

The Christian Manifesto

From the Series, “The King and I - Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”

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Introduction

I’m going to have to start our discussion today by dating myself. I was born in the year 1959. At the time of this presentation, that makes me 60 years old. That means the first 10 years of my life were solidly in the 1960s. That makes me a “child of the 60s”.

Many people see the 60s as a transitional decade in American history. It was the decade, supposedly, of change. I say, “supposedly”, because every decade brings some change somewhere. In fact, every year since the earliest days of mankind has brought some kind of change. But, in America and other “western nations”, the 60s were thought to be a generation where change began to happen with surprising speed.

To oversimplify that generation, there were two kinds of people. There were people who liked things the way they were. We can call those people **conservative**. And, there were people who didn’t like things the way they were. Those people, the ones who were discontent, wanted change. Among the people who wanted change, there were those who wanted gradual change. And then, there were people who wanted to see lots of change happen quickly. **Those were the radicals.**



Jerry Rubin, 60s radical

One of the things that came into question was how people dressed - How they presented themselves to society. Let’s take hair length. In the 1940s and 50s, men had short hair. Women had long hair. -You occasionally saw women with short hair, but long hair was the norm. One thing you never saw: Men with long hair. Well, that changed. Radical men started to grow their hair. It was slightly long at first, but at some point, it wasn’t uncommon to see men with hair down to their shoulder blades. Those were the hippies – the radicals.

Now, what’s odd is that, at different points in western history, hair length has changed a lot. If you look at pictures of people in the 1700s and earlier, lots of men had long hair. Somehow though, people in the western world forgot those days. Men who wore their hair long in the 1960s were looked upon with suspicion by more conservative folks. Today, we think nothing of this. People can grow their hair as long as they want, or shave it off, and no one thinks much of anything.



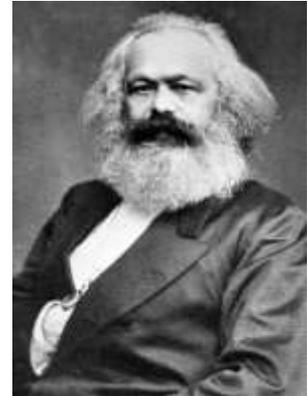
King Louis XIV of France, 1701

So, a question comes up here. Is a radical someone who is completely throwing out old things and bringing in new things? Or, is a radical someone who is trying to bring back old things?

Let me repeat: Every age of mankind has seen change of some kind. Every age and every society. People who are considered radical have challenged the way their governments are run. They've challenged culture, the arts. They're challenged religion.

Oftentimes, there are people at the core of radical movements who write down their thoughts. Sometimes those thoughts get titles like "rulebook", or "handbook". A common name for such a collection of thoughts is "Manifesto".

The best-known manifesto of the modern age is the "Communist Manifesto" by Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx. Marx is the better known of the two. He had very radical ideas. He challenged ideas about how the world should be run, ideas about economics, religion, and the social order. The content of that book is a topic for another day. Let's say for now that it was a radical collection of ideas that changed the world.



Karl Marx, 1875

Centuries before, a man appeared on the earth with very radical ideas of how the world should be run. He also talked about economics, religion, and the social order. But he talked about something much deeper. He talked about human nature itself. The changes he brought to the world were far more reaching than anything that has occurred since.

If you've been following our series, you know him. His name was Jesus.

In our series, we're studying the "Gospel According to Matthew". The King of the Universe, Jesus Christ, came to visit the earth. Matthew had the privilege of meeting him and walking with him. Matthew has spent considerable time telling us about the credentials of the king. Being announced by angels, visited by world political leaders, and fulfilling ancient prophecies. He's told us about John the Baptist, who prepared the way for the King. He's told us about the preparations the king went through, doing battle with the enemy of mankind, the Devil, and winning convincingly. This has all happened in the first four chapters of Matthew's book.

With all this, the great King is now ready to speak. He's going to give a presentation in which he'll share the core of his ideology. What he says is covered in chapters five through seven of Matthew's book. The King will share ideas that are radical, and which appear new. He will also share ideas that are old, that take his followers back to the earliest days of Mankind.

Let's listen now to the words of the Great King, Jesus Christ. Let's begin to study, The Christian Manifesto.

I. The Target of the Manifesto

Let's talk first about the target of the Manifesto.

