

# Small Group Session 4.1

## The good news of the Kingdom of God



Ask the average Christian to tell you about the Gospel ('good news') of Jesus Christ and you are likely to hear something about God's love for us, the forgiveness of sins, and going to heaven when you die. Yet when Jesus himself proclaimed the good news he spoke about the availability of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 4:17,23). Why did Jesus focus his gospel message on the availability of the kingdom of heaven and why should it be good news?



### Let God Speak First

*In a few moments of quiet, invite the Lord to speak to you. Be conscious of the presence of the Holy Spirit within you. Spend a couple of minutes looking at the photograph above. Try not to analyse the picture—that would lead you to your own thoughts and conclusions about it. Just try to be open to what God might be saying to you through it.*

### Good News

In Matthew's gospel Jesus begins his ministry by preaching "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). The Greek word which is translated as "repent" is *metanoete*, which literally means to 'think about your thinking'.

*Why should the news about the availability of the kingdom of heaven cause us to think about our thinking? Why is this good news?*

To answer this, let's take a moment to follow the development of Jesus' ministry in chapters 4 and 5 of Matthew's Gospel. As we have seen, Jesus begins with "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven

has come near". Jesus is not saying that the kingdom of heaven is about to begin. God's kingdom has been in existence for as long as God has been in existence. No, Jesus is announcing the *availability* of God's kingdom. He then goes throughout Galilee proclaiming, teaching and manifesting the kingdom of heaven (4:23-25).

*How did Jesus manifest the kingdom of heaven?*

Whilst Jesus was going about proclaiming, teaching and manifesting the kingdom of heaven, he sat down on a mountainside and began to teach them.

*Read Matthew 5:3-10. What did Jesus mean when he said "Blessed are the poor in spirit"?*

Some have suggested that the blessing comes from being "poor in spirit" and often interpret this to mean being 'humble'. But if Jesus had meant 'humble', why didn't Matthew use the word 'humble' (*tapeinos*) when writing his gospel, as he did later in 11:29? Being *poor in spirit* is not about being humble. It is about being poor in your inner resources, it is about being at the end of your tether, having nothing left to

give. People who are depressed could be described as being poor in spirit—they have lost hope and find a lack of inner resources to cope with life. So why does Jesus describe such people as blessed? The clue is in the second half of the verse. They are blessed **because** "theirs is the kingdom of heaven". In other words, they are blessed because the kingdom of heaven, which is filled with all the riches of God's resources, is now available for them to step into. Their lack of inner resource is infinitely more than compensated for by the availability of God's resources through his kingdom. This is how they are blessed.

It is significant that these verses (3-10), which we call the Beatitudes, begin and end with "... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". The technical term for this is an *inclusio*. It indicates that the kingdom of heaven is the key theme which runs through all of the verses between 3 and 10.

*Read through verses 4 to 10 asking for each verse how the blessing is linked to the availability of the kingdom of heaven.*



### Before you go ...

*As usual, read through The Daily Discipline together and pray for each other before you leave.*

# The Daily Disciple

## Keeping the Sabbath



In this fourth stage of Mathetes we will be focussing our efforts on getting the reality of the Kingdom of God sown deep in us so that it permeates every aspect of our being. Will do this through three spiritual disciplines: keeping the Sabbath, fasting and alms giving. In his article *The Key to the Keys of the*

*Kingdom*<sup>1</sup>, Dallas Willard writes:

*What are some practices that will make "the keys" given in response to our faith in Jesus as Messiah effective in our lives as ministers? We strongly need to see the manifest hand of God in what we are and what we do. We need to be sure He is pulling the load, bearing the burden—which we are all too ready to assume is up to us alone. We must understand that He is in charge of the outcome of our efforts, and that the outcome will be good, right. And all of this is encompassed in one biblical term, "Sabbath."*

*The Sabbath, Jesus said, was made for man. (Mark 2:27) That is, it serves human life in essential ways. Without it, life cannot be what it should be. That is why it is given in the Ten Commandments, at the heart of the moral law. It is not something we have to do because God has arbitrarily required it of us, a pointless hoop He would have us jump through. It is His gift to us. At the same time it makes clear that our life and our ministry is also His gift to us.*

