Salt and Light

On Breath as the First Gift, Dominion as Image-Bearing, and the Kingdom Built by the Meek

Rob Massie

Rob Massie Sermon Collection, Volume 3: The Upside-Down Kingdom, Chapter 2

Sermon preached February 4, 2024

Breathe in, Breathe Out

Let me begin with the verse I had planned to end with, because something in the worship this morning has shifted my order.

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. And the path into that verse runs through the breath, the air in our lungs that came from him and is returned to him, and through the action that the breath produces.

Justification by faith is absolutely meaningless if it does not produce something in your life. If it does not produce sonship, if it does not actually make us children of God with his character and his actions, then what is it that we have been talking about all these years? Words. Just words. We have been a three-phases-of-salvation community across the years: justified by grace, sanctified by the Spirit, glorified at the end. But every one of those phases is a place where God speaks something over us, and the word does not remain just word. It takes root. It becomes something. It becomes action.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works. See, visible, not invisible. Not private. Not interior-only. The good works are visible. And the glory of the visible works does not remain with us. The glory gets transferred to the One who gave us the gift to begin with, whether the gift is the simple breath that allows us to praise him, or the gifts and talents that allow us to serve those around us. It all goes back to him, in the end.

Crowned With Glory and Honor

And this idea of glory runs deep across the entire Bible. If there is a Father in heaven, and we are his children, what does it mean to be created in his image, to be image-bearers of God in the world, to carry the vocational mantle that God has laid on us? Listen to Genesis 1:

> Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Genesis 1:26)

Let us make man in our image, and let them have dominion. That is the original commission. The full mantle of kingship laid on the first humans. Let us give them dominion over the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the beasts of the field. Let us lay this mantle of responsibility on them.

And Psalm 8 picks up exactly this theme:

> When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet. (Psalm 8:3–6)

You have crowned him with glory and honor. That is the glory the verse of Matthew 5:16 returns to. Give glory to your Father in heaven, because the glory was a glory God himself gave us when he created us and set us over the works of his hands. We hold the glory as those who received it. We pass it back to him as those who recognize its source. The whole arrangement is a circulation: gift descending, gratitude ascending, glory returning to where it came from.

And if we read Genesis carefully, there are three domains created, and a kingship laid over each one. The water domain. The sky domain. The earth domain. And God set kings in each. The kings of the water are the great fish. The kings of the sky are the great birds. The kings of the earth are the great beasts.

And here is the strange thing about humanity's commission. We were not given dominion because we were the strongest creatures in any of those domains. Mano a mano, none of us wants to meet the great white shark in his domain. We do not swim fast enough. We do not have teeth sharp enough. Or the king of beasts: the lion. Nobody wants to face the lion in his domain. Or the eagle; go ahead and jump off a skyscraper and try to fly with the eagles. One of you will lose the encounter. Yet God somehow gifted the most fragile of creatures with dominion over all three domains. We could not run faster than the cheetah. We could not swim deeper than the whale. We could not fly higher than the eagle. And yet we were placed in the position of dominion.

And across whatever thousands of years humanity has now been on this planet learning to use the gifts of mind and tool and culture: we have come to fly higher than any bird, swim deeper than any fish, drive faster than any beast. We do, now, really truly hold dominion over the works of God's hands. That is breathtaking when you consider it. It was a gift. Strength elevated out of weakness; that is the way God works. And when we get that wrong, we get it very wrong.

The First Grasp

And that is exactly what Adam and Eve were faced with. *They listened to the voice of the serpent.* And the serpent said:

"For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5).

You will be like God. And they did not think their already-given position of glory and honor and dominion was strong enough or powerful enough. They needed to grasp for something beyond what had been given. To take hold, in a way that was unlawful for them, of a kind of power and dominion that God had not extended to them. And the grasp was the original distortion. Not the desire for power as such; God had already given them the legitimate exercise of dominion. The desire to take, by force, what would never have been given by gift.

And we will see, in a moment, that Jesus undoes exactly this grasp at exactly this point, by refusing to grasp the very thing that was actually his by right. Hold that. We will come back to it.

