

Who Is Influencing You?

Matthew 5:1-16

This morning we are going to be starting a new sermon series that will take us through March. It will probably end up being 9 sermons that cover 11 weeks because of a couple of guest speakers. This is a little longer series than in the fall, but if you're able, I encourage you to make the commitment to meet with a small group during the series. It will help you process and personalize what we learn. Each week I'll have discussion questions on the back of the sermon notes in the bulletin for group discussion or personal reflection.

I landed on the Sermon on the Mount for this series because it has really helped me in the past few years in my own spiritual growth in areas that I think are common struggles for many Christians today. It really forces you to think and helps you test and discern whether or not the Christian life you're living is in alignment with the kind of life Jesus is actually calling us to live, or if you've been unknowingly following a different path. So on one hand it can be quite troubling and disruptive, but on the other it can bring a lot of clarity and set you on a path that you can know God wants you to be on – a path that leads to deeper life and abiding joy.

We're going to look at the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount today, which is also known as the beatitudes. This really sets the theme and direction for the rest of the sermon.

Before we get into it, I want you to think about who you look up to as the primary Christian influencers in your life. Who are the people you turn to and trust and learn from about how to live as a Christian? As you think about it, more and more people will probably come to mind. It might be people you look up to in this church family – a pastor or ministry leader, or simply other Christians who seem to be further along than you. What are the things you admire about their faith and how they live their lives?

It could also include Christian family members and friends. Who do you look up to in your family? Whose life is having an influence on you? Which friends have a relationship with God that you aspire to? It probably includes the people you watch and listen to online – who are you drawn to? What do you

admire about them? What are you seeking to emulate in how you live your life? What about Christian leaders in our society? Politicians, business owners, athletes... What kinds of things are you learning from them?

When you start to think about it you start to see that there are a lot of people who are making an impact on how you live your life and what you think it means to live as a Christian.

The same was true for the people who lived in Israel in the 1st century, prior to the emergence of Jesus' teaching and ministry. They had similar influencers in their lives – people who were teaching them how to live in obedience to God. But at the top of the list were the religious leaders of Israel. This included groups like the scribes and Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots.

Among all these there were Rabbi's and teachers of the law, members of the Sanhedrin, and the people in the Jewish communities would look to them for guidance. They would watch them to see how they lived and they would listen to their teachings in the synagogues. They would try to become like them and pass on these things to their children. They were trusted, admired, looked up to, and they had a powerful influence on the whole society. They were the 1st Century influencers, much like the people we look up to in our lives today.

But the question I want us to consider is: How accurate has their influence been? How close are they to teaching and emulating God's will and the kinds of lives he wants us to live? And, more personally, how accurately are you, having learned from them, living your life according to the way of Christ and the will of God?

When Jesus came on the scene he was looked at as another Rabbi and influencer. And he was quickly rising in popularity. Wherever he went he drew large crowds of people who wanted to hear him preach. What kind of message would Jesus bring? How close would it be to the other Rabbis in their time? How close will it be to the influencers in your life?

We now know that Jesus was much more than just another Rabbi or teacher. He was the very Son of God who alone had a perfect understanding of the way God wants us to live our lives. And as we look at how he introduced this

sermon, we're going to see right away if the things we believe and live by are in line with him or not. It would have had the same effect on the people back then. Ask yourself as we read these Beatitudes – Does this line up with the values I'm seeing in the Christian influencers in my life? Does this line up with how I'm living as a Christian?

Read Matthew 5:1-12.

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²And he opened his mouth 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 shall be comforted.*

⁵*“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

⁶*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

⁷*“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

⁸*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

⁹*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

¹⁰*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

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

When Jesus spoke these things, I wonder what was going through the minds of his listeners? I think there would have been a lot of confusion and questioning. I don't think what Jesus said would have made sense. The way he described the kind of people that would be blessed, or fortunate would not have lined up at all with the kind of people they thought would be blessed and fortunate. They would have been thinking about their religious influencers and the things Jesus just said did not describe them at all. He described a completely different kind of person, not the ones they would have assumed.

