

## **God's Promise: Blessing**

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Matthew 5:1-12

There is often a disconnect when we hear about God's blessing. What I mean is that we experience life as difficult. We have financial hardship, marital turmoil, job difficulties, bitter relational ugliness, cancer and other illnesses, systemic evil in policies of discrimination — generally we experience bad things in life and also watch them happen in the world.

Then we hear that God has blessed us, and we are left thinking "What? You've got to be kidding. I don't see the blessing. In fact, our world seems to be going in the opposite direction."

Because we think, of course, that blessing is about financial freedom and abundance, marriages that are deep and meaningful, doors that are open to good jobs that are energizing and pay well, good friends that are supportive, laws that are just and protect people. Generally, we equate blessing with good things that happen to us and the world.

Then we are left with a disjointed feeling of tension between the way we see and experience the world and what we think of as God's blessing.

Hmmmm...

Let's read about one of Jesus' teachings to see if it might help us understand this tension a bit more.

### **READ MATTHEW 5:1-12**

Wait a minute! Maybe on a first read, this passage can leave us even more confused. How are people blessed when they are "poor in spirit"?

And what makes someone blessed when they are mourning a loss?

And how in the world is someone blessed when they are being persecuted?

Blessing seems to be in the opposite direction as these experiences.

Can blessing be the simple knowledge that when you are persecuted, you are in good company because they also abused and persecuted the prophets long ago? Is that supposed to take away the reality of our current state?

Are we blessed in the middle of our trials because they will only be bad for a season of time?

I don't know about you, but I still feel miserable because the pain is still real.

Let's step back for a moment to look at what is going on in this passage to see if we can sort it out.

First of all, the first verse says that Jesus saw the crowds and headed up the mountain. We might think logistically about this verse. There was a big group of people and Jesus wanted to talk with them, so he needed higher ground to effectively do this, so he went up to a higher elevation, up the mountain, so that they could hear him better.

Perhaps that is one side of it. Another side is to consider that the mountain is a main character in this story and it tells us something about what Jesus was doing and saying.

So, what did a reference to mountains mean in Jesus' day?

Mountains were associated with the divine and thought of as holy places. Dangerous and mystical things happened up on the holy mountain.

They believed that God would come down to meet certain people on the mountain, halfway between the realm of people and the realm of God.

If you think about it, this is still the case today. We talk about those "mountain top" experiences where we are energized by inspiration and feel full of life.

Teenagers often experience this while away at a faith-based summer camp experience.

It's also why adults arrange for spiritual retreats up in the mountains.

Dream Vacation Magazine has published their top 22 spiritual retreat locations in the United States. It isn't surprising that two of the top three destinations are in the mountains.

The number one location is the Esalen Institute at Big Sur, in California. In a magnificent retreat center positioned on a cliff overlooking the ocean and also inland nestled in the glorious mountains of the California coast, people find an oasis and experience yoga, massage, Tai Chi, mineral baths, mindfulness classes, spiritual workshops and more in Esalen's 120-acre landscape.

Number three on their list is the Shambhala Mountain Center in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. You can go as part of a group retreat or for self-created spiritual exploration. They offer more than 100 programs including: mindfulness, meditative bike rides, contemplative arts, and more in their 600 acres of simply beautiful mountainous terrain, that many have attempted to capture in song like John Denver in Rocky Mountain High, and Katherine Lee Bates who penned the classic *America the Beautiful*, poetically referring to the Rockies as “purple mountains majesty,” one of the great treasures of the American landscape.

So, who’s ready for a road trip?

OK, take a sigh, and come back to our story.

The history of the Jewish people was very important in Jesus’ day. Way back in the book of Exodus, the second book of the Old Testament and a central book for all Jews, we can read about the “Mountain of God” where Moses met God through a bush that was burning but not being consumed.

It was later, after Moses and the people were freed from slavery in Egypt, that Moses went back up the mountain and encountered

God again. This time he received the law that would govern and sustain the people for many generations to come. This included the Ten Commandments, which were the centerpiece of their law.

So, when we read about Jesus going up the mountain, sitting down and then teaching the people, it is a picture of a new Moses who was bringing not only a message from God, but a central teaching that would revolutionize how the people would live their lives.

So, what is this teaching about blessing?

Jesus was not pointing to philosophical and timeless truths about the reality of the world. Neither was he telling them to change how they lived so that they might be blessed.

Instead, Jesus was pointing to a new balance, a new world that God was bringing into reality. He was proclaiming wonderful good news to those who had been forgotten on the bottom rung of the social and political ladder.

These people were close to the heart of God and God had a special place for them in the family.

Jesus was pointing out that the world that had been upside down for as long as any of them had known was being turned right side up by God.

In God's new world, those who have been weak, can take courage because God is providing strength.

Those who have been poor can rejoice, because God has given them a whole kingdom and they are rich.

The peacemakers have a key role to play in this new world too because peace is central in God new world.

And he goes on...

This is Jesus painting a picture of the coming kingdom of God among people. It was also his call for them to live in a way that would make sense in this new world.

What amazing kind of chutzpah does a person need to envision a brand new world that looks so different from the one in which they currently live — and not only envision it, but stand for it with every fiber of their being.

Do you know what "chutzpah" is? It is an old Hebrew word that means someone had the guts, the audacity, the brazen nerve to step

outside and beyond the borders of acceptable behavior.

For a long while, the word held a very negative connotation and socially a person with chutzpah was looked upon with disapproval and condemnation for their subversive behavior.

However, the word was broadened inside Jewish tradition and a new phrase emerged among Jewish teachers called "chutzpah klapei shmaya" which included a raw, gritty, positive edge that some called "spiritual audacity."

The term was interestingly used by Jewish teachers, who were called rabbis, in reference to Moses.

When Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the people down in the village got restless and crafted a golden calf to worship instead of the true God. God told Moses about this while he was still up on the mountain and that God was ready to wipe the people off the face of the earth due to their worship of a false god.

This is when Moses stood up to God with chutzpah klapei shmaya. He argued with God on behalf of the people. In Exodus 32:11-14 it says this:

*But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"*

What chutzpah klapei shmaya did it take for Moses to talk with God that way, asking God to repent, and change direction! Perhaps he would be chastised and severely punished by Almighty God for questioning and challenging God's immutable authority.

Instead, this is what the next verse says:

*And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*

Chutzpah on our behalf! Chutzpah for a world set aright! Chutzpah!

In the tradition of Moses, Jesus had a ridiculous amount of chutzpah klapei shmaya. On our behalf he stood in the face of no agreement to declare blessing for those who most need it. This is God's new reality, no matter how bad things get. Jesus has brought the chutzpah to build a new world for us right here!

Now, let us also muster some chutzpah and join God's work to build a community where blessing is a reality for all people!