

*What If Jesus Was Serious?* is a compilation of reflections (and doodles) from Skye Jethani. The visual component of the book makes it memorable and enjoyable to read. If you've been dissatisfied with devotional resources but love thinking deeply about Jesus, this book was written for you.

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# WHO IS REALLY BLESSED ACCORDING TO...

...THE KINGDOMS  
OF THE WORLD



THE POWERFUL  
THE RICH  
THE INFLUENTIAL  
THE POPULAR  
THE STRONG



THE OVERLOOKED  
THE PAINFUL  
THE PURE  
THE MEAK  
THE SICK  
THE POOR

...THE KINGDOM  
OF HEAVEN



How Does the Church Answer?

1

## IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . . THEN WE WILL FOCUS MORE ON HIS GOOD NEWS AND LESS ON RELIGIOUS TO-DO'S.

**IT'S DANGEROUS WHEN** religious people read the Bible. They are often tempted to make the particular into the universal. For example, in the Gospels, Jesus called Peter to leave his fishing business to become His apostle and a “fisher of men.” Rather than seeing this as Peter’s particular calling, those steeped in religion often insist this is a universal expectation upon all

Christians. While heaping on the guilt, they conveniently ignore other stories where Jesus gives would-be disciples callings very different from Peter's. Jesus even tells some who want to follow Him to "go home." The gospel writers did not tell the story of Peter's calling to prescribe what all believers should do. The story was simply meant to describe what Peter *did* do.

The same temptation to confuse *description* for *prescription* is at play when we read the opening of the Sermon on the Mount. In the first twelve verses, known as the Beatitudes, Jesus identifies who is blessed by God. His list includes the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and the meek. Some misread this section as prescriptive—as what we should seek to be if we desire God's blessing. Such a reading will lead us to believe being joyful or courageous is ungodly, and that sadness and weakness are true signs of spiritual maturity. That, of course, is nonsense.

Jesus is not prescribing how to be blessed, but rather describing who is blessed. While the world says the strong, powerful, and happy are "well off," Jesus turns our expectations upside down by saying it's the weak, sad, and overlooked who are well off in God's kingdom. Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way:

*Too often those characteristics [of the Beatitudes] . . . are turned into ideals we must strive to attain. As ideals, they can become formulas for power rather than descriptions of the kind of people characteristic of the new age brought by Christ. . . . Thus Jesus does not tell us that we should try to become poor in spirit, or meek, or peace-makers. He simply says that many who are called into the kingdom will find themselves so constituted.<sup>1</sup>*

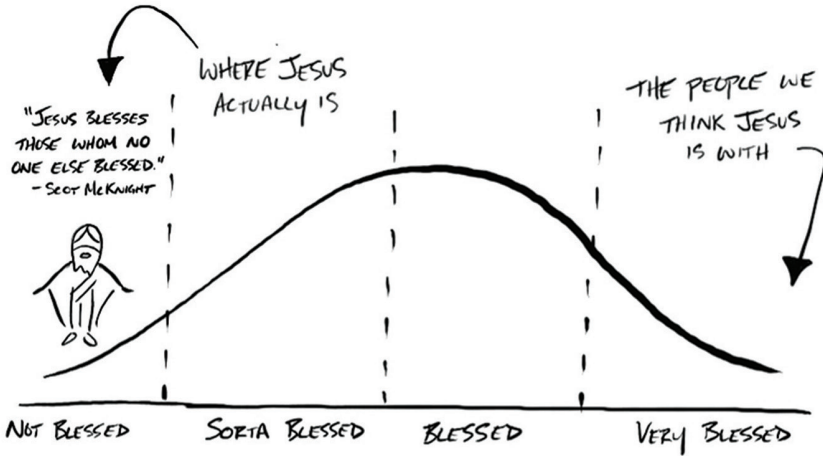
## WHAT IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS?

The beginning of the Sermon on the Mount is not a to-do list; it is a good news list. Jesus is describing who has the most to gain by the arrival of His kingdom. He is not prescribing what you must do to enter it.



**READ MORE** 1 Samuel 16:7; Luke 13:22–30

## THE BELL CURVE OF BLESSING



2

### IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . . THEN NO ONE IS BEYOND GOD'S BLESSING.

**IF YOU WANT TO BE HAPPY**, stay off social media. A recent study from the University of California found that “the more you use Facebook over time, the more likely you are to experience negative physical health, negative mental health and negative life satisfaction.” Psychologist Jean Twenge says it’s especially harmful to young people who “look at the so-called ‘highlight reels’ people post on social and compare themselves, so they may feel depressed or negative emotions as a result.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course, what gets posted on social media isn't reality. The "highlight reels" are snapshots of only the best, often inauthentic, moments. As a result, we end up comparing the unglamorous reality of our life with the fake-glamour of everyone else's. That's a recipe for despair.