And I believe that's the impression Jesus wanted to make. I think he wanted to get their attention and begin to uproot their faulty way of thinking. He wanted to confront a faulty religious worldview. He does the same thing throughout the rest of the sermon. He was confronting the way of life and the influence of

the scribes and Pharisees by declaring that those who would be blessed would not be like them, but very different.

One of the things I did this week was look at the things Jesus said about the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 where he warned the people not to be like them. My Study Bible pointed out that the characteristics he spoke against in their lives have many parallels to the Beatitudes, only they were the sinful counterparts. So as I look at what Jesus says in the Beatitudes, I can also see the sinful counterpart I believe he was intentionally confronting.

- Blessed are the poor in spirit – those who have an attitude of lowliness and humility, not people who exalt themselves and love to be honored at feasts, and in the synagogues and marketplaces (Mt. 23:5-7).
- Blessed are those who mourn – those who are struggling and broken because of sin, not those who are self-righteous because of their lineage and religious traditions (Mt. 23:23-24).
- Blessed are the meek – those who are kind and gentle, not those who are arrogant, proud, and think they're better than everyone else (Mt. 23:5-7).
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – who care deeply about pleasing the Lord, rather than being driven by the thirst for notoriety, success, and accomplishment (Mt. 23:15).
- Blessed are the merciful, who demonstrate God's mercy to the sick, poor, and lost, not those who turn a cold shoulder and care more about keeping the law and appearances (Mt. 23:23-24).
- Blessed are the pure in heart, who are clean on the inside – not those who clean the outside, but inside are full of greed and self-indulgence (Mt. 23:25-28).
- Blessed are the peacemakers, who love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them, not those who hate their enemies and fight against them, while pretending to be innocent (Mt. 23:29-31).
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, who do good, and help others even though it might go against certain customs and traditions, not those who neglect what's right due to pressure from others (Mt. 23:4).
- Blessed are those who are reviled and persecuted and receive all kinds of insults for following Jesus, not those who reject him, kill him and choose their old way of life instead.

I think these beatitudes would have been surprising and disruptive to many of the people Jesus was speaking to. Those who would be blessed and receive all the rewards of the kingdom of heaven, would not actually be like the people they were listening to – the people they had trusted and had been influencing their lives. Very disruptive.

And Jesus went on from there to continue preaching about what life would be like for those who were truly part of the kingdom of heaven. They would be different than the people around them. And that's what Jesus says in the last verses we look at today.

Read Matthew 5:13-16.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Whoever followed Jesus would become like salt and light in the world that had been under the influence of the scribes and Pharisees. They would be different and stand out and show others God's will in the kingdom of heaven.

After hearing these things I think we need to ask ourselves: What do these beatitudes tell us about our lives and the Christian influencers we listen to? Are you living the kind of life that Jesus says will be blessed? Are your influencers leading you that way, or do you see the same contradiction as in Jesus' day?

- Are you poor in spirit? Or exalting yourself in order to be honored by others?
- Do you mourn over the sin that remains in your life? Or are you proud of how good you are?
- Are you meek and kind around other people? Or do you act like you're a little bit better?

- Do you hunger and thirst for righteousness? Or are you too caught up in pursuing success and accomplishment?
- Do you show mercy to those in need? Or turn a blind eye to the lowly?
- Are you pure in heart? Or living a double-lifestyle?
- Are you seeking to make peace? Or do you always have to win and be right?
- Do you do the right thing even if you suffer for it? Or care more about saving face?
- Are you willing to be ridiculed for being a Christian? Or do you hide your light under a bushel?

We're going to take time now for worship and reflection and I encourage you that if God is using these things to show you some things about your life or the people you've been listening to, that you listen to his voice and do what he leads you to do. Take some time this week to reflect on these things and talk about them in your small group or a Christian friend.