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. (Matthew 5:1-2)

At the end of chapter 4, we learned that Jesus had begun his public ministry. Matthew gave us a general summary: Jesus spoke in synagogues, centers of learning for the Jewish people and anyone who sought after the God of Israel. Matthew summarizes that teaching by saying that Jesus "proclaimed the good news of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23). Jesus also healed people who had terrible diseases and handicaps. This drew a lot of attention, so we're told large crowds were following him.

But now, something different is going to happen. Matthew says that Jesus saw the crowds. However, he didn't call the crowds together. We're told that he went up on a mountainside and sat down.

A quick note: Over the centuries, people have tried to give us outlines for the Bible. These outlines are created by well-meaning people. Sometimes, the outlines are helpful. Sometimes, not so much. Because of the location Matthew just gave us, those people have called this portion of Scripture, "The Sermon on the mount". I'm not sure that the title "Sermon on the Mount" really tells us what's in this message. One time, Jesus was surrounded by a crowd so dense, he borrowed a boat and sat in it while the crowd sat on the beach. No one calls that "The sermon on the boat". I think that the words of Jesus here look much more like a Manifesto, a summary of important ideas. So, we'll go with that.

It's also important to note that Jesus sat. Today, we don't think much of that, but in the days of Jesus this was significant. This is what a great teacher of the day would do. They would sit before crowds and present their teachings. To this day, we call positions in universities a "chair". In choosing this position, Jesus is establishing himself as a teacher, a rabbi, among other things.

Then we're told that his disciples came to him. The disciples were those who were committed to Jesus. He taught **them**, his disciples. We'll later learn that at least some of the crowds followed. They were listening in, but they weren't the target of this body of teaching. **The target was the disciples of Jesus.** A disciple is a committed follower. The crowds might come and go. Here, Jesus is primarily talking to those who have committed themselves to him.

Before going on, let's take a moment and ask a question. ***How would you characterize your relationship with Jesus?***

Maybe you've been in church for a long time? You might already call yourself a disciple of Jesus, a committed follower. If that's the case, this will be a good time to review.

Or, you might be surprised as you listen. You might have some, what I will call “holes” in your spiritual development. When I speak, it’s not at all unusual to hear people respond by saying, “I’ve been in church for a long time, and I never knew that.” Or, they say, “I heard that before, but I never thought about it that way.”

So, if you consider yourself a disciple of Jesus, you’re in the right place. You can review, or, you might discover some holes.

Are you someone who doesn’t know a lot about Jesus, but you’re interested? There’s a place for you here, too. You’re what we could call “The crowd”. That’s a perfectly legitimate place to be. I hope you’ll hang around through our study. Be warned though: Some of what we’re reading is serious. You might find yourself agreeing. You might decide to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I hope this will be an opportunity for all of us to grow.

Later, Matthew will close his book with a quote from Jesus. It’s the last command Jesus gave before going up into heaven. I will periodically remind us of it as we study his book. Jesus said, “...go and make disciples of all nations...” (Matthew 28:19). One of the most important parts of any organization is to know exactly what you want to accomplish. The Church has one main function, our “Job One”: To make disciples. If you want to make something, you should know what it looks like. A car company wants to make cars. Before you build a car factory you had better know what a car looks like. You had better know exactly what a car looks like if you’re going to invest time and resources into making them. So, the church needs to know what a disciple looks like. In order for us to know what a disciple looks like we will need to start with this manifesto.

So, the target of the manifesto is disciples of Jesus Christ.

Let’s read on.

II. The Start of Discipleship

In this session, we’ll center on the starting place of Discipleship. Here it is:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3)

There is a great deal packed into this one sentence. Before we can go on, we need to understand it. The sentence has three parts. Let’s start with the first one.

A. Being blessed

Jesus starts with a word, which translated here is, “Blessed”. He also uses that for the next several statements. What does it mean to be “blessed”? Our New Testament is translated from Greek. The Greek word is one that doesn’t have an exact English equivalent. We’ll need several words and ideas to get the picture.

First, it has the idea of receiving a good thing. When we receive something good, it makes us happy. So, many translations of the Bible translate this word as “happy”. But, there’s even more. If you receive a good thing, and you’re happy about it, then others might be happy, too. In that case, they want to congratulate you. You are to be congratulated about the good thing you have. The word carries that idea as well. Maybe, what you’ve received is so good, that other people would even envy you. You’re so well off, others look upon you with longing. Yet another way to think about this is that receiving good things puts you in a good situation. You’ve arrived. You’re enjoying the good life.

