibly Hellenize the Jewish people. The Maccabean revolt had restored Jewish religious freedom and rededicated the temple, the event Hanukkah commemorates to this day. And from that successful violent revolution, a tradition of zealous-violence-as-the-pathway-to-Jewish-liberation had developed. The Zealots were that tradition's first-century inheritors. And one of them, Simon, was in the inner circle Jesus called to himself.

Imagine what it took for Simon to lay down his dagger. Imagine the depth of transformation required for a first-century Jewish zealot, who had been formed by a tradition that taught him that the kingdom of God advances through political violence, to begin instead to preach a kingdom that advances through enemy-love and turning the other cheek. That conversion is one of the deepest stories in the entire New Testament, even though the text gives us very few details about it. Simon the Zealot became Simon the apostle. The dagger became the proclamation. The political violence became the gospel of peace.

And as the disciples went out (Simon among them, along with the others) Satan fell like lightning. Not because the disciples had taken up violence to advance the kingdom. Because they had laid down the violence they had been formed by, and had taken up the dove's pattern instead. The new creation was being spoken into the surrounding chaos. And the chaos was yielding.

The Conditions of the Kingdom

And now we come to *the Sermon on the Mount itself*. Listen to how Matthew sets it up:

> And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people . . . And great multitudes followed Him, from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan. And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying . . . (Matthew 4:23, 25; 5:1–2)

From Decapolis. From beyond the Jordan. Gentile types. Half-breeds. Samaritans. People were showing up from outside the conventional boundaries of Israel, because something was going around about Jesus that sounded like good news to people who had not been hearing much good news lately. And Jesus went up to a mountain, just as Moses went up to a mountain to deliver the law, and what he delivered on the new mountain was the description of what kind of people the kingdom of God actually comes through.

Does the kingdom come through the powerful, the sword-bearing, the wealthy? Through the rich and the famous? We grew up in a culture saturated with Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous and similar broadcasts that taught us, week after week, that the powerful are the ones we should aspire to be like. We might think the kingdom of God is set up that way too. That it operates through the same kinds of people that the surrounding world operates through. Through politicians who have been in office their entire adult lives. Through the people who have made billions of dollars in a world that requires a dog-eat-dog approach to get anything done. A nice person, after all, will never survive political office.

I will not name the politicians, both major American political parties have their own examples, but you know the type. People whose entire public lives have been spent acquiring and protecting political power, or financial power, or both. We might be tempted to think the kingdom of God advances through that kind of person. It does not.

And let me be honest about my own limit here. I am not Jesus. I would not last in political office without being overcome by the same temptations that ordinary politicians are overcome by. I know what is dwelling in me, and the temptations would find their target. That is not a confession of personal disqualification; it is a confession that the kingdom of God is not principally advanced through the kinds of structures that political power has been built on. It is advanced through different people, formed by different processes, walking in a different posture.

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

And here is the great Matthean opening of what the kingdom-people actually look like. *The Beatitudes*:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3–10)

Notice that the first four Beatitudes describe the conditions of the people through whom the kingdom comes, and the last four describe the characteristics those people then begin to demonstrate. The conditions (poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and

thirst for righteousness) describe how the people enter the kingdom. Crushed. Mourning. Meek, which here carries the sense of lowly, oppressed, not the modern English connotation of weakness. Hungry and thirsty for justice that has been denied to them. These are the people who have been ground under the wheel of the surrounding world's powers, and who have come to the end of their own resources for getting out from under that grinding.

And the Beatitudes' opening line, blessed are the poor in spirit, is a direct echo of Isaiah 61:

> The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61:1–2)

The poor. The brokenhearted. The captives. The bound. Those who mourn. The Isaiah 61 vocabulary is the exact vocabulary the Beatitudes recapitulate. Jesus is announcing that he is the Isaiah 61 servant who has come to bring good news to exactly these categories of people. The kingdom is not coming through the powerful. It is coming through the people the powerful have been crushing.

Why was everybody hearing the good news about the kingdom and coming from all of these regions? Because they had heard the kingdom of Rome's version of good news (the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome) and they had seen what it cost. Many of their friends and loved ones had been conscripted into slave labor. Those who refused had found their way to a Roman cross at the side of the road, displayed as a warning to anyone else who might reject the Roman peace. That was what Pax Romana actually delivered to the people on the ground. Peace through

crucifixion of dissenters. Order through imperial violence. Exactly the ancient Near Eastern theology of creation, chaos quelled by the sword, applied to the political life of the empire.