While social media is a relatively recent development, the underlying human instinct to project a positive, but false, self-image is nothing new. Ancient Jewish culture was plagued by this tendency rooted in its understanding of who was #blessed. At the time of Jesus, most believed the healthy, powerful, rich, respected, and educated were clearly favored by God. The logic was simple—if your life looked good, it's because you must be good and God has blessed you for your religious devotion. The opposite was also thought to be true—if your life looked bad, it must be because you are bad and God has cursed you for your sinfulness.

Like modern social media, this desire to be perceived as blessed by God led people in Jesus' culture to project a positive, but false, public image. The truth about your life was less important than what people thought was the truth.

Jesus didn't play that game.

Instead, in His sermon, Jesus described who is really blessed—and it wasn't those who looked #blessed by the culture. New Testament scholar Scot McKnight says,

*Clearly, Jesus goes against the grain. Instead of blessing the one who pursues wisdom and reason and develops a reputation as a sage, and instead of blessing the one who has a good family, who observes the whole Torah, or the one who has all the right friends and develops*

## WHAT IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS?

*a reputation as righteous or as a leader, Jesus blesses those whom no one else blessed.<sup>2</sup>*

Jesus' countercultural list of who is blessed challenges us in at least two ways. First, it means that no one is beyond God's blessing, and even those society calls "cursed" or "worthless" are to be shown dignity as recipients of God's care. Second, Jesus obliterates our wicked tendency to judge others by their circumstances. Of course, the same goes for judging ourselves. Who is really blessed—or not blessed—cannot be determined by a person's appearance, circumstances, or social media highlight reel.



**READ MORE** James 2:1–9; 1 Corinthians 1:26–31



THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NOT...

A)



B)



C)



D)



E)

ALL OF THE  
ABOVE

3

### IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . . THEN HEAVEN IS ALREADY HERE.

**JESUS REFERS TO HEAVEN** regularly in the Sermon on the Mount, including in the opening sentence: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” What is the kingdom of heaven? If we misunderstand what Jesus meant by this phrase, then we are likely to misunderstand the whole sermon—and probably Jesus Himself.

First, the kingdom of heaven is not the church. Some assume a local congregation is a “church” but collecting all the

churches together is what constitutes God’s “kingdom.” But that is not what Jesus meant.

Second, the kingdom of heaven is not where God’s people go after death. Jesus was not speaking about the afterlife in the Sermon on the Mount. In English, the word *heaven* carries all kinds of supernatural and spiritual meanings, but the actual word used by Jesus was plural (literally, *heavens*) and more like how we might use the word *skies* to describe the atmosphere. The air isn’t a distant realm; it’s all around us. Likewise, Jesus used the word *heavens* to speak of the nonphysical, invisible, but very present realm where God dwells.

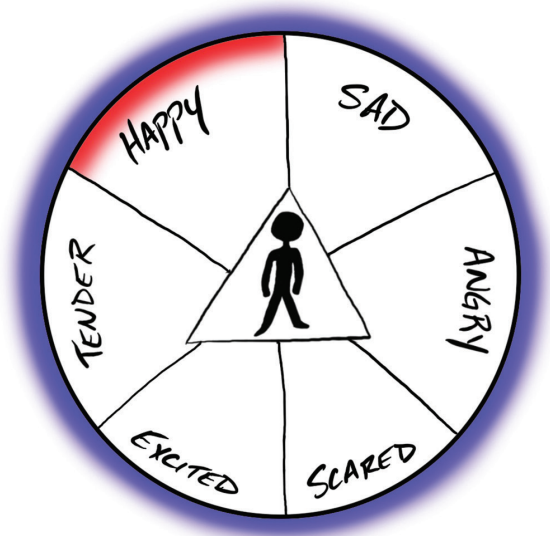
Dallas Willard defined the kingdom of heaven this way: “Where what God wants done is done.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, it is the realm where God rules and evil is powerless. Jesus announced that this kingdom was now “at hand,” meaning it is within our reach. The kingdom of the heavens has broken into our world, and a new way of life is now possible. In the Sermon on the Mount, therefore, Jesus is unveiling a new ethic for those who belong to a new kind of kingdom that is not of this world.



**READ MORE** **Colossians 1:9–14; Luke 17:20–21**

SCOPE OF THE  
HUMAN-DIVINE  
RELATIONSHIP  
EXPRESSED  
By...

