

- What did Jesus teach? Was it different from other teachers?
- How did Jesus say we can have a good relationship with God?

The Law Restored

The teaching of Jesus set a higher standard than any other human teacher. After hearing one of the longest recorded portions of His teaching, often called the **Sermon on the Mount** (Matthew 5-7), people recognised that Jesus taught as if He had authority (Matthew 7:28-29). Unlike the usual teachers of the Law, who merely taught from what had already been written, Jesus claimed authority to say exactly what the Law meant and what God thought. He said He came to fulfil the Old Testament Law (Matthew 5:17-20). Jesus certainly kept the Law perfectly in His own actions, but this statement means more. He had come to bring the Law to its proper conclusion (He would do this through His sacrificial death), but first He had to restore it to its original purpose (the word translated 'fulfil' can also mean 'restore'). Matthew 5:21-48 contains six examples of Him doing this. The Jewish teachers (rabbis) had changed the standard of the Law in three ways:

- Focusing on actions and ignoring the heart* – Jesus taught that heart attitudes are as important as actions. Sin is not just wrong actions, but wrong desires that flow from wrong worship (of self, not God).
- Limiting its requirements to 'religious' activities* – they acted as if God was involved in some parts of life but could be left out of others. Jesus showed that God knows and cares about every aspect of our lives.
- Limiting compassion to people they thought deserved it* – anyone who wasn't good enough (including prostitutes, tax collectors and anyone who wasn't Jewish) did not deserve good deeds from them and in fact was an 'enemy' to be hated. Jesus showed this was wrong through a story about a Samaritan man who showed love to an injured Jewish man (Luke 10:25-37). Provocatively, the man who acted like a neighbour to the injured Jew was someone he would naturally hate – a Samaritan (descended from the people the Assyrians settled in the land). There are no limits to our duty of love to others. Everyone is our neighbour, irrespective of whether we would naturally love them or whether they can repay us.

Jesus restored the Law by exposing the falsehood of these three limitations. His teaching strips away attempts to justify ourselves as better than others or 'good enough' and focuses us on our sin and need of forgiveness.

Jesus summarised His standard for behaviour in a famous statement often called the '**Golden Rule**': "Do for others what you would like them to do for you. This is a summary of all that is taught in the law and the prophets" (**Matthew 7:12**). Notice the full force of what Jesus says. He does not simply ask us to do no harm to others (not doing to them what we would not want them to do to us), but to go beyond this and positively do good for them, even if they have done no good or real harm to us. This call to radical selflessness seems impossible by human standards and is radically different to our usual behaviour. Jesus also warned about the seriousness of sin and the reality of God's judgement in Hell (e.g., Mark 9:42-48). We have a serious problem – Jesus sets us a seemingly impossible standard and tells us we will face judgement if we fall short.

The solution to this problem is that such behaviour is only possible within the context that Jesus sets His ethical teaching within: God's rule. The first words of the 'Sermon on the Mount', Matthew 5:3-10, are a list of promises of blessing to certain people and begins and ends with a promise of the kingdom of Heaven (what other Gospels call the 'kingdom of God'). This kingdom – God's rule in action – turns the values of the world upside down (a theme we have seen often in the Bible), describing as blessed by God exactly the kinds of people the world despises! Jesus says that "God blesses those who are poor and realise their need for Him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs" (Matthew 5:3). Importantly, God's rule is based on the principle of **forgiveness** (see Matthew 6:12). God calls us to experience His forgiveness and to extend forgiveness to others. To understand how God can forgive us, we need to follow the story of Jesus towards the cross.

The kingdom of God

Jesus taught a great deal about the Kingdom of God, which means God's rule. In one sense as Genesis 1 showed, everything He created is under God's sovereign rule, but human beings rejected God as king, declaring independence from Him. Jesus showed what God's rule looks like and how people can enter it.

