

“Are You Blessed?”

Matthew 5:1-12

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • February 10, 2013

I want you to think for a moment about some of the greatest speeches ever given. You could include Patrick Henry’s famous speech in 1775 where he said, “I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!” I would think another one would be John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural address with the famous line, “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” Other great speeches include Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King Junior’s “I Have A Dream” speech.

But at the top of the list of the greatest speeches ever given is the one we begin studying today – the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon, by Jesus himself, is easily the best-known and most extensively studied speech in the world. There are hundreds of books and thousands of articles about these three chapters of Matthew’s Gospel. In fact, there are so many that there are now books to tell us what’s in all the other books about the Sermon on the Mount.

If you happen to have one of those Bibles that put the words of Jesus in red, you will notice that the Sermon on the Mount is one of five large sections of teaching by Jesus. Leading up to this point Matthew has been revealing Jesus’ identity to us. We’ve been told by Old Testament prophecy, by angels, by the wise men, by John the Baptist, by God, and by Satan that Jesus is the Messiah, the King, the Son of David, the Son of God. We have seen that he is the one who fulfills all of the prophecies and that he has proved his identity by healing people with all kinds of diseases and afflictions.

It’s important for us to notice that Jesus heals *before* he teaches. As Dale Allison puts it, “Before the crowds hear the Messiah’s word they are the object of his compassion and healing. The first act of the Messiah is

not the imposition of his commandments but the giving of himself.” The same principal holds true today. Before you and I are even the least bit interested in what the Bible tells us to do, we have to experience the grace and forgiveness of Jesus. Likewise, before we can tell other people about Jesus we have to earn the right to be heard. Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.

So now with his identity firmly established and proven Jesus begins to teach. But it’s a different kind of teaching than the other Rabbis. Jesus teaches with authority. Matthew chapter 5 begins, “Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them.” The picture here is of Jesus going up into the hills with a crowd of people following him, but we’re told that it’s his disciples that he teaches. As one author said, “Jesus wanted disciples, not crowds.” There’s lots of symbolism here. By going up on the mountain, Matthew wants us to think of Moses going up on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. Remember that Matthew wants us to think of Jesus as the new Moses only better. He also wants us to see Jesus as the anointed one of Isaiah 61.

The theme that runs throughout the Sermon on the Mount is the kingdom of heaven and instructions on living as a part of the kingdom. As we learned a few weeks ago the kingdom of heaven is not like an earthly kingdom that has a particular geographic place. Rather, the kingdom of heaven refers to the reign or rule of God. It’s what guides and controls your thinking and actions. Wherever people are willing to submit their lives to God’s will, the kingdom of heaven has come. We also learned that with the coming of Jesus the kingdom had arrived on earth.

But all we have to do is turn on the evening news to know that things on earth are not the way they should be. So while the kingdom of heaven has begun here, we still look forward to the time when Jesus returns and makes everything right. And that's the point of the today's passage. Rather than being primarily a set of instructions on how to get to heaven, the Beatitudes are a message of hope.

Each line of Jesus' first sermon begins with the words, "Blessed are..." and a description of the people who are blessed or happy and then the reason they are happy. The first thing we notice about this list is that it is exactly the opposite of the way we normally think. He says that the ones who are truly happy are the ones who are poor in spirit, who mourn, the meek, the merciful, and most surprising those who are persecuted. Those don't sound like the kind of happiness we read about in a Hallmark card. That's the nature of the kingdom of heaven. It's not what you think. It's radically different from the kingdom of this world. A person who is blessed is someone who is favored by God and is therefore happy or fortunate.

So for the next few minutes, let's look at each one of these and find out what they really mean. Jesus begins by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." When he says *poor in spirit* he's not talking about economic poverty. To be poor in spirit means we are separated from God because of sin and we're unable to fix it. More importantly, when Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he is saying that the blessing comes from realizing our spiritual neediness because of our sinful nature, from seeing ourselves as we truly are.

