

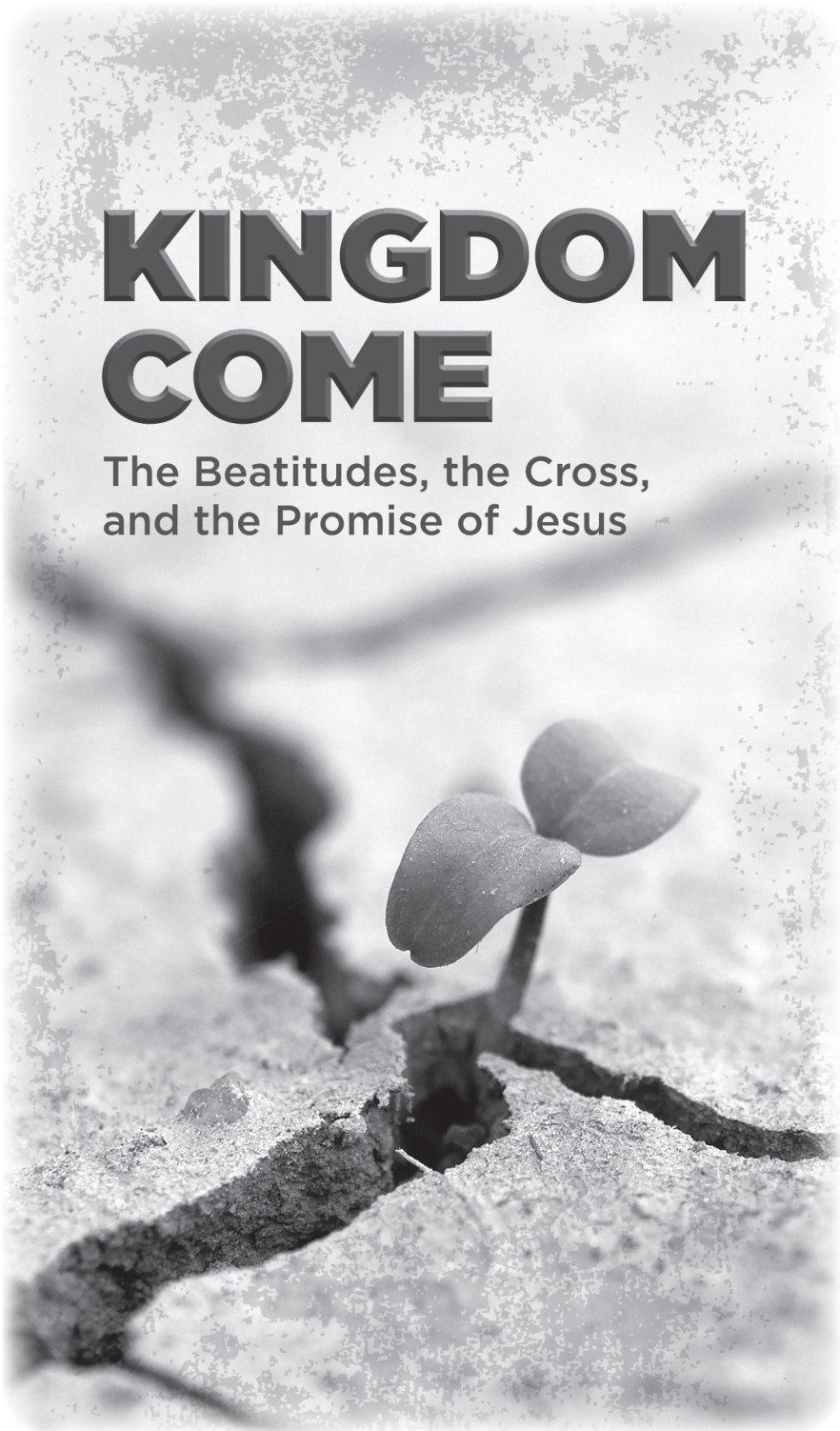
KINGDOM COME

The Beatitudes, the Cross,
and the Promise of Jesus



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Introduction

In Matthew 5, Jesus opens His longest public teaching recorded in any of the four Gospels, which has become known as “The Sermon on the Mount.” In this sermon, Jesus describes a counter-cultural and counter-intuitive way of life that is often described as the “upside-down Kingdom.” Jesus was teaching, through His words, a way of living that He would embody through His life—and ultimately, through His death. The crucifixion of Jesus—truly a most “upside-down” way to establish a Kingdom—was not just the ultimate injustice and tragedy; it also became the consummation of His teachings about the Kingdom of God. It was through the resurrection, then, that God made the Divine declaration that Jesus was indeed His only Son, and that both this Kingdom and this King were worthy to be followed.

The Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus lays out the principles of life in the Kingdom of God, begins with a series of short statements which have become commonly known as “the Beatitudes.” These short statements of blessing act as a sort of “title page” for the rest of the sermon, stating succinctly what it means to live a life of blessing. While there is disagreement on the exact structure of these statements, found in Matthew 5:3-12, many theologians agree with Thomas Aquinas, who makes the statement in his collected writings that the eighth beatitude “is a confirmation and declaration of all those that precede. Because from the very fact that a man is confirmed in poverty of spirit, meekness, and the rest, it follows that no persecution will induce him to renounce them. Hence the eighth beatitude corresponds in a way to all the preceding seven.” Therefore, through study of the first seven, one can truly understand the breadth and depth of life in the Kingdom.

If these seven beatitudes described the Kingdom at the outset of His ministry, Jesus’ words from the cross can be seen as a capstone to His ministry as it was consummated in His death. While it would be impossible to say that there is a direct tie between the seven beatitudes and the seven words from the cross, it would seem quite likely that there is, at the least, some relation between the two. Jesus’ ministry was holistic in all of its diversity. The example used by Charles

Spurgeon is that A and Z are both unique letters, but they are in the same alphabet. “You do not find [Jesus doing] one thing at the first, another thing afterwards, and third thing still later; He is ‘Jesus Christ; the same yesterday, and today, and forever.’ There is wondrous similarity about everything that Christ said and did.”¹ This early proclamation of the Kingdom, recorded in the peaceful setting of a mountain sermon to both the disciples and the crowds that had gathered, would seem to have a direct connection to all that followed—and certainly to these purposeful and agonizing statements that Jesus made from the cross.

The premise of this study is simple: through the Beatitudes, Jesus describes the Kingdom of God; through the cross, He fulfills that Kingdom. Unlike an earthly, human Kingdom, we are not capable in our flesh of living Kingdom lives. Thankfully, the cross stands as a testimony that we don’t have to. The simplest way that we can understand that gospel is this: Jesus lived the life that we couldn’t live and then died the death that we deserved to die in order to bring us into His Kingdom. As we study each of these fourteen statements, seven made from a mountain at the outset of Jesus’ ministry and seven made on a hill at its seeming conclusion, I believe that we will find an invitation into lives that are fulfilled through Him.

As we journey toward Easter this year, it is my hope and prayer that we will investigate both the life and death of Jesus, the man who is God. As we do so, I also pray that we will each hear the clear invitation into a life that we will never be able to live in our flesh, but one that is joyfully promised through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. I pray that we would find this invitation to be both clear and compelling, and that we would, through our transformed lives, invite many others into this journey along with us.

Soli Deo Gloria,
Brian Kannel
York Alliance Church

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Christ’s Words From the Cross*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1961.), pg. 106.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to be used as a companion resource to the 2016 Lenten sermon series at York Alliance Church. Each Sunday's message will provide the central teaching of the Scripture passages for that week. You will receive most benefit from this study as you utilize it in conjunction with both the Sunday messages and a weekly LIFE group gathering, a small community with whom you are able to discuss and apply these truths. If you are unable to attend one of the Sunday morning gatherings for any reason, the sermon audio can be found at www.yorkalliance.org/resources.

Please be aware that studying the Bible can be a challenging endeavor. Of course, there are very few worthwhile things in life that don't require some effort on our part. But beyond the difficulty of study in general is the fact that we have a very real enemy who is actively opposed to our understanding of the Word of God. Paul tells us that our battle is not "against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12) Therefore, if you find yourself feeling discouraged, frustrated, or unable to understand something, I strongly encourage you to stop and pray. Ask God to guide your heart and thoughts and to give you understanding.

Also, don't do this study in isolation. While most will complete the actual studies individually, I would encourage you to get connected to someone else who is doing this study and to connect with that person each week to talk about what you're learning. Along the way, if you have frustrations or are confused about something you're studying, that person can provide encouragement and guidance as you journey through the study together. However, if you get stuck along the way, you should feel free to skip a section and move to the next one.

This particular study guide has a few unique features to help you grow as a student of the Word as well as a disciple of Jesus. Therefore, a few notes may be helpful as you begin your study using this guide:

- Each week’s study will consist of three main sections: a study of the beatitude, a study of one of Jesus’ words from the cross, and a third study that will help combine the two.
- While the studies will be focused on the verse in Matthew 5 and the gospel passage that details the word from the cross, you will often be referred to various additional passages throughout the Bible. You are encouraged to look these up in the Bible that you are using to study and read them as well. Through study, you will find the 66 books of the Bible, written by 39 authors over 1500 years, present an incredibly unified message.
- I continue to encourage you to read each Scripture passage from multiple translations, remembering that every translation is just that—a translation. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations will be from the English Standard Version, which is a literal “word for word” translation. The New Living Translation is a “phrase for phrase” translation that is very readable but also quite accurate. I recommend reading key passages in both translations when possible. Both translations, along with dozens of others, can be found at www.biblegateway.com.
- Included with each study are blank sermon note sheets (for use on Sunday mornings and/or with the sermon audio available online) as well as a “Facilitation/Application” sheet. While the primary intent of this page is that it be used within York Alliance Church LIFE groups, this resource can be used in a variety of other settings as well.

If you have questions about how to best utilize this study guide, have comments on what you’re finding in it, or just want to report your experiences with using it, all are welcomed! Email me at bkannel@yorkalliance.org.

Lord Jesus, You began Your ministry with the proclamation that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and that we needed to repent and believe the Good News. May this study prompt both repentance and belief, and may we find ourselves entering in more and more to the Kingdom of God that is unfolding all around us. May we see the profound depths of Your simple words, and may we not be daunted by the depth of Your profound words, so that this study would not just expand our knowledge and understanding, but expand our lives as we pursue the abundant life promised in Your Kingdom.

In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Kingdom Experiments

Several years ago, we practiced a series of “experiments” during the Lenten season at York Alliance. These were short-term commitments that led to profound experiences for many in our growth toward Jesus. This Lent, I am proposing that we once again undertake an experiment, this time in Kingdom living. The following is an adapted excerpt from the “Discipleship According to Jesus” study guide, written for Lent 2012:

Here’s the thing with holiness: it doesn’t just happen. The paradox is that holiness doesn’t come from anything you do, and yet, it requires all of the effort that you have. You can’t make yourself holy—but if you sit around and wait for holiness to arrive, it will never show up. D.A. Carson says it this way:

“People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.”

In order to follow the way of Jesus, then, we must put forth an effort. This effort doesn’t negate grace; as Carson states, it’s driven by grace. But it takes effort nonetheless.

Historically, the church has observed the Lenten season through fasting. Whether it’s food, drink, an activity, or a behavior, something is removed for that period of time. With this form of spiritual discipline, the church seeks to increase in Christ-likeness during the forty days of Lent.

But, instead of something being removed, what if something was added? Specifically, what if behaviors that mirrored the way that Jesus described the Kingdom of God were intentionally added during the forty days of Lent? What if,

during this time, a small community of people, like your LIFE group or family unit, committed to radical obedience to a specific teaching of Jesus, and then paid attention to what Jesus did in each of your hearts through that step of obedience?

What follows are a series of seven “faith experiments.”² They are experiments in that they have a definite beginning and end, and until they are undertaken, the results can’t be predicted with certainty. They require faith because, outwardly, there would be no clear reason to attempt them. Not one of them is easy. Each of them requires a radical change in behavior and lifestyle for a period of time. They are not intended to be added on to normal life; they are intended to interrupt normal life with a practical (and maybe painful!) infusion of the Kingdom of God as Jesus taught it. They will most certainly require grace-driven effort.

