



Practical Blessings

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| Matthew 5:1-12

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When I was a little girl, we learned about the Beatitudes in Sunday School, the blessed-are-those statements that Jesus made, that we heard together this morning. The littlest girl in our class couldn't quite manage to say "Beatitudes" - and that's fair enough, I think she was maybe about four years old. So instead of Beatitudes, she said beauty-tudes. And it was pretty cute. But you know, I think she might have been on to something.

The Beatitudes are beautiful and poetic, certainly; we often read them as promises, that we can take hold of when we need them, when we find ourselves in those situations that Jesus named. But the Beatitudes are more than beautiful promises; they are instruction for living with...a beauty-tude or a beautiful, blessed attitude.

I suspect that the reason we read the Beatitudes as promises for us and stop there is because, if they are intended as instructions for living, well, they're not very good ones. They're impractical at best, and unattainable at worst for the world in which we live, and for the people we know ourselves to be, in our heart of hearts. While we might admire the teaching, we worry about the implications of putting them into practice ourselves. We live in a time when the blessings are given to those who succeed, often at the expense of others. To be poor in spirit, peaceful, merciful, and meek will not get you very far in a culture grounded in competition and fear.

Who can survive, let alone flourish, attempting to live into the spirit of the Beatitudes? It's very tempting to put a pin in the Beatitudes and just come back to them when we need the comfort when we are grieving or feeling poor in spirit, as validation when our mercy and peace-making weigh heavy on us, as a boost of encouragement when righteousness seems distant and persecution near at hand.

But the Beatitudes are the opening salvo in Jesus' great teaching sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. First and foremost, they are instructions for living; and they were intended as both a hook to his listeners and a concise, revolutionary critique of the way people lived in the societies that surrounded him. Living daily into the spirit of the Beatitudes is a challenge, but not an impossible one.

Jesus did not intend for only the occasional extra-saintly and holy person to be able to manage it. Jesus meant them for everyone, to be lived by all his followers. So today, we're taking a closer look at the Beatitudes from this perspective of instruction for blessed living, and seeing what we can pull from the whole collection of them to inform how we live, the character of a Christian life, our own beautiful attitude.

The easiest way to grasp the Beatitudes as instructive for our lifestyles and attitudes is to flip them around. The opposite of the poor in spirit are the proud in spirit; the opposite of those who mourn are those who think only of silly, fun things and lack a depth of feeling. The opposite of the meek are the aggressors, of those who hunger for righteousness, those who exploit injustice; of the merciful, the cruel, of the pure in heart, the lawless; of the peacemaker and persecuted, those who start conflicts, and those who compromise on everything and thus stand for nothing.

Even with just this exercise in opposites, we can see two very distinct ways of living begin to appear. We see that the Beatitudes invite us into a way of being in the world that leads us to act and think in particular ways. Let's dig a little deeper into each one.

To be poor in spirit - what does this mean? As reported in the Gospel of Luke, this first beatitude is simply "the poor;" that's a little clearer, but not really very helpful - there's nothing blessed about being poor. But riches can easily become pride, so when we consider Matthew's version - the poor in spirit - we can start to see poverty of spirit as something more like an absence of pride or arrogance, and the presence of openness and a desire to be filled by God...the poor, after all, will not be sent away empty according to Jesus' mother's Advent song. Some Bible scholars think that poverty of spirit - this openness and recognition of our own smallness next to God's largeness - is the foundation of a Beatitude-shaped life, especially when we fold in a clearer vision of the world around us, in all its opulent, wasteful, consumption-driven mess. A simplicity and openness of spirit, in place of a proud, crowded one.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted is a beautiful promise when we grieve. But Jesus knew very well that grief in and of itself is not blessed; he wept for his friends and for himself, too. So what kind of mourning brings blessing?

Perhaps blessed are those who accept their own sorrow and know it as an inevitable part of loving another person. And blessed are those who voluntarily share their neighbour's pain and do not look away from the suffering and misery of the world, and respond with compassion. And finally, perhaps, blessed are those who join God in his grief at sin, in us and in others and in the world, in mourning all the unnecessary pain and hurt it causes. I'm not sure it's even possible to be Christian and not mourn for the world God loves so much when we see its broken hurting places, and not express compassion and care when and where we can.

There is nothing weak about being meek. So let's side aside any ideas about self-effacing, false modesty and let's set aside the image of a meek person as the human equivalent of a door-mat. One of the other places in Matthew's Gospel that we run across "meek" is Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and that gives us a good definition of meek: trusting God completely, relying on God's strength and acting obediently, and for others. Meekness is gentleness and not being self-seeking; an inheritance is necessary, then, for the meek, because they would never seek gain or a reward from themselves.

To hunger and thirst for righteousness: the verbs -hunger and thirst - are verbs of need and yearning. Blessed are those who need and yearn for righteousness...not those who think it's a good concept or a nice idea. Can humanity claim righteousness? Our personal and collective history is failure, with a few accomplishments scattered around. But what Jesus teaches is to need it and yearn for it, and that, we can do. Righteousness is rightness with God, a particular flavour of rightness that includes equity, which is fair treatment of others based on their need, and justice, which must be equally applied to all if it is to be real, God-inspired justice.

Mercy follows naturally here; a revolutionary idea then and now. Compassion and pity were not Roman ideals, and found very little traction in most Greek philosophies of the day. The Pharisees believed that suffering was a just punishment for sin, so mercy was not even on their radar. But Jesus taught blessed are the merciful; blessed are those who indiscriminately offer help and comfort to anyone who needs it, who are not cruel, even when a person's wrong-doing is legally dealt with through punishment. Whether we are merciful by our actions, or by our words, or by our prayers, Jesus teaches that mercy is something we give and hope to receive; from God, of course, but from one another, too.

