

Sunday, March 20, 2022

The Mountain Message

(Series: "The Gospel According to Peter")
(Message Three)
(Matthew 5:1-12)

Scripture:

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them. He said:

³Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Message:

She had every reason to be bitter...

Although a unique talent, she went unrecognized for years. Born Jewish in Odessa, Ukraine, prestigious opera circles repeatedly rejected her for parts she easily qualified for. Only after she won the hearts of Europeans did people embrace her stateside.

Her personal life was marked by challenge. She had two children. Her daughter was profoundly deaf and had MS. Her son was severely mentally disabled. To escape the pressures of New York, she purchased a home on Martha's Vineyard. Two days before moving in, it was burned to the ground.

Personal setbacks and professional rejection often breed resentment. But her friends called her, *Bubbles*. Belle Miriam Silverman became a nationally

acclaimed opera singer and then Director of the New York City Opera. She died at age 78 after a long battle with lung cancer. We know her best as Beverly Sills.

She personified her nickname: *"I choose to be cheerful. Despite the challenges, I have been blessed..."*

He had every reason to be miserable.

He came from a palace where he was loved. He could change the course of history; he had everything. And then suddenly, he had nothing. His bed was usually the hard earth. He couldn't afford basic transportation; he was dependent on others.

The "palace" had been spotless; he was now exposed to filth. He had been revered, now he was ridiculed. Some called him a lunatic; some tried to kill him; his family tried to keep him home.

He was accused of crimes he didn't commit. The jury was rigged. The witnesses lied. The judge bowed to political pressure. He was killed and placed in a borrowed grave.

But children embraced him. Crowds listened when he spoke. Why? Because he exuded joy. He was joyful even when he was poor, betrayed, and nailed to a tree.

Jesus' joy refused to bend against the wind of hard times, held its ground against pain and suffering, and was deeply rooted in the bedrock of eternity.

Today we're looking at nine statements Jesus makes in the introduction of his most famous sermon - his mountain message, found here in Matthew 5-7 (and Luke 6).

Scripture, the Word of God, requires time and careful listening. Scripture, Jesus' teaching, is our basic grammar for becoming fluent in Kingdom-of-God language; it is the language of the citizens of the Kingdom.

The first eight statements are designed to describe kingdom members in general (theirs, they, those...); the ninth gets personal – for his disciples specially, but also for you and I who will usher God's Kingdom into this world – *"Blessed are you..."* Jesus sets the pattern here for the rest of his message (and teaching) – from general to specific; from crowd, to community, to the core.

TEACHING

Jesus is a teacher, par excellence; but he is not first-of-all, a teacher. Jesus is first, and foremost, *God-with-us* (**Matthew 1:23**); he is through and

through God and through and through a human being like us; he is Lord!
Savior! King!

We should never diminish Jesus to one dimension; nor should we minimize his teaching ministry: he was a teacher among teachers, a rabbi with *shmeika* (authority). If we get this “introduction” right, we’ll have acquired an accurate foundation from which to understand virtually everything Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of God.

These Beatitudes are ideally suited for memorization...

They are like scriptural equivalent to the famous *McGuffey’s Reader* (from which many of our grandparents learned the basics of the English language.) The Beatitudes are the **primer**, the *McGuffey’s Reader*, in the basics of **Kingdom living**.

Almost everything Jesus teaches is framed in these statements – like they were in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Embracing these Beatitudes will make an enormous difference in the way we conduct ourselves in our everyday lives.

The bottom line of Kingdom living is here. Will we live well or poorly? By truth or falsehood?

We need to take our time, listening carefully to these words, before we rush on to something else or assume we know Jesus’ teaching inside and out (that assumption is a major reason why Christians today spend so little time in the Scriptures.) Jesus is here instructing us in what it is like to live in a world where **God rules**.

Jesus came to teach what is involved in a world ruled by God (not a king, emperor or general). **He picked a great word to use, to start each sentence: blessed.**

Eugene Peterson says, “*He is teaching us not to live in reaction to our sin and guilt, not in response to people stronger than we, not in desperation by any means at hand, not to survive in a sea of cynicism and malice, and certainly not to live egocentrically with the self as center and master...*”

He is training our heart, mind and emotions to live in the realities inherent in the Kingdom of God. He is training us to live by faith, love, and grace - words so shopworn and twisted by our world they need to be recontextualized in the Kingdom of God.