The ideal situation is that you would evaluate these experiments along with your LIFE group. Participating in an experiment within the setting of community will not only make the experiment more feasible; it will make it more joyful and rewarding. In addition, the LIFE group setting provides a built-in context for debriefing, encouragement, and accountability as individuals proceed through the chosen experiment. Each LIFE group is encouraged to evaluate all seven experiments and (a) determine if each member is willing to commit to one of them, and (b) to decide together which experiment would be most effective for the members of your group to commit to. While you certainly could combine elements of several of the experiments, or even add your own unique elements, I would recommend that you stick with just one of the options. Each chosen experiment will be difficult and incredibly intrusive on “normal” life, and trying to attempt more than one at a time could lead to failure and discouragement.

While the LIFE group setting is ideal for these, it’s vitally important to give each person the opportunity to either opt “in” or “out” of the experiment. Undertaking this kind of practice goes far beyond the typical commitment to a LIFE group, and each person should determine his/her willingness and be given the opportunity

² I’m grateful to Mark Scandrette, Gary Moon, Jan Johnson, and Dallas Willard, who each have written extensively on “experiments” in living out the Kingdom of God on earth.

to either participate or not. Consider the roles and expectations that each person is being asked to change from a more “typical” LIFE group:

- We are moving from spectators to participants. While we always can participate in the application of the Word of God, we often choose to watch to see if others will jump in, and sometimes we are content to simply learn and discuss truth but not truly apply it. This requires participation.
- We are moving from passive connection to active engagement. Coming to a LIFE group gathering and being connected to one another’s lives can happen with relative passivity. Community, while valuable, is not an end in itself. We mustn’t have the mission of community—rather, we should be communities on mission! When this is happening, passivity is not an option.
- Leaders must move from service-provider to co-pilgrim and guide. Making a meeting run and facilitating connection and vision in a group is already a difficult task. Leaders now must engage the experiment alongside the group, and yet act as a guide for a trip they’ve not yet taken. Leaders must be willing to take this journey as well.³

If you are personally unable to participate in an experiment with a LIFE group, whether you are currently not connected to a LIFE group or your group cannot commit to an experiment like this, you are still encouraged to try it! Family units, particularly those with teens, can undertake these themselves. It’s most effective if several families band together and jointly commit to an experiment.

These experiments are in no way limited to adult participation! While they are largely written from the adult point of view, almost every aspect of each experiment could be easily adapted to children. Inviting children into your practice of these experiments, whether as a LIFE group, small community, or family unit, could also be a transformational experience for them as well! As you engage these difficult experiments in radical obedience, bring your children along with you! Discuss the process (both the victories and the difficulties!), invite their participation, talk about what God is showing you along the way, and allow them to debrief their hearts with you as well.

³ Principles adapted from Mark Scandrette, *Practicing the Way of Jesus*, (IVP, Downer’s Grove, IL, 2011.), pg. 42-43.

A final caution on these experiments: They could easily be construed as some new form of legalism. However, legalism is made up of rules that are imposed on both self and others in order to either earn or maintain favor with God. These experiments consist either of self-imposed limits or self-directed behaviors, both of which do not purport to curry favor, but instead teach us to walk more fully in the freedom of the Kingdom of God.

“We are being invited to trust that the instructions of Jesus are based on true knowledge of the way life actually works. They are meant to liberate us from the patterns of thinking and acting that are sabotaging and destroying us and everyone around us. So rather begrudgingly asking, ‘What do I have to do?’ or ‘How far do I have to go?’ a better question is, ‘How free and alive am I willing to be?’”⁴

Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God—abundant life—was available through Him. He gave His life so that we could be invited into that life. Our response, then, is to believe by faith that the freedom that He offers is truly the best possible life. These experiments are simply a pathway into that freedom.

On the following pages, you will find a description of each of the seven “Kingdom Experiments” which each correspond to one of the beatitudes. Each person is encouraged to read through each experiment, and then discuss with your LIFE group, family, or other community structure which one you are going to undertake. While it’s not required for each person in a given community to engage the same experiment, you’ll find that the common practice (and common struggle!) is helpful through the process. If you do not have a community in which you can participate in an experiment, you are encouraged to put your name on the sheet at the York Alliance Church lobby at the Welcome Desk to indicate your interest, and you’ll be connected with others who are interested in taking part in these experiments as a community.

⁴ Ibid. pg. 47.

Kingdom Experiment #1: Staying Connected

One of our biggest challenges that we have in trusting God as our Defender is very simple—we forget. The pace of daily life is such that it can be difficult to remember that God is in control and that He can handle our lives even better than we can. For many of us, we begin the day with a time of focus on the love of Christ for us, and then we've forgotten all about Him by the time we get to work in the morning, only to reconnect our hearts the following morning...24 hours later.

For this experiment, you are going to build six intentional “pauses” into each day for the entire Lenten season. The timing of each pause is flexible, although participants should work to stay as close to the schedule below as possible. If a time needs to be changed (due to a work schedule, etc.), it is best if that change is made at the very beginning and then stuck with consistently throughout the experiment.

During these pauses, the goal is to completely stop and focus your attention on the God of the Universe. That means (but is not limited to!) the following: turn off or close the computer, put the phone and tablet away, no texting, turn off the radio/music/podcast/mp3/etc., excuse yourself from all conversations, turn off the television, walk out of the movie, and so on. You will quite likely find that these “pauses” hit at difficult and awkward times, which is exactly the point—work to remain faithful to the experiment. These pauses should last between 2 and 5 minutes each, although you may find yourself combining them at some points throughout the day with additional Bible reading and prayer, which is certainly acceptable, in which case they will obviously be longer.

Pause at the following times:

6:00am (or when you get up)

9:00am

12:00pm (noon)

4:00pm

7:00pm

10:00pm (or before you go to bed)

During these pauses, ask yourself the following questions:

- Where have I been defensive, either outwardly or in my spirit?
- Have I been aware of the presence of Jesus today?
- Are there opportunities that I've had to love people? Have I taken those opportunities, or have I missed them?
- Are there any wrongs that I've committed that I need to make right with other people? Do I need to ask forgiveness or extend mercy?

After asking these questions, take about a minute to pray through the Lord's Prayer, phrase by phrase, allowing the Spirit to help you process each concept and request in the light of your day.

During this time, you might find yourself desiring to jot notes in a journal. While that's certainly appropriate, it's best to use an old fashioned pen and paper journal, so as to avoid the distractions that are most certainly to come while engaging electronic devices. However, be careful to limit the length of these times so that they are manageable over the long haul! The first and last pause of the day will likely be a bit longer as you intentionally pray into the day that is coming and then process the day that's been. For those two pauses specifically, you should look at the entire day—however, for all of the other pauses, work to simply be concerned about the period of time since the last pause, and until the next one.

One final objective: It's best to do this experiment not just with a group, but with a clearly identified accountability partner. At the outset, identify someone (in your LIFE group, family, etc.) who is also doing this experiment who will ask you at least every other day if you are pausing at the right times each day. This can happen via text message, email, phone call, or face to face—the medium isn't important, but the accountability is.

For group discussion: (ask each question weekly)

- In what ways is this experiment helping you to experience the presence of Jesus in daily life? What differences do you notice?
- What's been the biggest challenge with this experiment?
- Do people around you notice a difference in your behavior?
- What have you enjoyed the most about this experiment this week?

Kingdom Experiment #2: Radical Mercy

Showing mercy isn't overly difficult, as long as we're not personally inconvenienced in the process. Personal inconvenience, however, is often inextricably tied to the process of offering mercy to another. We must give up our time, our resources, and even our rights in the process—and that's often, if we're honest, a deal-breaker for us.

During this experiment, you will be serving others in a variety of different ways. The goal is quite simple: move outside of yourself and offer mercy to those in need of it. In the process, you will be serving those in desperate need of mercy both on the other side of the world and right here at home.

The first step is for you to recognize the barriers to serving others in practical ways. Think honestly: what stops you from sacrificing in order to meet the needs of those around you? For most of us, the list is relatively short: (1) we don't feel we have the time, (2) we don't feel we have the money, and/or (3) our pride gets in the way. Therefore, over the course of this experiment, you will be sacrificing in these three areas—time, money, and pride—each week as you intentionally serve those in need in the world around you.

For many of us, time is our single most valuable commodity, often worth significantly more to us than our money. This is maybe most clearly seen in the lengths to which we'll go, and the prices we're willing to pay, for convenience and service. Bloomberg Business reported that in April of 2015, Americans spent more in restaurants and bars than they did in grocery stores—over \$50,000,000,000 annually. Therefore, the first radical act of mercy will be to carve out at least 90 minutes each week in our packed full calendar, and use that time to serve the poor in your community. Contacting the local rescue mission, food bank, homeless shelter, or soup kitchen is a simple way to make this happen. While you can certainly commit to doing this yourself, it's a lot more fun to find a time when several of you from your LIFE Group can serve together! Commit to serving weekly throughout the Lenten season; and you may find this is a part of the experiment that you'd like to continue even after the Easter celebration.

While time has proven, for many, to be more valuable, parting with our money can still be quite difficult. If you engage this experiment, you are not simply committing to being generous with your time, but with your money as well. Each week over the course of this Lenten experiment you are encouraged to make an impact on the globe by giving a small portion of the abundance with which you've been trusted to someone in need. A great way to do this is to donate through the "Gift Catalog" put together by Compassion, International. These gifts start at a mere \$7.00 each and can go into the thousands—and each one makes an impact on someone in poverty. (<http://www.compassion.com/catalog>) If you'd like to get a little more personal, you can commit to helping a pastor's family with their education in the country of Burkina Faso through a local non-profit, based in Red Lion and developed by a member of the Glenview Alliance Church, called Burkina's Promise. (<http://www.burkinaspromise.org>) Of course, there are countless other ways to give toward global poverty as well—the goal of the experiment is not to support a specific cause, but to give generously each week throughout the Lenten season.

Finally, pride can get in the way of us serving one another, and certainly of us serving the world. Jesus modeled washing the feet of the disciples on the night that He was betrayed—an action that was prompted because the disciples were too prideful to serve one another in this way. There are some things that we tend to feel are simply beneath us, so we leave them for someone else. During this season, look for one "menial" task that someone does regularly—either in your home, your workplace, or your community. It may be picking up trash, cleaning a bathroom, cleaning up pet waste, or some such thing. Determine what you will do, and then commit to doing it, at least weekly, throughout the Lenten season.

Time—serving the poor in your community. Money—giving to the poor around the globe. Pride—serving others in the most menial of tasks. Each one, at least once, each week. That's radical mercy.

For group discussion: (ask each question weekly)

- In what ways is this experiment helping you see others differently?
- In what ways does this experiment help you to see God differently?
- What's been the biggest challenge with this experiment?
- What have you enjoyed the most about this experiment this week?

Kingdom Experiment #3: Radical Community

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said, “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.”⁵ There are some who have a deep aversion to solitude and silence (in which case, you should consider Kingdom Experiment #6), and others who have some level of aversion to real, honest community. There’s something in us that wants to hold people at arm’s length, and only allow them into certain areas of our lives. That something, we learn in Genesis 3, is our own sinfulness. Interestingly, the first reaction of Adam and Eve to their sin was not hiding from God—it was hiding from each other! (Genesis 3:7) This experiment pushes us to open our lives to one another.