Purity of heart sounds perhaps the most impossible of all the Beatitudes. In Jewish philosophy, “heart” meant the whole person: emotions and thoughts and intentions. A more familiar way of understanding this for us is probably the psalmist’s prayer for God to create in him a clean heart and a right spirit: a heart that follows God’s law and commandments, that seeks forgiveness, and acts in imitation of Christ. And like righteousness and mercy, a clean heart and peace-making flow together.

Jesus placed great emphasis on peace-making, his whole life was book-ended by proclamations of his peace-making role among us: the angels proclaimed peace on earth at his birth, and Jesus himself ended his ministry by proclaiming, “my peace I give to you.” Jesus’ task of peace is the bringing together of people and groups who are at odds with one another, and reconciling them - making them right with one another - and making us right with God, too, without which there can be no lasting peace in any sense of the word, from out-right conflict to abuses and broken relationships.

And that brings us to the last beatitude: blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Christians can be just as argumentative or intolerant as any other group of people; we are human, and God knows that. We can also be purposefully offensive, and all these attitudes can lead to being persecuted. But none of those attitudes have anything to do with Jesus, and it’s no coincidence that this is the last beatitude, I think. Following the instructions of the first seven would pretty much stop us from seeking out persecution by being cruel or proud or inciting conflict for fun. But as much as we are in the world and acting for its improvement, the world is not always going to understand or approve of us or our Saviour or what we believe. This final reward we are promised gives us a last, clear and yet paradoxical sense of Jesus’ beatitude perspective: we are offered a reward we no longer demand or seek for ourselves; the reward we are given is immeasurable and yet identical for each one of us, and it is overly generous and yet a free gift.

Perhaps the Beatitudes as instructions for living sound even more daunting a challenge than when we began this morning, but I hope not. Jesus was preaching to ordinary people, just like us, in many ways. It’s thought, too, that the Sermon on the Mount was not a one-off preaching engagement for Jesus.

Jesus travelled around Lake Galilee and in neighbouring regions, preaching and teaching as he went, and it's thought that the transcript that we've got in Matthew and then another, slightly different version in the gospel of Luke - these are examples of Jesus' preaching, repeated again and again, to crowds upon crowds of people.

The Beatitudes and the sermon that follow are instructions for living for everyone, teaching a particular way of being in the world that is life-giving for everyone, even those who don't live it and just experience other people living their lives that way. And taking all the beatitudes together, we can start to see a pattern emerge, some common threads woven through this whole first part of Jesus' message that we can summarize under three principles: a life lived in the spirit of the beatitudes is a life lived with simplicity, hopefulness and compassion.

By simplicity, I don't mean a lack of sophistication or plainness or anything like that. Rather, it's having that openness, the humility and the desire to have our impoverished spirits be filled by Jesus; it's about a willingness to listen and learn, and trusting Jesus enough to hear his words for what they are, not what we would prefer them to be. It's about hearing Jesus' teaching simply for it is, rather than layering on our own preconceived ideas about what we're prepared to hear, and that would include thinking that the beatitudes are impossible to live by, so must be about something else. We still receive more comfort than challenge when we hear Jesus saying directly to us, "you are blessed in this life when you demonstrate humility, bring a peaceful presence, open your heart to others, and show mercy to those who need your help." Hearing Jesus' words, taking in Jesus' teaching, simply spoken, is the first way we can live into the spirit of the beatitudes.

Although there's a lot of wishful thinking in the world, I wonder how much real, solid hopefulness there is. The distinguished theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote that the death knell of the church is when the overall attitude moves from anger to cynicism, and I suspect he's probably right, if what's making us angry are all the ways the world and our lives are not as they ought to be, in God's kingdom. When we lose our capacity for righteous anger over the way the world is hurting, when we stop mourning the brokenness sin causes, stop hungering for justice and equity...cynicism may well take over. Cynicism is deciding to accept what is, because there is no hope for things to be better. Cynicism grinds us down and makes us give up; the beatitudes invite hopefulness because Jesus not only lays out a better way to live, he gives us the capacity and the supportive community to actually do it.

When we are hopeful, when our hope is in Christ and following him, we stand in the world sure of the possibility that the day will come when mercy, humility, peace and love are descriptions of the world around us, no longer simply what we hope it will be.

And finally, compassion. Compassion isn't feeling pity for someone or expressing sympathy. To pity someone means you feel sorry for them; sympathy means that you can grasp what another person is experiencing and feel able to offer some advice. Henri Nouwen defined compassion as something that grows with the inner recognition that your neighbour shares your humanity with you. We are each unique in our person and in our experiences; but we share the gift of being created in God's image. Our needs are similar, whether those needs are for material things or spiritual things, justice, freedom, dignity or purpose. Compassion is the thread that binds us all together.

So - from promises of comfort and distant future hope, to life-changing and world-upending instructions on how to live - the Beatitudes have a lot to say to us about life as a follower of Jesus, things we can do, not just what we receive. We're going to stick with the Sermon on the Mount for a couple of Sundays, digging into the details of how Jesus is asking us to live. Some of those teachings are hard to hear simply, and harder still to see how hope and compassion are present within them. So I hope you'll keep this perspective on the beatitudes in mind, as a prelude that sets the tone for the more challenging and troublesome parts of Jesus' teachings.

Living daily into the spirit of the Beatitudes is a challenge, but not an impossible one. And as a way of life, the beatitudes - just these few opening lines of Jesus' teaching sermon - offer us the possibility of living with a beauty-tude - a beautiful, blessed attitude that has the power to change the world, and renew and reshape each one of us as we live them. Jesus' beatitudes are instructions for living in the spirit of these blessings together and in the world, blessings we can all faithfully live into with simplicity, hopefulness and compassion. Thanks be to God, amen.