

MATTHEW: HOUSEHOLDS OF JUSTICE: January 25, 2009

This gospel was written between 80-90 A.D., in Antioch, Syria. Most probably, the community of Matthew was upper class, filled with merchants and business people. Though they might have been prosperous, they were in the middle of a major urban area with problems of poverty, homelessness and social dislocation. Out of this reality, one of the central focuses of the community revolved around being a community centered on justice. Biblically, especially in the Old Testament, the word we translate as justice comes from righteous or righteousness, which means a right relationship.

Essentially this is the same material as in Mark, but with a different feel. There isn't the urgency and hurry of Mark, but instead there is the focus on showing Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and prophets. The heart of the gospel can be found in:

Matthew 12:47-50 (NRSV)

⁴⁷ *Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."*

⁴⁸ *But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"⁴⁹ And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!"⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*

For Matthew, the faith community can't be based on race, blood, status or wealth. The new family in Christ is not formed through kinship, but by obedience to God—living a life reflecting the will of God. Matthew is convinced that you can know the will of God and furthermore, that you can do it. To know and love God is, for Matthew, to focus on the right relationship in our households, the community and the world. At all times, this focus is on justice.

How that is played out in our lives in Christ is addressed in **Matthew 5:1-16**, the Beatitudes. These verses show us the kind of life we should lead in a community faithful to God. Certainly it would be naïve to assume this is a description of the community, but rather it was a challenge to them. The final challenge is in

Matthew 5:14-16 (NRSV)

¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."*

The next section of this gospel encourages us to be agents for mission and the center and heart of this new inclusive community. Hospitality in community is essential as well as being Christ to others and welcoming Christ in others ⁴⁰ *"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."* **Matthew 10:40 (NRSV)**

From mission, the gospel turns to the Kingdom. We see and understand this by and through relationships. These relationships are not defined by ethnicity, gender, social status or former identity. The next section of the gospel considers how to discipline and order a divided community. **Matthew 18:15-17 (NRSV)**

¹⁵ *"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."*

Clearly there is an expectation that believers would form a new community and commit to each other. This call isn't to some ideal out of reach, but rather one that is attainable through our allegiance to Christ as Lord. Through this primary relationship, we are called to live into our other relationships and to order them around "inclusive love and energizing forgiveness."

Finally, justice is seen as the standard by which we are judged. **Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV)**

³⁴ *Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was*

thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ...⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

This gospel calls us to obey Christ's call to be in right relationships with each other and the world around us. This isn't salvation by works, but a call to show the reality of salvation and the transformative power in our lives through our relationships and our deeds. Of course, this is a process and our transformation comes in the context of community. Our conversion doesn't happen apart from our relationship to the larger community. It is in that community that we have the opportunity to "nurture, deepen and demonstrate" our faith. The church in this gospel is "a new social community where the world is reordered and life is redefined."

Implications for us:

The membership standards and expectations are different today than in Matthew. Our church says you must be confirmed, attend regularly (at least twice yearly) and support the church financially. Quite honestly, we have lost the ability to make demands on each other or raise issues of accountability to the larger community. For us, membership bears little relationship to our "spiritual growth, biblical study, financial discipline or righteous living." With these low expectations, is no wonder that we ask so little of each other or ourselves. This reveals our belief that church is more a "right" than a "privilege". Moreover, there is an insistence that we come to church on our own terms, rather than on God's.

What if the focus of our membership shifted from participation to justice? At the least it would put us all on even ground. When we compare attendance, participation, or giving there is the opportunity to act more righteous than the other. This is more difficult when justice is the standard. The focus shifts from what we are doing to what we are becoming.

- Are we biased toward the rich and against the poor?
- Are we grappling with issues of inclusion and exclusion?
- Are we simply basing our community on common ethnic or class realities?

If justice is our standard, we are forced to confront "ourselves and one another in direct relationship to Christ's teachings." With that standard, what would it mean if we came to church, not for what we could get, but for what we could give? This would not be a matter of becoming more "strict" but of becoming more willing to discuss and struggle with the problems of our lives and the world around us. If we would seek to be a place of justice, we will also practice mercy and love.

- What are our expectations of membership at Good Shepherd?
- What would you like membership to mean?

The Beatitudes:

Matthew 5:3-14 (NRSV)

he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God...

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

Key Lessons from the Sermon on the Mount

Beatitude	Old Testament anticipation	Clashing worldly values	God's reward	How to develop this attitude
Poor in spirit (Mat 5:3)	Isaiah 57:15	Pride and personal independence	Kingdom of heaven	James 4:7-10
Mourning (Mat 5:4)	Isaiah 61:1, 2	Happiness at any cost	Comfort (2 Corinthians 1:4)	Psalm 51 James 4:7-10
Meekness (Mat 5:5)	Psalm 37:5-11	Power	Inherit the earth	Matthew 11:27-30
Righteousness (Mat 5:6)	Isaiah 11:4, 5 Isaiah 42:1-4	Pursuing personal needs	Filled (satisfied)	John 16:5-11 Philippians 3:7-11
Mercy (Mat 5:7)	Psalm 41:1	Strength without feeling	Be shown mercy	Ephesians 5:1, 2
Pure in heart (Mat 5:8)	Psalm 24:3, 4 Psalm 51:10	Deception is acceptable	See God	1 John 3:1-3
Peacemaker (Mat 5:9)	Isaiah 57:18, 19 Isaiah 60:17	Personal peace is pursued without concern for the world's chaos	Be called sons of God	Romans 12:9-21 Hebrews 12:10, 11
Persecuted (Mat 5:10)	Isaiah 52:13; 53:12	Weak commitments	Inherit the kingdom of heaven	2 Timothy 3:12

In his longest recorded sermon, Jesus began by describing the traits he was looking for in his followers. He called those who lived out those traits blessed because God had something special in store for them. Each beatitude is an almost direct contradiction of society's typical way of life.