Commit to a radical rhythm of life over the next six weeks. It consists of the following:

- Make daily contact with everyone in your LIFE group or community to which you have committed to pursue this experiment. While an occasional email or text connection is OK, strive for at least “voice to voice” contact, if not face to face. In addition, pray for each of these people daily—and it would be great to do it with them during your daily contact!
- If you are a part of a LIFE group, you likely already have one weekly connect per week. Particularly during this six week period, make sure that this is an intentional part of your week—don’t miss it! If you are not in a LIFE group, or if you’re not meeting during that week, schedule a time where your community can talk through how this experiment is going.
- In addition to your LIFE group, connect two additional times each week as a group. One of these should be sharing a meal together. It doesn’t need to be fancy or expensive, and everyone can certainly provide a prepared dish or food item. However, take time to experience the regular “breaking of bread” with this community.
- One of the things that we seek to remind one another of is that the church does not have the “mission of community”, but rather, is called to be a “community on mission.” Simply put, community is a means, not an end. As you connect to one another three times each week (LIFE Group, meal together, and one additional connection), intentionally invite someone that

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (Harper & Row, NY, 1954.), pg. 78.

you know into at least one of those gatherings each week. They may not accept, but be intentional about inviting. This is clearly the purpose for which God has saved us into community. (John 13:35 and 1 Corinthians 14:24-25)

- Commit to either serving all together as a group for one full day during the Lenten season or to taking a weekend retreat together. If you choose the retreat, have each participant plan a portion of the weekend in order to make your time together both fun and meaningful.

While these commitments may not seem overly difficult at first, keeping this level of community prioritized over a six week period will likely prove to be quite difficult. However, more than the time commitment itself, this level of time spent together will likely push you toward truly knowing one another and being truly known. As you gather, take time to talk to one another about the realities of life, faith, and pursuing radical community together.

For group discussion: (ask each question weekly)

- What is the most difficult part of this experiment for you?
- What are some of the joys and frustrations that come from being together so much?
- What are a few of the things that you've learned about yourself during this experiment thus far?
- Do we find that this community is an inviting place for others to connect?

Kingdom Experiment #4: Fasting

We live in a world in which the vast majority of our desires are able to be satisfied on the spot with very little waiting. The instances in which we need to wait to have some appetite or desire satisfied are relatively few and far between... and often cause a great amount of angst. Ours is an “instant gratification, fast-food” kind of world—one in which the idea of fasting has fallen quite out of vogue.

Jesus’ teaching seems to simply assume that His disciples will fast: “When you fast...” (Matthew 6:16) There was a tacit assumption that part of the approach disciples would take to seeking after God was self-denial and the limiting of their appetites. In fact, self-denial was central to Jesus’ message to disciples: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24) It was also central in Paul’s teaching—he taught that the lack of self-denial was one of the ways to identify false disciples and enemies of Jesus. (Philippians 3:18-19)

The Lenten season has traditionally been a time in which Christians fast, often giving up things like dessert, chocolate, or meat on Fridays. While these observances certainly have some value, I think we can all admit that they are far from difficult or painful sacrifices. For this experiment, you will be asked to engage in a much more difficult and invasive fast—one that will likely make you thrilled to give up chocolate next year! However, in this kind of radical self-denial for a finite period of time, you will likely find a resonance with the God-man who sacrificed His life for yours. As you review these three choices, you will be asked to choose one. Rather than looking for that which would be the easiest for you to accomplish, look for the one that most pinpoints an area of undue focus or even idolatry in your life.

Media Fast (Social and Otherwise)

Give up all non-essential electronic media. That includes, but is not limited to: TV, movies, internet surfing, social media of all kinds, email, radio, podcasts, video games, playing on the smart phone or tablet, etc. There will obviously be items listed above that are needed for work or necessary functions: the goal is not legalism, but a personally chosen limitation. You will likely be shocked at how full of noise your life is! If you are extremely active on social media, it might be a good

idea to let people know that you will be taking a break and give those who need it an old-fashioned telephone number at which they would be able to contact you if needed. Then, take the time that is freed up (literally hours each day for most of us!) to connect with Jesus and to connect with others. Develop a reading and prayer routine and look for opportunities to reach out (a phone call is certainly allowed) to those you wish you were able to connect with, but never seem to have time. Over these six weeks, you'll likely figure out why...

Food Fast

A six-week fast from all food is not realistic or safe, but choosing strict limits on food intake during this period can have incredible effects on both physical and spiritual health. Consider dropping all wheat and grains, soy, products that contain any lactose, and all processed sugar from your diet. You'll need to read labels! So much of what we eat and drink has endured lots of processing and contains lots of extra "junk," of which you're likely blissfully unaware. In addition, choose one 24-hour period each week during which you will only drink clear liquids and abstain from all food. Many find that a noon to noon fast is the most reasonable and meaningful.

Fashion Fast

Choose 10 specific articles of clothing that you will wear for the entire Lenten season. If you exercise, you are allowed an additional 4 items, but you can only wear them during the time you are working out. These items must include your shoes, and because of an early Lenten season, I would recommend they also include a coat. Obviously, basics will be your friend during this time—choose clothes that are versatile and comfortable. You will encounter multiple times over the course of the six weeks where you will feel the need to make an "exception"—resist the urge! As an added joy during this time, it's a great opportunity to radically clean out your closet and donate lots of unneeded clothing.

For group discussion: (ask each question weekly)

- What is the most difficult part of this experiment for you?
- What has been a joyful part of this experiment for you?
- What are a few of the things that you've learned about yourself during this experiment thus far?
- What have you learned about God during this time?

Kingdom Experiment #5: Simplicity

We live in a place and era of abundance that is just about unparalleled in the history of the world. Beyond that, we have become a radically consumerist society, constantly pursuing “more” and “better” in just about every area. We have far more than we need—clothes, food, and various “stuff”—and we continue to accumulate more. The marketing machine that is constantly at work around us is convincing us again and again that we are living miserable and unfulfilled lives because we don’t have _____ (whatever _____ might be). Once we get _____, we immediately find that we need the next _____ in order to be truly happy and fulfilled. And the cycle continues...

This is a two-part experiment. You are encouraged to practice both of these experiments together as a discipline in simplicity.

Limiting Consumption—The first part of this experiment is a recognition that most of us consume far more than we need in every area of our lives. Therefore, for the Lenten season, refrain from buying anything that is non-essential. This would certainly include clothes, music, movies, games, technological devices, furniture, household items, etc. However, you’re welcome to extend the discipline out to things like eating out, luxury food and drinks, desserts, entertainment or other things—as far as you choose to extend it. Of course, groceries and other essentials will be necessary, but everything else should be questioned and considered. Maybe even partner with someone else in your community and ask them to be both accountability for you and to help you determine if something is or is not “essential.” Each time you would typically purchase or consume, think about why you would have done that, and what it feels like to deprive yourself of that item or experience during this time.

Have2Give¹⁶—Look aggressively, along with your community, at what you own. Determine, along with your LIFE group or other community, six categories of

⁶ I first heard of this experiment in Mark Scandrette’s book *Practicing the Way of Jesus*. While I can’t agree with all that he says in the book, he does a great job of unpacking the idea of experiments as a step in spiritual formation. Mark Scandrette, *Practicing the Way of Jesus*, (IVP, Downer’s Grove, IL, 2011.), pg. 11-14.

“stuff” that you will target—one category for each week. The end result will be that you will cut your “ownership” in half within those areas over the six-week time period. This is the process: After determining categories, you’ll take inventory and, as the title of the experiment suggests, give “1” for every “2” that you have. Clothes, kitchen items, books, movies, shoes, décor, sports equipment, furniture, technological items, bank accounts (yes, that radical!) and even cars are fair game. In the home of someone within the community, you’ll need a staging area for all of the extra “stuff” that will be accumulated. Then, make wise decisions about what to do with it. Don’t simply send it to the Salvation Army; contact non-profits in the area and look for effective places to give where you are able to connect with specific families and people in need. Or, around Easter, have a massive sale, with all proceeds going to one of our York Alliance Home Mission organizations or to our Benevolence Fund⁷, or maybe fund a radical giveaway that spreads the message of the Kingdom. Larger ticket items should be stewarded well—for example, selling them on eBay or craigslist, or giving a specific item to a specific individual who needs it. The point is to recognize how much more we have than we actually need, and how to live open-handedly and generously, seeking the Kingdom instead of our security or the stuff of this world. (Matthew 6:33)

For group discussion: (ask each question weekly)

- What is the most difficult part of this experiment for you?
- What has been a joyful part of this experiment for you?
- What are a few of the things that you’ve learned about yourself during this experiment thus far?
- What have you learned about God during this time?

⁷ For a list of organizations, you can look at www.yorkalliance.org or contact the church office at 717-848-1700.

Kingdom Experiment #6: Silence

Most of us can quickly quote Jesus' command that we are to "abide in Him" (or "remain in Him" in the NIV). A significant percentage can even point to the passage from which that command comes: John 15. But how many of us can say that we have practiced that abiding? For most, abiding in Jesus falls victim to a frantic life that refuses to be tamed by the Savior who will not force His way into it. In the pace of everyday living, the most honest of us will admit that there are few times throughout the course of the normal day that we even consciously remember Jesus, let alone abide in Him.

This experiment engages the classic disciplines of silence and solitude as a pathway into the heart of God. If you just read those words and trembled inside, this may be an experiment you should engage! Some struggle violently with true silence and solitude, feeling loss of identity, deep loneliness, and even physical withdrawal symptoms. Others thrive in silence, but fear deep connection and community. Such individuals are encouraged to look back at Kingdom Experiment #3! Within the LIFE group setting, it is certainly possible to engage Experiments #3 and #6 together, either with each person doing the both, or with the group divided in two based on what we are most naturally drawn to (or away from). Both experiments will seem relatively easy at the beginning, but it will take a radical commitment to live them out daily for the next six weeks.

The Regular Discipline of Silence – Commit to a radical rhythm of life over the next six weeks. It consists of the following:

- Times of complete silence and solitude three times each day (morning, midday, and evening) for at least 15 minutes each. During this time, eliminate every distraction—no media, no books (not even a Bible!), no journal, no other people, and if possible, no noise. For most of us, simply carving out time like this requires a radical commitment! During each, work to stay completely focused on what it means to "abide in Jesus." What is He saying? Where has He been present in your day? What does His love mean to you right now? Where is He working around you right now? After 15 minutes of focus, you may want to take a few minutes to jot down a few notes about your experience.

- One time each week, spend 1-3 hours in silence and solitude. For these times, prayer journals are permissible, but they should only be used to keep focus. Otherwise, you should plan to spend the entire time much like you do the 15-minute segments each day. Ideally, these times should increase from an hour to three hours over the course of six weeks. As they get longer, you may have to get more radical about carving out the time—rising early, staying up late, etc.

In addition to these daily and weekly rhythms, take a Silent Retreat once during the Lenten season—one that lasts for at least 24 hours. This is best done at a retreat center, cabin, or some other “away” location. Do everything you can do to eliminate all noise—no cell phones or other technology, no radio or music (even worship music!), no other people. Take with you only food (or you can fast during this time), a Bible, and a journal of some kind. Decide what your best rhythm would be for hearing from God, and put that into practice.⁸ Before you break your silence, take time to record what you felt, experienced, and heard during this time.

There are at least two classic works on remaining in the presence of Jesus: *Abide in Christ*, by Andrew Murray and *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence. It would be great if you could buy (or borrow!) one of these books, and read it during the next six weeks. The ideal would be to decide on one of these as a community, read it at the same time, and discuss it.

Questions for discussion among the group undertaking this experiment:

- What is the most difficult part of this experiment for you?
- What are you noticing in your times of silence?
- What kinds of thoughts most easily intrude on this time? What might that say about your affections or your concerns?
- Do you feel like your life between the “silences” is different because of them? Why or why not, and in what ways?
- Are the more extended times of silence easier or more difficult? Why is that?

⁸ If you need assistance with this, talk with your LIFE group leader or one of the pastors at York Alliance.

Kingdom Experiment #7: Proactive Peacemaking

The concept of “social justice” has gained a good amount of traction in the church of the 21st century, particularly among younger generations. It is certainly an appropriate reaction to much of the evangelical movement, which has, at times, sought to care for souls while completely ignoring the bodies and physical needs of those to whom they are seeking to minister. However, beyond simply meeting practical needs like food and shelter, there is a recognition that, particularly in a global sense, a socio-political “peace” is also necessary in order for these needs to be met in a sustainable fashion. This is, of course, a logical extension of the ministry of the church of Jesus, who was called the “Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

It’s certainly appropriate for Christians to be actively involved in the process of peacemaking, both at the interpersonal level and the international level. However, as followers of Jesus, we also must recognize that true peace isn’t an external state of being, but an internal reality. Real peace isn’t simply the absence of war, crime, and political oppression—it’s found in the presence of identity, purpose, and forgiveness through Jesus. Until an internal peace is realized, external peace will always be short-lived.

