

A New Twist On the Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-12

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, January 29, 2017

Last Sunday's sermon reported the first days of Jesus' ministry, immediately following his wilderness temptations to forgo becoming the Suffering Christ. He began his ministry with the proclamation, "Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven has come near."

Also highlighted was Jesus' central role in God's mission to rescue the creation from dysfunction and decay.

Up to that point, the Jerusalem Temple played that central role of the thin place or sacred space linking heaven to earth. Then Jesus' birth triggered a seismic shift making him the embodiment of the temple, the new thin place where heaven and earth overlapped.

From the start, Jesus' ministry was balanced between saying and doing. He preached the arrival of God's kingdom through parables, saying, "The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed growing into a great tree." "The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast...mixed with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

His doings revealed the reality of God's kingdom by healing the blind, the deaf and the leper as well as welcoming outcasts and sinners

Imprisoned by Herod soon after Jesus appeared on the scene, John the Baptist began second guessing his belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Isolated in a dark dungeon, he saw no visible sign of God's kingdom. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was "the one to come or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind received their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them."

Was John the Baptist satisfied by his cousin's answer? We can only hope but one thing is certain, Jesus' answer was an emphatic "Yes." God was on the move. The kingdom of heaven was already arriving.

Today's sermon focuses on the Beatitudes, the introduction to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It could be said the Sermon on the Mount is the Kingdom of God's constitution and the Beatitudes are its preamble.

In twenty-five words or less, the Sermon on the Mount is the believer's primer for discipleship. It's not just about good behavior between believers. It's really about Abraham's descendants blessing all the nations of the earth.

Jesus' listeners welcomed this new teaching. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees who legislated morality, Jesus taught something completely different: being stuck in spiritual poverty isn't a punishment. Grieving isn't a weakness. Having a meek disposition is actually a strength. Being persecuted for going against grain has its rewards.

Implied in Jesus's sermon is the warning against confusing your blessings with signs of favor. That attitude can lead to a sense of entitlement. The so called brightest are at the top and the dimmest are left at the bottom. The only safe guard is knowing God's blessings are primarily given to be resources to benefit others.

Once again I paraphrase that line in JFK's inaugural address:

"Ask not what God can do for you, ask what you can do for God's kingdom."

In short, God's blessings are not just for our benefit but are meant to be passed on to others.

Let's do a quick run through of the beatitudes.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall see God."

Pharisees, then and now, believe people poor in spirit just aren't trying hard enough. They have little sympathy for any weakness dulling a muscular faith.

But according to Jesus, the poor in spirit are the earth shakers in God's kingdom. Failing to pull themselves up by their bootstraps is actually an advantage because there's only one other option: Letting God pull them up and blessing them with the gift of adequate faith.

Surprisingly, spiritual poverty becomes their greatest asset. Empowered by God they become agents of grace, encouraging anyone else poor in spirit by assuring them it's no sin to admit your faith falls short.

"Blessed are those who mourn... they shall be comforted."

Those who mourn are given a special blessing, an affinity with others who suffer loss. Having already walked through the valley of the shadow of death they can walk with others, demonstrating how the Suffering Christ is with them through their season of crucifixion until they can experience the resurrection and the promised new life.

It takes a special person to demonstrate empathy for others who mourn by entering into their pain.

"Blessed are the meek... they shall inherit the earth."

In the musical Camelot, King Arthur's nasty son Mordred sings,

"To be humbled means to be hurt."

It's not the earth the meek inherit,
it's the dirt."

Craving power over the weak is a dead-end. In God's Kingdom, meekness is a virtue. Only the strong and brave have what it takes to be meek and mild. Given the mind of Christ they respect the humanity of people from different social classes, ethnic and racial backgrounds. Through Christ they become agents of reconciliation.

For the time being, the controllers and the manipulators, the bullies and the thugs may think they run things but in God's time they will be swept away, leaving the meek in charge of the world God loves.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... they shall be filled."

The neurotic desire for celebrity, wealth and material things is a twisted attempt to satisfy our deepest longings. Only the blessed know the hungry heart is satisfied only by our maker.

God intentionally created us with souls that are bottomless pits. Never satisfied, we try filling ourselves up with junk food. Looking for satisfaction in the wrong places only leaves us even more hungry and thirsty.

Only by the grace of God do the hungry and thirsty realize their hunger and thirst is given to be a longing for meaning and purpose only satisfied by obeying our hunger and thirst for God.

Knowing God alone satisfies the hungry heart and thirsty soul gives believers the opportunity to be a blessing to people on the outside still starving for both.

"Blessed are the merciful... for they shall receive mercy."

You know God blesses with mercy when we can forgive and not hold grudges. The blessed are supernaturally overwhelmed by an avalanche of compassion. It's a genuine blessing when we experience God's love destroying our hatred for those who seek to destroy you. We are truly blessed when God helps us forgive and repent, so we can help others know the kingdom of God has come near.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God... blessed are the peacemakers... they will be called the children of God."

The pure in heart, blessed with a childlike innocence, can see with eyes of faith God restoring the creation. They also see the emperor has no clothes. Not content being side liners, they see beyond the present chaos of this present age to the future promise of peace and justice being the norm.

The pure in heart live in the present as if the future is already here. They become advocates of God's peace by visiting nursing homes, working in soup kitchens, and seeking friendships in places most want to avoid.

“Blessed are those... persecuted for righteousness’ sake... for theirs is the kingdom of God.”

Whenever God blesses you with the instinct to take a stand for a righteous cause and you follow up by risking yourself by speaking out for people without a voice, sooner than later you face scorn and opposition. As they say, no good deed goes unpunished.

Look at Jesus. When he went out on a limb and ignored the Sabbath to heal a leper and broke ranks with the Pharisees to socialize with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners he faced opposition at every turn.

Jesus warned us to expect the same. There’re always adversaries ready to brand anyone upsetting the status quo. But be of good cheer, in the end God wins.

The more you become aware of the mess this world is in, you just want to run away and hide. Many do run away to save themselves from getting involved. That’s why God asked Isaiah, “Who will go for me? Who can I send?”

The ones who say, “Here I am, Lord, send me!” are not sent into the fray empty handed. God blesses us with hope. Remember what I said last week, hope isn’t wishful thinking. Hope is solidly based on the promise that we will never be abandoned or forsaken.

If you look back on the hardest season of your life, you can see God’s fingerprints all over your recovery. God has a proven track record. God’s promise to stay with you in the past during the worst of times was kept and you can be sure God’s promise will continue to be kept in the present and in the future. That is the hope God extends to Abraham’s descendants and that hope is certified by the passion and resurrection of Christ.

For two thousand years the Beatitudes sustained people of goodwill in an adversarial world. Each blessing holds the promise of the reality of God’s kingdom overlapping the world God created and loves.

Before these blessings can impact your life for good they must be understood and then experienced. For that reason, I encourage you to make time this week to open your Bibles to the fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. Carefully read each verse over and over again. Ponder each blessing. Wait for the Scriptures to enlighten you. Allow the Holy Spirit to open your ears so you can hear Jesus as clearly as the first ones who listened to his voice on the mountaintop.

If we do these things, the next time God gives us an opportunity to share our blessings with the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the persecuted and the peacemakers, the kingdom of God will come near because our neighbors still on the outside will see your good works, experience the reality of Christ and his kingdom and give glory to our Father in heaven.