Montague Pastoral Charge

February 1, 2026

1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12

Timothy Wisnicki

Have you ever hypnotized a chicken? It's fairly easy to do. I don't have any chickens, but a friend of mine showed me once. There are a few ways, but one of them is to hold the chicken firmly from above, with its head down on the ground, and draw a line straight in front of it, from its beak straight away from its face. If you've done it well and the chicken was watching, you can take your hands away and the chicken will lie there, perfectly still, for maybe 20 or 30 seconds. Sometimes longer, depending on the chicken. And then it will wake up and be a chicken again. Supposedly, the record length of time for chicken hypnosis was almost 4 hours.

Lifting aside the curtain for a moment, that's what, in the world of homiletics, or sermon-writing, we call an "introduction." A little story, a joke, some sort of interesting hook to set the stage for the body of the sermon, when you will delve into the biblical text. You want your introductory paragraph to be engaging and enticing, something to try to get people curious. And your introduction should always tie into the rest of the sermon, maybe introduce some kind of thread that people can follow all through the sermon. If your catchy introduction doesn't have anything to do with what happens afterwards, it's usually a sign of a half-baked sermon. For example, if you haven't got a clear idea of what your sermon is about, you might start, as I have just done, with a completely pointless story about hypnotizing chickens.

I mention that because what we just read – the Beatitudes or blessings – are the introduction to Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, and it's not at all clear, at least at first hearing, what they have to do with the rest of the sermon. The Sermon on the Mount is usually thought of as the summary of Jesus' thinking, it's the pure distillation of his teaching, the essence of this bold new way of life that he is presenting. "The ethics of the kingdom of heaven," it's been called. In the sermon to come, Jesus is going to give some of his most famous and most radical lessons: "When someone strikes you, turn the other cheek," "Do not lay up treasure on earth, but treasure in heaven." "Pray like this, 'Our Father, who art in heaven…'" "Do not be anxious…consider the lilies of the field." "Judge not, lest you be judged." "Ask, and it will be given to you, seek and you shall find…" "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

For all its beauty, the Sermon on the Mount is an incredibly demanding speech. Jesus is laying down a way of life which is far more difficult than what people were already trying to do, in keeping the Law of Moses. And he knows it. "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," he says. No longer is it OK not to murder people, it's as bad even to have angry thoughts in your mind. No longer is it OK not to commit adultery, it's just as bad even to *think* about someone lustfully. There are some people who think that the whole point of Jesus' sermon is precisely to set an impossible standard; to make us all realise that we are utterly incapable of doing what God demands, and so to simply to admit that we are sinners and resign ourselves to God's grace.

It's an interesting idea, and you can make a strong case for it. But ythat would make the Sermon on the Mount a gentler version of what the 18th century preacher Jonathan Edwards tried to do in one famous sermon, entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Edwards paints a

picture of God holding each of us over the pit of hell on a thread, and God would be perfectly able and justified in dropping us to our doom. And I quote: "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours…And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up." What makes it an even more frightening sermon is that they say Jonathan Edwards didn't shout or shake his fists or anything like that when he delivered that sermon, but got into the pulpit and quietly read it to his congregation. You have to admit, it probably had the desired effect: to terrify people so much and despair so much of their own worthiness that they would do nothing but throw themselves on the mercy of God.

Is that what Jesus is doing when he makes such high demands of his disciples? Setting a golden ethical standard that no one could ever meet, so that we all simply give up in the face of God's judgement? Well, maybe. Except that, if that's the case, it means that the introductory paragraph of Jesus' sermon has nothing to do with the point he was trying to make. He might as well have scrapped the Beatitudes and begun with a story about hypnotizing chickens. But Jesus is a far better preacher than myself or anyone else, so we have to assume that he is not doing the half-baked introduction thing. More likely his introduction is the key to the whole sermon. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied…"

Somehow, blessing is the key to the Sermon on the Mount; blessing is the constant thread that leads us through the warp and weft of all Jesus' teachings. Like some kind of funicular railway, blessing is the cable that leads up the mountain and down again. And not just this mountain, but all of Jesus' mountains: the mountain of transfiguration where we get a glimpse of Jesus' true identity, the mount of Olives where Jesus weeps in the garden, and the mount of Calvary, where the weak foolishness of his cross thwarts and shames the strong and wise. Blessing is the meaning of everything he does – somehow we must insist on that, because when Jesus sits down on the mountain and opens his mouth, "Blessed" is the first word from his lips.

