



THE BEATITUDES

Kingdom Happiness



Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes

During my final year of seminary, the entire school was buzzing with excitement over the announcement of an upcoming lecture. Dr. Walter Brueggemann was coming to speak at our tiny seminary in Memphis, TN. During our seminary education, we all read Dr. Brueggemann's writings, often with a dictionary nearby. Dr. Brueggemann was a legend in theological studies.

Dr. Brueggemann's reputation preceded him as a world-renowned Old Testament scholar and one of the leading authorities on the Psalms. The anticipation was palpable, with clergy and scholars from a hundred-mile radius making plans to attend. What was unexpected, however, was the seminary's decision to host this prestigious lecture in a small chapel, a stark contrast to the spacious auditorium that typically housed our less-attended lectures. The day of the lecture saw the chapel bursting at the seams, with standing room only.

A tiny chapel seemed like an unlikely place for a prestigious speaker to give a lecture, and on the surface, the side of a mountain may seem like an odd location for the longest recorded discourse of Jesus to take place as well. Instead, we might expect Jesus to offer this sermon in synagogue or even at the temple. Instead, Jesus chose to deliver his most profound ethical teachings on the side of a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

Mountains in Scripture

Mountains play a significant role throughout scripture. In the Old and New Testaments, mountains symbolize the human and divine coming together. Mountains are also portrayed as places of divine revelation, where God reveals truths and commands. Perhaps because of their symbolic nearness to God, mountains are used this way throughout the Bible.

It makes sense that the writer of Matthew's gospel chose to have Jesus deliver this sermon on a mountainside. The writer of Luke, in contrast, sets the sermon on a plain (Luke 6:17-49). However, it could be interpreted that the sermon in Luke takes place on the plateau of a mountain. Nevertheless, by Matthew placing the sermon on the side of a mountain, Jesus joins a long biblical tradition. Additionally, it also connects Jesus to Moses, a topic we will explore in the next section.

I am a fan of the Star Wars saga. The first movie came out when I was five years old, and it was a formative part of my childhood. Years later, George Lucas released the prequel trilogy, focusing on Anakin Skywalker's descent into Darth Vader. While discussing the themes and motifs of Star Wars, George Lucas compared the movies to poetry, saying that they rhymed. In other words, the films had themes that repeated and mirrored one another. The same can be said about the Bible, and mountains are one of those repeating motifs.

One of the first places we see mountains in scripture is at the conclusion of the flood story. On top of the mountains of Ararat, God rescued humanity and all of creation. On top of these mountains, God made the covenant with Noah never to destroy the earth by flood again. (Genesis 8:4-22).

Later in Genesis 22:1-14, we find Abraham taking his son Isaac to be sacrificed on the top of Mount Moriah. Mount Moriah would later become the location for the Temple in

Jerusalem. God intervenes in the sacrifice and provides Abraham with a goat to sacrifice in place of Isaac. God providing a substitute sacrifice, and the later temple on this mountain symbolizes God's provision and presence.

The most well-known of these mountain stories takes place on Mount Sinai. After leading the Israelite people out of bondage in Egypt, Moses ascends Mount Sinai. Over 40 days, God gives Moses the Law (Exodus 19-20). The mountain symbolizes the covenant between God and Israel and serves as a place of divine law-giving.

Significant moments of Jesus' life also occur on top of mountains. Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. (This is not the actual name of the mountain; scripture does not identify it; therefore, it is known by this name.) On top of the mountain, Jesus meets with Moses and the prophet Elijah. This meeting symbolizes the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets in Jesus. (Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36)

Jesus frequently visited the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem. This would be the location where Jesus prayed to the Father before his arrest. It would later be where he ascended into heaven after his resurrection (Matthew 24:3, Acts 1:9-12). The Mount of Olives signifies a place of prayer and teaching.

Discussion

Why do you think mountains are often chosen as locations for significant biblical events and teachings?

Can you identify other recurring motifs in the Bible that play a significant role in the narrative?

How can understanding the symbolic role of mountains in the Bible enrich your reading and interpretation of Scripture?

How can the symbolism of mountains and significant biblical locations be used in teaching or preaching to convey deeper spiritual truths?

Moses and the Sermon on the Mount

The importance of Moses to the Hebrew faith goes beyond leading an enslaved people out of bondage. Moses' true importance is as the giver of the Law. The first five books of the Bible are known as the Torah. The word Torah means direction or instruction. These five books, also known as the Pentateuch, are traditionally attributed to Moses.

In Exodus 19-20, God gives Moses the Law on top of Mount Sinai. After 40 days of communing with God, Moses journeys down the mountain and brings the Law to the people of Israel. Israel would use this law to continue living out their covenant with God, the same covenant first made with Abraham and all his descendants in Genesis 15.

For the Hebrew people, the Law Moses gave them would serve as a framework for living righteously. Moses' ethical teachings would become the cornerstone of religious and daily life for the Children of Abraham. The law would become more than an ethical teaching; it would be a way of life that sets them apart from the rest of the world.

