

Sermon Series: Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5
Sermon: Blessed are Who?

Matthew 5:1-10

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Sermon:

Blessed are the Who? (Owls, The WHO, Dr. Who, Whoville).

I felt very much that the beatitudes, although spoken two thousand years ago, still have some things to say to us. Now, most of us have heard these words before. Or at least they are familiar. Sometimes they are quoted in poems, or in songs, or in other literature. Simon and Garfunkel quoted several of the beatitudes in many of their songs. They are familiar words to our ears. And to be honest, I think that takes away a little bit from their shock value. I think that the first time they were spoken, it caused a little stir in the community. It got the attention of those who were listening. This was Jesus’ sermon on the Mount. In all of the Gospels, we have Jesus preaching once. One sermon. In Matthew, it’s a sermon on a mount, Luke calls it the sermon on the plain, so maybe it’s on a plateau on a mountain, we are not sure, but in any case, we have it recorded that Jesus just preached once. Granted, he told stories throughout his ministry, parables and teaching moments, but this was the biggie. The Superbowl of his sermons. And this sermon, if you read it straight through, is about 15 minutes in length. Tops. But from these few words, the countless hours, days, and years of interpretation is a mystery. With the sermon on the Mount (or plains), Jesus sets the stage for Christian discipleship and Christian living. And he opens the sermon with a series of statements about blessings, and namely, who gets them. Blessed are these, because of this. Matthew has eight of them. And the people whom Jesus says are blessed are not the people that you would ever consider blessed. Here’s the shock value. Blessed are the people at the bottom. And you would think that these people are not blessed. Not by a long shot. Let’s take a look at each of these Beatitudes, each in turn. All of these could be their own sermons in and of themselves, but we will give just a little highlight here.

Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Now, I would wonder why someone who is poor in Spirit would be considered a positive. Wouldn’t the kingdom belong to those who are rich in spirit? In essence, the poor in Spirit refers to those who understand that they don’t understand it all. What does it mean to be poor in spirit? Even if your mind does not have a ready definition, your heart knows. To be poor in spirit is to be empty inside; to know the anguish and heartache of not having what seems to be necessary for spiritual survival; to feel keenly the bankruptcy of our answers and our adequacy; to feel helpless before the wrong in our world and in our heart. Jesus said these words to a crowd gathered on a mountain. If you have been there, you know that it is one of the most beautiful places on earth. A sloping field of grass and flowers overlooking the deep blue of the Sea of Galilee, but somehow the natural beauty was not enough to counter the spiritual poverty

of those Jesus addressed. When he spoke of the poor in spirit, he knew he was not speaking of a hypothetical person somewhere in the world. Jesus was speaking to many before him for whom the beauty did not bring adequate solace. The crowds gathered and listened because they knew they were the poor in spirit. We know emptiness, the bankruptcy of our answers and adequacy, helplessness before the wrong in our world and heart. Are there any poor in spirit here today? If the poor in spirit did not qualify for the Kingdom, then the kingdom would be empty.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. In this one, I like Luke's version better, "Those who weep will laugh." We all have something in our life that we mourn. We might mourn the loss of a loved one. We might mourn the loss of home or security. We might mourn the loss of opportunities gone by, or mourn our shameful acts committed. We might mourn the loss of dignity and respect. We might mourn days since passed. But whatever it is we mourn, God can return us to laughter. Return us to comfort. Some of us have holes in our heart from the mourning we have experienced. Who am I kidding, some of us have huge caverns. But it is God who makes the heart. And while I don't believe that God fills in the holes that are created by loss, He does repair the heart so that, while we never forget, we can return to laughter and comfort once again. Blessed are those who mourn, for by mourning, you have realized the power of love and what a gift of life we have.

Blessed are meek, for they will inherit the earth. This one is the trickiest in my book. Blessed are the meek? When I think of meek, I think of those who are mousy. Spineless. Chicken. Blessed are the cowards who don't stand up to anything. Now, that's not exactly what it means. The opposite of meek is not the strong and worthy as we sometimes think, but the opposite of meek is arrogance. Blessed are those who are not arrogant. Those with quiet humility. Jesus was speaking to people who didn't have a say in the world around them. Who is loved more? The arrogant or the humble? Who inherits the world? Those with humility. My favorite story about humility comes from Mohammad Ali. He was in his prime, and he just about to take off in an airplane for a fight across the country, and the stewardess came by and reminded him to fasten his seatbelt. He came back brashly, "Superman don't need no seat belt." The stewardess quickly came back, "Superman don't need no plane, either." Ali fastened his belt. In the end, the meek will win.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. What do you hunger after? What do you thirst for? If you desire spiritual blessings, you will find them. If you desire material things, you may or may not get them, and if you do, they may not fulfill your deepest desires anyway. You know this, happiness isn't found in things, but happiness is found in something to do, someone to love and something to hope for. You want a happy person? I'll repeat that again, a happy person has something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for. I didn't make that up, someone else did. I'd tell you who, but I've seen it quoted with different names. If you go after righteousness, you will find happiness. What a blessing!

The next ones are no-brainers. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. You reap what you sow. You want mercy? Be merciful. You want to be likable? Like other people. You want to be loved? Show love. You want a friend? Be a friend. When it comes to virtues, you get back what you give.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Pure of heart. What are your motives for what you do? Are you kind for the sake of being kind, or is it because you want something? Do you give just for the tax incentives? A while back, there was the National Conference of Undertakers and Morticians. They have conventions as well. The Commencement address was entitled, "How to Look Sad at a Ten Thousand Dollar Funeral". Nothing against morticians, of course, but look at your motives for your actions. The pure heart can

see God. Bad motives block our vision.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. This one gets misused quite a bit. It is not a call to eradicate war. One of the language issues that I have today is the question, “Are you for the war, or against the war.” Of anyone I know, I can’t think of anyone who is ever pro-war. We should never be pro-war. But sometimes war is the only recourse we have to face unchecked aggression, tyranny, injustice and genocide. We are never pro-war, but we should and will protect ourselves and others. Don’t equate peacemakers with pacifism. But peacemakers are those who long for peace. They are the people who live at peace with others. In Matthew’s community, there were factions within the population. Different groups trying to coexist together. Fights were common. Arguments heard. But blessed are the peacemakers within our towns and villages.

And the last Beatitude shares with us what Matthew’s community was going through, Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Have you ever done something right, and your reward was a slap in the face? Maybe not literally, but when you did the right thing, you got nothing but grief and trouble and misery? Do the right thing anyway. Blessed are those who are righteous, no matter the cost.

In closing, let me give you this thought. Every time I hear someone speak of the beatitudes, the emphasis is on the first part of each line. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, on the meek, on those who hunger for thirst and righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the pacemakers, the persecuted. The emphasis is always on what we are to be. But today, I want us to look at the second part of the line, the payoff, if you will, of what we are to be. And as I look at the second part, it hits me that these are the things for which we should be striving to achieve in this world. We are to strive for the kingdom of heaven, for comfort, for laughter, for fulfilment, for mercy, to see God, to be called a son of God, a daughter of God. As I look at what I want out of this world, it should be those things. I should want to be called a son of God. I should want to find mercy, I want to find fulfillment. And I learn that Jesus’ words are as true as they were 2,000 years ago upon that hillside. Blessed are those who look for such things. For they will be truly happy. Amen.