



Roanoke, Virginia

April 6, 2025

“New Wisdom”

Wisdom Sermon Series Part V

Matthew 5:1-12, 38-45

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Matthew 5:1-12, 38-45. ¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁰ ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ ‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.



³⁸ ‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Six weeks ago, I preached a sermon on Luke 6, an excerpt from Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain. This week in our Lenten sermon series on wisdom, I happen to have been assigned Luke 6’s parallel passage in Matthew 5, an excerpt from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. It is *almost* the exact same passage. So, if you don’t like this sermon, go back and listen to my sermon from Feb 23.

In the decades between the time of Jesus and the actual composition of the Gospels, the memory of what Jesus had said and done was shared only in the form of oral tradition. The apostle Paul, writing to the congregation at Corinth around the year 55CE (some twenty years after the life of Jesus), reminded the Corinthians that during his visit a few years before, he had orally “delivered to you as of first importance what I also received,” concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus (I Corinthians 15:1-7) and the Lord’s Supper (I Corinthians 11:23-26). By the time the stories from oral tradition found their way into written form, they had passed through the life and experience of the church.ⁱ

Jesus was a Jew. So, it goes without saying that the first attempts to understand his message took place within Judaism. The New Testament was written in Greek, but the language Jesus and his disciples usually spoke would have been Aramaic, a Semitic tongue related to Hebrew but not identical with it. Aramaic words and phrases are scattered throughout the Gospels. These include words like “Hosanna,” as well as Jesus’ cry from the cross, “Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani?” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Four Aramaic words appear as titles for Jesus in the Gospels: Rabbi, or teacher; Amen, or prophet; Messiah, or Christ; and Mar, or Lord.ⁱⁱ

The most neutral of these titles and probably most used is Rabbi. The disciples call him Rabbi, even people from the crowds and a Pharisee who came to see Jesus in the night use this title reserved for religious scholars. When Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Jesus in the garden, she exclaims, “Rabboni,” (John 20:16) “my teacher.” Clearly, we cannot separate who Jesus was from his role as a teacher.



Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus teaching and preaching along the roadsides, in grain fields, on the hillside, in a boat, in the synagogue and Temple. He knows the Torah well. He teaches the old word with understanding. And he also has a new word to share.

- ³ ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- ⁵ ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- ⁶ ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

In what Christian tradition has come to call the Beatitudes, Jesus lays out for the gathered crowd the reality of God’s Kingdom, where the last shall be first and the first shall be last. He’s describing a reality that already exists, if only we’ll open our eyes to see it. The world he describes is God’s world, if only we could recognize it and live the truth of it ourselves.

In our Thursday women’s Bible study, NT Wright categorized our daily readings for last week at “Jesus among enemies.” He discussed Jesus’ word about loving enemies, “You have heard it said..., but I say to you...” And he reflected on Jesus’ disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus’ healing a man on the Sabbath, and rescuing a woman caught in adultery. In each of these instances, the Pharisees tried to catch the good Rabbi in a heresy.

“Jesus among enemies” is a good subtitle for that particular group of readings. But, as I shared with our class, were I to label these stories, I’d rename the section “Jesus breaks bad rules.” Because, indeed, that is what he’s doing. He’s pointing out the error in obeying the law too strictly, while ignoring the grace and mercy in God’s kingdom now.

Plucking grain on the Sabbath? The Ten Commandments may say to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, but even King David broke the rules and ate the bread of presence in the Temple. And even the priests work on the Sabbath. Jesus’ interpretation of the law sees another way. The Sabbath rules of Jesus’ day made the law into a “burdensome yoke, ironic given that the Sabbath is meant to bring rest from the burden of work.”ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus pulls the boundary of the law and stretches it to where it needs to be stretched for the sake of his disciples’ flourishing. He restores the freedom to move around and explore and be free. Is that not the gift of the Sabbath anyway?

And healing a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath *in* the Temple, nonetheless? It’s not lawful to cure on the Sabbath, clearly. But Jesus, ever the teacher, asks the Pharisees, “Which one of you, having a sheep that fell into the pit on the Sabbath would not reach down and lift it out?” Of course you would, his question implies. Then how could one let this man suffer any longer? Jesus calls for boundaries stretch, perspectives shift.



The woman caught in adultery? Ignoring the fact she was setup and used as an object lesson to try and entrap Jesus in a legal and theological misstep, again, Jesus doesn't fall prey to their ploy. A woman caught in the act of adultery, according to the law of Moses, was to be stoned to death. Deuteronomy states that the witnesses to her crime are to be the ones to cast the first stone. Roman law says that she's to be turned over to the authorities. Which rule is right? Jesus simply ignores the question, draws something in the sand, and without looking up, states, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." And the jeering crowd falls silent and disperses one by one.

As hard as it is for my little rule-following heart to admit, there are some bad rules that are worth breaking. And Jesus shows us how to do it. By bending, by stretching, and leaning in always toward mercy, grace, generosity, and love.

In the New Testament world, the Pharisees weren't the enemies. They were hardworking, learned, devoted men. But in their attempts to maintain their identity over and against the empire that ruled them, they'd gotten so caught up in the "us versus them" of the empire, and they'd worked so hard to know and follow the rules, that they'd forgotten the grace and freedom that can exist within them.

The rules of the Old Testament were meant to bring freedom, promote health, and create community for God's people. But interpreted too narrowly, they became a burdensome yoke.

"You have heard it said—An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." These are too narrow, Jesus says. In God's Kingdom your vision must be broader, your grace must be wider. Jesus is pulling back the curtain and exclaiming that the ways of the world are not God's ways.

"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." This idea was meant to limit the escalation of violent retaliation. It was intended to break the cycle of violence by ensuring the punishment never became greater than the crime. The concept was about seeking true justice. But justice in God's kingdom brings about something greater than *quid pro quo*. In God's kingdom, justice is about restoration and healing. It's an entirely different way to relate to each other—relationships governed not by power, but by vulnerability and love.

"An eye for an eye makes all people blind," Ghandi would say nearly 2,000 years later. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."



A good teacher asks good questions. A good teacher makes you do the hard work of thinking for yourself.

So, what new wisdom is Jesus trying to teach us today? Some 2,000 years later, what new thing is he trying to tell us? Can you think of any bad rules that need bending or breaking?

John Calvin said that we ought to interpret Scripture through the lens of Christ. For in Jesus Christ, we have firsthand the illustration of God our Father. Who did Jesus love? How did Jesus serve? What would Jesus do? Wisdom does not always mean looking backwards. Wisdom also calls us to keep our eyes to the horizon, open to the Spirit, willing to live, move, and breathe as we strive to follow the way of Jesus. Soren Kierkegaard famously said that “life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.” As we look to our future, let us do so with the lens of Christ. Let us look within and around ourselves to see the ways we are called to live into God’s Kingdom now. Jesus is trying to tell us exactly who God is, and how we are to live in God’s presence now. Friends, we might be in this world, but let us be of God’s Kingdom—

- Where the last shall be first and the first shall be last.
- Where blessed are the peacemakers and the merciful and the pure of heart.
- Where we pray for and learn to love even our enemies.

2,000 years ago... and this day in age... it doesn’t get much more countercultural than that.

ⁱ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Illustrated Jesus Through the Centuries*, (Yale University Press, 1997) pp9-23.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Herbert W. Bassler and Marsha B. Cohen, *The Gospel of Matthew and Judaic Traditions: A Relevance-based Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p283.