This experiment is in proactive peacemaking—stepping into the transformational work of Jesus through prayer. Over the next six weeks, commit to the following:

- Begin and end each day with intentional prayer. There are many tools that can be helpful in this process. St. Ignatius of Loyola developed a prayer called the “Examen” which is a great tool for reviewing our day. Ignatius encourages its use twice daily—once at noon and once before going to bed—but it can certainly be used only in the evening. Information on praying the Examen can be easily found on various websites through a simple internet search. Charles Spurgeon developed a *Morning and Evening* prayer devotional which can help direct prayer, and John Baillie developed *A Diary of Private Prayer* which can be extremely helpful in guiding these prayer times. Of course, there is no need to utilize any specific tool—you are welcome to simply bring your heart before God and listen to Him.
- One additional time during each day, pause for roughly 30 minutes and intentionally enter into intercessory prayer. The only rule for this time is that you shouldn’t pray for yourself—begin with your family and your church

family, and allow God to prompt your prayer outward from there to your friends, co-workers, and neighbors, the lost in your community and nation, and ultimately praying for God's reign to the ends of the earth. For many, an extended personal prayer time like this can feel overwhelming and difficult—it can be helpful to utilize a prayer journal, either scripting prayers word for word, or outlining your prayer on paper as you pray. You'll find that as you engage in this daily discipline, it will become easier and easier, as well as richer and richer.

- Commit to participate in at least one of the corporate prayer times at York Alliance each week through the Lenten season. Prayer times are held in the church lobby at 6:00am on Tuesdays, in Room 21 on the lower level at 6:00pm on Wednesdays, and in the Sanctuary at 8:30am on Saturdays.
- Finally, take a half-day prayer retreat sometime over the course of the Lenten season. This exercise could last anywhere from 3 hours to 7 or 8, and should be structured in the following way: begin with praise and adoration, using recorded music, hymns, or the Psalms. Transition to a time of personal commitment to the work of Jesus in the world. Confess personal sin during this time. As you receive the forgiveness of God, ask Him to bring to mind those who have sinned against you, and intentionally forgive them as well. After this, take some time to specifically intercede for areas of need in the world around you of which you are aware. Close your time by listening to the Spirit and rededicating yourself to the work of Jesus. Music, time in the Word, and journaling will all likely be a part of this time as well.⁹

For group discussion: (ask each question weekly)

- What is the most difficult part of this experiment for you?
- What has been a joyful part of this experiment for you?
- What are a few of the things that you've learned about yourself during this experiment thus far?
- What have you learned about God during this time?

⁹ If you need further direction on making this a meaningful time, contact one of the pastors at York Alliance Church either via email at yac@yorkalliance.org or phone at 717-848-1700.

Week One: Forgiveness and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:5 and Luke 23:34

We are quickly aware of the failure of others, but slow to recognize our own shortcomings. When we feel attacked in some way, our natural response is defensiveness. However, when we recognize that we have an all-powerful Defender, we no longer need defend ourselves, but rather, we can offer grace and trust that God's justice will be absolute.

Meekness vs. Weakness

Read Matthew 5:5 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

One of the greatest challenges that we have with Jesus' admonition toward "meekness" is that most of us don't really understand what it is to be "meek." Thomas Watson, the great Puritan writer, defines meekness as two primary qualities: "submission to [God's] will; flexibleness to His Word."¹⁰ Martyn Lloyd-Jones defines it as "essentially a true view of oneself, expressing itself in attitude and conduct with respect to others."¹¹ Effectively, meekness is the recognition of our proper place before God—and living out that reality in relationship to others.

The concept of meekness is found first in the Old Testament, long before Jesus ever taught about the blessing that would come to those who are meek. Moses was called "very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth." (Numbers 12:3) However, likely the clearest explanation of meekness is found in David's writings—namely, Psalm 37.

Read Psalm 37:1-11.

- How might you summarize Psalm 37:1-9?

- What is promised to the weak in vs. 11?

¹⁰ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes: An Exposition of Matthew 5:1-12*, Kindle edition, Location 2092.

¹¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1971, reprinted 1981.), pg. 68.

The apostle Peter gives one of the clearest New Testament definitions of meekness, citing the example of Jesus. Read 1 Peter 2:23.

- What is the one active thing that Peter cites Jesus doing in this verse?

As you recall the first portion of Psalm 37, the theme of trusting God to act and judge according to His justice and mercy is at the essence of meekness. But in the midst of uncertainty and injustice, how are we able to do that? Read Peter's next sentence, 1 Peter 2:24.

- What is the one active thing that Peter calls us to do in this verse?

It's only through dying to ourselves that we are able to live in meekness. As Lloyd-Jones says, "[meekness] is not a natural quality."¹² Rather, meekness comes from the Spirit as we die to ourselves. Defensiveness disappears and we are no longer concerned primarily about what others believe—and it's in that reality that we have real freedom, and therefore, inherit the earth! How? When we realize that we don't deserve anything, we see everything as gain. When we lose our life, we no longer are driven with unmet desire toward anything—so we can appreciate and enjoy everything. When we die to self, we are able to truly gain the world.

Application:

- What are some situations in which you find it hard to really trust God? What of "you" do you think is at the root of that inability?

¹² Ibid., pg. 67.

Costly, but Free

Read Luke 23:34 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

It is difficult to embrace meekness because we often fail to understand it; it is difficult to embrace forgiveness because we want to ignore the need for it. We hear Jesus' prayer from the cross—"Father, forgive them"—and we long for the story to remain in its concrete, historical context instead of seeing its rich, theological meaning. For many of us, them refers to Roman centurions, Jewish officials, Pontius Pilate, or even Judas. However, the painful reality is that includes far more of us...

The old hymn asks "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" In a spiritual sense, you and I were most certainly there. And when Jesus spoke, He was not only speaking to those who were actively involved in the crucifixion; He was speaking to us—because we're truly in need of forgiveness. How do we know?

Read Romans 5:6-8.

- What state does Paul tell us our hearts were in when Jesus died for us?

- Think about the soldiers that were surrounding the cross as Jesus prayed. Did they know that they needed to be forgiven?

The forgiveness of Jesus is offered before we even recognize our need for it; we simply need to receive it and trust it. That happens only when we recognize our need for forgiveness, which comes with a recognition of our sin. That, of course, is the challenge. We live in a world in which sins are explained away as "mistakes" and we do our best to avoid any undue focus on our sin. In fact, some see any mention of sin as depressing or seeking to make people feel guilty. However, the reality is, we are unable to really appreciate God's forgiveness until we know that we need it.

Read Romans 3:10-25.

- What's your reaction to the severity of Paul's words in vs. 10-23?

- How does the weight of vs. 10-23 effect your understanding and appropriation of vs. 24-25?

My mom was recently diagnosed with a rare form of slow-growing cancer in her abdomen. When the doctor initially explained the diagnosis and the proposed treatment plan, we didn't leave that appointment complaining about how the doctor was such a downer. "All that talk about tumors and chemotherapy—he's so depressing! I wish he would have talked about happy things..." Ridiculous, right? If there's a tumor, we want to know about it, and if there's a possible treatment and cure, we want to pursue it. The same is true for our sin, which is like a cancer that is slowly killing us. (Romans 6:23) The gospel isn't centered on our sin; it's centered on the cure! That's not depressing. It's good news!

I love the way Paul Tillich says it: "Forgiveness is an answer, the divine answer, to the question implied in our existence."¹³

Application:

- Take some time to think about your own sin. Confess specifically before God, and recognize the grace that He offers you through the cross.

¹³ Paul Tillich in his sermon entitled "To Whom Much Is Forgiven..." quoted in Adam Hamilton, *Final Words from the Cross*, (Abington Press, Nashville, TN, 2011.), Kindle location 316.

Jesus as our Meekness

Read Matthew 5:5 and Luke 23:34 three or four times.

As He seeks to teach His followers about the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells them that the meek will be blessed and that they will inherit the earth. As He establishes the Kingdom through His death on the cross, Jesus embodies meekness through His forgiveness of those who are the cause of His death.¹⁴

One of the most difficult sections of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is found in the prayer that He taught His disciples to pray.

Read Matthew 6:12 and 6:14.

- Does the forgiveness of our sins seem to be conditional or unconditional?

- What's the condition on which it's based?

How could it be that we are only forgiven when we also forgive others? Is our forgiveness truly conditional? Remember back to the last study—when does Jesus forgive us? (Romans 5:6-8) Think about it: if we have already been forgiven, how can our forgiveness be conditioned on anything that we do? The challenge is not in God's ability to forgive us, but in our willingness to accept His forgiveness. It's at that point, when we recognize that we have received mercy, that we are willing and able to offer that forgiveness to others.

What does that have to do with meekness and the cross? Read 1 John 4:19.

¹⁴ I am indebted to the work of Fulton Sheen, who has fused the Beatitudes with the Words from the Cross long before this series was ever conceived. He begins each chapter of his book by making a statement paralleling the beatitude with the statement from the cross, so I will begin the third study each week in the same way as a way of recognizing his work. While Sheen writes from a Catholic perspective, and I'm unable to agree with all that he says, I'm grateful for his writing and have been greatly helped by seeing his fusion of these two sections of Scripture.

- What does John tell us should be our response to God's love?
- Who begins the process?

In this succinct verse, the apostle John explains an incredible principle: Jesus' love for us is actually generative! It's only because He loves us first that we are able to love Him; and as we love Him, we are able to truly love others.

How do we operate with meekness in a world that disdains it? We receive the gift of grace that He first gives to us; only then are we able to give that grace to those in the world around us. Jesus on the cross perfectly embodies the meekness which He taught His followers to have, and as He loves those who hate Him, we are given the power to love those around us in His name.

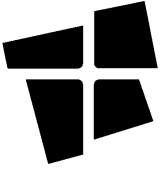
We know it is not the worldly thing to do—to pray for those who nail us to a cross. We know it is not “common sense” to love our enemies, for to love our enemies means hating ourselves; but that is the meaning of Christianity—hating that which is hateful in us, and loving those who hate us because they are the potential children of God.¹⁵

In Christ, we are free to see ourselves as we truly are, and to love others not based on what they are, but as they someday might be.

Application:

- Are you able to truly rest in the forgiveness and grace of God? Why or why not? How might that change the way you interact with others?

¹⁵ Fulton Sheen, *The Cross and the Beatitudes*, (Reprint Edition, Angelico Press, Tacoma, WA, 2012. Originally Kenedy & Sons, NY, NY, 1937.), pg. 9.



Forgiveness and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:5 and Luke 23:34

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the most trouble you remember getting into as a little kid?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Matthew 5:1-12, Luke 23:34

- How has God been at work around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- If you are doing an experiment together, how is that process going? What are you learning?
- What are some situations in which you find it hard to really trust God? What of "you" do you think is at the root of that inability?
- In what ways are you most aware of your sin? Do you avoid those times? Why or why not?
- Are you able to truly rest in the forgiveness and grace of God? Why or why not? How might that change the way you interact with others?
- What would it look like for us to be "meek" as a group? Is that possible? What steps would we/should we take?

World: The world around us longs to experience the freedom of self-denial that's at the heart of living meekly. As you begin this Lenten journey, pray intentionally for at least one person with whom your life regularly intersects. Pray that as you grow in Christlike character, through His grace, that they would see it and ask you about it. Be prepared to answer! (1 Peter 3:15)

Note: Please check www.yorkalliance.org, register for our weekly newsletter, and get information on coming events and activities.

Heart verse for kids! This week's verse is Matthew 22:37-39:

"Jesus replied, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Week Two: Mercy and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:7 and Luke 23:39-43

Our natural posture is to demand justice for others while requesting mercy for ourselves. In the Kingdom, however, Jesus calls us to be merciful towards others and to offer mercy, even in the face of guilt. Only when we recognize that we have been given mercy in place of justice are we able to offer mercy to others.

