

Blessed
Matthew 5:1 – 12; 1 Corinthians 1:18 – 31
Sunday, September 22, 2019

From time to time, I like to revisit a sermon that I consider *foundational* for the way in which we approach God and faith and ministry. And for Christians there is arguably nothing as foundational as the Sermon on the Mount. This is Jesus' most extensive teaching that we have as to what it means to follow him and live our lives under the rule and reign of Christ. And Jesus *begins* the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes. So that's what we're going to focus on today.

At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been going around healing people, teaching people, and his reputation has started to spread all around the region. He has called twelve disciples to follow him and learn from him, but there is this *larger* crowd following him, as well. Matthew's gospel says that people from Jerusalem, Judea, the Decapolis, and beyond the Jordan were following him. The Decapolis literally means "ten cities," it was like a Greek settlement in Israel, established by Alexander the Great. So basically what's going on in the Decapolis is that there are Greek people, Roman people, *non-Jewish people* living in Israel. There were people in this crowd from the Decapolis and from *beyond the Jordan*. "Beyond the Jordan" is another way of saying, "outside Israel." So people from the Decapolis and "beyond the Jordan" were *not Jewish*.

This is really important, because what this is telling us is that this huge crowd that was following Jesus was made up of *all kinds of people*: Jews, non-Jews, Greeks, Romans. This was not a good, faithful, uniform Jewish crowd. They were not the kind of people who were considered *blessed* by God. Some of these were people who didn't even *believe* in God. Yet there was something about Jesus that was drawing them and compelling them. So Jesus wasn't just

speaking to good faithful religious people. He was speaking to a huge mixture of people from all kinds of political, economic, and religious backgrounds; all walks of life.

So one day, Jesus sits down on a hillside and starts teaching his disciples, and all these other people are listening in to what he's saying. He says:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are *you* when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

More than *what* Jesus was saying here, like what it means to be poor in spirit or pure in heart or meek, I want to focus instead on *why* Jesus was saying this. Because I think *that* is what we so often miss when reading the Beatitudes.

In my Bible there are notes on the bottom of each page. If you look at the notes on the Beatitudes in Matthew, this is what it says: “The Beatitudes proclaim God’s favor toward those who aspire to live under his rule.” What that means is, if you are striving to do these things that Jesus is talking about, then God will bless you. Right? If you are trying to live under God’s rule, then these blessings are for you. You hear the little play on words all the time that these are

the *Be-attitudes*, like these are attitudes that we should strive to *have*, and then God's blessing will pour out on us.

That's how a lot of people think about the Beatitudes and about faith in general. That if we work hard and do our best to live good, upright, moral, righteous lives, to make good choices and we don't kill anybody or lie too much, if we *do that*, then God will bless us. When we look at the Beatitudes that way, Jesus is just giving us a list of things that we *have to do* or *have to be* in order to receive God's blessing. *Where is the good news in that?*

Because if *that's* the way that faith works, if *that's* the way that God works, blessing those who *earn it*, who have done something to *deserve it*, then we get caught up in this endless cycle of, "I *have to do more and more and more* in order to please God. It *never ends*. There's always *one more thing* that I have to do to earn God's favor. One more thing I have to *be*. One more sacrifice I need to make. One more Bible study I need to attend. One more book I need to read. One more prayer I need to pray. And if I *mess up*, what does that mean? That God *doesn't* bless me? That God *doesn't love* me? That God *punishes me*?"

That's a *horrible* way to go through life. It doesn't work. It only leads to feelings of guilt and failure, and it's not good news.

Jesus did not come to give us another set of *rules* to follow. He did not come to give us another *law* to follow. Jesus came to *set us free* from the *burden* and *judgment* of living under the law. Jesus did not come to say, "God loves you and blesses you *if...*" So we can't read the Beatitudes that way.

This is not a list of things that we are supposed to *strive to be*. Because who in the world *wants* to be poor in spirit, right? I mean, I just shared with you last Sunday how *I* have been there, and it's not fun! Who in the world *wants* to *mourn*; to lose someone they love? That's not something we're *striving* for. Who in the world *wants* to be *persecuted* and *hated* and *reviled*? This is not a list of things that we should *aspire to be*. Jesus is not saying, "If you *do this*, if you *attain this*, if you *aspire to be this*, then you will be blessed by God."

Jesus is not giving *instruction* here. "Here's how to get God's blessing." This is not a *command*. He doesn't begin with, "Here's what you need to *do* in order to be blessed." He begins with, "Blessed *are...*" Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with an *announcement*; a *proclamation*. And what he's announcing is that God is on the side of everyone who has *no reason* why God should be on their side.

This is *not*, "If you *strive to be* poor in spirit, if you *strive* to mourn or be persecuted, then God will bless you." What Jesus is saying is, "If you *are* poor in spirit or mourning or persecuted or meek, then you *are* blessed by God. The rest of the world might hate you and push you away and alienate you and say that you are *worthless*, but *God loves you* and *values you* and *favors you* and *blesses you*."