All that is wrapped up in this word. When we translate it, I like the English word “blessed”. It allows us to keep all these things in mind. So, disciples of Jesus are blessed. They’re blessed in a number of ways. Let’s move on to the next part of this sentence.

B. Being Poor in Spirit

“Blessed are the poor in spirit”. The word “blessed” is a little complicated, but when we get the picture, we like it. The next word is much harder. Jesus says that it’s “blessed” to be poor. Well, that doesn’t sound right. What does Jesus mean?

To make things harder, this isn’t the only time Jesus said something like this. When Luke wrote about the life of Jesus in his book, he quotes Jesus as saying something similar.

Looking at his disciples, he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. (Luke 6:20-21)

So, is it just “poor”, or “poor in spirit”? Are they the same thing? It turns out that they are related.

Protecting our faith from attack

We’re going to take a little side trip here. I think that the process of making disciples involves more than merely teaching words from the Bible. We must teach people how to defend their

faith against attacks. This involves teaching the things we've learned from history. Things we've learned from others who have walked the path of disciples over the centuries.

There are people in the world who don't like God very much. So, they attack us. One of those attacks involves our faith in the Bible. We believe that the Bible, when it was originally written, was the inspired word of God. It is infallible; that is to say, it has no errors.

The attackers say that the Bible has errors. They look at these two passages and say that they were written by two people who disagreed about what Jesus said. If they disagreed, then one must be wrong. If one is wrong, then the Bible is not infallible. It has errors. If it has errors, then we don't need to listen to it.

Well, the people who say things like this are mistaken about a lot of things. One problem they have is a total misunderstanding of how a public ministry works. Let me give you an example. I wrote a book a while back, called, "The Idols on the Hills". Some people in different places have read my book, and they've asked me to come to their church and speak about it. It's a long book with a lot of topics. When I prepare the messages that I share at those churches, I ask the leaders what the congregation is like. I ask about the problems they have and the challenges they face. So, when I speak at different churches, I may share the same idea in different ways. What I share is based on the same set of research and facts. Facts don't change. But the exact wording I use to share those facts may change based on the needs of the audience.

That's likely what happened here. Jesus probably told the same story more than once in different locations. He was under no obligation to use exactly the same words each time. He was concerned about the main ideas based on the needs of the audience. Add to his, Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience, and Luke is writing to a Greek audience. That no doubt influenced the choice of stories they decided to include in their books.

Most of the things we read in the Gospel stories agree. Jesus was born to the virgin Mary. That stays the same everywhere it's reported. It's not Mary in one place and Suzy in another. Jesus died on a cross. It's not a cross in one place and arrows in another.

So, don't be troubled when you see slight differences in the Gospel accounts. And don't be troubled when non-believers try to point them out. If you hang in, you'll find that there's really no problem. There is great evidence that the Bible is the authoritative word of God.

B. "Poor in Spirit" (Continued)

Let's get back to our text. What does it mean to be "poor in Spirit"?

Let's pull the phrase apart. To be poor means to be lacking. You lack the food you need to eat, and the clothing you need to wear. You lack shelter from the cold and wind and rain. You lack the money you need to purchase these things.

Now, "poor" is usually relative. The poor man looks around and notices that others have more than he does. Others seem to have what they need and want.

Here is where the word "radical" comes in. We said that to be "blessed" means to be in a good place, a place to be congratulated, even envied. The world doesn't say that when it looks at the poor. The world looks down on the poor. On the best day, the world pities the poor. On a bad day, the world looks on the poor with contempt. The world says, "Blessed are the rich". "Blessed are the successful". It is they who are to be congratulated and envied.

But Jesus says something radically different. Why?

Because there is something wrong with the world. **The world is broken.** Now, the brokenness of the world is uneven. That's part of the nature of being broken. Because the world is broken, some people get hurt. But others, not so much.

Here's an important principle: The less the brokenness of the world hits someone, the less likely they are to see the brokenness. The more the brokenness of the world hits someone, the more likely they are to see. Because of this the poor are in a good position to see what others don't.

Here is where the extra words come in between Luke and Matthew. When Jesus gave his manifesto, when he was focusing on his disciples, he said, "Blessed are the poor **in spirit.**" We said that sometimes being radical means bringing in new ideas. Sometimes it means returning to the old. This goes back to the earliest teachings in the Bible, the earliest things that God taught to humankind.

