

## INTRODUCTION

The summer I was eight years old, I spent several weeks with my grandparents in a cabin in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California. Every morning before breakfast, as was their custom, my grandparents read aloud the Upper Room devotional booklet, and prayed. But this time my nana added something new. “We are going to memorize the beatitudes!” she said. “The what??” I asked. “The Beatitudes. They are saying of Jesus, and they are very important.”

Ok, I thought. If my Nana says so, it must be so! I’m quite sure I did not understand them at the time, and honestly, I am still trying to grasp all that Jesus intended, when he first spoke them on that hillside by the Sea of Galilee. I invite you to join me on this journey of “Unexpected Blessing”. Memorization is recommended/encouraged, but not required!

Today we begin a series on the Beatitudes, or the first part of what is commonly called Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. This “sermon” is found in Matthew’s gospel, chapters 5-7. Our focus will be on Matthew 5:1-12.

<sup>1</sup>Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup>and he began to teach them. He said:

<sup>3</sup>Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup>Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup>Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup>Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup>Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

## PRAY

The context in which we find the Beatitudes is significant. In Matthew's gospel, the so called "Sermon on the Mount", introduces the Beatitudes. Some consider this Jesus' inaugural address, as it is the first collection of his teaching and comes early in the Matthew's account. At this early point in his public ministry, Jesus had called a few disciples: Peter and Andrew, James and John.

Jesus had been joyfully announcing what he called "the Gospel of God", the good news, proclaiming that God's kingdom was near! The sick were being cured, the blind given sight, the lame walked, sinners were forgiven and the mentally ill were coming to their senses. Lives were being turned right-side-up and people were flocking to listen to this man, Jesus.

Up until this point, Jesus' message could be summed up in one sentence: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Matthew 4:17

Repent means "think again" or "turn around". Make a U-turn!

The Kingdom of God is near, don't miss out on the Good News that is happening right here and now! Turn around and trust your life to God!

What is the Good News Jesus is announcing? The Good News is that Jesus is ushering in a whole new era—"The long-awaited, glorious, re-creative reign of God is invading the world."\* The future is breaking into the present; the Kingdom of God is breaking into the world, here and now \*(p.15,D Johnson The Beatitudes)

In the Beatitudes, Jesus is painting a portrait of a people who are focused on God's Kingdom values, of those transformed by God's amazing grace, of those who are filled with God's Spirit, of those who are indeed, blessed.

While these sayings are brief in length, they are deep in meaning. I trust that they are instructive to us, less in what **to do**, as to **how to be** Kingdom people.

Each "beatitude" begins with the word "blessed", **Makarios**, in Greek. It is occasionally translated as "happy" but that is not the best translation here. **Makarios** is "a state of being in relationship to God, in which a person is "blessed" from God's perspective, even when he or she *doesn't feel* happy or isn't presently experiencing good fortune. This does not mean a conferral of blessing or an exhortation to live a life worthy of blessing, rather it is an acknowledgment that the ones indicated are blessed. Negative feelings, absence of feelings, or adverse

conditions cannot take away the blessedness of those who exist in relationship with God.” (p. 204, M Wilkins, NIV Application Commentary on Matthew)

Blessedness is not dependent on our feelings or on our circumstances! Blessedness is how God thinks of us! In other words—God blesses whomever God chooses, based solely on God’s gracious choice. Such blessings are expressions of God’s favor, totally unsolicited by the recipients. In that regard, they are unexpected! One would not expect the poor, or those who mourn to be blessed, but these are in fact, among those who are close to God’s heart.

In the Gospels, a young peasant girl named Mary, is chosen by God to bear the son of God, the Messiah. It is understood that she is the recipient of God’s favor and blessing.

One day my friend Pat Thompson stopped by my office to visit. I was startled when she announced with great relish: “I am God’s favorite!”

“What makes you think so?” I asked.

“Why not? I am sure God’s smiling on me!” She replied.

**One way to clarify what the Beatitudes are about, is to start with what they are NOT:**

**These blessings are NOT conditional statements...if you are poor in spirit, then you will inherit the Kingdom. IF...then.** This is **not** how blessings function, if you will!

These blessings are stated in the **indicative**—that is, they are factual statements of **how things actually are** in God’s kingdom and economy.

**These blessings are NOT items on a “to do” list** that we are to check off as something we have accomplished or achieved. They are not transactional. Nothing we can do will make God love us more—or less--than God already does. Trying to become more righteous, poorer, meeker, hungrier, or whatever--will not gain us favor with God. We are blessed, purely because God loves us and graces us.