In Matthew, Jesus gives the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount as a direct allusion to Moses giving the Law at Sinai. In the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out a new ethic for people who desire to live in the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew phrases it. This connects Jesus back to Moses and the Law.

In considering the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, it is crucial to consider Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Jesus' teachings on the mount were not an overwriting or abolishment of the Law but fulfillment.

Whenever our church or the daycare center associated with our congregation has a position to fill, an ad is posted. In days gone by, the ad would run in a newspaper; today, we use hiring websites and services. The ad will run until an employee is hired. At that point, the purpose of the ad has been fulfilled. It does not mean that the ad never mattered, it is just that the ad has served its purpose.

When Jesus states that he comes to fulfill the Law, he has come to bring about its purpose: righteousness, justice, and right relationships with God and each other. Once all of these take place then the Kingdom of God will reign in all of creation. Moses was the giver of the Law, and Christ became the fulfiller of the Law.

Discussion

Why is Moses considered such a pivotal figure in the Hebrew faith beyond leading the Israelites out of Egypt?

How does the Law reinforce the covenantal relationship between God and the Hebrew people?

What does Jesus mean in Matthew 5:17 when he says, "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" the Law?

How can we strive for righteousness, justice, and right relationships in our own communities and lives?

Kingdom of Heaven or Kingdom of God

Before we begin to examine the Beatitudes, we must first answer some questions. What is the kingdom of heaven, and what is the kingdom of God? Are they the same thing, or are they different? Unlike the other three gospels, Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" in most of his writing. However, five times, the gospel writer chose to use the

phrase “kingdom of God.” What was Matthew’s purpose for alternating between the two phrases?

Is the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God the same thing? While you may want a simple answer, and we do for most things, this isn’t possible. The answer is rather murky, being both yes and no. For simplicity, we could say that they are both the same, but that would miss some of the nuances and rob Matthew of the message he is trying to share.

When I was born, my parents chose to name me after my father, William James Sardin Jr. However, the only times that I have ever been called William were when I got in trouble with my mother as a child, and then she chose to call me by my entire name. Instead, I have always gone by Bill. The only other times that I use William is when signing legal documents.

Some scholars and theologians have argued that, like Bill and William, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven are just two names for the same thing. Others have suggested that Matthew followed the Jewish prohibition against saying or even writing the Lord’s name and thus chose the kingdom of heaven over the kingdom of God. Unfortunately, neither of these explanations holds up to scrutiny.

If Matthew was avoiding writing the sacred name, then why does he use “God” liberally 38 times throughout his gospel? Secondly, in five separate verses, Matthew uses the phrase “kingdom of God.” (Matthew 6:33, 12:28, 19:24, 21:13, and 21:43). Finally, if Matthew saw the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven, then I believe we would see him swap between them randomly during Jesus’ teaching. Instead, it seems that Matthew’s switching between the two is deliberate.

Let’s begin with heaven. When we see the word heaven in scripture, it can refer to one of two things. First, it can refer to the sky, the clouds, the sun, the moon, and the stars. For instance, Genesis 1:1 reads, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.” This use is recognized quite easily in the Bible as it is always used in the plural, “the heavens.”

The second use of heaven in scripture is when the Bible refers to God’s dwelling place. This is where we will find the heavenly court and the angels, and it is the place that Jesus ascends to in Acts chapter 1. It is also the place where God’s will is already being perfectly done. Jesus makes this clear in Matthew 6:10, as he teaches his disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

This is heaven is the kingdom of heaven that Matthew is referring to. However, it is something more. The kingdom of heaven is also a promise. It is a promise of the restoration and healing of this world that Jesus will begin. It is the promise that God will make God’s “will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

For Matthew, the kingdom of God is about the here and now. It is not the promise of what is to come but what is taking place here in this world. It is when we as followers of Christ strive to do God’s will here on Earth, as alluded to in Matthew 6:30: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” It is when Jesus sets someone free from demonic bondage, as in Matthew 12:28: “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.” The kingdom of God is manifested in Matthew when we participate in God’s remaking of creation.

Discussion

Are the "kingdom of heaven" and the "kingdom of God" the same or different? Provide reasons for your answer, considering Matthew's deliberate use of these phrases.

What do you think Matthew's purpose was for alternating between "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God"? How does this choice contribute to his overall message in the gospel?

How does Matthew's description of the kingdom of heaven encompass both a present and future promise? What significance does this have for believers today?

How does Matthew portray the kingdom of God as an active, present reality in this world?

The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount establish a new ethic for living in the kingdom of heaven, reflecting Jesus' role in fulfilling rather than abolishing the Law. Though some use the concepts of the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God interchangeably, Matthew's gospel carries distinct nuances. The kingdom of heaven represents a future promise of restoration, while the kingdom of God emphasizes the present reality of God's rule and our participation in bringing about God's will on earth.

In the coming chapters, we will examine the 8 beatitudes that Jesus shares as he begins the Sermon on the Mount. Additionally, we will look at what it means to be blessed from a biblical perspective. Finally, what do the Beatitudes tell us about who God is and what God wants for us?