And then Jesus comes with a different announcement. Blessed are the poor in spirit. The crushed in spirit. The mourners. The meek. The hungry and thirsty for justice. To these, the kingdom belongs. Not by their conquering the surrounding kingdoms by superior force. By being the people through whom God himself enters the surrounding world to remake it from below.

Hungering and Thirsting for Righteousness

And let me dwell on one Beatitude, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, because the word righteousness has been overused in ways that have flattened its meaning. This is the true justice of God. How God will set all things right. The rectification of what has been wrong. True justice. The Hebrew background of the word (tsedaqah) carries the sense of putting right what has been put wrong, restorative rather than principally punitive.

And the justice of God is different from the justice of this world. The justice of this world says: you hurt me, and it cost me X. So I am going to hurt you and cost you X-plus-pain-and-suffering. Eye for eye. Tooth for tooth. That is the justice of men. But the justice of God looks deeper. God knows the heart. He sees the pain and suffering underneath the offense. He sees the wound that produced the wound-maker. And Paul, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35, says:

“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

Vengeance is Mine. I will repay. Hand the vengeance over to God, who alone can administer it justly. And the unsettling discovery is that we are all, at various points in our lives, on the receiving end of God’s judgment as much as on the petitioning side of his vengeance. Someday God is going to look at your account, my account, every account. And we will all have

been oppressors at one time or another, in our own measure. And the grace we have received is the only thing that allows any of us to stand at all.

All of that stuff that I was born in, all the words that have been spoken over me, every label that the second-grade teacher applied (Mrs. Vance called my mom and dad and said, could you do something with him? He's disruptive to the class. He's a class clown), every label that the first job and the second job and the various bosses applied, every label that social media is now applying to a generation of young people about whether they are beautiful or not beautiful or sufficient or insufficient, all of it has built up condemnation on us. And the justice of God is what is supposed to set all of that right. And the only evidence we have that God will set it right is Jesus, the One who was resurrected from the dead, and whose resurrection became the down-payment on the universal setting-right that is still coming.

Mercy, Purity, Peace

And the last four Beatitudes describe what the broken kingdom-people then become as the kingdom forms them. The merciful. The pure in heart. The peacemakers. Those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. These are the actions of the people who actually usher in the kingdom of God in the world. Not bold. Not strong. Not powerful. None of the attributes that the world uses to bring order out of chaos. Mercy. Purified hearts. Peacemakers. Those who are persecuted for justice' sake, whose suffering, instead of converting them to retaliation, deepens their commitment to the kingdom-pattern that produced the suffering in the first place. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And the Beatitudes close with the climax that links Jesus' disciples to the long line of prophets before them:

> Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11–12)

Rejoice and be exceedingly glad. Even in the persecution. Because the persecution is the same persecution that the prophets before us endured. We are in their company. And the kingdom we are walking in is the same kingdom they were walking in.

The Outline of Jesus's Life

And here is something striking about Matthew 5 that I want every reader to notice. The verses that follow the Beatitudes are basically an outline of Jesus's life and ministry. When you read Matthew 5:21–48, you are reading the teaching that Jesus himself is about to live out across the rest of the Gospel. Look at how this works.

Matthew 5:39 says: do not resist an evil person; whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other to him also. And when we get to Matthew 26 and 27, we are going to see them doing exactly that to Jesus. The high priest's servants slap him. The Roman soldiers strike him. He absorbs the blows without retaliating.

Matthew 5:40 says, if anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And when we get to the crucifixion, we are going to see the soldiers stripping Jesus of his garments and dividing them among themselves, casting lots for his clothing (Matthew 27:35, fulfilling Psalm 22:18). He gives up his garments without protest.

Matthew 5:43–44 says, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. And from the cross, we are going to see Jesus do exactly that:

> "Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do'" (Luke 23:34).

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Enemy-love and prayer for the persecutors, spoken from the very cross his persecutors had nailed him to. That is the Sermon on the Mount being lived out at the moment of its most extreme cost.

And notice what red letters do in the Gospel of Matthew. Look at all the red letters in Matthew 5–7, chapter after chapter of Jesus's teaching. Now turn to Matthew 26 and 27, and see how few red letters there are. Jesus's words across his trial and execution are reduced almost to yea and nay. He is fulfilling the very statement he had made in the Sermon on the Mount:

"But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37).

