

The Beatitudes: The Most Blessed Teaching
Psalm 15 and Matthew 4:23-5:11
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The Beatitudes are some of the most recognizable words ever written, not only in the Bible, but in all of Western literature. But, that familiarity can be an obstacle to their interpretation. These words have been spoken and written about so often that we can miss what Jesus was saying, totally failing to grasp his meaning or the radical nature of the kingdom he was proclaiming.

For us to hear these words anew, to feel the impact as Jesus' first century audience would have felt them, we need to do a little homework. Let's look first at what Scripture tells us about the setting and context of Jesus' famous sermon. As we saw last week, after his baptism and wilderness testing, Jesus began his public ministry by preaching the kingdom of heaven and assembling his team of disciples. His ministry then begins to expand to include teaching and healing which are signs pointing to God's new reign. Jesus is demonstrating in word and action what life in God's kingdom is like. Where God's reign is in effect, health of body, mind, soul and spirit is restored, relationships are made whole, and dignity is renewed.

For people who lived under the thumb of Rome's oppression, this was very good news indeed, and before long reports of Jesus spread and the crowds around him grew. People started coming from greater and greater distances to see what all the fuss was about. On this particular occasion, a huge crowd had assembled, and like any good preacher, Jesus wasn't about to let this opportunity pass by.

Matthew makes a point of telling us that Jesus "saw" the crowd, meaning that he looked on this vast array of men and women with what we've come to call "people eyes." He saw their struggles and sorrows and sin. He saw their hurts and needs and fears. No one cared about them; they were like sheep without a shepherd, and Jesus hastened to their rescue.

Matthew sets this scene on a mountain, unlike Luke who sets a similar sermon in his gospel on a grassy plain. Surely we've gotten to know Matthew well enough by now that this choice of setting doesn't come as a surprise. The unnamed mountain serves as a symbol for a place of momentous encounter, a place of revelation. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, significant events in Jesus' life happen on mountains: the third temptation, the Transfiguration, the

commissioning of the disciples after the resurrection. So, Jesus' ascent at this moment signals that a crucial event is about to unfold. This setting also evokes images of Jesus as the new Moses, as we've seen repeatedly from Matthew.

That Jesus sits down to teach is also symbolic. This classic posture of a Jewish teacher conveys solemn authority. Thus, Matthew pictures Jesus as an authoritative teacher atop a new Mount Sinai teaching the new law of the kingdom of heaven. We know that Jesus' words were intended for all those present, because the crowds are specifically described at the end of the Sermon on the Mount as being "astounded" by Jesus' teaching. Matthew is inviting us to image Jesus speaking to an audience arranged in two groups: the disciples are closest to him, and then the crowds behind them. Jesus is symbolically speaking through the disciples to the world, anticipating the mission of the church to teach all the nations "to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:20)

It's easy to imagine why the crowds would be hanging on every word. They have witnessed or experienced first-hand the miracles Jesus performed, and the relief, hope and healing that resulted had them ready and eager to hear Jesus speak. But, we don't experience miracles in quite the same way that this first century crowd did, which begs the question, why do *we* need to sit at Jesus feet and hear this sermon?

The great 19th century preacher, Charles Spurgeon, wrote that "the Beatitudes derive much of their weight from the wisdom and glory of [the One] who pronounced them....His every word [is] encompassed with infinite power." Dallas Willard, in his seminal work, *The Divine Conspiracy*, adds that "Our commitment to Jesus can stand on no other foundation than a recognition that he is the one who knows the truth about our lives and our universe. It is not possible to trust Jesus, or anyone else, in matters where we do not believe him to be competent. We cannot pray for his help and rely on his collaboration in dealing with real-life matters [that] we suspect might defeat his knowledge or abilities." Willard goes on to point out that Jesus was the best informed and most intelligent person of all, the smartest person who has ever lived.

Think about that. How often, when you consider Jesus' qualities or attributes, does "smartest man of all time" make the list? This One who sits on the mountainside is the ultimate scientist, craftsman and artist; the One who made all of created reality and keeps it working, literally "holding all things together" as Colossians says. Today we marvel at humanity's ability to build computer chips, put humans on a space station, decode DNA, and track evolutionary changes, but

all the smarts in the world are still only working with the raw materials God has handed us. So, when Jesus offers to tell us about reality, to tell us who we are and how this world is designed to work, it makes imminent sense to listen.

