

This Sunday and for the next two Sundays, we wade into a chunk of Jesus’ teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the most famous extended teaching of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. This week we look at the Beatitudes, the opening lines of his Sermon. I once heard someone say that in all the furor over posting the Ten Commandments in courthouses and on public property that happens from time to time in this country, that perhaps what we ought to post in courthouses is the Beatitudes instead. “*Blessed are the merciful*” might sound very different on the wall of a criminal court, don’t you think? But then, we couldn’t do that, some would say. That’s a place for enforcing the law, not for showing mercy. Really?

This may highlight the problem with the Beatitudes. They aren’t really practical. Some would argue they are *impossible*. How in the world are we supposed to live up to this kind of standard? It is simply not within us to capture all these elements, no matter how much we desire to. So then, do the Beatitudes function like the law? Do they simply show us how far short we fall from what we are supposed to be? Do they layer guilt upon guilt on us so that we turn in utter despair to the Savior, confessing our complete worthlessness?

That is how some have presented these verses—as a measuring stick for entrance into the kingdom of God. But if that is true, then why did Jesus introduce each verse with the word “blessed”? Actually, the Greek word is *makarioi*, which can also be translated with the word “happy.” Ever seen that before Happy are those who...etc. It could even be translated as “blissful.” It doesn’t seem to me that Jesus would set us up for layers of guilt and then use the word “blissful” to describe a condition that we can’t possibly reach.

So, maybe they aren’t laws. Maybe the Beatitudes are something other than a challenge to better living, or, as some have presented them, a psychology of happiness. Maybe they are something more.

What if Jesus began his public teaching ministry with a word of encouragement instead of an impossible standard to attain? In the previous chapter of

Matthew's Gospel, before the Sermon on the Mount, an amazing number of events transpire. Chapter 4 begins with the temptation in the wilderness, where Jesus declares the kind of Messiah he intends to be—to himself, to God, to Satan, and to all of us. Then he returns and calls together a community of followers in which he will work throughout his earthly ministry. Finally, he teaches and heals and draws increasingly larger crowds who come from great distances. And then chapter 5 lets us hear his first sermon and public teaching. But in between the wilderness and the calling of his disciples, he makes this statement: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*" (4:17). And "*repent*" in this case does not mean "shame on you," but rather it means, "get turned around, get on board, and walk with me."

What if the Beatitudes are a snapshot of the community of faith instead of a measuring stick? What if Jesus was saying, "Blessed is the community that makes room for peacemakers? Blessed is the community that makes room for the meek, for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who are poor in spirit? Blessed is the community that makes room for those who mourn because of the fallen nature of this world? Blessed is the community that knows persecution is inevitable and still decides to make room for those the world thinks are unimportant?"

I think Jesus got out the photo album and invites us to look again and see who we truly are, see what is among us. He opened scrapbooks we had forgotten about to show us our true selves. There is a challenging call here as well. I'm not dismissing that. But it's not an impossible call because it's already among us in the community of believers. We learn from one another, because we are given gifts to share, because we are blessed in different ways. So, let's take a look at the picture of the community of faith. It might surprise us how blessed we are.

These powerful statements of *blessing and promise* from Jesus, give us glimpses of what living in the kingdom of heaven is like. But the emphasis needs to be on his *blessing*. Jesus isn't condemning folks for not living into his promise. He is blessing those who already have a vision of what it means to be

alive in Christ and he is encouraging those who haven't yet caught a vision for leaning into the possibilities.

How do we balance the blessing and the challenge? How do we hear in Jesus' words both gratitude and exhortation at the same time? Both elements should be encouraged in us as we look at the Sermon on the Mount. I want to make sure the blessing is clear, because we all need that blessing, that presence of God's Spirit and the affirmation of our desire to follow Jesus. At the same time, we need to hear the challenge to draw closer to the way that leads to the kingdom. "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,*" Jesus proclaimed. We all have room to grow in our faith and witness. So "Where do we go from here?" "How are we to grow in our faith?" If there is no job description after such a call, it would be nearly impossible to respond. Right?