Let your yes be yes and your no be no. At the end of his life, Jesus is being rigidly truthful in his words back to Pilate and back to the council. He has stripped his speech down to the bare minimum required for honesty. He is enacting his own teaching in the most extreme circumstances possible. And the result is one of the most powerful conversions in the entire Gospel:

"So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'" (Matthew 27:54).

A Roman soldier, one of the very men responsible for Jesus's execution, stands at the foot of the cross and confesses Jesus as the Son of God. How did the evil oppressor get converted? By the death of the man he had helped to execute. Not by a sword raised against him. By a sermon lived out.

And one of the two thieves crucified with Jesus underwent a similar conversion. At first both thieves were reviling him. But watching Jesus die, one of them turned:

"Then he said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise'" (Luke 23:42–43).

Remember me when You come into Your kingdom. Look how quickly forgiveness comes. Look how quickly grace goes out to meet the sinner on the cross with Jesus. Today you will be with Me in Paradise. The kingdom of God arrives in the dying breath of a convicted thief, who turned in the last hour of his life and was met instantly by the King's grace. That is the upside-down kingdom in concentrated form.

Wrapping the Cross in a Flag

We do not yet see all the kingdom-promises fulfilled. Chaos still exists in our lives. The world still operates by violence in too many places. We have to believe much of this on faith for now. But we see Jesus, who died, rose, and was exalted to the right hand of the Father, and on the day of Pentecost poured out his Spirit to begin reproducing his pattern in his people. The Beatitudes have become the characteristics of the people who will usher in the kingdom of God.

What a paradox. What an upside-down kingdom. But we have to believe it. Because right now, there are a lot of good Christian people with good hearts who think the kingdom advances through the sword. Through the power. Through political dominance. And let me say this carefully: when you wrap the cross of Jesus Christ in the American flag (or in any other political flag, of any other nation) you are mixing images that do not belong mixed. The cross is not the flag's accessory. The flag is not the cross's vessel. The cross is the central image of a kingdom that operates by enemy-love, self-emptying, and resurrection. The flag is the central image of a nation that operates, like every nation, by the standard set of nation-state mechanisms. Loyalty to

the nation is one thing. Identification of the nation with the kingdom of God is another, and the second is a confusion that has done serious damage across centuries of Christian history.

And we are not principally headed for a plexiglass paradise somewhere out beyond the stars. The prayer that we have been praying is your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. On earth. Revelation 5:10 tells us that the redeemed will reign as kings and priests upon the earth. This is the place. There is an unseen heaven that exists among us. If we knew how close those who have gone on before us are, and how close Jesus and the heavenly angels are to us in this present moment, we would be ducking and dodging, as one preacher used to say. The kingdom comes here. The righteousness is lived out here. The reign of Jesus is enacted here. And the gradual transformation of the surrounding chaos into the order of the new creation happens here, through the gradual gathering of kingdom-people whose lives have been formed by the Beatitudes. That is what we are part of. That is where our hope finally lands.

Fourteen Snippets of Kingdom Life

And now Jesus moves from the Beatitudes into the body of his teaching. Listen to the framing he gives in Matthew 5:17–20:

> Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled . . . For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17, 18, 20)

I did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it. Until heaven and earth pass away, the law remains. And then comes the famous warning, unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

That is the launching point for everything Jesus is about to teach in the rest of Matthew 5–7. What does it mean for righteousness to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? It means going deeper than the rule-keeping that the scribes and Pharisees had specialized in. It means addressing the heart-conditions that produce the rule-violations, before the rule-violations themselves.

And what follows, from Matthew 5:21 through Matthew 7:12, is fourteen little snippets of what it means to be kingdom-people. Murder. Adultery. Divorce. Oaths. Retaliation. Enemy-love. Almsgiving. Prayer. Fasting. Treasures. The eye. Two masters. Anxiety. Judging. Fourteen sections. And every one of them follows a structure. Traditional righteousness named. Vicious cycle that produces the violation exposed. Kingdom-pathway out of the cycle given. Three parts. Repeated fourteen times across the body of the Sermon on the Mount.

Every one of us is guilty of probably all of these things at some point in our lives. All of us, if we have lived long enough, have been guilty of one or more of these. This is the no-judgment zone. But we are called to live into the story we have been called into. We are not to remain murderers, adulterers, liars, violent ones, haters of our enemies. We are to come out of these patterns. And each section is teaching us how the coming-out actually happens.