- THE PSALMS
- CONSUMER CHRISTIANITY



**4 IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . .  
THEN WE WILL MAKE ROOM TO CRY.**

**IS THE CHRISTIAN LIFE** only for happy-clappy people? Where are the doubters, the grievers, and the “Where the heck are You, God!” complainers? While a church pastor years ago, I read a popular book at the time advocating for the best way to operate a church. The author insisted that all weekend gatherings be called “Celebrations,” and he said the tone of these gatherings should always be upbeat, energetic, and focused on the victorious Christian life. (It’s difficult to read a book that makes your eyes roll as much as that one did.)

The problem with this nonstop celebration model, apart from being inauthentic, is the way it ignores the example found in the Bible. The book of Psalms, for instance, served as the prayer book and worship liturgy for God’s ancient people. It’s the prayer book Jesus and His disciples would have used in their worship. Psalms includes many songs of celebration, but there are even more prayers of lament, complaint, and even cries for justice. “How long, O LORD?” is a frequent prayer in the psalms, and it shows that the human-divine relationship has many dimensions. Ancient worship, it seems, could be celebratory, angry, mournful, repentant, or contemplative. So why do we think our worship should only be one dimensional?

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn.” This addresses those who are experiencing grief, but it can also include those who mourn alongside others in their pain. Where do we make space for this legitimate part of the Christian life to find expression in our communities? We must not fall into the delusion that God has called us to a perpetual state of ever-increasing happiness. Jesus reminds us that God is also with us when we mourn, and because this is a broken world mourning is to be expected. But we do not weep as those without hope.



**READ MORE** [Isaiah 61:1–4](#); [Revelation 21:3–4](#)

THE WAY OF  
LOVE, JOY, PEACE,  
PATIENCE, KINDNESS,  
GOODNESS, GENTLENESS...



"WHEN THEY GO LOW WE GO HIGH."



THE WAY OF POWER, OUTRAGE, AGGRESSION, VIOLENCE,  
COERCION, DOMINATION, LIES & DIVISION.

"OUR RIGHTEOUS GOALS JUSTIFY OUR MEANS."



5

## IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . . THEN WE WILL TRUST GOD MORE AND POLITICS LESS.

**WHO ARE THE MEEK** and why will they inherit the earth? First, we must understand Jesus' context and how His audience would have heard this statement. The word translated as "earth" can also be translated as "land," which is probably a better reading. Throughout the Bible, the relationship between God and His people was linked to the promised land. Faithfulness to God meant they could dwell in the land in peace, but unfaithfulness to God meant losing the land and being forced into exile.

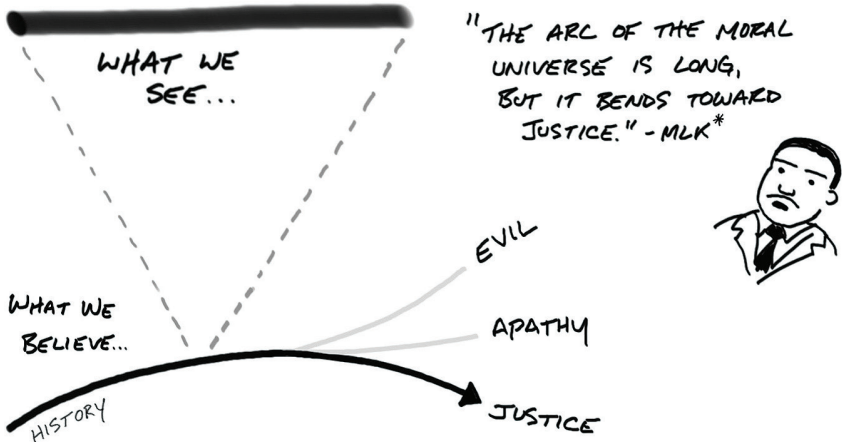
Centuries before Jesus, the Jews had returned from exile to the promised land, but they did not fully possess it. The Romans, who were pagans and idolaters, ruled over the land, which was unacceptable and humiliating to the Jews. In a sense, they were still in exile because they remained under the thumb of a foreign power.

This provoked a growing number of Israelites to become Zealots—violent revolutionaries. To the Romans, the Zealots were terrorists. To many Jews, they were freedom fighters. The Zealots believed in using the world’s violent ways to achieve what they believed were God’s goals. Their goal was to “inherit the land” by force. By announcing that the meek were blessed and would “inherit the land,” Jesus was condemning the tactics of the Zealots. He was proclaiming that it was not the powerful, violent, or angry who will accomplish God’s purposes, but the gentle, peaceful, and those who put their trust in Him rather than the sword.

