

A CURSE OF BLESSINGS

How and Where We Meet God

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

I

I want to look with you this morning – and again next week – at one of the most puzzling portions of Christ’s most famous sermon – the one we’ve come to call “The Sermon on the Mount.” Spanning chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew’s gospel, the Sermon on the Mount lays out a vision of the radically different way of living that Jesus calls “the Kingdom of God.” It is here that Jesus paints a picture of what it looks like to truly influence others with a righteousness that is more than skin-deep. In this sermon Jesus tells us how God wants us to manage our anger, sex-drive, marriage, money, and more. He teaches us about the radical forgiveness and love we are to extend to our enemies and the radical honesty with which we are to examine our own motivations and actions. Jesus unmasks the difference between religious practices done to impress other people and ones which are actually spiritual disciplines that bring us closer to God. He gives us guidance on overcoming worry, on praying properly, and on building our lives on foundations that can survive life’s inevitable quakes and storms. In no place, however, is the radically different way of the Kingdom of God made more vivid than in the very opening verses of the Sermon. Let’s take a moment to read them together...

Over the years, we’ve come to call this passage “The Beatitudes” or “the blessings.” The repeated word in the Greek New Testament is “*makarios*” (or “makarioi” in the plural) and it literally translates as “blessed ones.” The ancient Greeks originally used this term to refer to that state of blissful contentment, far beyond the cares and concerns of ordinary people, that only the gods enjoyed. Over time, however, the term *makarioi* also came to be used to describe people a little lower than the gods, namely, the wealthy elite of Greek society. Their money and power kept them above the worries and work of life and, therefore, qualified them as “blessed ones.” To be *makarios*, in other words, was identified with being high and mighty, beyond stresses and strains, above pain. Eventually the word *makarios* simply came to mean “happy,” as in care-free. ¹ Well-known preacher, Robert Schuller, popularized that definition of the word in a book about this text entitled, “The Be-Happy Attitudes.”

And that’s also why what Jesus says to us in the Beatitudes is so confusing, isn’t it? I mean, when we read the catalogue of people that Jesus says are “blessed” here, does it sound like the Happy List to you? The poor, the grieving, the meek, the hungry? That’s not the Happy List; it’s the Hardship List, isn’t it? Who in the world would possibly desire the curse of blessings like those? Can you see why this text often puzzles people?

But this is primarily because we still don't have the word right. Jesus, you see, was not actually preaching in Greek or to Greeks here. Jesus very likely gave this sermon in Aramaic, a form of Hebrew, and he delivered this sermon to Jewish people. For the Hebrews, the word translated *makarios* held a very different meaning. In Hebrew and Aramaic, to be "blessed" doesn't mean to be happy in the giddy, care-free sense. It means to "BE in the right path." What Jesus gives us at the front of the Sermon on the Mount is a catalogue of conditions and circumstances where someone – maybe you, maybe someone you know – might actually feel fairly unhappy. Yet it is these very conditions and circumstances which can actually place you or them "in the right path" to draw closer to God. All of the radically different ways of living that Jesus goes on to describe in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount are actually impossible to live out, except for those who have drawn close to God. When we get in his path, he lifts us up and takes us places we could never go on our own strength. That's what Jesus is getting at here.

II

So let's sit with this idea a bit this morning. We'll cover the second-half of this text next week, but let's just look today at the four opening Beatitudes and ask ourselves: "How do these conditions put us *in the right path* to be closer to God?" The FIRST, says Jesus, is when we are **"poor in spirit."** **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."** To be poor in spirit, is to have little left of your spirit to give to anyone. It is to be at that place in life's path where the passions that previously fueled you are largely gone. Your inner fuel tank is bone dry; you've tried every self-help strategy you can think of but hope has given way to depression and depression to a dull aching emptiness that nothing seems to fill. Some of you may be there right now.

Jesus suggests that in that very moment, you are closer to the kingdom of heaven than at most other points in your life. Why? Because when there is nothing left of your will and resources, there is nothing left to stop God from pouring into the vacuum. God is never so determined to come close and act on your behalf as when you feel that there is no resource left for you to draw upon. Where God is concerned, desperation is the doorway to inspiration. Are any of you there right now? Ask God in and he'll fill you with the riches of his life.

Jesus says there is a SECOND avenue by which we draw close to God and He to us. **"Those who mourn,"** said Jesus, **"are in the right path, and they shall be comforted."** I know that there are more people here today that are in the midst of mourning than is evident from just looking around. Garrison Keillor, host of Public Radio's "Prairie Home Companion," once commented on his son's pattern of sitting in his room just listening to the strains of heavy-metal blues music blaring on the stereo, singing out a song that seemed "so wrenchingly sad." "Where did he learn that?" wondered Keillor. "I give him enough money. I'm a nice dad. We get along well."

I give him lots of things. He does well in school... Where's he get this anguish?" And then Keillor hits the nail on the head, and says: "I guess we all got it inside of us."

Sometimes great grief is hidden behind a brave face. A loved one dies and leaves us behind to pick up the pieces. The body we've been able to trust for years begins to break down. A marriage perishes. A natural disaster shatters the lives of a million people. Children starve and die. We *feel* this anguish inside. So how can Jesus say that those who thus mourn are "blessed"? How are they "in the right path?"

The answer is because when we feel grief, we are much closer to feeling what God feels every moment of every day. Some people picture God as an unfeeling, distant deity. Some see him as an angry, fist-shaking being. But Jesus shows us the weeping God. He introduces us to the God who anguishes over the pain and sin and lostness of this world. Every time you experience mourning, you are walking closer to this God. You are in the right path to start to feel his presence with you at a deeper level – wrapping his arms around you, joining you in those sobs, waiting with you for the day of resurrection to come. If you are in mourning today, beloved, this I promise you: You are not alone. He is with you on that path.

