

Matthew delivers to us the famed *Sermon on the Mount*, but Luke gives us much of the same material in what is oftentimes called the *Sermon on the Plain*. It’s difficult to know whether this is the same sermon described in two different ways by two different gospel writers or whether Jesus had a few sermons in his back pocket that he delivered more than once. As a pastor with 40 years of preaching experience, I can relate to the idea of sticking with what works, but I don’t often find myself preaching the same sermon over and over. If this was a sermon Jesus preached more than once—if he once preached it on a mountain and then preached it on a plain—this might explain the addition in Luke of some “woes” (which Matthew did not include) that serve to counterbalance the “blesseds.” Luke’s version, while shorter—what I’m calling today the *Shortcut Beatitudes*—nevertheless packs a punch. By the way. Do any of you know what a bee-atitude is? It’s what makes bees buzz!!

The setting in Luke for the *Shortcut Beatitudes* is a flurry of activity surrounding Jesus. People are coming to Jesus in huge numbers, and everyone is trying to touch him hoping they could tap some of the energy that flowed from him. It somewhat reminds me of those black and white video clips of Robert F. Kennedy’s 1968 presidential race where people everywhere were desperately trying to reach out and touch Bobby. His aides reported that after campaign appearances, Bobby’s hands would be bloody from scratches and even the ends of his shirt sleeves would frequently be in tatters. Everywhere RFK went, he was greeted by a small sea of outstretched hands.

In Jesus’ day, everyone wanted healing. Everyone wanted a better life. Everyone wanted a piece of the man who held out the promise of a better tomorrow. And many were healed. But not all. Many were unquestionably changed. But not every person. Whatever the kingdom of God is for then and this present time, it’s not a ticket to a charmed life in which every follower of Jesus will be kept free of pain, disease, disappointment, and persecution. Maybe that is why, right in the middle of all the hubbub and excitement, Jesus turns to his disciples and begins to speak a series of Beatitudes, or blessings,

that point to a lifestyle and a mindset that was all but completely at odds with what most people were, at that moment, seeking to get from Jesus.

It's difficult to imagine a comparable scenario anywhere else in life. For example, it's hard to imagine someone getting elected president, riding high on the hopes and dreams and expectations of the millions of people who voted for him or her, who would then use the victory speech to say, "But you know, I want to congratulate the unemployed of this nation. Someday in heaven you will have it better. I want to reach out to the malnourished children of our land and bless you for your hunger. And I'd like to say a word to the hated people, to minorities and any others who feel the sting of prejudice and rejection. Someday all of you will receive a reward."

We cannot even imagine such a thing. A victory speech is usually the moment to whoop it up, to promise the moon, to tell all the people who have placed their hopes in you that you will not let them down and tomorrow will be a brighter day for all. But not Jesus. In Luke 6, Jesus uses a moment in which people are looking to him and expecting the world of him to candidly say that the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, and the hated are better off than the rich, the satisfied, the happy, and the well-liked. There's a Peanuts cartoon that's a favorite of mine where Charlie Brown tells Linus that a lady at the grocery store was complimenting him and telling him what a very nice boy he is. Then Linus reminds Charlie Brown of Luke 6:26: "*Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you...*" And Charlie Brown replies, "So much for feeling good!" By saying blessings and woes in the *Shortcut Beatitudes*, Jesus is in one moment describing a future reality of the kingdom of God and in the next moment tracing out for us the shape of our lives in the here and now.

The rich cannot hear that they will be sent away empty without receiving the message that they need to share their riches already, in the present time. We may bless the poor and the hungry and celebrate that in God's kingdom they will be taken care of and fed, but as followers of Jesus, it's impossible to hear about that future provision without recognizing its present-tense consequence for how we are living right now. We don't kick back and ignore the poor and

hungry now because they will be taken care of sometime later. Rather, in Jesus' name we begin to care for them already, initiating as best we can the patterns of God's kingdom in the present moment. In Luke 6 blessings and curses may have a definite future component but they directly influence today as well.

But why did Jesus address only his disciples here? As is the case in Matthew's version of this sermon, Jesus turns away from the crowds toward his closest disciples when he begins speaking his beatitudes. Clearly the crowds overheard these things—and clearly these words had implications for those people as well—but there must be something significant here about Jesus addressing his disciples so specifically. What do you suppose that significance might be?

