

Sermon on the Mount

May 18, 2014

Title: The Path to God's Kingdom

Text: Matthew 5:7-10

Summary: the path to God's kingdom takes us through the door of not only His justice, but also of His mercy. Only then can we become His true children.

The "Hammer"

December 25, 167 B.C.

On December 25, 167 B.C., the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the Temple and launched an all-out assault on the Jewish faith. The ancient historian Josephus writes:

And when the king had built an idol altar upon God's altar, he slew swine upon it, and so offered a sacrifice neither according to the law, nor the Jewish religious worship in that country. He also compelled them to forsake the worship which they paid their own God, and to adore those whom he took to be gods; and made them build temples, and raise idol altars in every city and village, and offer swine upon them every day. He also commanded them not to circumcise their sons, and threatened to punish any that should be found to have transgressed his injunction. (Antiquities of the Jews, XII,v.)

Antiochus' goal was nothing less than the complete extermination of Judaism. Those who dared to resist suffered unmentionable persecution. The land lay under foreign rule; many Jews compromised their faith in order to survive; God's great purpose for His people, not to mention His covenant promises to them, seemed doomed to extinction.

The Hammer:

Then one day the officers of the king came to a village named Modin to enforce the king's decrees. They attempted to enlist the support of a priest and village elder named Mattathias so that the rest of the populace would quickly fall in line.

But on this day things would go in a radically different direction. Mattathias refused, and when another Jewish man stepped forward to perform the pagan sacrifice, Mattathias ran him through with a sword, starting a war of revolution.

Mattathias' son Judas became the leader of a guerrilla army that won a series of decisive battles against the Syrians. For his exploits Judas earned the nickname "Maccabaeus," or "The Hammer."

On December 25, 174 B.C., three years after Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the Temple, Judas cleansed it of all pagan pollution and re-established the worship of the Jewish God in Jerusalem. Jews celebrate this renewal of the Temple to this day in the Festival of Hanukkah.

The Kingdom of Heaven:

If we were able to ask the people of Jesus' time what it would mean for God's Rule to finally come to reality, they would have immediately pointed to Judas the Hammer. He, after all, had won a decisive series of victories over the pagans and had driven them from the land. He had cleansed the defiled Temple and re-established the true worship of God. He had brought peace to the land and had established a new ruling dynasty.

True, as the years went by the glorious revolution had given way to infighting, corruption, and finally, Roman occupation. But for a few short years the Jewish people had been their own masters. And that meant that every word Jesus spoke and every action He took was measured against those of the great hero, Judas, the Hammer.

God's True Children

Defining the Kingdom of Heaven:

So, what kind of Kingdom was Jesus announcing when He said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven [or the kingdom of God] is near."? Well, He began, as we saw last week, by meeting people right where they were -- in their neediness. His listeners knew all too well what it meant to be impoverished, grieving, oppressed and hungry for justice. This was their daily reality. And Jesus began by promising that God would meet each of these needs:

Matthew 5:3-6 NIV

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

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

**Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.**

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

So far, so good. Isn't this what Judas the Hammer had accomplished, if only for a few decades two centuries ago? Maybe this time would be the "real deal." Maybe this Jesus

would turn out to be Jesus the Sledgehammer, who would crush the enemy once and for all!

A Strange twist:

But the second set of blessings, or beatitudes, introduces a strange twist to the expected story:

Matthew 5:7-10 NIV

**Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.**

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

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

**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

Here the focus is not on neediness, but on actions that in effect bring the kingdom to earthly reality. Here is what God's liberation force, God's guerrilla army is going to do when it takes the field. And what a different kind of army this is! Nothing like the glorious and feared freedom fighters following the orders of Judas the Hammer. Here is a force that would seem destined to utter defeat and humiliation -- by its own choice!

After all, what kind of an army would ever win a battle by *showing mercy*?

What kind of an army would ever win the day by refusing to *deceive* the enemy?

What kind of an army would ever win a war if all it ever did was *make peace*?

What kind of an army would ever see *persecution* as the path to victory?

God's true children:

The answer to these questions lies in the rewards that Jesus promises to those who are willing to be merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers and persecuted for the sake of justice. Each of these 4 rewards focuses us not on an earthly goal, but on God Himself:

- Being "merciful" results in receiving mercy and forgiveness from God Himself. We may be hungry for justice, but we had better be careful what we ask for! More than anything else, we need God's mercy!