We study these Beatitudes, then, because Jesus is the greatest truth-teller we will ever know, and we need and want to know the truth about ourselves and our lives. We also study them because nothing shows us the absolute need of new birth as much as the Sermon on the Mount. As I mentioned last week, these Beatitudes crush us to the ground. They show us our utter helplessness. And it is precisely in discovering our helplessness that we can then be helped and filled and empowered by Christ through the Holy Spirit. As long as we come to Christ full of ourselves, sure of what we can do and what we have to offer, we will never know the deep freedom, joy and peace that are hallmarks of life in the Kingdom of God.

Another reason to spend time with the Beatitudes is that the more we live and put into practice the Sermon on the Mount, the more we will experience a truly blessed life. The OT ends in Malachi with the threat of judgment and curse. Isn't it interesting, and I would add, not coincidental, that Jesus' ministry begins with blessing? Everywhere that God's kingdom is lived and realized, blessing is the inevitable result. But, not surprisingly, "blessing" looks and acts differently in God's kingdom than in our self-made kingdoms.

Lastly, we live and practice the beatitudes and become Kingdom people, because it is the best means of evangelism the church has. I have read ten books preparing for our 4-month immersion in the Sermon on the Mount, and one of the striking things among this vastly different array of authors and time periods and theological perspective is that nearly every one of them asks this question in some form: Why aren't people compelled by the church anymore? Why are we having less and less impact on our culture? Why are Christians indistinguishable from the world? What would it mean for Christians to live as if we really believed what Jesus said is true?

We cannot hear the voice of Jesus calling us and teaching us without reckoning seriously with this question. We cannot escape the fact that for many Christians, instead of life and faith being intertwined and inviolably connected, there is a disconnect between life and faith, and as Dallas Willard observes, in many of our churches Jesus the teacher is absent. This is not the fault of a wicked world, but is caused largely because the church has been preaching the gospel of sin management rather than the good news of the Kingdom of God. It's the gospel of sin management that reduces both God's commandments and the Sermon on the

Mount to a list of ethical standards, ideals that are beautiful, perhaps, but hopelessly impossible to attain.

If you hear nothing else today, hear this: the Sermon on the Mount is not an idealized ethical treatise. It is Jesus' teaching on how we are to actually live in the reality of God's kingdom that is present and available to us here and now. In order to live in that kingdom, each of us needs to be and become a certain kind of person, and that's what the Beatitudes describe. As we practice Jesus' teaching, the Holy Spirit works in us to produce the godly character that enables us to be kingdom people. It is a work that God does in us and that we cooperate with by hearing and heeding what Jesus says.

The Sermon on the Mount was and is seditious. It will turn on its head all the conventional wisdom about what it means to be a good person and what it means to have a good life. What is true for those who live in the power of the kingdom of heaven is a flat reversal of what is considered to be true in the culture at large. The Beatitudes declare that the poor in spirit, the meek and the peacemakers are the ones who are truly blessed. We live in a world, however, that pronounces the benediction of happiness over the self-sufficient, the assertive, and the powerful. The people who the world sees as pitiful—the mournful and the persecuted, for instance—are the very people Jesus claims really know joy.

The use of verb tenses in the initial eight beatitudes is theologically significant. Each one begins in the present tense: "Blessed are....", meaning that those who are blessed are joyful *now* in the present. In six of the beatitudes, however, the specific reason why they are blessed lies in the future: "they will be comforted or inherit the earth" and so on. What this means is that as the church, we are a joyful people, but the source of our joy is not in having easy lives in a happy world or trusting that things are getting better every day. Instead, we are joyful because our trust is in God and God's kingdom.

We are called as disciples to see life in two frames of reference. First, we see what everyone else sees—the world of human history, a world of struggle in which the church works and serves and lives out its mission. Based on the evidence from this world alone, there is little reason for hope or joy. War follows war, might makes right and the innocent suffer every day.

But, the church also possesses a second frame of reference. We see what others do not see, that God is at work in this world even today and will surely bring all creation to a time of peace and rejoicing. This hoped for time is the kingdom of

God. For the world, the kingdom is a sure future. For the faithful, the kingdom is a present reality which gives us strength and encouragement to do our work.

If the kingdom of God is an empty promise, then a life of seeking justice and showing mercy is a fool's illusion. Only the promised kingdom validates a life of hopeful service. That's why it is so critical that we can trust that Jesus knows what he's talking about. Based on the Sermon on the Mount, we can say with certainty that his promise of God's kingdom is sure. Therefore, we are joyful and blessed and happy when we put our lives on the line, trusting in his promise. Amen.