The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION ONE — The Mountain and the Plain

Texts: Matthew 5:1–2; Luke 6:17–20a

The Texts

> **Matthew 5:1–2** *When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak, and taught them, saying…*
>
> **Luke 6:17–20a** *He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people… Then he looked up at his disciples and said…*

Welcome to the Table

Every people has a founding document. Not a photograph of who they already are — a promise about who they intend to become. A constitution does not report a nation into existence; it calls one forth. It says: here is what we will be to one another. Here is what we will not do. Here is whom we will protect first. Ink on a page that dares to bind a people to a better version of themselves.

Friends, welcome to the Constitution of the Kingdom.

Over the next thirty-three weeks we are going to walk — slowly, together — through the two great charters Jesus left us: the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and its close companion, the Sermon on the Plain in Luke. And let me say at the outset what this is, and what it is not. This is not a lecture I deliver to you from higher ground. There is no higher ground here — that turns out to be the whole point. This is a house of study, a table, where the seasoned and the brand-new lean over the same text and ask, together, what in the world Jesus meant and what on earth it asks of us. I will bring what I have learned across eighteen years of loving these words. You will bring your questions, your doubts, your Monday mornings. We will need every bit of both.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

Where We Are Going

Thirty-three sessions, gathered into seven movements. Today we simply stand at the trailhead and get our bearings; next session we step into the Beatitudes and the climb begins in earnest. Along the way we will question some readings you may have inherited — not out of rebellion,

but out of reverence. We love the truth too much to leave it unexamined, and we are teachable enough to be surprised by it.

He Went Up; He Came Down

Here is the small detail that set this whole course in motion. Watch where Jesus stands.

In Matthew, he *goes up the mountain*, and he sits down, and he teaches. Up the mountain — you can almost hear Sinai in it, Moses coming down with the Law in his arms. But hear me clearly: Jesus does not come to cancel that story. He stands *inside* it, a Jewish teacher opening the heart of the Torah he loves — "not to abolish but to fulfill."[1] And he sits: the posture of the rabbi, the settled authority of the one who teaches.

Then look at Luke. Same teacher, same Kingdom — but Luke says he *came down*. He came down and stood on a level place, in the thick of a great crowd: the sick who came to be healed, the poor, the pressed-down. And on that level ground he looked *up* at his disciples and said, "Blessed are you who are poor." Not the poor in spirit — not yet; that is Matthew's. Luke's Jesus blesses the poor, full stop, standing among them.

Do you feel the difference in your body? The King of this Kingdom does not shout his charter down at us from a safe and flattering height. He comes down. He stands on the level. He looks his people in the eye. That is the God we are going to spend thirty-three weeks getting to know. And it is why this course reads mountain and plain side by side — because together they hold what neither holds alone: the height of the vision, and the level ground of its living.

What This Sermon Is — and Three Things It Is Not

Before we can read the Sermon well, we have to unlearn a few things we may have been handed. Three misreadings, and then the claim.

One — it is not an entrance exam.

The Sermon is not a ladder of requirements we climb to earn our way in. Dallas Willard put it plainly: these are not the terrible ethics that get us into heaven someday, but the description of life in the Kingdom *now* — a curriculum for Christlikeness.[2] We are not auditioning for God's approval. We are learning to live inside a reign that has already come near.

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[1] On reading Jesus as a teacher within—not against—Judaism, and Matthew 5:17's "not to abolish but to fulfill," see Amy-Jill Levine, The Misunderstood Jew (HarperOne, 2006). This course refuses supersessionism: the Sermon opens the heart of the Torah Jesus loved.

[2] Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998): the Sermon is not a set of entrance requirements but a portrait of life in the kingdom now—a "curriculum for Christlikeness."

Two — it is not an impossible ideal.

There is an old and comfortable reading that says Jesus set the bar impossibly high on purpose, only to drive us to grace — so we need not actually *do* any of it. Bonhoeffer had a name for that: cheap grace. He insisted the Sermon was given to be obeyed, that the only way to understand it is finally to do it, and that such obedience is costly precisely because it is real.[3] We will take Jesus at his word: he meant for this to be lived.

Three — it is not private and inner only.

The long temptation is to shrink the Sermon down to personal piety — a matter of my heart, my quiet time, my someday-heaven. But Jesus is forming a *people*: a visible community whose common life bends toward justice. Clarence Jordan, who lived these words on an interracial farm in the Jim Crow South, called the Kingdom the "God Movement" and would not let anyone spiritualize the Sermon into harmlessness.[4] It is public. It is bodily. And it is good news to the poor first.

So what *is* it? It is the constitution of the Kingdom of God — the charter of a real people learning to live, now, under the reign Jesus announced.

The Kingdom Has Come Near

One sentence stands behind the whole Sermon: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). Everything Jesus is about to say unpacks that announcement. This is not a distant heaven we wait to escape into; it is the reign of God breaking in, already, here — and the Sermon is how its people learn to live in the overlap of the ages, the already and the not-yet. So we will make one promise to each other now: we will not use "someday" as an excuse to postpone obedience. The Kingdom is at hand. So is the neighbor.

The Thread We Will Follow

There is one question we will carry from the first Beatitude to the last verse. Put it in your pocket today. As we hold up each teaching to the light, we will keep asking: *where does this increase someone else's freedom, someone else's dignity, someone else's flourishing — and*

[3]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship: against "cheap grace," the Sermon is given to be obeyed; costly grace is grace that is actually lived. Compare N.T. Wright and George Eldon Ladd on inaugurated eschatology—the kingdom "already" and "not yet."