The Sword and the Dove

Now let me say something about *how God put down chaos at creation*, because the ancient Near Eastern world had its own theology of this, and the Genesis account deliberately differs from it. *I covered this last week, but it bears repeating because the contrast is fundamental.*

The ancient Near Eastern creation myths, especially the Babylonian Enuma Elish, depicted creation as the result of cosmic combat. The high god Marduk fought the chaos-monster Tiamat. He defeated her with a sword. And he formed the heavens and the earth out of the

dismembered halves of her body. That was the surrounding world's theology of how chaos becomes order. Through violence. Through the sword. Through the killing of the beast.

And then Moses begins to write Genesis. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void. And darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters (Genesis 1:1–2). And the Hebrew word the translators give us as deep (tehom) carries an etymological connection to Tiamat herself. Moses is signaling the surrounding cultures' chaos-monster, and then deliberately undoing what those cultures said about how chaos becomes order. No sword. No combat. No dismemberment. The Spirit of God hovering (fluttering, brooding) like a dove over the chaotic waters, and the voice of God speaking, let there be light, and the chaos yielding into order through speech and presence rather than through violence. That is the Hebrew theology of creation. And it is fundamentally at odds with everything the surrounding ancient Near Eastern world believed about how the universe began.

God does not use power and sword and mayhem to put down mayhem. He does not use what we might think of as strength to put down chaotic strength. He uses what we would call weakness. What is the weakest bird in the heavens? The cooing dove. So frightened of human presence that you can hardly walk outside without it fleeing. Soft, gentle, meek, quiet. And that is how God tames chaos.

And when Jesus comes up out of the baptismal waters, we are not surprised that the Spirit descends on him as a dove. Like Israel coming up out of the Red Sea. Like Adam emerging from the deep sleep into which God had laid him to form Eve. Like Noah after forty days of the flood, when the dove came back to him with the olive branch in its mouth as the sign that land had emerged and creation was about to begin again. Now you have a new Man and a new creation.

The dove descends. The voice speaks: This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. The same Spirit that hovered over the original waters now hovers over the new creation that is being inaugurated in the body of the Son.

Three Temptations

And immediately after the baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested, just as Israel was led by the cloud and the fire into the wilderness for testing. For forty days he ate nothing. And the devil came to him and tempted him. And every one of these temptations was a temptation to grasp power inappropriately, exactly the grasp that had defined Adam's failure in Genesis 3.

Jesus had heard from the Father that he was his Son. Just as you and I have heard, at some point in our walk, that we are sons and daughters of God. And he was tempted to take hold of that sonship and weaponize it for his own ends. He could have used the sonship-power for his own means. Have you ever known a king of this earth to use power to build his own wealth? Of course you have. Every king of this earth has done so. Power is what kings use to enrich themselves.

And when Jesus could have filled his own belly with miraculous power, turn these stones into bread (Matthew 4:3), he refused. He refused to take that path. The inappropriate use of power. And later, when the suffering of others is in front of him, he is not afraid to draw on all the power of heaven to turn five loaves and two fishes into enough to feed five thousand (Matthew 14:13–21). He will do it again for four thousand (Matthew 15:32–39). Jesus is not afraid of the miraculous when it comes to serving others. He is afraid of it, refuses it, when it would serve only himself. That is the diagnostic for power-in-the-kingdom-of-God. Power is for others, not for self.

The second temptation was to take power through spectacular demonstration:

> Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" (Matthew 4:5–6)

Throw Yourself down and let the angels catch You. Make Yourself a public spectacle. Descend into the temple courtyard in a way that nobody can deny, and everybody will then have to confess You as Messiah. That is the shortcut. That is tempting the Lord: being out in the wilderness and saying, can you really do this? If you are the Son, prove it. And the angel-borne metaphor itself was Israel's own deliverance language: Isaiah 40 had described those who waited on the Lord in Babylon as those who would mount up with wings as eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31). The deliverance imagery from one of Israel's deepest prophetic passages was being weaponized by the devil to invite Jesus into the very kind of public spectacle that would distort his Messianic vocation.

