

“Blessed”

Proverbs 3:11-22; James 1:12-15;
Psalm 84:1-2, 4-5, 11-12; Matthew 5:1-12

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As we think about this sermon that Jesus gives, this Sermon on the Mount, there are a couple of things to think about. One is, as he goes up the hillside, there's a sense that in Jewish perspective you go up the hillside, up the mountain, to receive revelation. Think back to Moses going up the mountain.

So it sets up an expectation in Matthew that something important is happening. It's interesting that when Jesus goes up the hill, it says he sits down and his disciples come and he begins to speak to them. Notice that there was a great crowd around as well. It suggests that maybe the crowd was following along. So perhaps it's a little like we have a great crowd here (the congregation) and we have disciples sitting up here with me (choir). Perhaps somebody in the crowd notices that Jesus is sitting down with his disciples and nudges somebody next to them and they come over to listen.

But it seems that Jesus is speaking to his disciples (as I'm speaking to the choir now), and he says, “Receiving the highest type of well-being are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God. Receiving the highest type of well-being are those who are experiencing sorrow, for they will be comforted. Receiving the highest type of well-being are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Receiving the highest type of well-being are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Receiving the highest type of well-being are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Receiving the highest type of well-being are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Receiving the highest type of well-being are the peacemakers, for they are called children of God. Receiving the highest type of well-being are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

There are a couple of things I want to think about in what I just did. One is if you see some people you know in a conversation, isn't there just the slightest bit of desire to figure out what they are saying? To get in on it? It feels a little bit to me like that with the way Matthew sets up this conversation. Jesus sits down and starts talking to his disciples. He doesn't announce to the crowd, “I'm going to give a speech.” It's almost as if he's inviting people to come of their own accord. He's inviting them to come partly out of their own curiosity. If this teacher who is becoming famous is teaching his disciples, we might want to listen in. So there's first that. At this point, I think it's important to remember he's talking to his disciples. I don't think he doesn't know that the crowd is listening in. I have a sense he's doing something on purpose.

The other thing is, this is the very beginning of a much longer discourse, so while some people don't want us to use it as just an introduction, it is an introduction. I think we can think about it that way. If you hear that first beatitude, that first blessing—blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven—if you began listening in on that

and you hear that out of the blue, and... I read it now and I still think, "What is he saying?" It seems contradictory. How can you be blessed and be poor in spirit?

Being poor in spirit seems to be a definition of *not* being blessed. For me, what it does is make me wonder more. It catches my attention. Isn't that what you're supposed to do at the beginning of a speech, is catch the audience's attention? I think it's an incredible attention-getter because I want to know how he can say this. What does it mean? I think as they go on, they begin to be not quite as hard to figure out, but boy, that first one is a doozy. What do we do with it?

So I do think at the very beginning Jesus is not only creating a situation where people want to start listening, he starts out with a statement that causes people to say, "What are you saying!" and get closer, lean in. I think that's the invitation, for us to lean in, to hear.

There's one other way I want to think about these. Trying to do the Beatitudes in one sermon, I'll try not to keep you here all morning, but it's a little tough because there's a lot there. And there's a lot there because Jesus, I think, is giving a huge preview of what it means to be a disciple. Sometimes when people are really logical, they will start out a speech and say, "This is what I'm going to tell you, and I'm going to tell you in these ways." And then they go on to tell you in an expanded version. Or, in the beginning of a book, you often see in the first chapter or two the author saying, "This is the importance of what I'm going to say. This is where it's going to take you."

In many ways, I think these Beatitudes are the same thing. This is where it's going to take you. I think we do need to notice how they are written. They are written, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Not, *if* you become poor in spirit, you will be blessed. Or, I'm *asking* you to be poor in spirit so you'll be blessed. He's saying the poor in spirit *are* blessed. There's something about already being poor in spirit.

Now, who is poor in spirit? I think that's the importance of the fact that he's talking to his disciples because he's not saying it's just being poor in spirit that is blessed. He is saying that when a disciple is poor in spirit, there's something that is blessed about *that*. I think that's a little different. Think about that. This is a description that he's giving to his disciples. He's explaining what it means to be a disciple. He's inviting the crowd, I think, into that, enticing them to think about what it would be like to be a disciple.

And in being a disciple, there are results. There are some states of being that happen to us as disciples, and there are results that comes out of those states. So we need to at least look at the Beatitudes themselves and see what kind of preview Jesus is giving. We have the advantage of having it before us, to be able to sit down and look at it, to think about it in context of the rest of who Jesus was, and all of history thinking about Christian faith. We're not one of the members of the crowd hearing it all for the first time and wondering what in the world he is saying without being able to bring some context to it. And even then, I was reading one commentator on it, and he said the Beatitudes remain an enigmatic set of sayings. They still remain hard to understand. We

sometimes have conflicting understandings. But I think that as we begin to look at them as a preview or a description of what it's like to be a disciple of Christ, we can begin to think about what they mean.

So let me just take the first one. It's the one I've always struggled with the most. What does it mean to be poor in spirit? What does it mean to be poor? Without resources. You know you're completely dependent when you are without resources. When you are poor in spirit, you know that your spirit is completely dependent. Who are we completely dependent on? God. We are completely dependent. There's a way in which we can begin to see that by letting go of thinking we're in control and letting God be the one we're dependent on, we recognize all of a sudden that we're in the kingdom, because who's our king? That's the result, right? Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew uses the "kingdom of heaven" because he doesn't like to use the word "God" any more than he has to. The kingdom of heaven is the place of God.