Three Stories of Mercy

Read Matthew 5:7 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

We recently got a new dog. No one seems to know exactly what kind of dog he is—we took him in because his owner lived in Philadelphia and the city was just too confining for an active dog. He wasn't sure of the breed either. The dog's name is Hershey, named after his rich chocolate color. He's got a long nose, barrel chest, and runs like the wind. Every time we take him out, whether to the dog park or just for a walk around the neighborhood, everyone seems to want to venture a guess as to his breed. They look at him, ask some questions, and based on his characteristics, they make a judgment as to what kind of dog he is.

That's the process we use in just about every area of life. In order to know what something really is, we have to first look at the characteristics and then make a judgment. So, with that in mind... what's it mean to be merciful?

It's easy to confuse mercy with "grace" or "love." However, mercy has its own set of characteristics—its own "breed," so to speak. They can maybe most clearly be seen in two parables that Jesus tells, both highlighting what it means to be merciful.

The first is known as the parable of the "good Samaritan." Read Luke 10:25-37.

- What is different about the actions of the Samaritan man in comparison to the other two passers-by?

- Is it possible that the other two felt pity on the man who had fallen victim to the robbers, but just didn't do anything?

One of the defining characteristics of mercy is action. Not only does the Samaritan feel emotion toward the victim—that emotion drives him to taking a specific action in order to relieve the situation. In trying to identify mercy, taking action to care for another, not simply feeling pity towards them, differentiates mercy from love or grace. The same thing can be seen in Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 25:31-46.

The other story Jesus tells is often called the parable of the unforgiving servant. Read Matthew 18:23-35.

- Look at vs. 27. The king not only feels pity, but takes action, releasing the servant and forgiving the debt. How does the forgiven man respond when faced with a similar situation?

Mercy is not just active, but it’s also reciprocal. True mercy is based on having received mercy, and then passing that mercy onto others. As we looked at last week, the surface of Jesus’ teaching can look like we earn the mercy of God through offering that mercy to others, but in reality, the opposite is true. “I am only truly forgiven when I am truly repentant...if I am truly repentant...then of necessity I shall forgive those who trespass against me.”¹⁶ Jesus is showing us that real mercy flows out of the mercy of God.

What about the third story? The next study will walk through that one.

Application:

- What are some ways you can actively show mercy to the world around you, based on the mercy that God has shown you? Think practically!

¹⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1971, reprinted 1981.), pg. 102.

Merciful Assurance

Read Luke 23:39-43 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

We saw in the last section two of the key characteristics of mercy: that mercy is both active and reciprocal. However, we didn't investigate the greatest story of mercy of all time—Jesus' death on the cross. Certainly it fits the characteristics: Jesus is actively pursuing a solution to our sin dilemma, and He's passing on the mercy that God the Father has for us as His creation (although He's not personally the recipient of mercy, as we'll see in the final study of this week). There's also an additional characteristic of true mercy; one that we see in Jesus' statement to the thief beside Him on the cross.

Luke 23:39-43 has been the subject of various interpretations over the past two millennia. Adam Hamilton helpfully divides this statement into its three parts, calling out the "peace," the "point," and the "promise" of Jesus' words.¹⁷

Our Peace... "Today"

- What peace can you take from Jesus' declaration that salvation would be fulfilled "today" to the thief on the cross?
- Look at 2 Corinthians 5:8. In what does Paul take comfort and courage as he considers both life and death?

The Point... "You Will Be With Me"

- How much theological understanding does the thief seem to have regarding some of the "finer" points of theology? Has he been baptized? Taught the basics of discipleship?

¹⁷ Adam Hamilton, *Final Words from the Cross*, (Abington Press, Nashville, TN, 2011.), Kindle location 451-475.

- Look at Luke 17:6. How does this teaching from Jesus relate to the thief?

The Promise... “Paradise”

- The word Jesus uses for “paradise” is a Greek word that referred to a king’s garden.¹⁸ Look back at Genesis 3:23-24. How might this word from Jesus be a promise for us?

Each of these words and phrases—in fact, the story of the cross in general—point us to the most profound characteristic of mercy: it is otherward. In a world where so much of our focus and energy is spent being concerned about our own situation, mercy is concerned about the others in the world around us. Jesus’ forgiveness of this thief hanging on the cross beside Him came in the midst of His pain and agony. However, He was willing to act in mercy toward this man, which pointed to the fact that He was acting in mercy towards us as well.

There are some who would see this “death-bed conversion” as a recipe to live as we’d like and repent at the very end. However, it’s clear that the thief repented as soon as he understood the mercy of God toward him—and we are called to do the same. We don’t know when the end of our life will come, but we can be assured that when it does, we will be with Him in paradise.

Application:

- What are some situations in your life when you find it hard to think of others?

¹⁸ Ibid.

- What did he have to do in order to show his faithfulness to God?

- What would Jesus have been experiencing at the exact moment He assured this man of his forgiveness and eternal life? (ref. Matthew 27:45-50)

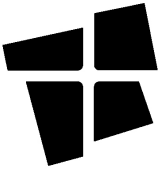
Think of Jesus—the perfect God/man who was without sin. Read the following Scriptures: Luke 7:36-50, 15:1-2, and 19:1-10. Now look at Luke 19:10 one more time.

- How does this statement of Jesus’ mission relate to His forgiveness of the thief on the cross?

Jesus spent the last moments of His life doing what He came to do—reaching out to those who were lost, and offering them salvation. He was not shown mercy so that we could receive mercy; and so that we could offer that mercy to others.

Application:

- Do you struggle to offer mercy to those who are clearly sinful? Why or why not? What does that say about the way that you view yourself?



Mercy and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:7 and Luke 23:39-43

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the most fun you've ever had serving someone else?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Matthew 5:1-12, Luke 23:39-43

- How has God been at work around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- If you are doing an experiment together, how is that process going? What are you learning?
- When you think of the mercy of Jesus toward you, how do you respond? Think both about your emotional response and your physical response as you live in the world around you.
- What are some ways you can actively show mercy to the world around you, based on the mercy that God has shown you? Think practically!
- What are some situations in your life in which you find it hard to think of others?
- Do you struggle to offer mercy to those who are clearly sinful? Why or why not? What does that say about the way you view yourself?
- How might we as a group show mercy to the world around us?

World: When we recognize how much mercy we've received, our hearts are well positioned to show mercy to those around us without being patronizing. What are some ways that we as individuals or a group might do that? Pray about specific opportunities that you can identify, and ask God to show you additional opportunities as well.

Note: Please check www.yorkalliance.org, register for our weekly newsletter, and get information on coming events and activities.

Heart verse for kids! This week's verse is Joshua 1:9:

"Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Week Three: Purity and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:8 and John 19:26-27

As we enter into the Kingdom of God, we see the entire world differently. When the Creator occupies His proper place in our lives, He becomes visible in all of creation. However, nowhere is this more apparent than in the church. In the Kingdom, we recognize a call to community that supersedes family, age, race, and class and makes us one in Christ.

Seeing God

Read Matthew 5:8 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

On the surface, the meaning of this beatitude is rather clear: “behave and you will see God.” However, with just a little meditation and reflection on the whole of Scripture, it becomes quite clear that there’s quite a bit more to Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom in this verse. What does He mean?

Read Matthew 23:23-28.

- What charge is Jesus making about the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law?
- What does that mean for our understanding of what it means to be “pure in heart”?

Clearly Jesus is more concerned with our hearts than our outward behavior. Does that mean that we can live however we’d like? Read Matthew 15:17-20.

- How does Jesus explain the connection of the heart to our behavior?

So Jesus is concerned about our hearts first, recognizing that our real behavior will flow from our hearts. Outward behavior with a hard heart has no value in the Kingdom, but a pure heart will ultimately translate to right behavior. This is the process of transformation that is seen throughout the Scriptures. Read Ezekiel 36:26-27.

- How does God promise to change our behavior?

The second portion of the promise is that those who are pure in heart “will see God.” What does that mean? “As with all other Beatitudes, the promise is partly fulfilled here and now...”¹⁹ Read Titus 1:15-16.

- What is Paul saying? Re-write the idea of these two verses in your own words.

- How is this “seeing God” in the here and now?

There are times that we experience God more deeply due to the state of our hearts. “But of course that is a mere nothing as compared with what is yet to be...”²⁰ Read 1 Corinthians 13:12.

- How does Paul describe our ultimate experience of seeing God?

There’s one final reality we need to consider—how does this happen? Do we just work at “being pure?” Read Psalm 51:7-12.

- Who is active in the process of developing “a clean heart”?

We need to remember that creating a pure heart is God’s work—no effort on our part makes us pure. Through the Word, prayer, and disciplines, we are able to put ourselves in position to be made pure, but God does the work.

Application:

- What are some practical ways you could position yourself for God’s work of creating a pure heart in you?

¹⁹D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1971, reprinted 1981.), pg. 114.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The Family of Jesus

Read John 19:26-27 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

As we look at the words from the cross, it's vital for us to remember that these aren't simply "last words" that Jesus spoke, but that He spoke them in the midst of unspeakable agony and suffering. As such, it's an incredible reality that the first three words from the cross were focused on the well-being of others, not Himself. This is the final word in that category; a beautiful and poignant reminder of how Jesus honored all people, and the way that He saw the Kingdom of God unfolding in the church.

Read John 19:25.

- Who does John tell us is present along with Jesus' mother Mary?

In a culture where women were largely marginalized and forgotten, the ministry of Jesus was radically different. Read the following verses:

- Luke 8:1-3
- John 4:28-29
- Matthew 26:6-13
- John 19:25
- Mark 16:1-8
- John 20:11-18

While the last several examples occurred after Jesus' death, it's clear that women occupied a vital and important role in the ministry of Jesus!

So the first remarkable detail in John's account is the presence of women in general. However, even more remarkable is Jesus' interaction with His mother, Mary.

- Read John 7:5 and then Acts 1:14. What do these two Scriptures tell us about Jesus' family?

One of the often overlooked implications of this word from Jesus from the cross is that He commends Mary to “the beloved disciple” (John) and not one of His brothers. Jesus is concerned about honoring His mother (far past the age of childhood, showing us that this command is not one that we mature past), and as He is nearing the end of His life, and therefore, His role as the eldest son, He declares that “the beloved disciple would take his place in being her protector and provider.”²¹

Why didn't Jesus pass that role on to one of His earthly brothers? Read Matthew 12:46-50.

- What statement does Jesus make about the deepest connections between people? How does this influence this word He spoke from the cross?

Of course, we are not to disregard our earthly families, regardless of their belief system. There are many passages that make this reality clear. (For instance, look at Ephesians 6:2, 1 Timothy 5:8, 1 Corinthians 7:12-14) However, Jesus makes it quite clear that our connection to one another as believers in Jesus supersedes even our family ties, and it's incredibly important. Read John 13:35.

- What does Jesus tell us is at stake when we seek to love one another well?

Application:

- Think about the community around you. Are there places that you should invest more deeply based on this reality that Jesus spoke from the cross?

²¹ Leon Morris, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1971.), pg. 812.

Jesus as our Purity

Read Matthew 5:8 and John 19:26-27 three or four times.

As He seeks to teach His followers about the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells them that those who are pure in heart will see God. As He establishes the Kingdom through His death on the cross as the perfectly pure sacrifice, Jesus becomes our impurity so that we would be able to see God face to face.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones called Matthew 5:8 “one of the greatest utterances to be found anywhere in the whole realm of Holy Scripture.” He continued: “Anyone who realizes even something of the meaning of the words... can approach them only with a sense of awe and of complete inadequacy.”²²

Throughout the history of God’s people, the longing to “see God” has been the supreme goal of spirituality.

- Read Exodus 33:18-23. What does God say is the reason that Moses is not able to see His face?

- Read Isaiah 6:1-7. What is Isaiah’s reaction to seeing a vision of the glory of God?

Our sinful nature, as well as our sinful actions, are completely incompatible with the glory of God. If we were to come face to face with the glory of God, we would die! To be pure in heart, then, must be to try to live a holy life before God, right?

- Read 1 John 1:8 and 10. What case does John make for our ability to avoid sinful behavior?

²² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1971, reprinted 1981.), pg. 106.

