

Are You Blessed?

Matthew 5:1-12

A while back, I read that 85 percent of all drivers in America consider themselves "above-average" drivers. Of course, this cannot be true. Statistically, by definition, only 49 percent of drivers are above average. I lived in Florida for six years, and that may not be true in Florida. One day I heard someone say, "In Florida, it's not the retirees you have to watch out for, it's their parents!" But, the survey does give us an insight into human nature: People generally view themselves as better than others. And if they are better than others, then they are doing a good enough job.

This transfers over into religion far more than we are aware, and it becomes apparent in how these Beatitudes are taught. Often one will hear, "The message of the Beatitudes is that, if I do these things well enough, then I will be happy. If I am good enough at these things, then I will be blessed." It's a human standard of measure: "If I am better at this than average, then I'm in good shape." But does this work for disciples of Jesus?

Today's Gospel lesson, of course, is the beginning of the *Sermon on the Mount*, as it has been recorded in Matthew's Gospel. A similar version of this sermon is found in Luke, where it is known as the "Sermon on the Plain." The *Sermon on the Mount* contains the central points of Jesus' teachings to his disciples and to those who would follow him. What does it mean to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus? The *Sermon on the Mount* contains Jesus' own answer to these questions. The entire sermon runs through Chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew, encompassing 107 verses.

The sermon begins as Jesus goes up on a mountain, or large hill, and his disciples follow him. There are great crowds of people present, all of whom have come to see and hear Jesus, and they are all anxious to hear what this great new teacher has to say. The sermon closely follows the calling of the original twelve apostles, and has been referred to as "The Ordination Address to the Twelve." But it is not only addressed to the inner circle, but to all the disciples gathered here, and to the crowd which is listening beyond them, and by extension, to us. Matthew notes at the end of the sermon that the crowds were astonished at what he had taught them, because he taught with such great authority. So Matthew sets the scene for us: Jesus, on the highest level of the hillside, his disciples immediately surrounding him, and the great crowd spread out below.

Jesus takes a seat, as was the custom of the great teachers of his time, and begins to address the gathered people. He begins with the Beatitudes. Each of the beatitudes begins with the same form. Each begins with the phrase, "*Blessed are ...* " Some of the modern translations of the Bible (such as the NIV and CEB) say, "*Happy are ...* " But I

have become convinced by the overwhelming number of Bible scholars who state that "*happy*" is an unfortunate and inaccurate translation in this place. The beatitudes declare an objective reality, while happiness is a subjective emotion.

One can manage to make oneself happy. But one cannot bless oneself. A blessing must come from another. The opposite of "blessed" is not "unhappy;" the opposite of "blessed" is "cursed." The beatitudes were a common form used in the Old Testament, in both the Psalms and by the prophets. Jesus' Jewish listeners would easily have recognized them as such. For example, Psalm 1 begins, "*Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked.*"

The form is important because it tells us what the beatitudes are not - a pious hope of what will be, they are indeed congratulations on what is. The blessedness which belongs to the faithful does not belong to some future world of glory; it is a blessedness which exists here and now, without dependence upon some fleeting state of happiness. The state is not something the faithful will enter into, but is that which he or she has already entered.

The beatitudes do not describe different types of people who shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, nor different rewards for the poor, or for mourners, or the meek, or peacemakers. They describe the same people in a variety of ways. To be admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven means this: to be comforted, to have our deepest longings satisfied, and to be acknowledged as sons and daughters of God.

The greatness of the beatitudes is that they are not wistful glances of some future beauty, or even promises of some distant glory. Rather, they are triumphant shouts of joy that nothing in the world can ever take away. They are the pronouncements of blessings on the faithful of every age. The blessedness described is in *this* world where there is sometimes pain, sometimes sorrow, and sometimes poverty, all in the midst of life and within creation -- a creation restored and redeemed through Jesus Christ. This is where the blessings of God can be found. All thanks be to God.