This is an important reminder for those of us living in a divided land where everything has become politicized between “us” and “them.” Like the Zealots, we can be tempted to use the world’s ways—coercion, power, and fear—to “take back the land” for God. Instead, Jesus calls us to put such things aside and discover the power of God available through meekness. It is by trusting the Lord and the meekness of His ways, not through the sword of politics, that the land is won.



**READ MORE** Zechariah 4:7; Ephesians 6:10–20



\* MLK WAS QUOTING AN IDEA FROM A SERMON BY THEODORE PARKER.

6

## IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . . THEN A DESIRE FOR JUSTICE SHOULD BE AFFIRMED.

**"IT'S NOT FAIR!"** With three kids, I hear that a lot in my household. Although the phrase is often misapplied—a fact my wife and I point out often to our apparently persecuted progeny—it does not diminish the strength of their instinct for justice. We all carry a sense that the world is not what it ought to be, and we also have a profound desire for this wrongness to be made into rightness—or what the Bible calls “righteousness.”

The word is often used to describe a properly ordered

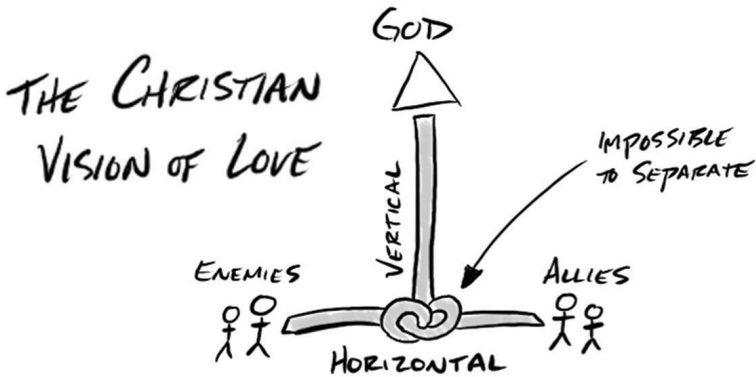
relationship between God and His people. Violating this relationship makes one unrighteous, while faithfulness to God results in a declaration of one's righteousness. The word, however, carries a much broader meaning. It can also apply to right relationships between people, between the government and the governed, and between humans and creation. That's why the same words often translated as "righteousness" in the Bible are also regularly translated in English as "justice."

Whether it is the shout for justice by a protestor or the call to be reconciled to God by a preacher, Jesus affirms our longing for justice: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice/righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." He equates the soul's desire for justice with the unrelenting physical desire for food and water. It is an inescapable aspect of our human condition, and He promises that it will be quenched. We can be assured that, in time, God will set all things right. The desire that God placed in our hearts will ultimately be satisfied. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."<sup>1</sup>



**READ MORE** Psalm 106:1–3; Luke 18:1–8





THE WAY WE SHOW OUR LOVE FOR GOD IS BY HOW WE TREAT THOSE CREATED IN HIS IMAGE.

ANYONE WHO USES THEIR DEVOTION TO GOD TO JUSTIFY THEIR MISTREATMENT OF OTHERS IS A LIAR (SEE 1 JOHN 4:20).

7

## IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . . THEN WE CANNOT SEPARATE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD FROM OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS.

**ONE OF THE RECURRING** themes of Jesus' sermon is the inseparable link between our relationship with God (the vertical) and our relationship with others (the horizontal). He repeatedly emphasizes that how we treat others will determine how our heavenly Father will treat us. This idea was as uncomfortable to hear then as it is now.

For example, He said “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Later, Jesus makes it clear that God’s forgiveness comes with a condition—we also must forgive others (see Matt. 6:14–15). Of course, this message isn’t unique to the Sermon on the Mount. It permeates the Old Testament law and the writings of the prophets, and it’s carried on by Jesus’ apostles.

Perhaps the reason we find this theme throughout Scripture is because the Lord knows our human inclination to separate the vertical and the horizontal. We desperately want to believe that we can stand blameless before God and utterly despise, mistreat, and condemn those created in His image. This is one of the most common and pernicious traits within religious communities. In fact, when the vertical and horizontal are completely severed, it’s not uncommon for religious people to use God to justify their mistreatment of others. This is precisely what religious leaders, the Pharisees, did in Jesus’ time. Those who are comfortable praising God while showing contempt for people look more like the Pharisees who killed Jesus than the disciples who followed Him.



**READ MORE** 1 John 4:7–21; Isaiah 58:1–14

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