

“If you find yourself despairing over the deep cultural divides of our time, you will find hope and help in reading this book. Alistair Begg explores the call of Jesus to a life that is radically different from what we see in the world and sometimes in the church: a life in which we love those with whom we radically disagree, speak with gentleness and kindness, and focus first on dealing with our own sins rather than the sins of others. This book is full of the grace and wisdom of Jesus, that we desperately need today.”

**COLIN SMITH, Senior Pastor, The Orchard Evangelical Free Church,
Illinois; Founder, Open the Bible**

“Alistair Begg brings the message of Jesus into our world, clarifying its meaning and relevance without blunting any of its challenge. But Begg also sets that challenge in the bigger context of Christ’s message of grace. As a result, the challenge becomes an invitation—an invitation to a happy life.”

**TIM CHESTER, Crosslands Training; Author, *Enjoying God
and Truth We Can Touch***

“Here is a book to be read slowly—and more than once. This is not because it is difficult to understand (it isn’t), but because it is so important and good. Alistair Begg casts a brilliant light on the remarkable life into which Jesus calls his people. How does the life of a Christian actually show the reality of their salvation? How does it show their delight in values that are contrary to those of the world? Readers will find real answers. More than that, they will find themselves rejoicing in the privilege of being among those Jesus described as ‘blessed.’”

**JOHN WOODHOUSE, Retired Principal, Moore Theological College,
Sydney, Australia**

“Life in Jesus’ kingdom is life at its very best—liberating, exhilarating, and altogether satisfying. It is also countercultural and counterintuitive. The principles and priorities of the kingdom are wildly different from the values and virtues celebrated in contemporary society, and it’s all too easy for us to conform to the dominant culture rather than embrace our calling to live distinctively. With his typical blend of wisdom, warmth, and wit, Alistair Begg takes us back to Jesus’ teaching and shows what kingdom life looks like—and why it really is the best life.”

CAROLYN LACEY, Women's Worker, Woodgreen Evangelical Church, Worcester, UK; Author, *Say the Right Thing* and *Extraordinary Hospitality*

**The
Christian
Manifesto**

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Manifesto

Alistair
Begg

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Contents

1. An Invitation to Happiness	9
2. A Reversal of Values	17
3. An Exceptional Kind of Love	31
4. What the Golden Rule Really Means	43
5. Generous Forgiveness	55
6. A Life of Integrity	71
7. A Genuine Desire to Obey	83
8. The Heart of Our King	95
Bibliography	105

1 An Invitation to Happiness

How do you enjoy life at its very best?

Advertisers, of course, claim that they know the answer. Every commercial is seeking to make us feel discontent with how things are, in order to convince us that a better life will be found by buying what it's selling.

Politicians claim that they know the answer too. Every political address is asking us to trust that that person or party can put things right, and is trying to assure us that a better life will be found in voting for what they're offering.

At times, commercials and political speeches both point us back to a bygone era—the nostalgic impulse—when (if we squint, and forget the problems that existed at that time) everything was better: when our lives were purer or our hearts were lighter or our country was greater. At other times, they point us forward to the future and invite us to dream of how, if only we buy this or vote for that, all will soon be well.

So, amid the blizzard of offers and promises, to what or to whom are you looking to deliver life at its very best?

I want to take you to a description and a promise that you will never see in a commercial or hear from a politician. In this book, we're going to look at what can be helpfully seen as a "Christian manifesto." A manifesto is a public declaration or proclamation issued by a monarch or head of state, or by a representative of a company or organization. Here is a manifesto for the Christian life, straight from the lips of Jesus, as he gathered both his followers and those who were thinking about becoming his followers on "a level place"—on a plain—and taught them one of his most famous sermons, found in Luke's Gospel and known as the "Sermon on the Plain." It is a manifesto that is not oriented towards the political arena, but towards the relational and individual one.

At 725 words (in the ESV English translation), this manifesto is less than a third of the length of the average US presidential inaugural address. It is therefore, of course, not exhaustive—it does not cover every aspect of how Christ's people can live in a way that pleases him—but it is foundational. And in the first four words of his sermon, Jesus announces that what follows will be his answer to that question of where the best life is to be found:

"Blessed are you who..."

Kingdom Blessing

The word we translate "blessed" means "How happy!" "How fortunate!" or "How privileged!"¹ We all know people whom we look at and just think, "Your life is great. It's all fallen into place for you. You must be so happy. You

1 I owe this approach to the Sermon on the Plain, and the similar but longer Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, to my friend John Woodhouse.

are so fortunate, so privileged.” You’re probably picturing someone right now. Those we consider blessed tend to be the wealthy or the successful or the powerful or the popular. Jesus looks at *his disciples*—his followers—and says that, even though they are none of those things, it is *they* who are blessed.

Why? Simply because they are members of his kingdom. The kingdom of God is one of the great themes of Luke: Luke records Jesus speaking of the kingdom of God (by my count) thirty times. The kingdom was what he *announced*: “I must,” he told his disciples, “preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; *for I was sent for this purpose*” (Luke 4:43, emphasis mine). The kingdom was what he *revealed*, through his miracles; those who gathered to hear the Sermon on the Plain had come “to hear him and to be healed of their diseases” (6:18). These healings were a glimpse of what Jesus’ eternal kingdom is like: a place where all that is wrong in this life is put right. The kingdom was what he *opened*, in his death and resurrection; the thief on the cross next to the Lord’s, realizing who Jesus was and what he ruled, asked him to remember him “when you come into your kingdom” (23:42). It is an eternal kingdom, which will one day arrive in all its fullness but which for now exists in this world wherever its subjects are to be found (17:20-21).