And not just any blessing, but blessing upon the poor: those who suffer poverty of means and poverty of spirit. Blessing upon the humble, the persecuted, the grieving, upon those whose mercy is unseen, those whose purity is hidden in the heart and not worn in cleanliness of their clothing. Jesus pronounces the blessedness of those who, as he soon will be himself, are despised and rejected. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. They will inherit the earth; they will see God, because God has seen them.

That, I think, is the link between these blessings and the rest of the sermon – that's why the introduction works. There certainly is a lot of pressure in all these difficult demands he is about to make, and of course we need God's grace to do it, but the grace lying hidden behind all of them is that God is a god who notices. All good sermons are about God before they are about human beings, and Jesus' is no exception. It's not, first of all, about how we need to behave, it's about a God who *cares* so much how we behave. Read through the next few chapters and you'll find out how this God, who demands the very best we can do, is also the God who notices the

very least we do. “The Father who is in secret, who sees in secret,” as Jesus puts it. In his sermon, he speaks of a God who notices what we eat, when we fast and when we give, a God who notices not just what we do, but the thoughts of our hearts before we do them, who cares not just about violence and betrayal on the outside, but about anger and lust on the inside. He speaks of a God who cares about who we greet on the sidewalk and who we avert our eyes from. A God who knows what we need and hears the tiny prayer of the bedroom, who hears when we knock and opens when we ask, who notices the grief and the pain that we ourselves are too frightened to face. A God who notices what we think no one cares to see; above all, a God who notices the people who have gone unnoticed by the world. God notices them and God blesses them.

Now every good sermon should have a catchy introduction, but it should also answer a question. And the question that Jesus’ sermon seems to be answering is the question that’s as old as our Psalm today: “Who shall dwell on God’s holy mountain?” Really, that’s been the question ever since the Israelites looked up at the fire on top of Mount Sinai and Moses began climbing up there to speak for them. “Who shall abide on your holy mountain?” Today, Jesus tells us exactly who belongs on that holy mountain, because they are right there with him, being blessed.

Matthew tells us at the start of the chapter that Jesus left the crowds to go up onto the mountain, then his disciples followed him up there, and he began his sermon to them. But when you get to the end of the sermon, you find that the crowds have found their way up there, too. “When Jesus finished these sayings, the *crowds* were astonished at his teaching.” We’re never told when the rest of the people got up there, but they did. While Jesus is teaching, blessing and challenging, talking about this God who notices the meek, the meek themselves have all been scrabbling up the mountain. The poor, the beggars, the unemployed, the lonely, the widows, the people who didn’t have anywhere else to be that day – the whole crowd of them follows him up the mountain with the disciples. Jesus sees them, I’m sure, out of the corner of his eyes, and is glad. You can picture them coming, skulking behind the rocks, hiding behind bushes, trying to get within earshot. They’re very adept at hiding, but Jesus notices them.

Jesus takes the unnoticed and puts it on display, He takes the pure salt of the earth – trodden underfoot, unseen amidst the dirt, and puts it on the table. He takes the stubs of our little candles and puts them proudly on the lampstand. The flickering people whose lights had gone unnoticed by the world, he makes to be the light of the world. They have all come to him on his holy mountain, and they find out that they are blessed. Their blessing is the first thing he has to say, and out of that blessing – of knowing God’s favour – a new way of life, as radical as Jesus demands, is possible. Once we know how blessed we are, how God has noticed us, then these seemingly impossible demands are manageable, because we are doing them knowing that the strength of God’s blessing is working within us.

A good sermon should also have a conclusion to wrap things up. Something that catches that constant thread and ties in the end nicely. It’s always nice if you finish off with a reprise of the story you told in the introduction. As long as the introduction had something to do with the rest of the message. In our case, it didn’t, so we won’t say anything more about chickens. But in Jesus’ case, the conclusion does what it’s supposed to do. He tells us about a house built on a rock, which the winds can’t shake: the house of the blessed. But the real conclusion to the sermon is when Jesus leads the crowd back down the mountain and lives out the blessings he just spoke. The sermon concludes with a new community going back into the world with the amazing

news to share that God has noticed the unnoticed, and that, far as the curse is found – the curse of poverty, loss, persecution and all of it, God's blessing freely flows.