

Blessed Fools  
Matthew 5:1–12; 1 Corinthians 18–31  
Saturday, January 22, 2023

Let us pray: Make us to know your ways, O Lord. Teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation; for you we wait all day long. Amen.

When I was in seminary, I worked in the library, down in the basement, where we received donated books. If a pastor retired or died and donated their books to the seminary, we would receive them and process them, decide which ones to keep and which ones to get rid of. I worked down there with another student named Aisha. It was just me and her, day after day, processing these books. We would talk for hours about scripture, theology, what we had learned in class that day, life, politics, everything. We had some really deep, amazing conversations and got to know each other really well.

But the one conversation that sticks out in my mind was this one day when, out of nowhere, she asked me, “Patrick, what is *wisdom*?” I sat there thinking about it for a while, but all I could say was, “Aisha, I don’t know how to answer that.” It was one of those things where you know it when you see it, but I couldn’t *define* it. I mean, I was 23 years old, what did I know about *wisdom*? But I’ve thought about that a lot over the past 20 years. It’s a question that I have sought to answer.

The dictionary defines *wisdom* as “the accumulation of scholarly knowledge or learning about what is true or right.” But is that all wisdom is – accumulating knowledge and information? Because I’ve met people who didn’t graduate from high school, but you sit and talk with them, and there is *wisdom* there. And I’ve met PhDs who are the exact *opposite*. So what does it mean to have *wisdom*?

Here's what I have come up with in the 20-plus years since then. Wisdom is not just what you *know*. Wisdom is how we *use* what we know. What we *do* with it. How we *act out* what we know to be good and true and right. Wisdom is the *proper use* of knowledge.

Paul talks to the Corinthians about wisdom – human wisdom and the wisdom of God. And the lectionary has paired this reading with the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, I think as a way of saying, “This is what the wisdom of God looks like.” This series of blessings that Jesus announces reveals to us the wisdom of God and stands in stark contrast to human wisdom. So let's start with the Beatitudes.

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The word *beatitude* comes from a Latin word that means *blessed*. So what does it mean to be blessed? In our world today, what does that look like? What does human wisdom say that it means to be blessed? *Who do we say is blessed?* People who are successful, who have everything they need. If you have enough money and a good job and a home and a family, “I'm just so blessed.” If you have good health, you hear people say, “I've been blessed with good health.” We often associate blessing with strength and success and security and prosperity; when everything is going *right* in your life, you are *blessed*.

This word *blessed* that Jesus uses in the Beatitudes, it's the Greek word *makarios*, which also gets translated as, “happy.” You will see some translations of the Bible where it has Jesus saying, “*Happy* are those who....” So to be *blessed* means to be *happy*? What about people who are *not* happy? What about people who are sick and hurting and struggling and poor; people who do *not* have good health or jobs or homes or families; people who are *not* successful or strong or prosperous? Has God *not* blessed them? Would you see a man sleeping on the streets

in Philadelphia or a child who lost her whole family in a bombing in Ukraine and say, “Blessed?” Would we watch a video of a man being beaten to death by the police and say, “Blessed?”

This is the way that the world thinks about blessing, that the proof of God’s blessing is that you are doing *well*; that you are *happy*; that you are strong and stable and secure. Jesus says something entirely different. He turns that notion completely upside down. He says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Not those who have a *lot* of spirit, who are *rich* in spirit. “Blessed are those who mourn.” Not those who are happy. “Blessed are the meek,” those who can’t speak up for themselves and get pushed around and taken advantage of. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Not those who are *full* of righteousness. “Blessed are the merciful.” Not the *powerful* who can impose their will on others. “Blessed are those who are persecuted, who are hated and lied about.” Not those who have it easy and are well-respected and loved.

A lot of times we read the Beatitudes like a list of things we are supposed to strive to *be*. But who in the world *wants* to be poor in spirit? Who *wants* to mourn? Who *wants* to be pushed around and taken advantage of? Who *wants* to be persecuted and hated and lied about? If you’ve ever been there before, it does not *feel* blessed. This is not a list of things that we should aspire to be. Jesus is not saying, “If you do this, if you attain these things and aspire to be this, then you will be blessed by God.” He is saying, “If you *are* this, if this is the situation you find yourself in, you may not be blessed by the world, but you are blessed by God. If you are poor in spirit or mourning or persecuted or meek, then God’s blessing is for you, because you *need* it. The rest of the world might look upon you with scorn 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.”