**These blessings are NOT intended to shame us.** We need not fear or be paralyzed by our inability to live into these blessings. A blessing is not earned, it is ours NOT because we deserve it, but because we don’t!

**The Beatitudes are NOT permission slips for passivity.** In other words, while God takes up the cause of the oppressed, that is never an excuse to tell those who suffer oppression that God has ordained it. Quite the contrary, we who embody Christ-like Kingdom values, are those that work on behalf of the oppressed.

**The Beatitudes are NOT ‘pie in the sky, by and by’.** The Kingdom of God is initiated by Jesus, so it is already present. The Kingdom of God is also a future reality that will come in its fullness when the Risen Christ returns. So we live in the “in-between”—the tension between what already is, and what is yet to be; the “already” and the “not yet”.

In other words, these blessings of comfort, of inheriting the earth, of experiencing fullness or satisfaction, of mercy, of perfect justice and shalom—**these are NOT just future promises** that will be experienced in heaven but are also experienced now. **These blessings are not just present or future but both/and.** God’s Kingdom—inaugurated by Jesus—is here now, and yet to be completely realized.

In a recent online gathering of pastors, one confessed that since CoVid19, he had realized that he had taken for granted, the fellowship of his colleagues in ministry. Likewise, I suspect that you and I have come to similar realizations. Have you discovered things you have taken for granted? Getting a haircut? Hugging grandkids?? I took for granted the ability to gather in our sanctuary for worship, to be together—LESS than 6 feet apart, to be able to hold the hand of a friend, or to hug another or to put an arm around the shoulders of one who simply needs encouragement.

Surely those, but more: the ability to move about freely, to visit a friend or family member, to travel and cross even state borders without threat of quarantine. May we be mindful of the blessings we enjoy—both spiritual and material!

If these beatitudes/blessings are NOT:

\*Conditional, but indicative

\*Not items on a “to do” list, but rather about how to BE like Jesus.

\*Not intended to shame us but fulfill us.

\*Not ‘pie in the sky, by and by’ BUT a reality here and now.

WHAT more can be said about what these blessings actually are?

By God’s grace these are expressions of God’s Kingdom in which we participate. They are expressions of Christ-like character expressed in and through us by the Holy Spirit!

Perhaps one “blessing” of this season of adversity—a CoVid19 global pandemic—is that it makes us literally, pause in place, and appreciate what is truly important. All extraneous parts of our existence have been stripped away.

What is essential to our lives as Jesus’ disciples?

What does it mean to be the church? (And I am not referring to the building !!)

What does it mean to be the people of God?

What is essential to our mission, to what we do and how we do it?

How do we best communicate the Good News of God’s Grace and love in new ways?

Do former ways no longer fit the culture that is evolving out of this life-changing event?

How do we best communicate the Good News of God’s Grace and love in new ways?

If we are so blessed, how then do we bless others??

How might we bless others, as we have been blessed?

What would happen to us, to our hearts, to our church and our community if we offered blessings to our neighbors as generously as God offers unquestioning blessings to us?

We can only do this—we can only bless others—if we do so from a sense of abundance, not scarcity. When we act, we must do so out of an abundance of love, for perfect love casts out fear. We serve others from a position of strength in Christ, not our human weakness. Our identity as Jesus’ disciples is one of blessedness!

Bill Cain took a break from his job in order to take care of his father who was dying of cancer. Though physically frail and dependent on Bill, his dad was still mentally alert and his mind, lively. In a role reversal common to adult children who care for their dying parents, Bill would read to his father after readying him for bed in the evening, exactly as his father had done for him in his childhood.

Bill would read to from some novel, and his father would lie there, staring at his son, smiling. Exhausted at the end of the day, Bill would plead with his dad: “Look, here’s the idea. I read to you, you fall asleep.” His dad would apologize and close his eyes. But moments later as Bill resumed reading, his dad would pop one eye open and smile at his son. Bill would catch him and whine, “Come on, now!”

This became part of their evening ritual, a story of a father who just could not keep his eyes off his kid. How much more so God? (Greg Boyle, Tattoos on the Heart, p.19-20)

What is true of Jesus is true for us.

I trust that you can see God smiling and hear God's voice saying: "You are my beloved, who brings me great pleasure. You are beloved and blessed."

We *are* so blessed, in order to bless *others*!

PRAY