And then, there are **"the meek."** They too are in the right path. And they **"shall inherit the earth."** What did Jesus mean by that? Well, let me ask you. Have you ever been in a position of conflict with someone over whom you had some knowledge or power but, in spite of the fact that your ego spurred you to press your advantage, you chose not to? Have you ever been in a position to take credit for something, but refused to step into the limelight because it seemed so important to someone else that they do? Have you ever been faster and stronger than someone else but you slowed yourself down, you gentled your touch down, so that you could walk by that person's side? If any of these scenarios are familiar to you, then at some point you have been meek.

Meekness didn't originally mean weakness or timidity, as we have come to define it today. Meekness originally meant *power restrained*. Just as we get closer to the *mind* of God when our own resources are completely impoverished... Just as we get nearer to the *heart* of God when we mourn... we are rarely nearer to the absolute *strength* of God than when we are meek. God shows his awesome power most clearly in his loving restraint -- in His refusal to demand, destroy, judge, or control people when He certainly could. And if that sort of meekness is characteristic of the way you deal with people, then dear one, you are in the right path -- the path of the King. You are the kind of person, says Jesus, to whom my Father in heaven will bequeath authority. You are the kind who will inherit this earth.

Jesus says that there are four sorts of people to whom God promises to draw especially near: Those who are spiritually poor -- whose tank is empty; Those who mourn -- who feel the anguish of this world; Those who are meek -- who voluntarily take the back

seat, the second place, the servant's shadows; and FINALLY, those who **"hunger and thirst for righteousness,"** says Jesus, they are in the right path and **"they will be filled."**

On our trip to Southeast Asia this past month, the delegation from our church met a remarkable man from Beijing. For many years, this man had been an atheist. He had served as a professor at one of the Chinese capitol's great universities. He was highly respected, reasonably affluent, in the world's terms "well-fed." When the bloody massacre at Beijing's Tienanmen Square occurred in 1989, however, this man got in touch with a hunger that he hadn't realized he had. He found himself undone by the witness of those courageous Christian students who stood up for the sake of freedom as government tanks and soldiers bore down upon him. "What do I hunger and thirst for so much," he may have wondered, "that I would go to those lengths to get it and stand up for it?" It was the start of his conversion.

Today, that professor is one of the lay-leaders of an 800-member house church that meets for worship every week in the capitol city of China. On many week-days, he travels down from Beijing to Hong Kong to attend a Ph.D. program at the China Graduate School of Theology. He wants to equip himself to be an even better disciple and leader. He hungers to be more like Jesus. He thirsts for greater knowledge of the Master's way. And he is but one of the *millions* of dedicated Christ-followers who – more than the media will ever tell you – are slowly re-shaping the heart of China. That's good news, don't you think? We'd like our bankers to be committed Christians!

We met so many blessed people on this recent trip. I think of the woman who once headed up Hong Kong's entire civil service. She had more than 200,000 employees under her command; but her greatest passion today is growing as a disciple and helping others grow. I think of the children we met who live in the squalor of a refugee camp. But they get themselves up at 6:00 a.m. to go to the Bible School that is the heartbeat of that camp. I could go on, but here is my point. There are people who are pursuing righteousness -- Christlikeness -- with the sort of hunger and thirst I too often just associate with lunch.

How about you? For what are you hungry and thirsty? As Greg Ogden reminded us last month: "No one ever became like Jesus because they thought they should. You've got to want it." Our nation, our communities, our families, need people who want to become more like Jesus. Do you want it enough to do something different in these months ahead – to take up a spiritual discipline, join a class, get in a group, pursue some counseling, serve in a ministry, share your faith at school or work, invite someone to church. I ask this question because the promise of God to you and me is every bit as good as the one made to that professor in Beijing: If you will hunger and thirst after my Kingdom, **"You shall be filled."**

III

So, on our way out today, what do the Beatitudes have to teach us? Here it is in a nutshell: If it feels like a curse to you that your inner tank is empty and you are poor in spirit... If it feels like a curse to you that you have suffered a terrible loss and are in mourning... If it feels like a curse to you that you're barely exercising the power you could, you're in a position of meekness... If it feels like a curse to you that there is an ache in the pit of your soul for something more... Maybe you are not actually accursed. Perhaps you are "makarios" – blessed. Maybe rather than being lost you are actually *in the right path*. God is drawing you closer to him -- and, in due season, the kingdom, the comfort, the earth, the very infilling of God, *will be yours*.

Please pray with me...

Lord God, we want to BE people who exhibit the character of your Kingdom. We know that there is no way to soak those values up, short of drawing close to you down paths we often fear. When our spirits are drained of all resource, enable us to believe that you shall come with the refreshment we need. When our hearts are mourning over the anguish of pain and change, help us to feel your comforting arms which never leave us alone. When our ego seems denied by relegation to the back row, awaken us to the knowledge that in such meekness we imitate you. When there is within us a gnawing hunger, and clawing thirst that nothing in this world will sate, remind us in that hour that the only thing which finally fills, is You. For we offer these prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Text: Matthew 5:1-12

The BE Attitudes (Part 1)

1. To what extent do you identify with any of the conditions described in the first four Beatitudes? Explain.
2. Do these conditions feel like curses, blessings, or both? Why?
3. What do you think is meant by the specific promises contained in the Beatitudes
 - Yours is the kingdom of heaven
 - You will be comforted
 - You will inherit the earth
 - You will be filled
4. How have the following conditions affected your spirituality or relationship with God?
 - Poverty
 - Mourning
 - Meekness
 - Hunger/Thirst

¹ Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes, *CrossMarks.com*.