

Jesus Is Preaching Sermon Series  
Who Is Blessed? – Matt. 5:1-12  
January 6, 2023  
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Happy New Year! The church's new-year present to you is a new sound system, which will hopefully make it much harder for you to ignore the sermon each Sunday. This past week, when I came into the sanctuary they were installing the new speakers and had a large scaffolding set up on the chancel. I asked the worker, "Any chance you could leave that here for Sunday so I can preach from up there?" The guy said, "I bet you are preaching the Sermon the Mount." And I said, "You, sir, are going to heaven!" I decided to stay down here and let Jesus do the preaching from on high.

To start this new year off right, we will be looking at the Sermon on the Mount, the longest sustained teaching in all four gospels. Jesus covers a lot of ground in these three chapters, from words about who is blessed to how to treat your enemies to guidance on worry and judging. We won't be covering every topic during this series, but we will highlight the parts that we feel are most applicable to our lives today. You see, not only did Jesus preach then, he is still preaching to us today.

The focus of the whole sermon, and the section we read this morning, is the kingdom of heaven, also called the kingdom of God. Jesus' goal in coming to earth is to show the world what the kingdom of heaven looks like, to give us a glimpse of a life lived solely for God's glory. Through his teachings and the way he lived his life, Jesus shows us what it's like to live with God's blessing. We pray to God every Sunday, "Thy kingdom come." In this sermon, Jesus is showing us what that looks like. People who live for God's kingdom first are blessed, but not in ways we would think.

That's why we have to be careful about how we hear the Sermon on the Mount. These are not a set of instructions on how to get to Heaven. "If you act meek enough, you'll get your Golden Ticket." Too often the Beatitudes have been misused as behavioral requirements or ethical standards, and the truth is no human being can live up to these. And to be honest, who would want to? "If I can just be poor enough or mourn enough, I'll get into God's kingdom." None of these qualities are desirable.

So this language is not transactional: "Act this way to get this reward." Instead, it's descriptive of what life is like when lived for God and God's kingdom. We'll unpack that a bit in a few moments. The sermon is an invitation to those who want to live with God's blessing and a condemnation of those who think they already did because of their power, their religious standing, their authority over others. Their focus was on external performance – "Look at how religious I am as I put money in the offering plate!" This sermon is more about inner motivation, what drives us to be faithful even when life is a struggle.

That's why this sermon sounds a lot different from on top than it does from underneath. If you are up top, it sounds confrontational, because it excludes you from those who are blessed. But if you are on the bottom, it sounds like grace. I'm going to venture to say that almost all of us are on top. Sure, we have our struggles and challenges, but in the grand scheme of things, we are not "the least of these." So, what do we do with this series of blessings?

Let's look at a few, and I'll be comparing the version we read today with the Message translation to help our understanding. The first one says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." The Message says, "You are blessed when you're at the end of your

rope. With less of you, there is more of God and his rule.” Poor not only means literal poverty but a lack of arrogance, a sense of one’s own need. It’s easy for us to forget that because we are not literally poor. To quote a character from “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills” when talking about a friend of hers and all that she has, “She’s rich, honey! She’s rich!” We’re not just rich, we’re RICH, aren’t we? And we can often translate our material wealth into arrogance, a feeling that we don’t need anything because we have it all or can buy what we need.

And yet, as we know, it is sometimes the richest people who are spiritually the most poor. Jesus contrasts the spiritual self-sufficiency of the religious leaders with a kind of spiritual bankruptcy that compels dependence on God. Gustavo Gutierrez says, “The poor are favored by God not because they are better than others, but because they are poor.” People who have a robust ego and strong sense of self-worth don’t need God. They find their identity and security in themselves, their accomplishment, their things. But they are missing God’s blessing. Where do you find your identity? Your security?