Just quickly, in today's world I think we have a hard time with kingdom language because we don't live in a kingdom. We live in a community, we live in cities, we live in a nation, we live in a particular culture. In some ways, I think it would be better if instead of "theirs is the kingdom of heaven," we said "they are in the culture of God." They are in God's nation. They are in God's place. They are in God's city. They are in God's community. When we begin to recognize our full dependence on God, we open ourselves up to living in the culture God would give us. Culture is simply a way of saying "a way of being." It's the way we do things together.

So let's quickly try to get through the rest of these. Experiencing sorrow and grieving, mourning. Sometimes when we think of being a disciple, I think the hope is that all of a sudden everything will just be joy. Jesus is suggesting that as we enter into discipleship, as we follow him, we're going to enter the fullness of life, and that includes grief and mourning. After all, we couldn't live through life and care for others and not have some grief. We couldn't love others without experiencing some of that loss. The wonderful thing is that Jesus says as we live into life and experience even the deepest and hardest feelings we have, we are not without God. We will be comforted. It's an invitation into that place, that way of being.

Meek. I think this is one we often have a hard time with because meek has come to mean something negative. Weak and submissive is the way we often think of meek. One of the places I looked for a definition said the old meaning of meek was *accommodating out of strength*. It's not a weak and submissive place of being, but it is a recognition that in our faith, because our value is in God, because we are disciples of Christ, not because we have to live up to some worldly standard, or not because we have to have the next thing to make us OK, but because we already have God we can step back and accommodate. We can look at how we can make it work. We can try to figure things out. We don't have to simply come in with aggression because we know that only creates more aggression. We don't have to pick up and fight because we have a God who has given us grace. We have the strength of faith that allows us to listen, that allows us to try to figure things out, to try to accommodate one another, to

work it out. It says then that we inherit the earth. It's interesting that if you try to work things out then you have something left to inherit. I'll just leave it at that.

Oftentimes when you think of discipleship, of following, it seems almost a passive kind of thing. You let somebody else make all the decisions. After coming off "meek," sometimes people think that's what it's all about. But the very next one is a longing—a hunger and a thirst. That's not submissive language. That's language of passion. You hunger and thirst for righteousness. There's an active nature that comes with being a disciple. You're looking for something. You're looking for righteousness, looking for right relationship. As we do that as followers of Christ, we are promised that's what will happen. That right relationship builds. He says they will be satisfied.

Then there are the merciful. Sometimes I think of the merciful as being the one who helps someone in need. But really, again, mercy comes out of a position of strength. You are able to do something to some other, maybe they even deserve it, but instead of doing what you feel they deserve and giving them a punishment, you step back and see what they need. You step back and try to see what would be good for them rather than what you want to give them, or what you have the power to do to them. Mercy. It's wonderful to think about. If we can do that, what does it say? We also receive mercy.

Pure in heart. Eugene Peterson translates this one as, "If you let your interior life be put right, then you also see God in your exterior life." It's also interesting to think about the word that is translated "see." It can also be translated as observe, notice, understand, recognize, experience. So Jesus isn't going to ask us, as we follow him, just to put on a window dressing, just to pretend we're somebody. He really wants our hearts to be changed, for our lives to be cleaned up from the inside out. When that happens to us as we follow Christ, we begin to notice God at work in ways I don't think we do at other times.

Peacemakers. Blessed are the peacemakers. Peacemaking, I think, doesn't just mean ending conflict, trying to be the one who brings a semblance of order to things. It goes beyond that because the peace that Christ brings, first of all, is beyond all understanding. But the peace that Christ brings is more like the word "shalom" or the idea of harmony. It's like an orchestra that has all these different instruments playing and it's when they play together that you get the beautiful music. Peacemaking is more than just the end of conflict. It's the beginning of creating life together in a way that works like an orchestra beginning to play. It sings a beautiful song.

Even being treated poorly because of all we do as disciples is that which brings life and blessing. Earlier, I read over the idea of blessing in a different way. When we think of blessed, sometimes it's translated as "happy" because there's a feeling that comes out of being blessed. But it's interesting that that word *blessing* in Greek had the idea of the life of the gods. The way Dallas Willard translated it in *The Divine Conspiracy* was "receiving the highest type of well-being." As we become disciples and experience what it means to be a disciple, we experience the highest sense of well-being. We are

blessed. When I began to think about doing this sermon series, I began to think about our spiritual health, our well-being.

It is in laying this preview out for us that Jesus invites us into discipleship that begins to experience the blessings and the results. So I would suggest that we think about this. As we have walked through our lives, as we have walked and attempted to be disciples, when have we noticed the results?. Has there been a time when we experienced the pooriness of spirit, our dependence, and recognized, then, that we were in a God-bathed world, that we were in the kingdom, that God was present? Have we experienced grief and felt the consolation? Have we been accommodating and recognized God at work in it? Have we hungered and thirsted for righteousness and noticed the satisfaction God has given? Have we been merciful and felt the mercy? You can go through this whole list. I think it's an invitation, not only to recognize that's what discipleship is about, but to recognize how it's at work in our own lives. It is an invitation to hear what Jesus has to say in the rest of his Sermon on the Mount.

For me, Jesus gets my attention with these Beatitudes, and I want to know more. He invites us on this journey with him, to follow him, to know more. Amen.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, we are sometimes like the disciples sitting and listening, trying to soak it up. Sometimes we are like the crowd, listening in. Sometimes we look at our lives and wonder how our discipleship has gone. We need to hear again these encouraging words and notice how you are present, the results of following Christ. Lord, let these words lead us again into the desire to hear more fully what Jesus is about, what he would teach us, and where he would lead us. Help us recognize how discipleship is already at work in our lives, and the wonder of your grace. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.