The kingdom of God has arrived (Matthew 4:17)

Jesus continued John's preaching (Matthew 3:1-2), boldly declaring that the kingdom of God was near and people must repent to get ready. Most Jews would have expected this to mean the overthrow of the Romans and the reestablishment of David's throne. As Jesus continued His ministry, He claimed His miracles, especially casting out demons, were proof that the kingdom had arrived (Matthew 12:28). Yet Jesus refused to become king (John 6:15) and never led an army. Shortly before His death, Jesus affirmed that he was "King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:11) but explained that His kingdom was not from this world, but from God (John 18:36). Instead of being 'lifted up' on a throne in exaltation, He was 'lifted up' on a cross to suffer and die (see the use of this phrase in John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32). The cross was His throne and thorns were His crown.

The kingdom of God arrived with Jesus, but not in its fullness. Jesus spoke of a future time when He would return in glory for all to see (Matthew 16:27; 25:31). Many of His parables about God's kingdom describe a future judgement over which He will preside (Matthew 25). During His first coming His mission was not to establish an earthly kingdom, but to bring God's rule in the lives of people. His miracles affirmed that He was the longed-for **Conquering King**, but He must first fulfil the prophecies about the **Suffering Servant**. For now, God's kingdom is growing slowly and often unseen in people's lives as they accept Him as Lord (Matthew 13).

Entering the kingdom (Matthew 13)

Jesus taught that we are not automatically part of God's kingdom. He said much about how people enter it:

- *We cannot be good enough on our own* (Matthew 5:20) – we must obey God better than the Pharisees, who were known as strict law keepers. His point is that we must realise we can never fully keep God's Law – we have all sinned and therefore need forgiveness to be part of His kingdom. The good news is that it is those who recognise their poverty of spirit before God who can possess the kingdom (Matthew 5:3).
- *We must do what God says, not just act the part* (Matthew 7:21-23) – Jesus warns that even some people who say they are His followers will not enter the kingdom. We must follow Him truly as Lord to be saved.
- *We must humble ourselves like little children* (Matthew 18:3) – Jesus is not telling us to act immaturely, but to recognise our dependence on God and trust Him as little children depend on and trust their parents.
- *Other things can distract us* (Matthew 19:24) – a rich young man came to Jesus, who told him to sell everything if he wanted to have eternal life, but the man wasn't prepared to because He loved possessions.
- *Sinners can enter the Kingdom if they repent* (Matthew 21:31-32) – Shockingly, Jesus said tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom before the chief priests. These 'sinners' had heard John the Baptist and repented from their sins, but the chief priests were proud and did not recognise their own sin and need to repent. Anyone can enter the kingdom, but only through repentance and faith.

Jesus demanded a response

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged His hearers about how they would respond (Matthew 7:13-27). He had just presented His manifesto for His Kingdom and now they had to decide whether to acknowledge His rule. Jesus used three pictures to describe the choice before them:

- a) *Narrow and wide gates* (v13-14) – to reject it, as many do, leads to destruction, to accept it leads to life;
- b) *Good and bad trees* (v15-23) – false teachings lead to sinful actions, but Jesus' words lead to healthy fruit;
- c) *Wise and foolish builders* (v24-27) – only Jesus' words provide a firm and lasting foundation for life.

One of the best-known parables (Matthew 13:1-23) describes four different responses people make to the message about the Kingdom of God using the image of four kinds of soil onto which seed is sown:

- **The path** – people whose hearts are hard do not understand the message and Satan snatches it away;
- **Rocky soil** – some initially receive the message gladly, but turn away when it becomes difficult to obey;
- **Thorny ground** – some receive the message at first, but are later distracted by other concerns;
- **Good ground** – people who really receive the message, producing the fruit of a changed life serving God.

People still respond in these four ways today whenever God's word and the message about Jesus are taught.

SUMMARY: Jesus' teaching was unique and demanded a response, calling us to enter God's kingdom

- God's rule commands us to love everyone and leaves us with no excuse for our own sin.
- To enter God's kingdom we must respond to Jesus' teaching in humility, repentance and trust in Him.