Suppose we could combine the personality traits of the Beatitudes and put them all into one person. *What would Mister or Miss Beatitude look like?* Well, she would be consistently kind and yet also a bit shy, shunning the limelight. He would always downplay his own actions by claiming they were never enough to achieve what he really wants. We might conclude he has low self-esteem. This would be a person quick to lend a hand to anyone in need but also quick to get a bit depressed every time she hears a news story about disasters and death, or after seeing pictures of children without adequate nutrition somewhere in the world. This would be a person as often as not who looks distressed and may seem to be on the verge of tears; someone who could never shrug off anything.

This would be a person who is transparently spiritual, someone whose heart seems so centered on the God of his faith that most everything he does would come off looking like an offering. This would be a person who might seem perpetually restless and dissatisfied with much of life. She'd be someone who consistently gives money to animal welfare organizations, who volunteers to clean up littered highways, or who participates in programs to aid the homeless.

In short, Miss or Mister Beatitude might not always be the life of the party. As often as not she'd have a serious look of concern on her face or a tear of

sympathy in her eye. She'd rather talk about substantive issues than engage in typical cocktail party small talk. He might be busy enough helping the disenfranchised that some would sneer at him as someone who was naively "out to save the world." And, unfortunately, happiness does not necessarily come to those who live out Jesus' Beatitudes.

Mister Beatitude or Miss Beatitude might even be seen as a troublemaker or a nuisance, what with all his or her restless talk about issues and problems, not to mention the fact that there seems to be no satisfying this person. He's always hungering and thirsting for something better—for others. And so, it's quite possible that among some groups, Miss or Mister Beatitude would be ridiculed or ostracized.

You see, the life of Mister or Miss Beatitude will probably be busy, restless, maybe even manic, not because he or she is trying to get to heaven but because folks like this have seen the kingdom come near in Jesus Christ and they won't settle for less. As such, there is a curious paradox running through the Beatitudes. On the one hand, it's clear that true followers of Jesus don't really "fit" in this world. In this sense, Matthew 5 seems to validate the old spiritual that says, "*This world is not my home, I'm just a 'passin' through.*"

If, we get ridiculed and persecuted, as Jesus predicts, part of the reason must be because we don't buy into the world's agenda. We're going to challenge most conventional wisdom and shake up the powers that be. On the other hand, though, the Beatitudes don't call us to be hermits and shut out the world. We're not to pretend that society or culture don't matter, that national or international politics is beneath our notice, or that we can ignore environmental decline because this world is not our home anyway since we're headed for heaven.

No. Instead the Beatitudes make clear that we are to hunger and thirst for God's righteousness not in the sweet by-and-by but *right here and right now*. We are to make for *shalom* (God's peace) *right here*. We are to be meek *right now* and, if we are, we are promised to inherit the earth! All the Beatitudes name truth—both the external truth of life circumstances, and the internal truth

that we can hold onto. The kingdom of heaven is already ours. There is no earning it, just living it. The gift of the kingdom is not a guarantee to live (hashtag) “a blessed life” like we see plastered all over the internet. Nor do we have to concoct reasons why we are being persecuted because choosing how we show up in our circumstances, how we seek God in the midst of them, will reveal enough about who we are and what we cling to.

Jesus easily mixes his words about “*the kingdom of heaven*” with his words about this earth. In Jesus’ mind it seems there is no dichotomy. You don’t have to choose between heaven and earth because down the line the two are going to be joined anyway. I would say it this way: *Blessed* are you if you can see the world the way Jesus sees it; *Congratulations* to you if you already believe and act and live in these ways because it shows that when it comes to God’s kingdom, you “get it.”

Throughout this sermon series from Matthew, we will celebrate the kingdom of heaven that has come near in Jesus our Teacher (Matthew 4:17). And if we recognize the kingdom of heaven as a gift that we must not keep to ourselves, we get Jesus’ teaching. The Beatitudes show us how we are to live *after* grace is given and *after* Jesus issues the invitation to follow him. They are not how we earn his grace or deserve a place with him (which we can’t do anyway, of course).

What Jesus is teaching us in the Beatitudes is this: We are not blessed to feel satisfied in ourselves. Instead, we are blessed to be a blessing. Thank you Lord! Amen.