- Being "pure in heart," or pure in our inner motivations, results in the vision of God! It means that God has truly "come home" to His people. This is the great promise that will be fulfilled in God's New World:

Revelation 22:3-4 NIV

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. *They will see his face*, and his name will be on their foreheads.

- Being a peacemaker qualifies us to be called "children of God." When God brought Israel out of slavery and oppression in Egypt, He said, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." Now, as His true Rule comes, we discover our true identity -- children of God.
- And it is only when we embrace mercy, integrity and peacemaking that we can stand up to the inevitable persecution brought by the old, decaying regimes of this world. Being persecuted merely affirms that we belong to a different "family."

The Path of the Kingdom

The door to the Kingdom:

We all hunger and thirst for justice. We all, in our own way, want to see things made right. We can all point to areas in our lives and in the lives of others where things are wrong, out of joint, needing fixing. But if we are ever to see God's Kingdom come and make things right we will find ourselves confronted by a strange and unlikely doorway.

On the front of the door is a sign that reads "Justice! Enter here all who hunger and thirst for God's Justice."

But on the other side of the door is a sign that reads "Mercy! From here forward leave justice in the hands of God and allow His mercy to be your only reality."

Living in God's mercy and grace washes out of our hearts resentment, unforgiveness, bitterness. It reminds us that we -- most of all -- are the beneficiaries, the blessed! God's mercy provides the only vision of God's face.

Only then can we commit to be peacemakers who act out their family identity in a warring and hostile world. How unlike is God's Kingdom to the "kingdom of this world."
(Rev. 11:15)

And only then can we understand that we fight for the kingdom not by fighting back, but by showing mercy to those who persecute us. We do not fight fire with fire. We fight hate with love; we fight injustice with mercy; we fight hypocrisy with integrity. We refuse to be the children of a broken, decaying and dying world. We are the children of God who see His face.

The path to God's Kingdom:

The blessings that Jesus announced end where they began. The first -- "blessed are the poor in spirit" -- promises that "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The last -- "blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" -- promises the very same thing: "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

In between is the path to God's Kingdom. It is a journey that Jesus challenges you and me to take with Him each and every day. It is a journey that begins, as always, in the depths of our neediness, especially for God's justice in a corrupt and deceitful world.

But just when we realize that God is coming through for us with His justice we come face to face with *that door*. We read the sign: Justice! We eagerly open it, perhaps expecting that now everything will be put right. We will be vindicated. Our enemies will get what's coming. God will *judge*.

No sooner are we through the door and we see the sign on the other side: Mercy! From here on out we are in a different reality. Jesus Himself walked here, crying from his cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" This is the path of the sacrificial Lamb who took upon Himself the sins of the world. And now it is our path.

Every thought, every action must now conform to this strange path. This is the path to God's Kingdom.

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The only way:

On an October day in 2006 a man named Charles Roberts burst into an Amish schoolhouse and killed 5 schoolgirls in cold blood. 5 more were injured but survived. So how would the Amish community respond? If any group of people ever hungered and thirsted for justice, surely it would have been all of those grief-stricken mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, grandparents and friends.

But when they found themselves staring at the door labeled "Justice!" they did an amazing thing:

In the midst of their grief over this shocking loss, the Amish community didn't cast blame, they didn't point fingers, they didn't hold a press conference with attorneys at their sides. Instead, they reached out with grace and compassion toward the killer's family.

The afternoon of the shooting an Amish grandfather of one of the girls who was killed expressed forgiveness toward the killer, Charles Roberts. That same day Amish neighbors visited the Roberts family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain. Later that week the Roberts family was invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls who had been killed. And Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at Charles Roberts' funeral.

It's ironic that the killer was tormented for nine years by the pre-mature death of his young daughter. He never forgave God for her death. Yet, after he cold-bloodedly shot 10 innocent Amish school girls, the Amish almost immediately forgave him and showed compassion toward his family.

In a world at war and in a society that often points fingers and blames others, this reaction was unheard of. Many reporters and interested followers of the story asked, "How could they forgive such a terrible, unprovoked act of violence against innocent lives?" (lancasterpa.com)

How could they forgive? It was the only path forward, the only way.