What about “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted?” The Message says, “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.” No one would choose to mourn, but this is life and you don’t have a choice. There are families mourning within our congregation, right here in this sanctuary this morning. But we not only mourn what we’ve lost, we mourn what others don’t have. One commentator said, “People in mourning are people who lament the present condition of God’s people and the state of the world. They lament the fact that God’s kingdom has not come and God’s will is not being done.” Does it upset you that others don’t have enough?

How about the meek? Hardly a quality that’s desirable in our world today. If you’re meek, you’ll get run over. And yet Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” The Message says, “You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.” When you live in light of God’s glory, you recognize your own humility and brokenness, which opens you up to experiencing the greatness of God. Are you content with who you are or are you trying to be someone else?

Jesus says those who hunger for righteousness are blessed, or as the Message says, “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.” The rich never have to worry about being hungry, and they don’t have to worry about the hunger of others. But people who hunger for righteousness are not only those who suffer literal hunger pangs but who are driven to anger over the inequitable distribution of goods and services that allow others to starve. When you see the world through God’s eyes, you hunger for things to be set right. When you sit down for your next meal, will it bother you that not everyone has enough to eat?

I love what the Message says about “Blessed are the merciful.” It says, “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.” Religious leaders and those who think they know it all cannot receive God’s mercy because they have become so self-satisfied with their own accomplishments that they don’t believe they need mercy. Why worship a Savior when you don’t think you need to be saved from anything? Will you let yourself be interrupted in order to care for someone else?

When Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart,” he’s not talking about merely the avoidance of impure thoughts or actions. He’s referring to a particular kind of single-mindedness. To be pure in heart means your focus is on God, not divided between God and money and work and status and all the other things that seek to draw us away from our faith. If

we looked at your bank account, your phone, your browser history, where would we say your focus is?

There's a pattern we see in these Beatitudes that is played out in the last statements about peace and persecution. These words are not just about a state of being but a way of living. Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are those that think about peace," he says, "Blessed are the peacemakers," those who actively strive to make peace in this violent, conflicted world. A life lived for God's kingdom is a life devoted to actions that are in line with what Jesus showed us.

That can get us in trouble because everything Jesus says here is in opposition to who the world tells us we should be. The world says be RICH, Jesus says the poor are blessed. The world says be aggressive and powerful, Jesus says the meek are blessed. The world says might makes right, Jesus says the peacemakers are blessed. Jesus reverses the general value system of this world, Where our world tells us to be winners, Jesus says, "Blessed are the losers."

Here's the point I hear Jesus making. Christianity is not a philosophy of life. It is not a scheme to reduce stress, to lose weight, to protect us from illness, or to help us get along with our cranky friends or family. Christianity is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that, against all evidence, Christ is alive and at work in this world to make the kingdom of heaven real among us. And it's here, if only in fleeting glimpses. Do you want to see the kingdom of heaven? Look at the poor, the meek, the hungry, those giving their lives for peace, those who are persecuted and ridiculed and ostracized because they dare to put their faith above everything else. The world calls them "losers," but Jesus says they are blessed.

So, what do we do with this? Try to be more poor or more meek? Should we go hungry or be more sad in order to get God's blessing? Of course not. Those characteristics are not behaviors to emulate; they are the results of putting God first. If we seek first God's kingdom, those characteristics will develop naturally within us. If we truly commit to following Christ, we won't have as much as we have now, our hearts will be broken by the way this world treats people, we'll get angry when others suffer unnecessarily, we'll lead with mercy instead of vengeance, we'll focus on God more than anything else, we'll seek peace at all costs. And we might not be persecuted for our faith, but we might lose some friends and status and influence when we say "No," when we stand up against the world's systems of injustice and exploitation.

As we start this new year, are we willing to give up so much? Are we willing to live out the radical teaching of Jesus? Are we willing to strive to be the people God knows we can be, that God created us to be? This world needs to see a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, but to do such work comes at a cost. We might even be called "losers." Hmm. May we be so blessed.