- Read Ephesians 2:3. When does Paul indicate that our sinful nature was first deserving of the wrath of God?

Both our actions and our nature are sinful, and we are not capable of purity on our own. How, then, could Jesus' blessing be a reality for us?

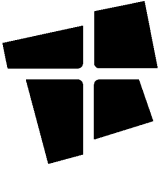
- Read 2 Corinthians 5:21. How does this change the reality of our impurity, and therefore, our ability to see God?

- Now, read Hebrews 10:19-25. Paraphrase these verses in your own words.

The impurity that we are cursed with is placed upon Jesus, and His purity is given to us. It is through this singular act that a community of people, all of whom are able to "see God," is formed. We don't see God based on our merit, but on His!

Application:

- In what ways do you try to purify yourself? How is that different from simply seeking to obey God in faith?



Purity and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:8 and John 19:26-27

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "How many first cousins do you have?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Matthew 5:1-12, John 19:26-27

- How has God been at work around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- If you are doing an experiment together, how is that process going? What are you learning?
- What are some practical ways you could position yourself for God's work of creating a pure heart in you?
- In what ways do you try to purify yourself? How is that different from simply seeking to obey God in faith?
- Think about the community around you. Are there places that you should invest more deeply based on this reality that Jesus spoke from the cross?
- If everyone at York Alliance, or even in this LIFE group, was as committed as you are, would the church (or LIFE group) be better or worse?

World: Hopefully you've been praying for at least one person intentionally through this Lenten season. Take time this week to either pray for *or schedule* time with them. Pray that you would reflect the glory of God into their life, and that you would have the opportunity to be a blessing to them!

Note: Please check www.yorkalliance.org, register for our weekly newsletter, and get information on coming events and activities.

Heart verse for kids! This week's verse is Joshua 1:9:

"Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Week Four: Desperation and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:3 and 27:45-50

It is only when we are truly empty that we are able to be filled. The admonition of Jesus is that we become those who are emptied of ourselves so that we might experience the fullness of God; on the cross, Jesus was emptied of Himself and forsaken by God so that we would never need experience being forsaken ourselves. In the desperate cry of Jesus, we find true victory.

Emptying Self

Read Matthew 5:3 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

Jesus begins His sermon with a sentence that was as counter-cultural then as it is today—that those who are “poor in spirit” will inherit the Kingdom of God. The idea of being “poor in spirit” is literally to be emptied of self and desperate; unable to help oneself in any way. It’s a position of extreme weakness; one that wasn’t celebrated in the culture of Jesus’ day any more than it’s celebrated in ours.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks very clearly about this idea of emptying self. He holds Jesus up as the ultimate example, and then shows how he has lived out this call in his own life.

Read Philippians 2:5-8.

- What does Paul cite as Jesus’ ultimate act of “emptying Himself?”

- What was the cost of that act for Jesus?

- We’re called to model ourselves after the example of Christ. What are some ways that we might empty ourselves as Jesus did?

Now, read Philippians 3:4-11.

- What are some of the things that Paul has rejected as his identity so that he might be emptied of self?

- What are some of the aspects of our identity that we might be called to “give up” just as Paul did?
- What is Paul seeking to gain by rejecting these aspects of his identity and emptying himself?

It’s vital for us to recognize that the things we are emptied of when we are emptied of self are of very little value. Although we may feel “rich” we are truly poor; and when we are “poor in spirit,” being emptied of ourselves, we are truly rich. However, if we fail to recognize the reality of who we are, we can put ourselves in a very dangerous position. Read Revelation 3:17.

- How does the church at Laodicea estimate their worth and position?
- What is God’s judgment of them?

The hymn writer captures heart of being “poor in spirit” perfectly: “Nothing in my hand I bring / Simply to thy cross I cling / Naked, come to thee for dress / Helpless, look to thee for grace / Foul, I to the fountain fly / Wash me, Savior, or I die.”²³

Application:

- What are some areas of your life in which you are tempted to place value outside of Jesus?

²³ Augustus M. Toplady, Rock of Ages, 1776. Public Domain.

Psalm 22 and the Victory of Jesus

Read Matthew 27:45-50 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

The Old Testament is filled with prophecies regarding the person and work of Jesus. His virgin birth and birthplace, His miracles, and His manner of life are all seen depicted by prophets and writers hundreds and thousands of years before Jesus arrived on the scene.

In addition to the prophecies that are sprinkled throughout the Old Testament, there are a few places that are so striking in their description of the death of Jesus that the connection is nearly impossible to deny. Isaiah 53 is one such place. Another, and the one that Jesus seemed focused on at the end of His life, and particularly during His journey to the cross, is Psalm 22. Jesus quotes the first verse of this psalm from the cross; however, Jewish men and women (particularly Pharisees and teachers of the law) would reference the psalms by their first lines. Therefore, hearing Jesus' words, both He and they would have referenced the entire psalm.

First, re-read Matthew 27:45-50. Then, read Psalm 22:1-18.

- Write down verses from the Psalm that parallel Jesus' life and experience, particularly in death.

Now, read Matthew 28:1-20. Then, read the rest of Psalm 22 (vs. 19-31).

- Write down verses from the second half of this Psalm that foreshadow the victory of Jesus.

- Look particularly at Matthew 27:46 and Matthew 28:20. How do you see the promise of Jesus relating to the experience of Jesus?

As Jesus died on the cross, it's quite likely that He was meditating on Psalm 22 which He quoted several times on the cross. Could it be that after His resurrection, that same Psalm was still on His mind? Except this time, He was focusing on vs. 31: "they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it."

Application:

- Does recognition of Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies strengthen your faith in Him? Why or why not?

Jesus as our Propitiation

Read Matthew 5:3 and Matthew 27:45-50 three or four times.

As He seeks to teach His followers about the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells them that those who are poor in spirit will inherit the Kingdom of God. As He establishes the Kingdom through His death on the cross, Jesus is made completely poor and left in utter desperation so that we would never again be left alone and without hope.

There are some words that are important for us to learn, even if they aren't part of our everyday vocabulary. "Propitiation" is one such word. According to Webster's it means "an atoning sacrifice" but that fails to really get at the heart of the word. The concept is that the right and deserved punishment for sin must be placed somewhere—otherwise, God would not be just. Therefore, Jesus isn't simply a sacrifice that appeases God, but He is a wrath-absorbing sacrifice that allows for the justice of God and the mercy of God to both remain fully intact.

Why is that important for us to know?

Armed with a functional understanding of propitiation, we can see the call to be "poor in spirit" and thus inherit the Kingdom of God in a new way. In the death of Jesus, we are able to see Him act as our replacement, being "poor in spirit" on our behalf that we might gain access to the Kingdom of God.

Read Romans 3:21-26.

- Understanding the concept of propitiation, how is God both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus?"

Read Hebrews 2:17-18.

- Understanding the concept of propitiation, why was it that Jesus needed to be “like his brothers in every way?”

Read 1 John 2:1-2.

- Understanding the concept of propitiation, why does the fact that He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world give us confidence in Jesus as our Advocate?

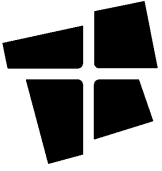
Read 1 John 4:7-12.

- Understanding the concept of propitiation, why does the love of Christ move us to love one another?

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14, “The love of Christ controls us.” Because He has absorbed the wrath of God on our behalf, we have been given real victory over sin. We no longer need fear the wrath of God toward our sin—it has been absorbed fully and completely in Christ.

Application:

- How does the promise of the presence of Jesus in your life give you confidence as you live in the world around you? Does it make a practical difference?



Desperation and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:3 and 27:45-50

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's your favorite part of spring?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Matthew 5:1-12 and 27:45-50

- How has God been at work around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- If you are doing an experiment together, how is that process going? What are you learning?
- What are some areas of your life in which you are tempted to place value outside of Jesus?
- Does recognition of Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies strengthen your faith in Him? Why or why not?
- How does the promise of the presence of Jesus in your life give you confidence as you live in the world around you? Does it make a practical difference?
- Are there specific ways that we as a group can encourage one another to trust wholly in Jesus and not in our own strength?

World: When we are truly poor in spirit and emptied of ourselves, we can live with a holy boldness toward the world around us. As you continue to pray blessing into the lives of specific people this Lenten season, look for opportunities to live (and speak!) boldly to them. As we approach the Easter celebration, there may even be an opportunity to invite them to worship, or to a group gathering of some kind.

Note: Please check www.yorkalliance.org, register for our weekly newsletter, and get information on coming events and activities.

Heart verse for kids! This week's verse is Hebrews 11:6:

"It is impossible to please God without faith."

Week Five: Desire and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:6 and John 19:28-29

We find in ourselves a desire that is only momentarily quenched within this world. Bound up in our humanity is the longing for eternity, and in the cry of Jesus, we find the summary statement for all of humanity: I thirst. However, through the thirst of Jesus the Man, Jesus the Divine Savior offers us the opportunity for our eternal thirsts to be quenched through Him.

Getting Hungry

Read Matthew 5:6 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

One of the most fascinating ideas that is played out throughout the entirety of Scripture is encapsulated quite concisely by Augustine in his work “Confessions.” He states it this way: “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our soul is restless until we find our rest in Thee.” While there are many things that draw our attention and drive our appetites, we are created in such a way that full satisfaction will never come from anything but Jesus Himself.

Solomon, in the book of Ecclesiastes, makes a similar case. Having experienced and enjoyed everything that the world could possibly offer, he wrote a book with the oft-repeated refrain “all is vanity; a striving after the wind.”²⁴

In Ecclesiastes 3, Solomon explains why that’s the reality. In vs. 11 he states it this way: “He has put eternity into man’s heart.” Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-13.

- Think about the list in vs. 2-8. In this poetic expression—is there any part of life that is being left out?

- Do vs. 12-13 sound more like a solution or a compromise?

With all of life in view, Solomon seems to recognize that nothing will fully satisfy since God has placed eternity in our hearts. His answer to the dilemma? Be joyful, do good, eat, drink, and be merry, because that’s all there is.

Of course, Solomon’s experience was fully grounded in the Kingdom of earth. When Jesus arrives on the scene, He pronounces the arrival of the Kingdom of heaven! (see Mark 1:15) It’s in the process of teaching about the Kingdom of heaven that Jesus speaks these beatitudes—and specifically Matthew 5:6.

²⁴The sermon series “Up in Smoke” from Fall 2011 at York Alliance Church walks through the book of Ecclesiastes in its entirety, along with the companion study guide. Both the study guide and the sermon audio are available at www.yorkalliance.org.

Read Psalm 42:1-2. What is the psalmist longing for?

Read Matthew 5:6 again:

- What are the people in question hungering and thirsting for?

- When they long for righteousness, what does Jesus say is true about them, and what are they promised?

It's notable for us to see that blessing doesn't come to us when we thirst for blessing. Satisfaction doesn't come to us when we're hungry to be satisfied. Rather, it's only when we desire righteousness that we are given blessing and satisfaction.

Jesus said the same thing to His disciples a different way, using literal food as His example. Read John 4:31-34.

- Is Jesus being literal or figurative? What's He mean?

We have been created to hunger and thirst. Unfortunately, we often seek to fill those desires in ways that can never satisfy us. We are created to be filled by Him.

Application:

- What are some of the ways that you seek satisfaction and blessing apart from Jesus?

Deep Thirst

Read John 19:28-29 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

It's easy for us to focus so completely on Jesus as God that we forget that He was fully and completely man. Philippians 2 makes it clear that He willingly gave up aspects of His position as Deity in order to take on humanity. Hebrews 4 makes it clear that the temptations that Jesus faced were just as real as those that we face, and that in His humanity, He understood them fully—which is why He is a sympathetic High Priest.

Have you ever been thirsty? Really thirsty? Tongue stuck to the top of your mouth kind of thirsty? Being really thirsty, like being really hungry or really tired, is one of the great reminders of our limitations as humanity. Unlike God, we have needs. These needs must be met in order for us to survive.

Read Matthew 26:47-54.

- Who does Jesus say is at His disposal, should He call upon them?

- Would those angels be capable of quenching His thirst, should He call on them?