And life in the kingdom of God was what Jesus *described* in the Sermon on the Plain: “Blessed are you who are poor,” he began, “for yours is the kingdom of God.” We shall return to this line in the next chapter, but Jesus is linking the life of true blessing with kingdom membership. Here is life as it is designed to be lived and enjoyed.

Here, as we shall see as Jesus continues to speak, is satisfaction, laughter, and joy—the full reality of what the advertisers and the politicians are offering us in their commercials and their manifestos.

An Invitation

The Sermon on the Plain, then, is Jesus' invitation to you to experience life at its very best. It is his description of what life in his kingdom—a kingdom where all that is wrong is being put right—looks like as we live in this world.

To be clear, the Lord is not describing how we *come into* the kingdom but how we *live in* the kingdom. As the great Reformer Martin Luther said of this passage, “Christ is saying nothing in this sermon about how we become Christians, but only about the works and fruit that no one can do unless he [or she] already is a Christian and in a state of grace.”² These chapters, then, do not lay out a mechanism whereby someone becomes a Christian but the lifestyle of someone who is already a Christian. As Jesus told his disciples later in the Gospel of Luke, “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Luke 18:17). A place in Jesus' eternal kingdom, with its satisfaction and laughter and joy, is something we receive from his hands, not something we have to gain or grasp with ours. Like children, we come to him and accept it as a gift, rather than bringing all we have done and achieved as a payment. But having come and received the kingdom from him, here, in this sermon, is an outline of what kingdom life today

2 *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 21 (Concordia, 1958), p291.

is like. It is not exhaustive, but it is transformational. It shows us how kingdom membership transforms us from the inside out.

A Challenge

What we shall hear Jesus saying to us is radical—how faith in him compels and equips us to live out a new lifestyle that is often countercultural and counterintuitive. This makes the Sermon on the Plain not only an invitation but also a challenge. The hallmarks and priorities of Jesus' kingdom are different from this world's—and so its citizens will be different too. Jesus' call is deep, and it is wide, and it calls us to turn everything we naturally think upside down. Here we shall discover what the marks of a genuine Christian are. No one who is truly a member of Jesus' kingdom is left unchanged by that membership. Jesus says, *I want you to be happy about different things from what other people are happy about, and sad about things that other people don't routinely get sad about. I want you to have as your ambition something that the world regards as weak and ineffectual. I want you to treat people in a way that makes no sense to them and, at times, not much sense to you. I want you to have a different way of evaluating your decisions and your reactions and your life. I want you to be different.*

Jesus would not long have been employed by a 21st-century advertising agency, for he does not pretend that answering his call will be easy. He would not get far as a 21st-century politician either, for he does not flatter his hearers or compromise on his standards. But Jesus is neither an advertiser nor a politician; he was, and is, the eternal King, and he is not selling a product nor

stumping for votes but announcing and describing his kingdom.

This is why I find this passage as hard as virtually any other. This manifesto is a description of the life we were all made for, but it is a challenge to be different from how I naturally am and how the world around me operates.

Make a Difference

This call to enjoy the blessing of life in Jesus' kingdom is, then, a call to be different. This is why it is the key to making a real difference in this world. Advertisers may make good money, and politicians may win fleeting power, but members of Jesus' kingdom can make a difference for eternity. For, to the extent that we are prepared to take seriously the standards and values of Jesus' kingdom and to display them as we live our lives, we will offer to the world around us an alternative and far better way to live than one that chases what the latest advert is selling or politician is offering. We will offer what John Stott referred to as "a Christian counterculture"³: a life that is harder and more uncomfortable and yet one that is truly satisfying and joyful and eternal.

The apostle Peter was one of those who was sitting and listening on that plain 2,000 years ago, as Jesus "lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, 'Blessed are you who...'" (Luke 6:20). Years later, Peter would describe members of Jesus' kingdom by reaching back to God's description of his Old Testament people:

3 *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian Counter-Culture in The Bible Speaks Today* series (IVP Academic, 1978).

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God’s] own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Peter is saying, *You need to know what you are—you’re aliens and you’re strangers; and so, as people who do not belong in this world, don’t stop battling against everything, including your desires, that makes you want to live just like everyone else in this world. It’s only as you live differently from this world that those around you (though they may fling accusations and derision at you) may actually come to see God’s goodness through you, and give him glory when Jesus returns* (v 11-12, my paraphrase).

The best thing we have to offer those around us is the kingdom of Jesus, and the way to earn the right to speak to them about that kingdom is to show them that kingdom. The biggest reason for the ineffectiveness of contemporary Christianity is a failure to take seriously the radical difference that Jesus calls for as we follow him as King. The 21st-century Western evangelical church has too often given in to the temptation to soft-pedal Jesus’ words—to find caveats and loopholes in what he says—in order to offer the world something that sounds more palatable and less demanding. We have spent decades congratulating ourselves for being able to go among our non-Christian friends and say, “You know what? We’re just the same as you.” And they’ve said, “You know what? I think you’re absolutely right!” But if there is nothing different to be

seen in the church, people will not see why they should consider listening to the church.

We are not called to be like the world, and the world does not need us to be like the world. We have something better to say because we have someone better to follow. That means the call of Christ to you and me is both greatly exciting and deeply challenging. The call is not to be comfortable but to be Christ-like—to discover the surprising means of experiencing real blessing, and in doing so to point others the way to it too.

In this book, then, as we listen to Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, we shall hear a manifesto describing what genuine Christianity looks like. It is upside down and right way up. It is surprising and wonderful. It is challenging and liberating. It is life at its very best—a blessed life, a kingdom life.