The blessing of God does not look like the blessing of the world. It turns our understanding of what it means to be blessed completely upside down. But Jesus begins his ministry with this announcement that God is on the side of those who have no one else on their side. It is the announcement of God's unconditional love and blessing for the hurting and broken, the oppressed and persecuted, 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 are not favored by the world."

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It's like Paul says to the Corinthians, "God chose what is foolish in the world...God chose what is weak and low and despised in the world...so that no one might boast in the presence of God." So that no one could say, "Look what *I* have done! Look what *I* have achieved and accomplished! Look at the blessings that *I* have attained!" If God only worked through the wise and the powerful and the mighty and the respected in the world, it would be like, "Well, of course they can do that. Look at them! They have everything they need." But when God chooses the weak and the low and the despised in the world and works through *them* and pours out God's blessing upon *them*, we look at that and say, "There is *no way* they could have done that on their own. *That* is the power of God at work in them." They can't boast in their own ability. They can only boast in the Lord. They can only say, "Look what God has done in my life!"

The Christians in Corinth had plenty to boast about. Corinth was an important city, often referred to as the "Crossroads of the Mediterranean World." It was a major Roman colony, a center of trade for the whole Mediterranean region, and it became the center of Christianity in Greece. Paul pours out praise on the Corinthians at the beginning of this letter, saying that they

are eloquent and knowledgeable and not lacking in any spiritual gift. There are plenty of reasons why others would look at them and say, “They are *blessed*.”

But we saw last week, at the beginning of this letter, Paul tells them that they have lost their center, their focus. They have started boasting in their own wisdom and eloquence and strength and ability; in their own leaders. They have started viewing themselves or others as the source of their blessings, losing sight of Christ and the cross. So that is the first thing that Paul does; he points them back to Jesus and the cross as the source of their wisdom and strength and blessing. And that doesn’t make sense. A crucified savior doesn’t make sense. That’s why Paul calls it a “stumbling block” and “foolishness,” because according to *human* wisdom, it is. “Crucifixion was the *opposite* of power. It was a humiliating death reserved for slaves, criminals, and social outcasts. Only the powerless died on the cross.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus empties himself out and places himself alongside the outcasts and the weak and the powerless and the poor and the suffering. And Paul says *that* is the *power* of God and the *wisdom* of God. So if that is where you find yourself – weak, powerless, suffering, spiritually empty, mourning, pushed around and taken advantage of, hated, talked about, lied about, desperate for justice – then the good news of Jesus Christ is that God is *with* you, God is on your side, God’s blessing and favor and love are for *you*, not because everything is going *right* in your life or you *deserve* it, but because something is *wrong* and you *need* it.

But also, if that is where *Jesus* stands – with the weak and the powerless and the persecuted and the suffering and abused – if Jesus blesses the poor and the hurting and the outcast, and we are called to *follow* him, to center our lives on Jesus, to *be like Jesus*, then *we* are called to stand with

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<sup>1</sup> From *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A* by Walter Brueggemann, Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, and James Newsome. Pg. 123.

the poor and the powerless and the outcast and the oppressed. The church of Jesus Christ is not called to stand and side with the *powerful*. We are called to bless the weak and the suffering. And the question we have to ask is, “Are we?” As individuals, as a church, are we standing where Jesus stands, blessing those whom Jesus blesses? Because if we are not standing where Jesus stands, we’re standing in the wrong place. Are we building *ourselves* up and boasting in *our* blessings? Or are we emptying ourselves out like Christ and boasting in the Lord; in what *God* is able to do in us and through us?

Wisdom is the proper use of what we know to be good and true and right. And we have been told here, by Jesus, what is good and true and right; what God’s blessing looks like. What will we *do* with that? How will we *use* that? In ways that serve *ourselves*, or in ways that serve *others*? In ways that *reinforce* the power structures of this world, or in ways that lift up those who are the *victims* of that power? Because we worship a crucified savior who was broken and poured out for the world, but was *then* raised to power and glory. Because the blessing of God is for those who need it most. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.