Sadly, the word *blessed* is often translated as **happy** (another word twisted by our world). Happy doesn’t do “blessed” justice. Blessed means, “*consecrated, exalted, lauded, sanctioned, endorsed, commended.*”

Our western tendencies want to go right to *happy* (often a self-gratifying word). Scripture's "blessed" is a description and a prescription for Christ's Kingdom community – again, it is in the plural (until we get to the ninth one). As we learn to live in this Kingdom-of-God world, we experience his ***blessedness***.

There is a *blessedness* in being part of a great movement, **suffering** for a great cause, **journeying** with others on a great adventure...even in the middle of **trials** and **challenges**.

The word Jesus used, *blessed*, soon spread through the surrounding villages, cities, and nations; it crossed oceans; it has been heard nearly everywhere. Some have listened. Some carefully. Some believe it. Some live it.

BLESSING

The word "blessed" is familiar to us, and often used flippantly. Few people comprehend the **revolutionary impact** of this word when Jesus used it.

Using our imagination, we can go back to the first century and immerse ourselves in what we know of the culture, economy, social structure, and daily life. In Jesus' day, the word "blessed" was a strange one.

Today, Americans assume **happiness** (how we often translate and understand "blessed") is our (everyone's) **right**. (Our Declaration of Independence promises us the "pursuit of happiness" is an inalienable right!) We surround ourselves with happy faces; we feel the necessity to put one on. Advertisements have people smiling; politicians, in addition to kissing babies, always smile (even when it's inappropriate), a newborn smiling is worth recording and posting. It's a mark of decency – even if we have to fake it. It's so American!

The ancient world was not like that (nor is much of the world today). In Jesus' day, only the **gods** could expect to be **happy**, not mere mortals. People were expected to pursue **virtue, courage**, excellence, and goodness. With so much suffering, loss and tragedy in the world, **happiness** was simply **not** on the list for consideration (Tragedy was the most common drama in the theatre of Jesus' day).

It was important to live **bravely**, to live graciously, to leave an **impact** on the world; it was not important to be happy. (How things have changed!) In fact, if by some chance you were happy, you actually hid the fact. The gods might notice and spitefully rob you of your brief happiness because they resented you infringing on their turf.

People didn't get divorced, leave a job, move, go to therapy, drink excessively, or shop until they dropped because they were unhappy. Happiness was not a motivating factor or a goal to be achieved.

Then an obscure group of people in a remote corner of civilization started sharing a sense of **joy**, excitement, and **purpose**. Their word for it was *blessed*. They used it a lot. They used it in their story of the world's creation four times; they used it in their prayers and hymns; talked about being blessed by God ("*Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe...*") and blessing one another.

God's people focused on being a blessing for all nations - just as God promised to bless their father Abraham (**Genesis 12:1-3** - "*I will make you a great nation and I will bless you...and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and all the people of the earth will be blessed through you.*")

Most people considered this "blessed" living to be very odd; so, the world largely ignored it.

In Hebrew, there are two words that can be translated into English as "Blessed." (In the Greek, there are two words that parallel two Hebrew words.) It's important to understand the differences:

First, the Greek word, *eulogeo*, parallels the Hebrew word, *bereka*. This word is used in **praying** when the pray-er **asks** God for something (i.e., for a blessing) that a person or community needs or longs for, e.g., Lord, bless Bob's surgery, bless the sick, bless the missionaries, or bless the people in Ukraine...

This is not the word used in the Beatitudes, but it does underscore when we are asking for God's *blessing*, we're not simply asking God to make us *happy*. We are asking God to respond in a certain way...that honors our praying.

Second, the Greek word, *makarios*, parallels the Hebrew, *asir*. These words do not mean a wish or hope of a future blessing. They affirm a quality of **spirituality** and **maturity** that is already present: "Mr./Ms. So-and-so is a bless-ed person in our church" (i.e., they already are). This is the term Jesus uses here.

Knowing the word Jesus uses here makes a significant difference.

These beatitudes are not saying, "*Blessed are people who do X **because** then they will receive Y.*" (you can fill in X and Y). That is, this is not an attempt to promote a certain type of behavior; this is not a cause-and-effect scenario...if you do this, then this will happen.

Instead, they must be read with the sense, "*Look at the authentic spiritual life and **joy** of the people who are **part** of the Kingdom. They have (or will receive) X.*"

Ken Bailey clarifies this using the following example: “*Bless-ed is the wonderful daughter of Mr. Jones because she will inherit the Jones’ farm.*” Note the woman is already the wonderful daughter of Mr. Jones. She does not have to earn *daughter status* nor is she working to earn the *farm by being wonderful*. But a key element in her joy and security is that one day the family farm will be hers. The first part affirms current **reality**; the second part affirms a **certain future** that allows her to lead a blessed (joy filled) life already now.