This is the announcement of God's *unconditional love and blessing* for the hurting, the broken, the down-and-out, the people that *no one else wants*. God says, "*I want you*. Blessed are those who have *no reason* why they should be blessed. The favor of God is pouring out upon all those who do not *deserve* the favor of God."

Why? Jesus doesn't say *why*. He doesn't *explain*. He just says, "This is how it *is*. This is who God *is*. This is what God is *like*. It's not because *you* are good enough...it's because *God* is good enough."

Now, our natural *reaction* to that as people who grew up in America in the 20th century is, "No, no, no. God blesses the people who make the right decisions and do the right things at the right time. God blesses the people who are morally upright. God blesses people who believe the right things. God blesses the people who go to the right schools and work hard and stay out of trouble. God blesses the people who are nice and kind and generous and good and follow all the rules. *That's* who God blesses." Which *then* says that God's love and God's blessing are for the people who can *earn* it.¹

But it's like Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "God has made foolish the wisdom of the world...Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are *not*, to reduce to nothing things that *are*, so that no one might boast in the presence of God." Our *boast* is not, "Look how great I am! Look what I have done!" Our boast, Paul says, is in the Lord, "Look how great *God* is! Look what *God* has done in me!"

The Beatitudes are the announcement that if you are weak and low and despised, God's blessing is for *you*. In your suffering, in your misery, in your brokenness, in your poor, spiritually destitute state in which nothing is going right and there is nothing good within you, *God is on*

¹ Rob Bell, from the sermon "Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit," September 13, 2009

*your side.*² It's not that God helps those who help themselves. It's that God helps those who *cannot* help themselves. *That is good news.*

I can't tell you how many times I have been sitting, talking with someone...The man who has been to rehab not once, not twice, not three or four but *five* times for his alcoholism and drug addiction, and he has relapsed *every single time*, and I'm sitting with the family and they say, "This is *tearing us apart*. How can we forgive him? How can we ever trust him again? We're ready to give up on him."

The young woman who has so much unbearable pain on the *inside*, because she is absolutely *convinced* that no one, not even her parents, loves her or accepts her, so she just has to find a way to let that pain *out*, and the only way she can find is by cutting herself. Or she thinks she's not pretty enough or skinny enough, so she makes herself throw up after every meal, so she can look like the girls on TV.

All these people, with their *junk* and their *problems* and their *mistakes*, we look at all these people and almost *instinctively* look *down* on them. We think, or even worse we actually *say*, "What a *mess*. He needs to get it together. She needs to straighten out. We don't really want people in our churches like *that*, do we?"

The young man who is struggling with doubts, and he doesn't even know if he *believes* in God, because how could he trust God as his father when he can't even trust his *own* father who abused him for years. We look at him and think, "Well, he needs to get that figured out before he can

² Rob Bell, from the sermon "Blessed Are the Poor In Spirit," September 13, 2009

get involved *here*.” And all the time, God is saying, “Those are actually the people who *have* my blessing, because they are the ones who *need me the most*.”

What did Jesus say? “It’s not the *healthy* who need a doctor, but the *sick*. I came, not for the *righteous* (why would *they* need me? They’re already righteous!), but for *sinners*; for the hurting, the broken, the sick.”

Jesus does not give us another *law* that we have to follow. “Do *this*, be *this* way, and you will have the favor and love and blessing of God.” No, Jesus says, “Just the way you are, with all your pain, with all your baggage, with all your brokenness, *you* are loved and blessed by God *just the way you are*. *You are accepted* by God just the way you are.”

So what are the implications of this for us? The first is that if this is where you find yourself (hurting, struggling, broken), then God is on your side. God is *with you* and *for you*. That you do not have to *do* or *be* more and more and more. You just have to *be* yourself, and that is enough for God, even (or *especially*) if *you* are a total mess. This is how God receives *us*.

But then we also have to ask, “Is this how we are receiving *each other*? Is this how *I* am receiving the people around me?” Am I accepting you *as you are*, or am I trying to make you *do* or *be* something else *before* I will love you and accept you? What Jesus is saying here is that you, with all your mistakes, all your struggles, all your bad decisions, all your doubts, *you* are accepted and loved and blessed by God, *just the way you are*. Is that what *we* are saying, too? With our words, our actions, the ways that we treat other people, are we saying, “I love you and accept you *just the way you are*, even if you *never* change.” As a *church*, are we *showing* others,

“You are welcome here, with us, *just the way you are*, and we will love you, even if you *never* change.”

Shane Claiborne writes that the church should be a place where we can stand up and say we are wretched, and everyone will nod and agree and remind us that we are also *beautiful*. *That is exactly* what Jesus does here. “You are wretched. You are poor in spirit. You are meek. You are *hurting*. You are *broken*. You are persecuted and hated. And you are also *beautiful* and *blessed* in God’s eyes. I am here for *you*.” Is that the Jesus we are showing people? Because *that’s* the Jesus that changes *lives* and changes *churches* and changes *communities* and can change the *world*.

So the question for *us*, as individuals and as a church: are we simply *receiving* the blessing, or will we *be* the blessing of God to a broken and hurting world?