And then the third temptation, to take all the kingdoms of the world through political power:

> Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." (Matthew 4:8–9)

All the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And the devil's offer was substantively accurate to what had been promised in the Old Testament. The Messianic king of Psalm 2 was supposed to inherit the nations and the ends of the earth as his possession. The Servant Songs of Isaiah described a light to the Gentiles whose kingdom would extend to the ends of the earth. All

the kings of the earth were going to come and bow down and bring their tribute to the King of the Jews. That was his ultimate destination.

But the devil offered the destination through a shortcut. Be a Caesar. Be an Alexander the Great. Grab the sword, muster the troops. You already have five thousand men in the wilderness: muster them up. Take on Herod. Take on the Romans. Build out the kingdom through a few decisive victories, and then you take this thing. With your charisma, Jesus. With your gifts. With your following. With the sword in your hand. You could do a lot.

And you and I could be tempted by the same offer. We can wrap the cross in just about any kind of flag. We can take the suffering and the humility that Jesus called us to, and turn them upside-down, into a Christianity of dominance, of political ascendance, of cultural conquest.

Beat Your Shovels Into Weapons

I was listening to music on a recent vacation, and a contemporary Christian song came on that contained a lyric I cannot get out of my head. Beat your shovels into weapons of war. I do not know about you, but that sounds like an inversion of the true prophetic call. Listen to what the prophets actually said:

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4; cf. Micah 4:3).

Beat your swords into plowshares. Beat your spears into pruning hooks. Do not learn war anymore. That is the prophetic vision of the kingdom-fulfilled-on-earth. Implements of violence converted into implements of cultivation. The military instrument repurposed as the agricultural one. And the contemporary worship lyric had inverted exactly this, calling Christians to beat

their cultivation-tools back into weapons. To turn the shovels into swords. To reverse the prophetic trajectory of the kingdom.

These are not the mechanisms by which the King of the kingdom of God is going to get his kingdom work done. We do not need to pass laws. We do not need governments to keep peace at our borders. We need the praise in our mouth. We need the gifts that God has given us. We need the spirit of meekness to come upon us. And we are going to be surprised at how many people who are mourning, hungry, and poor in spirit God uses to transform this planet. It is not the people with the greatest voice and the most money and the fullest bellies and the most weapons of war at their disposal. That is not how the kingdom advances. And we are not in any greater peace because we bombed Iraqis or Syrians, whether they deserved it or not. This is not a political statement. This is just to observe that humans have been tit-for-tat taking out their enemies for millennia, and the tit-for-tat has not produced one additional ounce of peace. Oh, you killed my cousin. I will kill your brother. You killed my brother. I will kill your mother. It is escalating violence. Help us, Lord.

A Greater Than Moses

And then Jesus goes up to the mountain. Just as Moses took the children of Israel to Sinai and went up to the mountain for forty days, praying and fasting, receiving the laws written on tables of stone, and then brought those tablets back down to a people who had already fallen into idolatry around the golden calf, Jesus goes up to a different mountain. And what he delivers from this mountain is greater than what Moses delivered from Sinai. Not because the law was wrong. The law was holy and just and good (Romans 7:12). Because what Jesus is about to deliver moves beyond external commandments into the formation of a new kind of people whose

interior has been so renewed that the external commandments become the natural expression of who they have become.

"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 5:1–2).

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

> And here are the conditions of the people through whom the kingdom of heaven comes: 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)

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Not the powerful in spirit. Not those who have all the advantages. Not those who arrive at the kingdom because their resumés are most impressive. Just the broken. And listen to what God said through Isaiah about exactly the kind of person he is looking for:

> Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? . . . But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word." (Isaiah 66:1–2)

To this one I will look: he who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word. That broken-and-poor spirit. The one who reverences God when all the evidence appears to be that God is losing the argument, when the powerful are getting more powerful, the rich are getting more rich, the poor are getting more poor, and the weak are becoming more weakened. And that is not a political statement. That is simply the observation that we can look around the world and see, every day, the elevation of power and the exaltation of strength.

The Temptation of the Brilliant Builder

I find myself doing it. I find myself looking at Elon Musk. I read his biography recently. And I came away thinking: wow, that is impressive. The way that mind works. Conceiving of colonizing Mars. The way the engineering imagination operates at scales most of us cannot reach. He is, by many accounts, a difficult person. Mean to those who work for him. Not to be honored personally, but to be appreciated, in the limited sense that we can appreciate that God places gifts inside of human beings to think about ways of doing things that previous generations never imagined. We can appreciate the gifts God gives. We can recognize that human ingenuity at its outer edges is one of the gifts of the image-of-God deposited in our race.