That realization naturally leads us to the second Beatitude: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The mourning Jesus has in mind is specifically mourning for our sin and for the sin of the

world. When we see the hurt and suffering in our lives and in the world caused by sin, we are saddened by it. But Jesus has promised us comfort and that is the comfort of the gospel, which is the only true comfort. Knowing that Jesus calls us by name and forgives us is the source of all comfort. This is the hope of Revelation 21:4, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

The third statement Jesus makes is, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." This is probably the best-known line of the Beatitudes and also the most misunderstood. When you hear the word "meek," you probably think weak or timid, a push-over. That's not what Jesus is commending. By meek he means gentle or humble, unassuming. It's the opposite of ambition and envy. People who are very strong or assertive can still be described as meek if they use their strength primarily for the good of others. Meekness is not the absence of assertiveness, it's the absence of *self-assertion*. "The meek do not ask for special treatment or demand special rights. We trust God to protect and provide, and he promises to do so."

When we discover our spiritual poverty and mourn because of our own sin, something happens to us. We begin to see other people and their sin in a new light. We become less judgmental and more compassionate. We become meek. But, as Jesus tells us, we also hunger and thirst for righteousness. We aren't content to be sad about the way things are, we want to change them.

Verse 6 is the pivotal verse in this passage. The first three Beatitudes focus on the way things are in our lives, which causes us to want to make a change. Righteousness means God's rule in our life and we are blessed by God when we seek righteousness

like we seek food and water. It means we want to *know* what is right and we want to *do* what is right, which is the focus of the next three statements, each of which is linked to the first three.

Verse 7 says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Many people today use the word “justice” when what they really mean is “mercy.” Justice means getting what you deserve, while mercy means *not* getting what we deserve. When you get pulled over for driving a little faster than you should and the officer gives you a warning instead of a ticket, that’s mercy. You broke the law, you deserved the ticket. You deserved justice but you received mercy.

Trust me on this, the last thing you want from God is what you deserve. What you and I experience every day instead is mercy. When you discover that you are poor in spirit and experience the grace of God, you will want to show mercy to others.

The sixth Beatitude says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” There are two ways to understand Jesus’ call to purity and they both apply here. First, there is the purity of thoughts and actions. If you are truly mourning for your sin you will do whatever it takes to get rid of it, which leads to an inner purity. It’s a change in your thoughts and your actions. But purity also refers to our will or motivation. Anybody remember the movie *City Slickers* with Billy Crystal and Jack Palance? There’s a great scene where they’re riding along on horseback and Jack Palance’s character curly says, “You want to know the meaning of life? It’s this. It’s one thing. If you don’t figure out that one thing the rest doesn’t matter.” James 4:8 says, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Purity of heart means having that “one thing,” which is Jesus. If your whole life isn’t focused on Christ, the rest really doesn’t matter.

The seventh Beatitude that Jesus gives is, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Peacemaking is the result of meekness. It’s impossible for you to be a peacemaker among other people if you are looking for your own personal gain. Most conflict arises because of self-assertion. Discontentment and envy disrupt peace. The humility of meekness allows you to help others.

The last three verses can be grouped together as one Beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.” Evil and sin does not like righteousness. Godly living makes people uncomfortable and leads to persecution. We have seen mild persecution occasionally in this country but nothing like the first disciples of Jesus experienced. Most of them died a martyr’s death. But in other parts of our world Christians are being tortured and persecuted at an alarming rate – more than any other time in history.

Jesus says, when this happens to you rejoice and be glad. How can he say that? What is there to be glad about in persecution? What Jesus is telling us is to put it in perspective. We know how things will turn out in the end. We know that the kingdom of God will win and that it’s on the way. All we have to do is hold on until then.

As we’ve seen, this first section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, is not a list of rules for the Christian life. He’s not saying, here’s what you have to do to become a Christian – do these things and I might let you into heaven. Instead, Jesus is saying, “I love you. I died for you so that you could experience a new way of living.” Jesus called that new way of living “the kingdom of heaven.” He says, “this is what real blessing looks like.” Instead of a list of rules, we find that this is a description of who we are in Christ because it turns out that this is a description of Jesus himself. Jesus mourned because of the sin of his people. He was meek

and merciful. He had the singular purpose of a pure heart, he was a peacemaker between us and God, and he was persecuted. And because of his death and resurrection we now have the power to live this way too. So let me ask you: are you blessed?

Amen