

Blessed Matthew 5:1-12

We hear it all the time. “I’m blessed.” But what does it mean to be blessed? Usually we associate it with plentitude, like when we have a lot of something: money, property, talent.

Today were we to write our own beatitudes, it might start off like this: Blessed are the college educated, for they get the good jobs. Blessed are the attractive, for they get fawned over. Blessed are the arrogant and the ignorant, the mean and the petty, the shallow and self-absorbed, for they get their own reality TV shows.

Every age and every culture has its own understanding of what it means to be blessed and they are all, surprisingly, similar. Almost all of them involve fame or power or wealth — and sometimes, all three.

Jesus takes all of this and stands it on its head, re-defining what it means to be blessed.

The Beatitudes, our reading today, has been called “Jesus’ opening salvo” for his teachings in Chapters 5-7. They’re not simple advice for practical, Christian living but prophetic pronouncements based on the idea that God’s kingdom is both coming and already present.

Have you ever noticed that most of them contain a description of the present and a proscription for the future (blessed “are” ... for they “shall” ...). Each beatitude marks that which already is and that which is about to be.

One more thought before we turn to the beatitudes themselves. To be blessed (the Greek word is *makarios*) means to be fortunate, happy, in a privileged situation, well off. Some suggest that the American equivalent would probably be, “okay.” That being blessed is to be in an okay place or in a fortunate circumstance. It has nothing to do with what you own or how much power you have, but everything to do with your relationship with God and God’s people.

With these opening lines, Matthew begins to fill in the content of what the “kingdom” is and what “discipleship” looks like — both of which run counter to what this world anticipates — in Matthew’s time and ours.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This first beatitude and the last beatitude form bookends for all the others and speak to the same issue in the lives of faithful Christians — a humble and repentant heart. The “poor in spirit” are those who know that they are dependent upon God for their salvation. They understand that their own acts, their own knowledge, and their own talents will never be sufficient.

It’s when we recognize our need for salvation that we can most authentically receive it.

This beatitude has nothing to do with being physically poor and everything to do with recognizing that we are in need of God’s salvation.

This first beatitude reminds us that for all our degrees and born again revelations, the entire truth of the gospel can be reduced to two lines from a children’s song: “Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.”

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. This beatitude is not about the mourning that comes in the midst of life. We all mourn the death of a loved one or a good friend. Here “those who mourn” refers to those who see and understand the fallen state of the world — the whole world and not just their personal enemies or the enemies of their country.

They see that separation and estrangement are rampant in families, neighborhoods, towns, cities, states, regions, countries. They see that sin abounds and lament that God's kingdom has not yet come. They acknowledge the tragic chasms that divide races and nations, genders and ethnicities.

The comfort that's promised is that they'll be part of that kingdom when it does come. They'll see it, experience it, and be part of it. Whether the kingdom comes in small events scattered through our everyday life, or all at once at the end of time, they'll see it, know it, and celebrate it.

Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. While "meek" can be translated timid or shy, used here "meek" can also mean humble or low.

This beatitude is not so much about adopting an attitude of meekness as it is about accepting the fact that we are not in control of all that happens around us. Like the "poor in spirit," the meek are those who rely upon God.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Righteousness gets a bad rap in the modern day Christian church. We tend to associate it with self-righteousness, which is moral arrogance, the notion that I am better than, more moral than, closer to God than others who are theologically inferior to me because they believe the wrong propositions or practice the wrong rituals.

There is, however, a good kind of righteousness that we are called by Jesus to pursue. It's relational righteousness. To be righteous, in this sense, is to be in a right relationship with God. It's to recognize that God is the creator and I am the created; that God is the one I worship; that God is the one who directs my life.

To hunger and thirst after righteousness is to seek diligently for God's will and to strive mightily to do it. The promise is that if we do these two things we'll get that for which we seek and will come to know and understand God's will so that we can do it.

Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. Mercy is not, necessarily, pity. If we're very careful we'll mentally paraphrase this to read, "Blessed are the pitiful for they shall be pitied." Nothing could be further from the point.

The mercy mentioned here is not a feeling of pity but an action taken. Matthew is referring to concrete acts of mercy, which is much more dangerous than mere feelings of pity.

Mercy described here is the kindness and gentleness that are offered to others regardless of whether they deserve it or not. Those who give mercy to their neighbor will receive it from God.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Usually we think of people who have a pure heart as people whose brains are free of bad or impure thoughts. They don't have inappropriate sexual thoughts. They don't think about things like revenge. They don't fantasize about getting even or doing unto others as has been done unto them.

But that's not the pure heart that is spoken of, here. What Jesus is talking about here is actually the brain. The pure in heart have a mind that is focused on God and God's will for their lives.

The world asks us to divide our loyalties and our devotions — God on Sunday (morning) other things the rest of the time. No problem. This beatitude teaches that the only way to see God is to focus our total attention upon God.

Showing up in church for one hour a week to be spiritually fed, mentally entertained, and emotionally inspired won't cut it. Those who experience the presence of God in their

lives are those who focus on God and dedicate their lives to the pursuit of God's will. The promise of the beatitude is that those willing to do that work will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Peacemaking is not pacifism. Pacifism is, well, passive as in "I refuse to do violence." Peacemaking is active as in, not only do I refuse to do violence, I will place myself between those who would do violence and those they would do violence to in order to make peace.

Peacemakers are the ones who actively do the things that make for peace. Peacemakers stand in the gap and say, "I will not fight you, but neither will I allow you to harm another through violence." Peacemakers use passive resistance and non-violent interference as they pursue peaceful resolution to differences.

Matthew offers the promise that those who fit this description will be called "children of God." Not by other people, but by God. God will claim them as God's own! Now and at the end of time.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. This eighth beatitude is a paraphrase of the first. Matthew closes the beatitudes with this re-phrasing of the first and then transitions into the next section by using an imperative: "Rejoice!"

"Rejoice!" Not in spite of persecution but *because* of it. The fact that we are persecuted proves that we are the authentic Christians. The fact that we are persecuted proves that we are following the tradition of Jesus and the prophets before him. Indeed, these eight beatitudes are, to a large degree, paraphrase Isaiah 61 (make note of that. Look that up later today).

This transitional ending reminds us that our greatest witness, our greatest testimony, is in our ability and willingness to suffer for our faith in Jesus Christ. Why is it that most Christians will bake a casserole for anything but we will get arrested for nothing? Matthew reminds us that Christians are known by both the friends we keep and the enemies we make.

And we should be just as careful in choosing our enemies as we are in choosing our friends.

The beatitudes are not historic. They care little for the past. Each begins in the present (are) and ends in the present or the future (shall).

The kingdom that has been promised to us is God's doing and even though we can experience it in glimpses, snapshots, and occasional moments of bliss, we can't fully live within it until God has completed the new creation which is promised in scripture.

I close with the words of biblical scholar, M. Eugene Boring: *The future tense of the beatitudes resists all notions that Christianity is a "philosophy of life" designed to make people successful and calm today, in the present moment.*

Christianity is not a scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance in one's career, or preserve one from illness. Christian faith, instead, is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, that God's future will be a time to do mercy and not cruelty.

Blessed are those who lived this life now, even when such a life seems foolish, for they will, in the end, be vindicated by God.ⁱ Amen.

ⁱ M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew." *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1995), p. 188