But let us not worship it. Let us not bow down to the creature. The glory belongs to God, the One who is the source. We are conduits of the glory. He has crowned us with glory and honor. And we are passing the glory on to him in this world (Psalm 8:5). But, listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 1:

". . . who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen" (Romans 1:25).

They exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped the creature rather than the Creator. Let us not exchange the glory God has given us. Let us not bow before the brilliant

builder, the visionary entrepreneur, the gifted technologist, the powerful statesman, the charismatic leader, whatever the creaturely vessel happens to be in the present moment. God has called us to sonship. To be his children. Not to be the worshipers of the impressive creatures around us. The impressive creatures themselves are still children, of one Father or another, and the worship belongs to the Father, not to his impressive children.

Comfort and Consolation

And the Beatitudes' vocabulary of *comfort* and *consolation* connects directly to one of the most beloved passages in Luke's Gospel. *Listen to what Simeon said when he saw the infant Jesus in the temple*:

> Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him . . . And he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel." (Luke 2:25, 27–32)

Waiting for the Consolation of Israel. And Simeon (old, faithful, finally permitted to see the One he had been waiting for) held a baby in his arms and recognized that the comfort of Israel had arrived in the body of an infant. Can you imagine having eyes of faith like that? To recognize the consolation when it is small, fragile, just-born, easily missed? The world needed comfort. Israel needed comfort. But they did not know that the comfort would arrive in a baby.

They thought the comfort would be a deliverance from Rome. The comfort was a deliverance from their own sin, in a form they could not have predicted.

And the Beatitudes' blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted uses exactly Simeon's vocabulary. The comforted ones are the ones who recognized that the comfort had already come, in a form the powerful had not been able to see.

Mercy, Purity, Peace

And the last four Beatitudes name the characteristics that the broken kingdom-people then become. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

The merciful, those who give up revenge-killing. Who give up the right to retaliate when something has been taken from us. Who go into life open-handed. We have the power and the authority to take. But we only receive. That is the kingdom-posture.

And Paul gives us the deepest articulation of this posture in Philippians 2. *I had not planned to jump over here, but the chapter requires it.*

> Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of

those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:3–11)

Did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. That is the line that overturns the entire Adamic pattern. Adam grasped at what he thought would be equality with God, at the voice of the serpent. He took. Jesus could have grasped at what was already legitimately his (equality with the Father, the inheritance of the nations, the kingship over all the kingdoms) and he did not grasp. He refused the grasp. He made himself of no reputation. He took the form of a servant. He humbled himself to the point of death. Adam took. Jesus released. Adam grasped. Jesus emptied. And the result was the opposite of what each had been aiming for. Adam, grasping at exaltation, fell into death. Jesus, refusing to grasp, was exalted by the Father to the name above every name.

See how that turns? We do not have to exalt ourselves. We do not have to bring glory to ourselves. All we do is focus on living, serving others, considering others greater than ourselves, considering others' needs as more pressing than our own. And the exaltation, when it comes, if it comes, comes from the Father, given by him, on his timing, by his criteria. Not by our own grasping.

Lions, Not Lambs

And here is a contemporary diagnostic of how easily we get this wrong. I was driving behind a lifted pickup truck the other day. Beautiful aftermarket lift kit. Loud exhaust system. The kind of truck I have to confess I admire, in spite of myself. I have driven my own truck for years, and I am working on the envy. But on the back of this lifted truck was a decal that read: Lions, Not Lambs. With a big lion head graphic. And the message was clear. We are not the kind of Christians who are going to be lambs. We are the kind of Christians who are lions.

Now look at what Revelation 5 actually does with this imagery. John uses a very specific kind of rhetoric across Revelation. He says, I heard a voice say . . . and then I turned to see . . . And every time he does that, the thing he hears and the thing he sees are completely flipped. Sometimes our expectation is that God is going to do X, but the reality is Y. And the gap between the expectation and the reality is one of the deepest pedagogical moves in the entire book.