Jesus affirms the joy we receive when we love and share in the kingdom of God.

Christians believe they are blessed today and will [also] be blessed in the future. Many followers of Jesus already acknowledge their blessing. Sadly, some have not; for many the “blessing” dominates their life; for others, not so much. Many have been caught up in the discontent of our world and became resentful. Covetousness and misery are widespread in our culture and in the church.

We put on happy faces, use cosmetics to mask our misery, and surround ourselves with smiling *celebrities* to divert attention from our self-pity. At the same time, many are ashamed of being blessed. They don’t like to talk about it so people don’t see them as prideful (it is true, the focus of our talking needs to stay on God).

The ancients were afraid to **display** their *happiness* for fear the gods would punish them; we seem afraid to display our *blessedness* for fear our friends will disapprove. The ancients never expected to be happy and were surprised by little episodes of it; we expect to be happy all the time and are resentful when we are not.

Jesus says, “*Blessed are you...*” He said it over and over again. His disciples repeated it. Christians continue to repeat it and ultimately live into it. As that happens, we and the church are changed; our world is transformed. The change pivots on Christ’s word and blessing. Jesus expects us to live out our “blessedness” as we **witness** his presence and power in our world. And His kingdom comes.

LIVING

While many people are convinced happiness is possible for everyone, they continue to ignore the One who can actually bless us – it makes little sense.

People strive for what Christ has to offer but ignore his instructions; they accept his promises while rejecting the life he lays out to be lived.

God wills to bless us. Jesus leads with this word over and over again; he never lets us lose touch with the basic goodness, this blessedness, that he wills for us.

Then he points out eight ways by which we enter and illustrate this blessedness:

1. *Blessed are the poor in Spirit.* We empty ourselves of **pride** so we can be filled with *God's Spirit*. With less of us, there is **more** of **God** and his rule.
2. *Blessed are those who mourn.* We share the **sufferings** of others rather than avoid them. When we **lose** what is most dear to us, we can be **embraced** by One who is most dear to us.
3. *Blessed are the meek.* When hone our passions into gentleness and become **content** with who we are, we become proud owners of everything that can't be **bought**.
4. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.* We reject the **appetites** of a consumer society and cultivate deep personal **relationships** with God and others.
5. *Blessed are the merciful.* We refuse to react to the wrongs and troubles in the world by condemning and blaming, but instead we involve ourselves in compassionate **servicing**; in our **caring** we embrace his caring.
6. *Blessed are the pure in heart.* We don't allow ourselves to be **distracted** and dissipated in gossip and trivia; we see the **heart** God sees.
7. *Blessed are the peacemakers:* we decide to look at others, whatever their position, whoever they are, not as rivals to beat out but as brothers and sisters to **love** into **wholeness**, welcoming them into God's family with us.
8. *Blessed are the persecuted.* We reject the comfortable conformism of fitting into whatever the **majority** is doing, Persecution **brands** us as members of God's Kingdom.

Jesus teaches and teaches. But if we don't stop and listen, we will not learn who we are and how we live in God's Kingdom.

God blesses and blesses. God graciously defines who we are now as he describes who we will be as we live into and out of the blessings that **mark** the citizens of His **Kingdom**.

Sadly, the *invitations* involved for blessing and Kingdom membership are despised and rejected by men and women who think they will interfere with their happiness. They continue happiness—but find it alludes them. They (we?) need to take another look at the depth of joy Jesus offers.

The follower of Jesus who accepts and embraces the marks of His Kingdom, to the surprise of the world, becomes complete, satisfied, and **fulfilled**. We are prepared for **Kingdom living** and for our **home going**.

The pastor visited him in the hospital a few days before he died. As he entered the room, he noticed an empty chair beside the man's bed. He asked if someone had been there to visit. The patient smiled, "I imagine Jesus in that chair, and we talk." The pastor looked puzzled, so the man explained. "Years ago, a man told me that following Jesus was a lot like talking to a good friend. So every day I pull up a chair, invite Jesus to have a seat, we talk, we listen. I learn.

A few days later the patient's daughter called to say her father had died.

"He seemed so content," she said, "that I left him in his room alone for a few hours. When I came back, he had died. It was strange, though. His head wasn't resting on the pillow, it was on the empty chair by the bed."

Jesus' teaching is unlike any other teaching. It is **counter cultural** and **counter intuitive**. Because of Jesus, we choose to be cheerful; to *bubble* even in a world of tragedy; to show the world what it means to live Blessed!

*Blessed are those who live today as **citizens** of His Kingdom,
for they will find deep **joy** and eternal **rest**.*

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