*Sabbath is a way of life. (Heb. 4:3 & 9-11) It sets us free from bondage to our own efforts. Only in this way can we come to the power and joy of a radiant life in ministry, a blessing to all we touch. And yet Sabbath is almost totally absent from the existence of contemporary Christians and their ministers.*

*What is Sabbath? Biblically, it is a day, once a week, when we do no work. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work." (Ex 20:9-10) It was also a year, once every seven years, when God's covenant people not sow seed, prune vines or store up harvest. (Lev. 25:4-7) And to the question, "How are we going to eat in the seventh year?" God replied: "I will so order My blessing*

*for you in the sixth year that it will bring forth the crop for three years." (vs. 21)*

*The moral principle certainly applies as well to our non-agrarian, contemporary life, though our faith will be greatly challenged in working out the details. Very practically, Sabbath is simply "casting your cares upon Him," to find that in actual fact "He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7) It is using of the keys to the kingdom to receive the resources for abundant living and ministering.*

Lynne M. Baab, Presbyterian minister, writes the following in her article entitled *Sabbath-Keeping—It's OK to Start Small?*

*The sabbath commands in the two versions of the Ten Commandments give different reasons for keeping a sabbath. The first version, in Exodus 20:8-11, says that God rested after creating the world, and we should rest on the sabbath, too. God rested at creation because the world is abundantly provisioned and exquisitely made. We can evaluate our sabbath activities by asking ourselves what we can cease from, and what we can choose to do, that help us remember God's abundance.*

*Many people enjoy being in nature on the sabbath, in part because it helps us connect with the abundance of God's creation. Eating good food, giving a friend or a child a back rub, lighting a fat candle, focusing on prayers of thankfulness . . . all of these can help us remember and experience God's bounty. Just stopping from all activity and taking a deep breath can remind us that God sustains the universe so powerfully that we don't have to be productive every minute.*

*In the second version of the sabbath command in the Ten Commandments, Deuteronomy 5:12-15, God invites the people of Israel to "remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." We are encouraged to rest on the sabbath because we are no longer slaves. In Jesus Christ we have been freed from all possible kinds of slavery. . . .*

*More than any other faith discipline I have engaged in, the sabbath has taught me grace. God has given us good work to do, steward the universe in all kinds of ways alongside God. Our work is noble and important, but even the best and most fruitful work can nudge us towards the belief that we are earning the good things we have. We*

*can so easily fall into the trap of believing that God loves us for what we do.*

*Grace teaches us that nothing we do can make God love us more. Year after year of keeping one day each week free from work has helped me learn that truth deep inside. God's love is so awesome that we can rest for one day each week – or even just for a few hours each week – in the certainty that God runs the universe competently and carefully. The freedom we have in Jesus Christ reaches into every area of our lives, so we can spend time each week relishing that freedom as we stop moving so fast and stop producing so much.*

As Lynne M. Baab notes elsewhere in this article, we need to start small when we think about what we will do on the Sabbath to grow closer to God. Over the next two weeks try one or two of the following approaches to keeping the Sabbath:

1. Spend some time on your own in prayer and worship.
2. Read a devotional book or some poetry or a few of the psalms.
3. Do something creative—paint a picture, write a song, write some words that express your love for God.
4. Perform an act of spontaneous generosity, such as cooking a meal for friends, or spending time with someone who lives alone.
5. Take a few hours of complete rest. If you need it, use this time to catch up on some sleep.

## Memory Verses

Week 1: Matthew 5:9

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

Week 2: Matthew 5:10

**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for**

Week 1	Week 2
Matthew 25:14-30	Matthew 26:57-75
Matthew 25:31-46	Matthew 27:1-26
Matthew 26:1-16	Matthew 27:27-44
Matthew 26:17-35	Matthew 27:45-66
Matthew 26:36-56	Matthew 28:1-20

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=40>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.lynebaab.com/articleok.htm>