Listen to Revelation 5:

> And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals . . . So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. But one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals." And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. (Revelation 5:1, 4–6)

Do not weep. The Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed. That is what John heard. And then he turned to see what the voice was describing. And what he saw was a Lamb. A slain Lamb. Standing in the midst of the throne. With seven horns and seven eyes, full power and full wisdom, but the form was a slain Lamb, not a roaring Lion.

The Lion who prevailed is the Lamb who was slain. That is the central image of the entire Apocalypse. Not lions instead of lambs. The Lion is the Lamb. The roaring strength of the conquering Messiah is identical, in his actual appearing, with the bleeding meekness of the slaughtered sacrifice. And the pickup-truck decal had it precisely backwards. The truth of the

kingdom is not lions, not lambs. The truth is the Lion who is a Lamb. And the Lion-Lamb is the central image of how the kingdom prevails over the surrounding chaos.

And Jesus himself names this same paradox in Matthew 11:

> Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28–29)

I am gentle and lowly in heart. That is the self-description of the King of the universe. Gentle. Lowly. Meek. The Lion is a Lamb. The King wears the form of a Servant. And the kingdom advances through people who learn from his gentleness, not from any lion-roaring substitute we might be tempted to construct.

Bread Broken, Wine Poured

And the kingdom-pattern reaches its consummation in the night Jesus was betrayed. He took bread. He blessed it. He broke it. He gave it to them, saying: This is My body, broken for you. And He took the cup. He gave thanks. He gave it to them, saying: This is My blood of the new covenant, poured out for many for the remission of sins (Matthew 26:26–28). And then he got down on his knees and he washed their feet (John 13:1–17). The King of the universe, on his knees, with a basin and a towel, performing the work of the lowest household servant.

And Paul, picking up exactly this image, says: do this:

> “This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me” (1 Corinthians 11:25).

Do this. Break ourselves. Pour ourselves out. Be loaves of bread that get broken so that others can eat. Be cups of wine that get poured so that others can drink. The vocation we have been called to is the vocation of taking the form of the One we follow. Cruciformity. Living the cross-shaped life that the King himself lived first.

The Good Samaritan

And what does that cruciform life look like in concrete daily practice? It looks like the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man fell among thieves on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The priest passed by on the other side. The Levite passed by on the other side. The unlikely Samaritan came by (a half-breed, a despised heretic in the Jewish religious imagination of the time) and the Samaritan saw the wounded Jew lying half-dead in the road, and the Samaritan stopped. He bound up the wounds. He poured in oil and wine. He set the man on his own animal. He took him to an inn. He paid the innkeeper to continue the care until the man was rehabilitated (Luke 10:30–35).

That is action. Our faith is not in word only. We do not come down here, say the sinner's prayer, and then go back out to do what we have always done. We are now sons and daughters of God through the waters of baptism. We are new creation. The Spirit of God has been poured out on us. And now we are witnesses of him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8). The words God has given us are words of grace. The hands God has given us are hands of action. And the two, the word and the deed, operate together in the kingdom-life that the Spirit forms in us.

What would happen if everyone lived the way Jesus lived? Giving. Serving. Washing each other's feet. Pouring themselves out. What if the entire planet was like that? Any need for nuclear weapons? For missile-defense systems? For battleships? For warships? Any need to get our own way at the expense of someone else's flourishing? Would anybody be hungry, as long as somewhere on the planet there was something to give? No. There would not be.

But we do not live in that world. And as the writer of Hebrews said:

> "You have put all things in subjection under his feet." For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus . . . crowned with glory and honor. (Hebrews 2:8–9)

We do not yet see all things put under his feet. But we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor. And he is the down-payment on the universal subjection that has not yet arrived. We see him. And in seeing him, we have hope. That God is creating us, through his Spirit, into the kind of people the world has not yet seen.

Why Not Just the Beatitudes?

And here is one question worth pausing on. If the Beatitudes are all we need, if the kingdom-character described in Matthew 5:3–12 is the substance of what God is forming in us, why didn't God just give the Beatitudes to Moses? Why didn't God hand the Beatitudes down on Sinai and say: there, finally somebody got it right. Now go do that, and you are good?