There are at least several reasons but one in particular stands out for me. In his turn to the disciples, Jesus signals that what he will go on to describe is *not* the kind of person you need to be in order to *enter God's kingdom*. Nor is he saying that once you enter the kingdom, these are rules you *need to follow*, as though you can *make yourself* poor and sorrowful and hated so that you'll fit in. But nor is Jesus saying that if you should happen to find yourself experiencing one of the less happy situations described here, God will swoop in with some kind of quick-fix solution and turn things around for you.

These are not entrance requirements, rules to follow, or even a dream of receiving a reward from God in this life. That's not at all what Jesus says. Instead, he says that if you are a citizen of the kingdom, then being poor, mournful, meek, hungry for the things of God, are going to be the natural *result* of your kingdom membership. Further, the reason this will be the result is because commitment to that whole new world of God is *always* going to clash with the powers that be and the authority structures of this present world.

This is an important connection to notice. Jesus is not saying that if you are hated or weeping or hungry for *any* reason, then you will automatically receive God's blessing and consolation. There are lots of reasons why people might be sad or downtrodden. Someone might be exceedingly sad that his stock market portfolio is not performing as well as he had hoped, but that hardly qualifies

this person for the comfort Jesus talks about! Someone might be very meek, but maybe in some cases it's from sheer sentimentality. The guy next door might feel hated and disliked, but maybe that's the result of him being an unpleasant person who has a personality that could curdle milk.

The point is that the dispositions Jesus blesses in the *Shortcut Beatitudes* are not free floating but are kingdom rooted. If you are weeping, then what makes you weep is the sin you see around you, the disjointedness of life in a world that has fallen so far from God's heavenly hopes and intentions. If you are merciful and meek, then it's not because you're just an old softy by nature but because the Spirit of God has given you the heart of Jesus. If you are hated, it's not because you're an oaf of a person but because you won't compromise when it comes to your belief in Jesus Christ as Lord of all. You will live out what you believe the gospel reveals as God's way, even if that pits you against the "business as usual" practices of other people.

Both the traits that Jesus describes and the consolations Jesus promises cease to be gifts of the Holy Spirit given to citizens of God's kingdom if we instead use them as tools and mental ploys by which we feel better about ourselves and about our lives. In fact, if we cut away the kingdom perspective of all this, Jesus' words will make absolutely no sense. From the vantage point of merely this life and this world, there's nothing good about persecution, about being nobody, about being sad. No one in his or her right mind *wants* to experience any of that. Also, if the kingdom is not real and not true, then to be persecuted becomes like going to jail because we've been convicted on a false charge. If God is not real and his new world not true, then there is nothing to hunger or thirst *for*, nothing to desire, nothing to pursue. If we are sorrowful, it's because we've seen the moral beauty of God's new world and, compared to that, this present world contains much that causes us grief. Again, however, if we take away God's kingdom, **there's nothing to compare this world to.**

The kingdom of God becomes the way we see things, the lens through which we view life. It's a gift to be able to see into God's world and see it God's way. **Blessed are you if you can see the world God's way!**

**Jesus died penniless.** Roman soldiers cast lots to divide among themselves Jesus' only possessions—the clothes on his back. And he looked at his disciples and said, **blessed are you who are poor.**

**Jesus died hungry.** There is no record that Jesus had anything to eat the day of his death. What we call The Last Supper on Thursday evening may very well have been Jesus' last meal. He died on the cross Friday at sunset with an empty stomach. Looking at his disciples he said, **blessed are you who hunger now.**

**Jesus died weeping.** After his last supper Jesus headed for the Garden and in that place we call Gethsemane he prayed and he wept. He told his disciples **blessed are you who weep now.**

**Jesus died hated.** Caiaphas, the greatest religious authority in Israel called him a blasphemer. The crowds wanted a murderer freed before they would see Jesus pardoned. His disciples deserted him. Looking at his disciples he said **blessed are you when people hate you because of me.**

Suppose we could combine the personality traits of the *Shortcut Beatitudes* and put them all into one person. What would Mr. or Ms. Beatitude look like? Consistently kind, yet a bit shy, probably shunning the limelight. In short, Mr. or Ms. Beatitude wouldn't always be a barrel of laughs! As often as not they would have a serious look of concern on their face or a tear of sympathy in their eyes. They would rather talk about real issues or how to solve problems rather than engage in typical cocktail party small talk. They're always hungering and thirsting for something better.

Let's not forget that the kingdom lifestyle of Jesus was profoundly counter-cultural. What Jesus proclaims as *good news* may be what most of us regard as a crying shame. These are not entrance requirements for the kingdom, rules to follow, or even a dream of receiving a reward from God in this life.

Just remember that Jesus' *Shortcut Beatitudes* were meant to be taken seriously, but more importantly, to be taken to heart. Amen.