

SUNDAY, July 28 2024 "Beatitudes"

Psalms 66 784 ref 2 Pt1&2 Matthew 5:1-12

We continue in our summer sermon series "At your Request" with this week's focus on Jesus' teachings from the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew 5:1-12 and otherwise known as the Beatitudes. This passage from Matthew 5 begins simply "When Jesus saw he crowds, he went up in the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them." Who is Jesus speaking to?

Some illustrations of this particular passage show Jesus standing to thousands sitting on a hillside; other images show him sitting with the 12 disciples around his feet. The scene is simple- Jesus on a mountainside speaking. And these are the opening words of what has become known as the Sermon on the Mount. A sermon which covers chapters 5,6, and 7 of Matthew and ends at 7:28-29 with these words, "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as scribes."

Jesus taught with authority and the crowds were astounded. What prompted Jesus to teach about being blessed or finding happiness at this time? What did Jesus see in the faces of the people in front of him- not only his faithful 12, but the crowds? Jesus must have been moved with compassion when He saw a crowd. What Jesus sees in us today? Would Jesus see hopeful expectation with the need for compassion? Would he share these statements the same way with us even now?

We might ask about those who were in front of Jesus and what they had been experiencing prior to his time of teaching? We know that Roman taxation was high and corrupt, food was scarce and there was corruption in synagogues as well as in the land itself. There was racial, political, religious strife and a deep prejudice existed between Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles. There were differences of ideas between Judean Jews in the south and Galilean Jews in the north. And there was certainly a difference in wealth and the poor. Then Jesus starts his talk with the people using language that offers hope to those listening as Jesus states that blessings abound. But these blessings which are super blessings about happiness is what he shares. Jesus came that we might have joy and happiness. Verse 3-12 which follow seem to be confusing yet clear, opposites with each other yet important truths about the world, and spiritual teachings with difficult actions required.

These statements follow a simple pattern: Jesus names a group of people normally thought to be unfortunate and pronounces them blessed. Each beatitude consists of two phrases: the condition and the result. In almost all cases the phrases used are familiar from an Old Testament context, but Jesus elevates them to new levels and teachings. Together these statements present a new set of ideals that focus on love and humility rather than force and exaction. They echo Jesus' highest teachings on spirituality and compassion.

Philip Yancey writes in "The Jesus I Never Knew" that the Beatitudes are important truths which apply on at least three levels. The first is dangled promises. Jesus offered his listeners lasting and eternal rewards. Jesus made such promises with authority because he had come to establish God's kingdom that would rule forever. He stated very clearly that who were mourning- will be comforted; those who are meek will inherit the earth; the hungry will be filled; and the pure will see God! There was no question for those listening to Jesus. If they fit any of those listed- mourners—of any type of loss, those who were meek and shy within the work, those starving for physical nourishment or having a definite lack of something, and those who sought to live pure safe lives; all would see God! Promises from Jesus—to see God. Their service would not go unrecognized. Those who experienced these things in life would have future rewards of infinite joy.

But in the meantime the prospects of future rewards in no way cancels out the need to fight for justice now in this life. Jesus didn't say do nothing in the meantime before you get to be with God. Act and serve others and you will even be further blessed. Justice is what is needed as we each seek to be blessed, fully blessed by God.

These important truths were also on the level of the great reversal. These blessings describe both the present as well as the future because they contrast how to succeed in the kingdom of heaven as opposed to the kingdom of this world. Jesus was impressed by different people – a widow who placed her last coins in the offering, a dishonest tax collector filled with anxiety who needed to climb a tree to see him, a nameless child, a woman who had 5 unhappy marriages, a blind beggar, an adulteress, a leper—what did they have in common? A longing to change, sorrow and repentance and the desire to follow Jesus. Jesus really believed that a person who is poor in spirit, mourning, persecuted, hungry and thirsty for righteousness had different kinds of advantages over the rest of others. What is this key advantage? A cry out to God for help as they sought hope. People who are comfortable and self-sufficient have a hold over those who are not, they do not need help from others. But those in need might turn to God. And this is when they are blessed.

The third level according to Yancey is psychological reality which means putting oneself into the position of actually living out these blessed moments on earth in the here and now. What does it mean to be pure in heart? What is it that one needs to strive for? To see God. If we are impure, we will not see God. Purity calls us to a higher love with and for God and in turn God's love for us.

How does one show mercy? Giving to others in need but truly giving of self to see the other be well. Not for their benefit but yours. How do caregivers work with those in our communities who are not able to assist themselves for various reasons? They show mercy and love of God in what they do each and every day. The question is how do you show mercy in your life? What are the small things you do that might be considered merciful?

What about peacemakers? It was on March 26, 1979 that the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, was signed on the White House lawn which formally ended the state of war between two longstanding enemies. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, and U.S. President Jimmy Carter gathered to sign this peace accord, the first one between Israel and a neighboring Arab state. This photo was shown around the world with the caption. "Blessed are the peacemakers". This treaty took hours of work and negotiation but in 1979 the treaty was signed with hope and happiness. Many people today are praying for new photographs like this-- with world leaders shaking hands and leading people to end wars. There are also those who are blessed because of righteous acts so that others are lifted up and given opportunities not received before. How does this contrast to peace? After all they too lead to hope and the promise of God's kingdom.

In reading verse 11 it is difficult to understand because people do insult, persecute and falsely say all kinds of evil against those who follow Jesus. Maybe due to past hurts, no knowledge of Jesus or what his teachings really mean. For some people, Jesus was just a good guy who died but to say he died for the sake of others is not something that is considered as possible. No one does this but in war-time!

Yet here we are faithful followers of Jesus searching for happiness which he alone may offer? Receiving insults, and hurtful words for what one believes and not acting with revenge is difficult but as Jesus' followers are we wanting to serve in faith? Jesus did not say it would be easy but to be his disciple means to bear the cross he did. To walk the mile and carry his load so that we may also rise up to new life in Him.

Why are these statements worthy of our consideration today? They seem absurd, as Jesus offers a paradoxical key to abundant life. The kingdom of heaven represents value far more real and permanent than anything the world has to offer. This treasurer pays dividends both on earth and all of eternity.

Is it possible to live out the Beatitudes? Never- unless God can do what Jesus Christ says He can. Unless He can give us the Spirit who will remake us and bear us into a new person altogether. The disciple we strive to become is based on devotion to Jesus. IT is the Spirit which sees you and if you believe, the Spirit will be in you and you are no longer the devoted one, but fully committed to following and being Jesus. The Spirit must be in you to enable this to happen. And it is then as we each strive to live as Jesus' disciples that we can rejoice and be glad. Our reward is in heaven if we seek the blessings that Christ teaches. But we must be willing to live out our faith and seek happiness and have hope in Jesus.

Blessings, happiness and hope they all go together in Jesus' Beatitudes. Our task is to seek God's kingdom and move towards serving and living out our lives as we answer Jesus' call to serve. And as we serve we are reminded that we will see God!

Let us pray.

Holy God of grace and love, we praise you and thank you for these blessings shared by Jesus. Help us to further understand their meaning for us as we strive to live for you. In faith and with hope we pray. Amen.