[4]Clarence Jordan, Sermon on the Mount, forged at Koinonia Farm, an interracial community in the Jim Crow South; Jordan called the kingdom the "God Movement" and refused to spiritualize the Sermon into harmlessness. See also Gustavo Gutiérrez and Obery Hendricks on the kingdom as public good news to the poor.

what might it cost us to live it? Bonhoeffer said the church is only the church when it exists for others.[5] Freedom for others is the thread. We will not let go of it.

Around the Table — For Discussion

- Before we begin: what have you been taught the Sermon on the Mount is for? Where did that reading come from — and does it hold?
- Matthew sends Jesus up a mountain; Luke brings him down to a level place. What changes in you when you picture the teacher standing with the crowd rather than above it?
- How might this Sermon look in practice for the least among us in our own corridor?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. As we begin, what might you need to lay down to hear these words honestly?
- What story are you carrying into this study — and who around this table needs to hear it?

This Week — A Practice

Before Session Two, read the whole thing in one sitting: Matthew 5–7 and Luke 6:17–49. Out loud, if you can — these were spoken words long before they were printed ones. Don't stop to study; just listen, the way that first crowd listened, all at once. Then mark the single line that stops you cold — the one that thrills you or troubles you — and bring it back to the table. That line is the Spirit's finger. We'll follow it together.

Looking Ahead

Next session we step onto the trail proper — into the Beatitudes, those upside-down blessings that open the charter. "Blessed are the poor…" We'll ask who exactly Jesus is calling blessed, and why the Kingdom begins there, of all places.

Benediction

So go from this first gathering knowing the ground beneath you is level. The One who taught these words did not shout them from a safe distance — he came down, and stood, and looked his people in the eye. May you hear them the same way this week: not as a burden laid on you from above, but as an invitation offered at eye level, by One who means to walk the whole road with you.

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[5]Bonhoeffer: "The church is the church only when it exists for others." Letters and Papers from Prison. The "freedom for others" test recurs in every session of this course.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,

Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION ONE

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still. Look into the lens before the first word.]

Welcome. If you're watching this, you've stepped up to the table for the very first session of The Confluence — and I could not be happier you're here.

Let me begin with a question. What is a constitution for? Not what does it say — what is it for? A constitution isn't a photograph of a people as they are. It's a promise about who they intend to become. It doesn't describe a nation; it calls one into being. It says: here is what we will be to one another. Here is what we will not do. Here is whom we will protect first.

Friends, that is exactly what we're about to read. Over the next thirty-three sessions, we're going to walk — slowly, together — through the founding charter of the Kingdom of God: the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew, and its close companion, the Sermon on the Plain, in Luke. Two Gospels. Two settings. One Kingdom. I'm calling this course The Constitution of the Kingdom, because that is what these words are — not a wish, not an impossible ideal, but the charter of a real people learning to live, right now, under the reign Jesus announced.

[Lean in slightly — this is the hinge.]

Now let me show you the thing that set this whole course in motion. Notice where Jesus stands.

In Matthew, he goes up the mountain, and he sits down, and he teaches. Up the mountain — you can almost hear Sinai in it, Moses coming down with the Law. But hear me clearly: Jesus does not come to cancel that story. He stands inside it. He opens the heart of the Torah he loves.

And then look at Luke. Same teacher, same Kingdom — but Luke says he came down. He came down, and stood on a level place, in the middle of a great crowd — the sick who came to be healed, the poor, the pressed-down. And on that level ground he looked up at them and said, "Blessed are you who are poor."

Do you feel the difference? The King of the Kingdom does not shout his charter down at us from a safe and distant height. He comes down. He stands on the level. He looks us in the eye. That is the God we are going to spend thirty-three sessions getting to know.

[Warmer, plainer — house-of-study tone.]

So here's how we'll do this — and it matters as much as what we study. This is not a lecture. I am not up on the mountain and you down on the plain. There is no higher ground here — that's the whole point. This is a table. I'll bring what I've learned across eighteen years of

ministry and fifty years of study, loving these words; you'll bring your questions, your doubts, your Monday mornings — and we will need every bit of both. We'll question some readings you may have inherited. Not out of rebellion — out of reverence, because we love the truth too much to leave it unexamined.

And there's one question we'll carry the whole way through — put it in your pocket now: as we hold up each of these teachings, we'll keep asking, where does this increase someone else's freedom, someone else's dignity, someone else's flourishing? And what might it cost us to live it? Freedom for others. That thread runs from the first Beatitude to the last verse, and we will not let go of it.

[Direct — the assignment.]

Here's what I'd ask of you before we gather. Read the whole thing in one sitting — Matthew, chapters five through seven, and Luke chapter six, verses seventeen through forty-nine. Read it out loud if you can; these were spoken words long before they were printed ones. Don't stop to study — just listen, the way that first crowd listened, all at once. And mark the one line that stops you cold — the one that thrills you, or troubles you. Bring it back to the table. That line is the Spirit's finger, and we'll follow it together.

Next session, we step onto the trail proper — into the Beatitudes, those upside-down blessings that open the charter. We'll ask who exactly Jesus calls blessed, and why the Kingdom begins there, of all places.

[Slow down. Let the last lines land.]

For now, hear this. The ground beneath you is level. The One who taught these words came down to stand on it with you. So come as you are — curious, unsure, hungry for something truer — and let's find out together what this Kingdom is, and what it might make of us.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

Blessings, Pastor Mick Finch.