Because humans are not changed that way. Humans are not changed by being handed a moral list. Humans are changed when they receive, through faith, the very Spirit and life of God deposited in them. When they call out, in their time of suffering, Abba, Father (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). Something changes right then for them. God does something. The internal transformation that the law could never produce by external command begins to happen, by the Spirit's work in the new heart.

That is why Sinai was not enough. That is why we needed Pentecost. That is why the Beatitudes had to be preached by the One who would die and rise and pour out his Spirit, not just by the One who would hand down tablets of stone. The Beatitudes are not principally a moral list. They are a description of what life looks like in the people the Spirit has been forming. And the forming is the gift that no external command could have given.

And I still fail. I fail pretty regularly. Sometimes I just sit there with my head in my hands and think: how did I, again? It is what Paul warned about, that we should not teach others and find ourselves castaways (1 Corinthians 9:27). We do not want to teach the kingdom-life publicly and live the world-life privately. So we continue. Every day we get up out of bed and we say, today I recommit again. Today I come up out of those waters of baptism. Today is new life. Today is dove. This is a dove life today. A spirit of grace. A spirit of love. A spirit of charity. God help us. It is impossible, except that with God all things are possible.

The Sermon Beyond the Beatitudes

And when we get into the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, we are going to find ourselves saying, I cannot do this. Jesus is going to say things like: you have heard it was said by Moses, thou shalt not kill. But I say to you that if you are angry with your brother without a cause, if you say to your brother, Raca!, you worthless fellow, if you devalue your brother even in the slightest, you have already crossed the line the commandment was guarding (cf. Matthew 5:21–22). And we are going to read this and we are going to think, who is sufficient for these things?

But he also gives us the way out of each spiral. Each section of Matthew 5–7 has the three-part structure I have noted across the recent chapters. Traditional righteousness named. Vicious cycle exposed. Kingdom-pathway given. We are not left in the impossible-command condition. We are given the path of escape, and the path is always, in the end, the same path. Trust the Father. Walk in the Spirit. Live the cruciform life. Break the bread. Pour the wine. Wash the feet. And by these practices, slowly, the impossible commands become the natural expressions of the renewed heart.

Outside the Camp

And let me close with the pastoral application Hebrews 13 gives us:

"Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach" (Hebrews 13:12–13).

Outside the camp. Where Jesus suffered. Where the sin-offerings were taken to be burned. Where the rejected were thrown. Let us go to him there. Because it is from that poor and marginalized place that God has changed and will continue to change the world for his glory.

Are you holding a baby right now? Your family. Your church. Your community. And it looks like nothing. It looks small. It looks like it could not possibly matter, given what the powerful around us are accomplishing. But we are breathing. This is the Consolation of Israel. What begins in weakness, when seen with eyes of faith, becomes the seed of something enormous. You do not know what your simple act will produce ten years from now in someone else's life. You will hear it (sometimes, if you are blessed enough to hear it) when somebody comes back and says: that meant so much to me. When you said that. When you did that. When you acted in that way. When you sang that song, I was transformed. When you came and knocked on my door, you have no idea, I was at my wit's end, and your knock changed everything.

That is the kingdom in slow operation. And the language of the King at the final judgment will be exactly the language we have already encountered:

"Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40).

When did we see You? When did we feed You, clothe You, visit You? And the answer is: You did it to the least of these, and you did it to Me. That is the active faith. That is the cruciform life. That is the kingdom-pattern producing what the kingdom always produces: fruit, gradually, in places the world had written off, by the slow patient operation of the dove hovering over the waters and the voice speaking order into chaos.

Let the grace of God that has been given to you take root. Let people eat off the fruit of the tree God is building in the midst of your garden. And together (your tree, my tree, ours, theirs, all of them) we become a garden of God. Eventually, as God originally intended from those first glorified humans in the original garden, that they would be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28), the whole world becomes the garden it was meant to be. Engulfed in grace. Engulfed in beauty. Engulfed in righteousness. Let us be that people. Breathing in his gift. Breathing out his praise. Living the dove-life on the day the world we have been given offers to us. Amen.