Jesus' declaration of thirst is a clear reminder of His chosen humanity, and that He has truly humbled Himself fully, all the way to death. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Read Matthew 27:48-49, Mark 15:36, and John 19:28-29.

- What similarities do you see in these parallel accounts?

- What differences do you see? What details does John add?

The added details in John's gospel often have specific meaning. The fact that the sponge is attached to a hyssop branch may seem like an unimportant detail, but John is including it for a purpose.

Read Exodus 12:21-23.

- Where does the blood come from that they are to spread over the lintels and doorposts?

- What kind of branch was used for this task?

Read Leviticus 14:4-6, 49. What kind of branch was to be used for these cleansing sacrifices?

Read Hebrews 9:18-22. What kind of branch did Moses use to institute God's covenant with the people of God?

John wasn't giving us a needless piece of information when he tells us that a hyssop branch was used to address the desperate thirst of Jesus. "For John, the hyssop branch was one more clue pointing to Jesus' identity as the sacrifice that would save the Israelites from death and deliver them from slavery to sin...Jesus was initiating a new covenant...cleansing all who would trust in Him."²⁵

Application:

- How does the humanity of Jesus give you confidence as you approach Him in confession and repentance?

²⁵Adam Hamilton, *Final Words from the Cross*, (Abington Press, Nashville, TN, 2011.), Kindle location 1088.

Jesus as our Satisfaction

Read Matthew 5:6 and John 19:28-29 three or four times.

As He seeks to teach His followers about the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells them that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. As He establishes the Kingdom through His death on the cross, Jesus has a thirst that cannot be quenched, in order that those who follow Him could be fully satisfied.

This is, perhaps, the clearest of the connections between the beatitudes and the words from the cross. The question is not how they connect, but rather, what does the connection mean? How is it that the hunger and thirst for righteousness and the promise of satisfaction can be fulfilled through the unquenched thirst of Jesus on the cross?

Read the parable Jesus tells in Luke 16:19-31.

- What is the rich man asking for in order to have a moment of satisfaction?

- What reason does Abraham give for not being able to send Lazarus?

There is a chasm between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of men that is not able to be bridged on our own. However, look at Isaiah 43:19-21, which is a prophecy about the Messiah.

- What is the Messiah prophesied to do in the midst of desert wilderness?

- What are the end results for the people of God of Him making a way in the wilderness?

Finally, read Hebrews 10:19-22.

- Where does the writer invite us to go?

- What is the reason that we can get there?

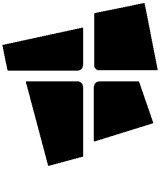
In a very real way, the thirst of Jesus on the cross, which was not quenched, provides the possibility of quenching our deepest thirsts which could never have been possible without Him. As the hymn writer declares:

All my life long I had panted
For a draught from some cool spring,
That I hoped would quench the burning
Of the thirst I felt within.
Hallelujah! I have found Him
Whom my soul so long has craved!
Jesus satisfies my longings;
Through His blood I now am saved.²⁶

Application:

- What are some ways that you can cultivate a spirit that is satisfied by the love of God for you?

²⁶ Clara T. Williams, Satisfied, 1875, Public Domain.



Desire and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:6 and John 19:28-29

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the hungriest that you've ever been?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Matthew 5:1-12 and John 19:28-29

- How has God been at work around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- If you are doing an experiment together, how is that process going? What are you learning?
- What are some of the ways that you seek satisfaction and blessing apart from Jesus?
- How does the humanity of Jesus give you confidence as you approach Him in confession and repentance? Does this change the way you approach Jesus practically? Why or why not?
- What are some ways that you can cultivate a spirit that is satisfied by the love of God for you?
- How can we help one another as a group hunger and thirst for righteousness and not be satisfied with less?

World: Jesus declared that His food was to do the will of His Father. For us, Jesus has called us (willed us!) to make disciples of all people. It is in doing what He's designed us to do that we will be truly satisfied! Pray about opportunities to engage the work of Jesus in the world around you, and be as specific as you can. Encourage one another to this work!

Note: Please check www.yorkalliance.org, register for our weekly newsletter, and get information on coming events and activities.

Heart verse for kids! This week's verse is John 3:16-17:

"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him."

Week Six: Mourning and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:4 and Luke 23:44-49

In the midst of tragedy and suffering, the hope that we have is found in the sovereignty of God. Our mourning, which occurs throughout our lives, must find its ultimate grounding in a mourning for our own sin and brokenness. However, even in that, the sovereign God gives us hope. When Jesus felt the weight of sin, like us, He committed Himself to the love of the Father.

A Reason to Mourn

Read Matthew 5:6 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

Each of the beatitudes is “backwards” to the way that we naturally think in some way. However, when paired with its counterpart in Luke’s version of the beatitudes, this statement might be the most directly in opposition to our culture. Consider:

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”

“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.”

(Luke 6:21b, 25b)

Certainly Jesus can’t mean that we are to live dour, pessimistic lives—the entirety of the gospel is one of hope both for this life and the one to come! However, that hope comes through a deep realization of who we are and what that means as image bearers of God in the world.

Read the following passages:

- Romans 1:18-32
- Romans 3:10-20
- Romans 7:7-24
- Ephesians 2:1-3
- 2 Timothy 3:1-7
- Hebrews 10:26-31

As you read these passages, what thoughts and emotions do you have?

The reality of our sin is great and, in many ways, lost in our modern world. However, a true realization of sin—true mourning—is necessary for us to have a

real conversion and real joy. There are many today who “want joy apart from the conviction of sin. But that is impossible; it can never be obtained. Those who are going to be converted and who wish to be truly happy and blessed are those who first of all mourn. *Conviction is an essential preliminary to true conversion.*”²⁷ (emphasis added)

Now, with the previous list in mind, read the following passages:

- Romans 3:23-26
- Romans 5:1-5
- Romans 8:1-4, 37-39
- Ephesians 2:4-10
- 2 Timothy 2:11-13
- Hebrews 4:14-16, 10:19-25

As you read these passages, what thoughts and emotions do you have?

If you were able to enter into the heart of those two sets of passages, you have a bit of a sense of what Jesus was saying. If we ignore the reality of sin, we will be unable to come to the Father through grace. But when we mourn our sin, we are comforted in our mourning through the promise of redemption.

Application:

- Do you feel like you mourn the sin in your own life and in the world around you? Why or why not? How do you know?

²⁷D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1971, reprinted 1981.), pg. 56.

A Final Prayer

Read Luke 23:44-49 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

Jesus has already prayed twice from the cross: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” and “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Now, as Jesus’ life is coming to a close, He prays a third prayer—one that not only had profound meaning for Him, but for us as well.

Like His second prayer from the cross, Jesus is actually quoting a verse from the psalms, Psalm 31:5. As has already been stated (see “Psalm 22 and the Victory of Jesus” from Week Four), a reference to a verse in a psalm would have referenced that entire psalm for many who heard Jesus’ prayer that day. Read all of Psalm 31.

- What are some of the major themes you hear in this psalm?

William Barclay writes that Psalm 31:5 “was the first prayer that every Jewish mother taught her child to say last thing at night...the Jewish mother taught her child to say, before the threatening dark came down, ‘Into thy hands I commend my spirit.’”²⁸ It is such a beautiful idea that Jesus was taught this prayer at a young age—possibly the first prayer He ever learned to pray—and then prayed it again as His very last prayer as well.

However, Psalm 31:5 has one word added in Jesus’ prayer: “Father.”

²⁸ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke: Daily Study Bible Series*, (St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1953.), pg. 301.

Read Luke 11:1-2. How did Jesus teach His disciples to address God in prayer?

The familiarity of the address of “Abba” or “Father” would have been an incredible shift for these good Jewish men who had always approached God with a mix of fear and reverence. And the rest of the phrase, “hallowed be your name,” reminded them that the fear and reverence should still be present. However, the address of Father let them know that their status as sons was secure as well. Martin Luther said it this way: “You have taught us to regard you and call upon you as one Father of us all... although...you could rightly and properly be a severe judge over us. [Therefore] implant in our hearts a comforting trust in your Fatherly love.”²⁹

Read 1 John 3:1-2.

- What is John rejoicing in?

- What does John say is the natural response to this relationship that we have with God?

Like our earthly fathers, we honor God our Father through obedience. Jesus had done that fully and completely, so He could pray with confidence at the end of His life. His words are a reminder to us that we have the opportunity to do the same!

Application:

- Does the assurance of the presence of Jesus give you peace in the midst of difficult circumstances? Why or why not? Can you think of a time that you’ve felt a peace like that from Him?

²⁹ Martin Luther, quoted in Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy With God*, (Dutton, New York, NY, 2014.), pg. 109.

Jesus as our Comfort

Read Matthew 5:4 and Luke 23:44-49 three or four times.

As He seeks to teach His followers about the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells them that those who mourn will be comforted. As He establishes the Kingdom through His death on the cross, Jesus commits His life to the Father, recognizing that God is completely trustworthy, sovereign and loving.

Read Psalm 115:3 two or three times. Think about the implications of this verse.

The reality of the sovereignty of God can be very difficult in the midst of tragedy and suffering. When life doesn't go as planned, or when disaster strikes, recognizing the sovereignty of God is a double-edged sword. It's heart-wrenching and even angering to know that God could have prevented suffering and pain but chose not to. On the other hand, it's quite disconcerting to think that the world is out of control. John Piper says it this way: "It is not comforting or hopeful in pain to tell people that God is not in control. Giving Satan the decisive control or ascribing pain to chance is not true or helpful. When the world is crashing in, we need assurance that God reigns over all."³⁰

The little Old Testament book of Ruth has much to say about this difficult topic. While there isn't time or space to survey the entire book, there are a few key passages that can help show God's sovereign love and control.

The book opens with unspeakable tragedy in the life of Naomi, an Israelite who had moved to Moab with her husband and sons. All three of them die, leaving her and her daughters-in-law widowed and helpless. Read Ruth 1:19-21.

- Where is there hope in Naomi's assessment of her situation?

Despite all of the pain and loss, Naomi still understands that God is in charge. She doesn't like the circumstances that He's allowed, but even in her bitterness, she

³⁰ John Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence: Sex, Race, and the Sovereignty of God* (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2010.), Kindle location 220.

recognizes that He's in control. As the story continues, Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Naomi, goes out to glean from the fields so that they can survive.

Read Ruth 2:3.

- Where can you see God's hand in this verse?

Ruth "happens" to come to the field of Boaz. As the story unfolds, Boaz "happens" to notice her, provide for her and her mother, respond positively to Ruth's desire for him to play the role of kinsmen-redeemer and take responsibility for her and Naomi. He also "happens" to see the other family member that needed to be addressed at the city gate when he arrived, and ultimately, he "happens" to marry Ruth, provide for Naomi, and ultimately, become the great-grandfather of King David, in the line of the Messiah.

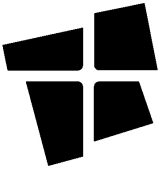
Read Romans 8:28-30.

- What is the promise for those who love God and are called according to His purpose?
- What are the activities of God that Paul lays out in vs. 29-30. What is left to chance or left for us to do?

Our comfort is not in our own circumstance, skill, resources, or power. Our only real comfort is in Christ. When we recognize who He is, we can commit our lives to His complete control.

Application:

- What's a situation in your life in which you need to remember that God is in control? Pray about that right now!



Mourning and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:4 and Luke 23:44-49

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "Who is the person in your life whose death has had the greatest impact on your life?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Matthew 5:1-12 and Luke 23:44-49

- How has God been at work around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- If you are doing an experiment together, how is that process going? What are you learning?
- Do you feel like you mourn the sin in your own life and in the world around you? Why or why not? How do you know?
- Does the assurance of the presence of Jesus give you peace in the midst of difficult circumstances? Why or why not? Can you think of a time that you've felt a peace like that from Him?
- What's a situation in your life in which you need to remember that God is in control?
- How can we comfort one another within this group as the hands and feet of Jesus to one another? What about to the world around us?