The Pattern of Murder

Let me walk through one section in detail, to illustrate the three-part structure. *Matthew 5:21–24, the section on murder*:

> You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his

> brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matthew 5:21–22)

Traditional righteousness: thou shalt not murder. Excellent traditional wisdom. If you murder, you go to court, and your life is probably taken. The Mosaic law was right to enshrine this command as one of the Ten Commandments.

Vicious cycle: anger → derisive language → devaluation → eventually murder. First anger. Then Raca, which the translators don’t even translate, because the term doesn’t have a clean English equivalent. Raca means something like empty-headed, worthless fellow. It is a term of derision. When we devalue another person, it becomes easier to kill them, they are just animals to us, after all. Isn’t that what race relations and tribal conflict have been doing for thousands of years? If your tribe isn’t like their tribe, or your nation like their nation, or your cultural practices don’t match theirs, then they are just a little bit less than human, less than worthy, less than fully image-bearing. So we bring down the value. First we are angry. Then we say Raca. Then we say you fool, which carries enough devaluation that we feel justified in removing the person we have now made worthless. That is the spiral. And in our internal logic, every step has felt warranted by the previous step.

Kingdom-pathway out: go and be reconciled before the bitterness becomes lethal. And like Cain and Abel, presenting your offering at the altar, there you remember that your brother has something against you:

> Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23–24)

Leave your gift. Go. Be reconciled. Come. Make friends. Take those verbs and have them tattooed on your inner arm, because those are the verbs of the kingdom. There are times we come, we go, we reconcile, we make friends, and then we come and offer. But it is in that order. God is last. The brother is first. Cain and Abel had been at exactly the moment when Cain needed to apply this principle. God himself warned Cain:

"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it" (Genesis 4:7).

Sin is lying at the door. This feeling you have after your sacrifice was rejected and your brother's was accepted, keep the door locked. Sin is right there, ready to pounce. Rule over it. But Cain opened the door to the beast. He took his brother out into the field and he crushed his head. And that is how murder comes. Little by little, step by step, anger to Raca to you-fool to action. And the kingdom-pathway interrupts the chain at the earliest possible point, by sending us to reconcile with the brother before the chain gets any further along.

The Pattern of Adultery

Now let me walk through one more, to make sure the three-part structure is clear. *Matthew 5:27–30, the section on adultery*:

> You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. (Matthew 5:27–30)

Traditional righteousness: thou shalt not commit adultery. Excellent traditional wisdom.

Vicious cycle: the spiral of out-of-control begins with a look. Then a flirt. Then a coffee. Then a private dinner. Then a hotel room. And finally adultery. Every step has felt minor relative to the step that follows it. And by the time you reach the step where the line has been crossed in unmistakable terms, you have already been crossing it incrementally for weeks or months.

Kingdom-pathway out: if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. And note the specificity: the eye and the hand, not the foot. Why eye and hand and not foot? The eye is the distance-faculty. The eye is where the gaze begins, before the body has moved. Plucking the eye out is when you are looking and you have intention: That is at a distance, when the mind begins to think about acting on what the eye has been seeing. The hand is when the temptation is nigh at hand, when it is there and offered, and the body is about to take what the eye has been wanting. Remove the thing that is the object of desire, before the body acts on the eye's wanting.

And this principle goes beyond adultery. This applies to anything that is lustful. Adultery is just one example of a thousand different things that could be called up as lust. Addiction operates exactly this way. I have spoken with a leader of a local recovery-home who has said that there are specific streets in the surrounding area he cannot drive through, because those streets remind him of where he used to go in his addiction. He will drive substantially out of his way to avoid those streets, just so he doesn't have to be drawn into the old patterns again. That is the eye being plucked. That is the hand being removed. We distance ourselves from the situations that trigger the patterns. If a person is a draw, we remove ourselves from that person's proximity. If a place is a draw, we remove ourselves from the place. If a routine is a draw, we restructure the routine. Whatever the desire is, whatever the trigger is: we know God has not permitted it, and

we remove ourselves from it. That is what plucking the eye and cutting off the hand actually looks like in practice. Not principally literal self-mutilation. The aggressive structural removal of the trigger-conditions that produce the spiral.