Why is the world broken? It's broken because of sin. It broke when Adam and Eve disobeyed the clear command of God. It is broken more and more each day when other humans sin.

Do you know what you are? You're a human. So, you know what? You sin, too. Along with me. We are all sinners. The apostle Paul said, "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 6:23)

The problem isn't just a broken world. It's broken people. People who are broken by sin. Being broken by sin means you are in poverty. You are poor in spirit.

Now by itself, that's a bad thing. But it can be a good thing in the hands of merciful God. Because God, being rich in mercy, can show things to the person who realizes that they're poor in spirit. Let me give an illustration:

Illustration of spiritual poverty (bankruptcy)

Imagine that there is a line somewhere in the universe. At that line, you are even with God. You don't owe God anything. However, you find out one day that God has created you. You owe your existence to him. You now owe something to God. So, you move beneath the line.

But you then find out that God is very generous. He made you, and that's his gift to you. No strings attached. So, now you're back to that line. You don't owe God anything. Then, you find out that God made everything you need to live. He made the air you breathe and the water you drink. He made the ground out of which your food grows. He also made the enjoyable things like sunshine. So, now you're back to owing something to God, in fact, lots. You couldn't get along without all the things he's made. Once again, you move beneath the line. But, once again, you find out that God is generous. He made all the things you need to live and to be happy, and he gave them to you and all humans as a gift. So, you're back up to the line. You don't owe God anything.

But now, let's say that you commit a sin. You're broken something. You're knocked below the line. You now owe God.

"But", you say, "I'll fix this". "I'll do something good to make up for the bad thing I've done." But what are you going to use? God made your body. God made everything needed for your body to work, the air you breath, the water you drink, etc.

So, you have a terrible problem. You owe God, and you have nothing you can use to repay him. You are spiritually poor. In fact, you are spiritually **bankrupt**.

Why is this a terrible problem? Because sin has a penalty. A little after the Apostle Paul warned that all have sinned, he said, "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). And it's not a matter of one sin. We are not people who have committed one sin. We are **sinner**s. We are born in sin. We commit sins all the time. Because of that, we're in terrible, terrible danger.

Because of all this, ***the starting point for a disciple of Jesus is to realize that they are spiritually poor***. They have a terrible problem of sin. *And they have no way to fix it.*

C. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven

But now, there's the third part of this sentence.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

How can this be? How does spiritual poverty lead to the kingdom of heaven?

Remember, the message of John the Baptist? “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 3:2). “Repent” means to turn away from sin. How can you turn away from sin when you don’t think you have any? Those who are “rich” often don’t see themselves as having any problems. So, there’s nothing to turn from.

But those who are spiritually poor know their sin. As we said, Paul taught in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death. Then, he finishes his sentence by saying, “but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Those who know they are spiritually bankrupt know they can’t fix their sin or make up for their sin. ***They know that they need to turn away from their sin and ask for God’s help. They know they need the gift of Christ Jesus.***

Conclusion

Let’s pull this all together.

So, after spending a long time learning about the great King, the King has begun to speak. He has called his disciples, his committed followers, to a mountainside. There he begins to present his manifesto.

We’ve looked at just the first sentence of the manifesto, the starting place for a disciple. We’ve learned that people are blessed when they learn and acknowledge that they are spiritually poor. They have a terrible problem of sin. That should place them in terrible danger. But their terrible problem isn’t the end. Instead, it can be a wonderful beginning. The knowledge of spiritual bankruptcy can lead someone to repent. When they do that, the kingdom of heaven becomes theirs.

There are two groups listening today. One we have called, “The crowd”. You aren’t sure about Jesus, but you’re curious – even interested. Consider today your spiritual state. You are bankrupt. You have a terrible problem of sin. Acknowledge your sin – repent. If you do, the kingdom of heaven will be yours. Let us tell you how.

Contact us at Trinity church – www.TrinityTeaneck.org. Let us tell you how you can know that one day you will enter the kingdom.

The other group is the disciples. At some point you’re become a follower. That’s great. But maybe as I said before, there are some holes? Maybe you have forgotten the starting point? Maybe you have forgotten your spiritual poverty? Ask God to help you with his Holy spirit. Ask him to point out the holes. Ask him to tell you if you’ve gotten off track.

In the coming sessions, we will continue our study of the Christian manifesto. I pray that we will all know where to start. I pray that we will all be able to say with confidence, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”