

## The Beatitudes - Matthew 5: 1 - 12

Jesus climbs a mountain, and when you hear the word mountain in the bible, take notice. Because mountains are places of revelation; think of the Transfiguration, think of Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah to Moses. And on this mountain, Jesus will impart the Sermon on the Mount, illustrating teachings and values of the kingdom of God. His sermon covers chapters 5 through to 7 of Matthew's Gospel. And Jesus begins with what many consider its piece de resistance - the Beatitudes, the Blessed statements. He is about to set some traditional ideas about life and religion on their head.

The term blessed in Jewish understanding was of blessedness as God's provision, fullness of life, rightness of relationships and even material security. But it was also acknowledging that when conventional security failed, blessedness still came from recognising God's presence and purposes. That God was still there and in control. This blessing ultimately had very little to do with chance or circumstances.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the meek, the merciful, the persecuted, the reviled.” I imagine these words may have sounded just as improbable to Jesus' first hearers as they do to us, because for many of us, this is the antithesis of how we know this world really operates. Because we are confronted with:

Blessed are the rich: for they have everything a person could ever want or need.

Blessed are the trouble-makers: for people take notice of them.

Blessed are the pushy and morally indifferent: for they get their way in the end.

And don't we see examples of this everyday, in our nation, our world. Taken at face value there could be a lot to be uneasy about in the Beatitudes: is Jesus simply presenting pie in the sky, fantasy vs reality, a set of alternative facts for his listeners? Because what Jesus is preaching is radical. Theologian Frederick Bruner says: “The beatitudes sets the world's and

even many of the church's values systems on their head. Jesus is the countercultural force par excellence".

There is no doubt that Jesus was a man of the Beatitudes. An alternative value system. His earthly life was characterised by poverty, mourning, meekness, a hunger for righteousness, mercy, peacemaking and of course persecution. And if we are following Jesus, can we expect this to be our path also? Some even say the beatitudes are virtues to cultivate, to aspire to to be more like Jesus.

Well that may be fine and noble when one is thirsting for righteousness, or peace or mercy but what about the mourning, the being persecuted, being reviled. And isn't Christian history littered with stories of people misinterpreting beatitudes of mourning, of persecution and actively seeking such circumstances in the quest to become more spiritual?

However, I believe if we simply approach the Beatitudes as an instruction manual of how to be a 'good' Christian, and tick off the categories we think we are cultivating or heaven forbid, have "mastered" - we are doing ourselves and Jesus' teaching a great disservice.

Bruner explains: "Most of the beatitudes do not first of all describe people with *good* spiritualities so much as they describe people in *bad* situations... we will miss the good news of Jesus' blessings and their inclusivity, if we *prematurely* hear Jesus blessing virtues or good attitudes or good works. First and foremost, the Beatitudes are Jesus' suprisingly countercultural God-bless-yous to people in God-awful situations." They are statements of fact, not imperatives. This doesn't mean we are not to hunger and work for righteousness or be peacemakers or merciful. But let us first and foremost see the Beatitudes as statements of grace not duty.

Because note who Jesus is very likely speaking to. To the disciples, but in the previous chapter he has been healing the sick, the demon possessed, the afflicted. It's highly likely that at least some of them have clambered up this mountain to remain with him: people

who typify those who lack, who are poor in many varied ways, in need of grace and hope. People who cannot do anything to bless themselves.

We see this particularly in the first four beatitudes: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and and thirst. These are all people in some sort of deprivation. What it shows us is that God blesses broken people. And that is a radical thought: certainly in our world and even in some of our churches.

Take for example the first beatitude: blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. But just who are these poor in spirit? Theologian Holly Hearon points out that the only equivalent expression to “poor in spirit” in ancient literature occurs in the Dead Sea Scrolls where it speaks of God giving courage to those who have been beaten down by people and situations that are oppressive and unfaithful to themselves and God. They can be seen as those who recognise and acknowledge that they are helpless without God’s help. Remember the saying, “God helps those who help themselves”. Well, it isn’t in the bible.

Bruner suggests that the “great enemy of the gospel is successism and the idea it is the winners of the world who have God’s blessing”. Positive thinking seminars will tell us, “Blessed are the rich!” and even some church seminars will tell us, “Blessed are the rich in spirit! Those who have got it together spiritually,!” Whatever that means.

However, you would think to do the will of God, a requirement would be to have a richness of spirit, not a deficit, but this highlights the countercultural aspect of the Beatitudes: Jesus sides with those who fail and feel this failure. These are the ones heaven is for. One of the best examples of this is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: The Pharisee who says, “Thank God I’m not like those sinners, I follow all these requirements” and the tax collector who says, “God, be merciful to me a sinner”. Jesus leaves us in no doubt which one was justified before God, more open to God and therefore more able to be blessed.

The poor in spirit feel far from virtuous, far from capable simply in their own capacity, and this constantly draws them back to dependency on God and God blesses this. This is why

this first blessing is in fact the life blood for all of the beatitudes and indeed the sermon on the mount. All the rest flows from it.

People who recognise a genuine spiritual deficit and reach out for God will bring a humbleness, will hunger and thirst for God's right rule. They will be merciful because they will recognise and live out the mercy God has shown them. They will allow God to soften their hearts, they will work for his kingdom values and many sadly, be persecuted and reviled in the process. They will as the prophet Micah exhorts, "Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God".

There is a wonderful grace filled inclusiveness to the Beatitudes. It doesn't matter who you are, you don't need to strive, you are not on your own in difficult circumstances, in negotiating this thing called life. Blessed are those that need help, that are struggling, that are mourning because God blesses broken people.

Blessed are those who seek kingdom values of peace and justice and meekness, even if they are countercultural to the way the world works because such actions bring the light of God's kingdom into our broken world and God blesses this. This is all part of the mystery of the strange up-side down kingdom of God, and blessed are all who turn and embrace it.

The Lord be with you.