Let Your Yes Be Yes

And let me say one honest thing about *the next section* in Matthew 5, the section on oaths, because I have to confess on this one. *Matthew 5:33–37*:

> Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all . . . But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33–34, 37)

Let your yes be yes and your no be no. This is the one I am most guilty of. I work in a political environment. I am always trying: yeah, boss, it's all good. Yeah, sure, everything's on track. Yes, we'll get it done. And then I get on the next call with somebody else, and it's: okay, guys, here's what's actually going on. Here's what we have to do. The finance department, the leadership, the timeline. After I just got off the previous call making nice with the language, only to come over to the next call and put just a slightly different spin on the same situation. It is like Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof: well, on the one hand . . . but on the other hand . . . Words coming out of my mouth that were just true enough that I could defend them, but not honest enough that I had let my yes be yes and my no be no.

This is my confessional. If I could just say yes and no, yes and no (keep it clean, keep it truthful) God has called us to be truth-speakers. Not over-nuanced everything-spinners. So if you come up to me and say, Rob, I think this would be a great idea, and I go, I don't think so, then you'll know I am practicing truthfulness. Not bluntness for its own sake. But the simple integrity

of letting my words mean what they say, without political adjustment for whoever happens to be in the room. That is the kingdom-pathway out of the cycle of over-nuanced people-pleasing speech that the world has trained me into.

Enemy Love and the Rain on Both Fields

And the last section before the Lord's Prayer is *enemy-love*:

> You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:43–45)

Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who persecute you. And the reason given is striking: that you may be sons of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Notice what God does. The evil farmer and the good farmer both get the same rain and the same sun. Both have the opportunity to say, thank God for the sun, and thank God for the rain. Their crops both grow. That is how God operates. He does not micro-target his blessings only to the righteous and withhold them from the unrighteous so the difference becomes obvious. He blesses both fields, indiscriminately, and waits to see what each field will do with the blessing.

That is why so many people appear to be blessed even though they are reprobates. You look at the surrounding world and see deeply ungodly people who have prospered enormously, and you wonder how it can be. It can be because the Father is sending his sun and his rain on the evil and the good both. He is not yet running the audit. The audit comes later. For now, the

blessings fall indiscriminately, and that is meant to be a lesson to us about how we are to operate. We are to bless even our enemies, because that is how the Father blesses his.

And the chapter closes with the climactic instruction:

"Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

Be perfect as your Father is perfect. The Greek word here (teleios) carries the sense of complete, mature, brought to the appointed end. Not principally moral flawlessness, but the full maturation of the character into the kingdom-pattern the Father has been demonstrating. That is the goal of formation. The Father's perfection is the model. The Spirit's work in us is the means. And our walking-in-the-pattern, day by day across a lifetime, is the slow ordinary practice that the model and the means are calibrated to produce.

Enemy Love Is the Only Thing

And the chapter's final pastoral landing is this. Kingdom of God. Upside down. It does not seem right. But it is the only thing that is going to settle the chaos of this world. Enemy love is the only thing.

I think of the 1985 film Enemy Mine, where Dennis Quaid plays a human pilot and Louis Gossett Jr. plays an alien fighter: mortal enemies, both crash-landed on a hostile planet, who learn over time that they cannot survive separately and must reconcile. The film is corny in its sci-fi packaging. But the underlying argument is sound. Mortal enemies can reconcile when the circumstances make their separateness unsustainable. And God has put us together on a planet where the circumstances ought to make our separateness unsustainable. This world is all we have. This pale blue dot. Let us live with that kind of spirit toward everyone. Let us cause our blessings to fall on the fields of the just and the unjust. And let us see whether the chaos that

surrounds us can be settled by the same kingdom-pattern that the Father has been modeling for us since the beginning.

Maybe it is through forgiveness. Maybe the unlock to the chaos of this world is the unlocking that begins with being forgiven and then proceeds by forgiving others. I do not have all of it figured out. I am in the same boat as everyone else who is still walking out the implications of the Beatitudes in their own lives. But I suspect the unlock to the chaos is, in the end, forgiveness. Given to us. Extended through us. And changing (slowly, generation by generation) the texture of the world the kingdom is being woven into.

That is the upside-down kingdom. That is the Sermon on the Mount in concrete pastoral application. That is what the disciples went out two-by-two to proclaim. That is what Simon the Zealot laid down his dagger to learn. That is what the centurion at the foot of the cross was converted into recognizing. That is what the thief crucified next to Jesus was met by in the last hour of his life. That is what we are called into, every day of our walking-out of this faith. Take a breath. Trust the Father. Walk the pattern. And watch the chaos slowly yield to the dove that has been hovering over the waters since before the foundation of the world.