You may have noticed that Jesus does not address the beatitudes to anybody in particular. As he teaches on the mountain, he releases his blessings into the air. "*Blessed are the meek,*" whoever they are. "*Blessed are the merciful,*" wherever they may be. "*Blessed are the peacemakers,*" whoever, wherever. If the blessing fits our circumstances, welcome to the kingdom! If it doesn't fit, we can put ourselves in a position to receive the blessing. If we desire a blessed life, we must get out into the world and be poor in spirit. If we want to be blessed, we must become peacemakers.

This is a good interpretation of the beatitudes. The problem is it doesn't work like a scientific formula. There is no assurance that anybody who tries to live out the beatitudes will turn out to be blessed.

There is no simple assurance that living the beatitudes will make somebody's life a blessed bed of roses. We can claim them as values to teach our children and virtues to pursue in daily life, but they are not stepping stones for success, at least not in this age. As someone said, "Blessed are the meek? Try being meek tomorrow when you go to work and see how far you get. Meekness is fine for church, but in the real world, the meek get to go home early with a pink slip and a pat on the back."

It is difficult to understand the beatitudes of Jesus. Perhaps this wild, untamed quality is the very source of their power. Anybody who learns these words from the Gospel of Matthew may not understand them right away. Whoever takes these teachings seriously may wonder how Jesus can actually say them in such a rough and aggressive world. They do not comfort anxious parents, give quick assurances to politicians, or promise relief for feisty priests. But they do unsettle us.

If these blessings by Jesus are truly inscribed upon our hearts, they prompt us to wonder whether or not they are true. Are the poor in spirit blessed by God? Is God revealed to the pure in heart? Will God give the earth as a free inheritance to the meek? We cannot know completely unless we are following Jesus, who epitomized what it means to be meek, pure, and poor in spirit. Does God show mercy to the merciful? Does God claim those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness? We cannot be sure until we have been set free by the death and resurrection of Jesus, who claims us in mercy. When we are sufficiently unsettled by the living word of the living Christ, then the beatitudes can offer their blessing.

What kind of life does God value? We cannot really know until we follow Jesus Christ to the point that it makes a difference in how we live. God's blessing comes not to those who pursue meekness, but to those who pursue Jesus Christ and welcome God's earth as a holy inheritance. Satisfaction comes not to those who work to make themselves righteous, but to those hungry for God's righteousness, as revealed in the cross of Jesus.

The beatitudes of Jesus announce a realm of values that press us to ask where we belong. Do we belong to a world of persecution, war-making, and death? Or do we belong to a realm of mercy and comfort, purity and righteousness? Daily life can confuse us, until we claim our place among Christ's unfinished saints. As we follow Jesus, the blessing of the Gospel is that we begin to see the realm of God which this world does not yet see.

Frederick Buechner tells about watching a scene in the Ken Burns film series on the Civil War. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, and veterans from North and South gathered at the battleground to reminisce. At one point, the veterans decided to reenact Pickett's Charge. All the participants took their positions, and then one side began to charge the other. Instead of swords and rifles, this time the vets carried canes and crutches. As both sides converged, the old men did not fight. Instead they embraced and began to weep.

Buechner muses, "If only those doddering old veterans had seen in 1863 what they now saw so clearly fifty years later." Then he adds: "Half a century later, they saw that the great battle had been a great madness. The men who were advancing toward them across the field of Gettysburg were not enemies. They were human beings like themselves, with the same dreams, needs, hopes, the same wives and children waiting for them to come home ... What they saw was that we were, all of us, created not to do battle with each other but to love each other, and it was not just a truth they saw. For a few minutes, it was a truth they lived. It was a truth they became."

Where do we belong? When we look out the window, we see a world of division and war. There are debts to pay and dangers that scare us to death. It looks like our children and grandchildren are at risk, and the future seems tenuous, at best. But now and then, as we follow Jesus, this weary, old world is unmasked as an illusion, and we see beyond a shadow of a doubt that the kingdom of heaven truly is at hand.

Rev. John W. Caster
Trinity Presbyterian Church
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