World: Even in suffering, God is completely in control. In fact, there are times that we are allowed to go through something in order to be drawn closer to Him. Think about people in your life who are going through difficult circumstances right now. Pray intentionally for them as a group—and then contact them this week and let them know you've prayed for them!

Note: Please check www.yorkalliance.org, register for our weekly newsletter, and get information on coming events and activities.

Heart verse for kids! This week's verse is John 3:16-17:

"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him."

Week Seven: Peace and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:9 and John 19:28-30

We live in a world of unrest. While there can, at times, be temporary “peace,” conflict and war will always be on the horizon. Adam and Eve set into place a course of events that have consistently caused turmoil—however, through Christ, we can have real peace. The second Adam came to restore peace with God, and in the cry of Jesus, we see that He has done it!

Peace Diffusers

Read Matthew 5:9 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

In C.S. Lewis' brilliant essay "The Weight of Glory," he makes a statement that is worth consideration at length as we look at what it means to be peacemakers:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.³¹

The reality of our lives is we actually make an impact on the world around us, whether we intend for that to happen or not. The question we need to consider is: What impact are we making?

God Himself is a God of peace. Consider the following passages:

- What is final name of the Messiah in Isaiah 9:6?
- How is God described in Hebrews 13:20?
- Read Romans 15:13, 15:33, and 16:20? What is both the character of God and gift of God?

³¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, (NEED PUBLICATION INFORMATION), pg. XXXXXX

The question is, how is that peace given? Read Colossians 1:19-20.

- How is Jesus reconciling all things to Himself?

That language of reconciliation is found most clearly in Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church. Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-20.

- How much of the world is included in Paul's statement in vs. 14-15?

- Are vs. 16-17 talking about the natural man or the spiritual man?

- What is the source of this change (vs. 18), and what role have we been given?

- What title are all believers given according to vs. 20?

Jesus gives His Spirit to those who believe, and we are given the charge to act according to His nature—to make peace in the world around us. All this is through the finished work of Jesus on the cross... But that's for the next study.

Application:

- What are some practical ways that you can be an ambassador for Christ in the world around you?

The Work is Finished

Read John 19:28-30 three or four times. Think about what Jesus is saying.

Much of Jesus' teaching and ministry proved to be prophetic. He proclaimed healing for people, and then He healed them. He told the most outwardly righteous people of His day that they were inwardly evil, and they ultimately murdered Him. He predicted His journey to the cross. He told Peter that he would deny Jesus three times, and sure enough...

However, possibly the greatest prophetic declaration of Jesus was His final word from the cross, found in John 19:28-30. (Or His sixth word according to some scholars.) The declaration? "It is finished." Onlookers must have believed that He was speaking of His life and death on the cross; however, history would prove that the work He had finished was far greater.

Remember we noted earlier that John includes many details in his gospel in order to communicate specific messages to his audience. (See "Deep Thirst" during Week Five.) His resurrection account includes what would seem to be an unimportant detail to us as modern readers, but would have made a profound impact on the original hearer.

Read John 20:5-7.

- What details do you notice in these few verses?

- What specific detail does John seem to specifically highlight?

Sigmund Brouwer makes a fascinating observation about the face cloth, which John specifically tells us was left separately from all of the other cloths, folded up neatly "in a place by itself."

During Jesus' time there was one way a carpenter let the contractor know a job was finished. A signature, so to speak. Imagine a hot afternoon in Galilee. Jesus has completed the final pieces of a job he has worked on for several days. The hair of his strong forearms is matted with sawdust and sweat. His face is shiny with heat. He takes a final – and welcome – drink of cool water from a leather bag.

Then, standing to the side of his work, he pours water over his face and chest, splashing it over his arms to clean himself before his journey home. With a nearby towel, he pats his face and arms dry.

Finally, Jesus folds the towel neatly in half, and then folds it in half again. He sets it on the finished work and walks away. Later, whoever arrives to inspect the work will see the towel and understand its simple message. The work is finished.

Christ's disciples, of course, knew this carpenter's tradition. On a Sunday of sorrow, three years after Jesus had set aside his carpenter tools, Peter will crouch to look into an empty tomb and see only the linens that the risen Lord has left behind.

A smile will cross Peter's face as his sorrow is replaced by hope, for he will see the wrap that had covered Jesus' face. It has been folded in half, then folded in half again and left neatly on the floor of the tomb. Peter understands. The carpenter has left behind a simple message with this cloth. It is finished.³²

Jesus words on the cross prophesied the deepest reality. "It is finished." Death has been conquered, the power of sin is broken, and Jesus has won.

Application:

- In what ways do you live as though Jesus has won the victory? In what ways do you live as though the battle is still going on and the result uncertain?

³² Sigmund Brouwer, *The Carpenter's Cloth*, (Word Publishing, Nashville, TN, 1997.), pg. 125.

Jesus as our Peace

Read Matthew 5:9 and John 19:28-30 three or four times.

As He seeks to teach His followers about the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells them that those who make peace will be called sons of God. As He establishes the Kingdom through His death on the cross, Jesus declares that the work is finished, establishing peace for all who embrace Him.

There are a series of seeming contradictions in Jesus' teaching on the peace that's associated with His coming into the world.

- Read Matthew 10:34-36 and Matthew 11:12. How would you summarize these teachings about the Kingdom?

- Now read Matthew 26:52 and the end of Isaiah 9:6. How would you summarize this teaching about the Kingdom?

How do these two seemingly contradictory teachings relate to one another? The answer is found in Jesus' last significant teaching to His disciples, recorded in John 13-16. They had gathered to celebrate the Passover meal, a gathering that would ultimately be known as the Last Supper, during which time Jesus taught them a series of key principles about life in the Kingdom of God.

- Read John 14:27. Where does the peace that Jesus is speaking of come from?

- Read John 16:33. Does the peace that comes from Christ mean that we will also have peace in the world around us?

How then do these two sets of Scriptures come together? Jesus did indeed come to bring war—a war against the false peace that simply seeks to avoid the conflict rather than resolve it. Lloyd-Jones states it this way: “The mere avoidance of war does not make peace, it does not solve the problem.”³³ There are times in which a kind of violence is necessary in order to have true peace, and Jesus has come so that we might not have a lesser peace, but a true peace.

This reality may be even more true within our own hearts. There are two pathways to peace when dealing with the results of our sinful nature. One pathway is simply to compromise on holiness. “Nobody’s perfect,” we say. Our sin becomes “a mistake” and we slowly cauterize our consciences until we feel peace. False peace.

The other option is a bit more violent. Read Galatians 2:20-21.

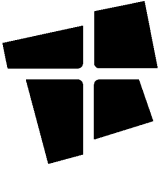
- What does Paul say has happened to his life?

The violence of Jesus’ death points to the violence with which we must pursue His life. He came to bring peace, but to wage war on false peace; which is why it was vital for the work to be finished.

Application:

- Are there ways that you’ve settled for a false peace in your own life? In your relationships?

³³D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1971, reprinted 1981.), pg. 121.



Peace and the Kingdom

Matthew 5:9 and John 19:28-30

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What is your favorite Easter tradition?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Matthew 5:1-12 and John 19:28-30

- How has God been at work around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- If you are doing an experiment together, how is that process going? What are you learning?
- What are some practical ways that you can be an ambassador for Christ in the world around you?
- In what ways do you live as though Jesus has won the victory? In what ways do you live as though the battle is still going on and the result uncertain?
- Are there ways that you've settled for a false peace in your own life? In your relationships?
- How can we as a group bring peace into the world around us?

World: The victory of Jesus over sin and death means that we can have true peace, and that we have a message of peace for the world around us. Think about how you can take the peace of Christ from your meeting place out into the world around you! As spring slowly starts to come, think of ways that you might impact your neighborhoods or communities. Start to pray about opportunities, and get something on the calendar!

Note: Please check www.yorkalliance.org, register for our weekly newsletter, and get information on coming events and activities.

Heart verse for kids! This week's verse is Ephesians 3:20:

"Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think."

Acknowledgements

When I first had the thought of merging together the beatitudes and the words from the cross, I was honestly relieved when I realized that there were eight beatitudes and only seven words from the cross. The project was honestly a bit intimidating! However, I couldn't really shake the idea, so I did just a little bit of research, thinking maybe I could merge two beatitudes or some such thing. I was shocked to see that so many scholars have seen the eighth beatitude as a summary, and that, indeed, there was the possibility merging the words from the cross with these statements of blessing. However, even after that, I was uncertain of the viability of such a series. It was only through several conversations with both the staff and the Elders that I was encouraged to tackle such an ambitious project—and while it's been one of the most difficult studies I've ever done, I'm grateful that I was encouraged to do it. My prayer is that it will be as fruitful for us as a congregation as it has been for me in my study.

I'm grateful to Fulton Sheen, who is the only person that I've found who has attempted to tackle the merger of these two subjects. I'm also grateful to Charles Spurgeon, who at least preached on both of subjects one at a time, and to Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whose work on the beatitudes has proven invaluable to me. After spending so much time with these guys over the past few weeks, I feel like I should take them out for coffee—however, they're all having coffee with Jesus now, so I guess I'll just have to wait.

A huge thank you to our staff, who managed (and thrived!) without me far more than we had anticipated would be necessary during this project. I think this took about three times longer than I had originally projected, so that's a lot of hours that you guys have covered for me, and I'm grateful. Honestly, without the incredible staff we have, these study guides would never be possible. Thanks also to our Elder team, who continue to support these study guides as one of our forms of Biblical Education, and who encourage and allow the margin to write. And thank you to Jonas and Chris for filling the pulpit while I was feverishly writing—both of your words were helpful to me in my journey, and I'm sure the same is true for the congregation as a whole.

I'm also thrilled to be working with Marty Krebs again on graphic design! The cover work, the graphics package, and the video are all the creative brainchild of Marty. You have done an incredible job, my friend, and I'm so thankful for your work! Everything looks fabulous. And a huge thank you to a NEW editing team: Belinda Jackson and Phil Scott! You guys both did a great job working with my last minute schedule and catching my errors.

Some of the music that has been the soundtrack for this project: Mount Valor is the recording and performing name that Kyle Novy, a former YAC youth, is working under. His new project is really fabulous. He's releasing a new song each week this year, and you should check them out! (www.mountvalor.com) Also on the rotation: Andrew Peterson, Sara Groves, The Lone Bellow, Metric, Judah & The Lion, Kevin "K.O." Olusola, Burlap to Cashmere, Holly Ann, and Typhoon. And, of course, my boys Mozart, Chopin, and Tchaikovsky were instrumental in the process... (You see what I did there?)

A final thank you to my family. This was a long process, and I was a bit more spaced and absent than my usual spacey absence during writing projects—thank you guys for bearing with me! I'm so incredibly thankful for all of you, and so thrilled that we get to be a family together. Amanda, thank you for putting up with a crazy start to the new year. It's going to slow down here soon... wait, have I said that before? I love you and am so glad that we get to be on this adventure together.

Without Jesus, I have nothing and am nothing. The victory of the cross and the empty grave is the reality that drives each day. All glory to Jesus' Name.

Grace and peace,

Brian Kannel
February 3, 2016

**“Your Kingdom come, on earth
as it is in heaven...”**

The ministry of Jesus began in a whirlwind. He was baptized by John, His identity confirmed by the voice of the Father and the presence of the Spirit, and He immediately went out into the desert on a 40-day fast. At the end of the fast, He was tempted by Satan, and, emerging victorious, made an incredible declaration around which His ministry would be centered:

**“The time is fulfilled, and the
kingdom of God is at hand; repent
and believe in the gospel.”**

Matthew's gospel then records an extended teaching, known as the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus began with a series of statements of blessing known as the beatitudes. These simple statements explain the profound nature of this “kingdom” that is at hand. Three years later, Jesus' life came to an abrupt ending. Although He had done nothing wrong, He was sentenced to torture and execution on a Roman cross. As He hung on the cross, He made seven statements. In those statements, we see how the life and death of Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise of the Kingdom.

Through this Lenten series, we will examine the connection between the beatitudes and the words from the cross. We will see Jesus to be the perfect model for life and the perfect sacrifice in His death. Through His words, we will find an invitation into life in the Kingdom of God.



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