

REFLECTIONS ON THE BEATITUDES

By Ruth Bowen

To really understand The Beatitudes, you need, or should, read the entire Sermon on The Mount. That is Matthew chapters 5-7. I want to focus on the introduction, also known as The Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-11.

To me, they are a job description for how we should live our lives. How to become the person God created you, me, all of us to be (by the way, all of us are a work in progress). In The Beatitudes, Jesus is telling us how we are to live in God's kingdom here on earth. The way the world ought to be, the only practical way to live. Jesus requires his followers to demonstrate:

- Humility (to be poor in spirit requires humility, to be humble)
- Mournfulness (acknowledge grief, care to comfort, take action)
- Meekness (listens, observes, resourceful, strong, acts when needed)
- Passion for justice (hunger for righteousness)
- Pure Heart (choose love, focus on God)
- Acts of mercy (compassion)
- Acts of peace (stewards of creation, forgiveness, build community)
- Acts of justice (reciprocity, restoration, equity)

You could say humility, mournfulness, meekness, passion for justice and pure in heart are the personality traits we should exhibit. The acts of mercy, peace and justice are the actions in which we should engage.

Differences in culture, world view and language can challenge understanding and applying The Beatitudes in our daily living. Jesus and God want us to live a life that is counter to the western civilization mind set of "living the good life", having it all, and the idea that material things and lots of them are what are most important. Relationships are secondary as are compassion and loving your neighbor. God's kingdom is a world where everyone has enough to eat, where everyone has a share of what the earth produces, where peace, compassion and justice is the way of life for all. This radical and revolutionary description of the Kingdom of God reads like a sound bite from the 1960's but it comes from both the Old Testament prophets and writers of the New Testament. Yes, Jesus was radical and revolutionary and to be followers of Jesus, we must be as well. This is counter to the western culture view of having it all, having it now and individualism.

Languages and dialects vary widely among and between cultures. Jesus spoke in Aramaic. Matthew's gospel was written in Greek and has been translated into multiple languages. The meaning of the key word "Blessed" and a phrase such as "poor in spirit" are blurred or changed when translated into English or other languages. Some languages or dialects may not have words that can reflect the original meaning. To be blessed by God is a gift we are to share with others. It has built in reciprocity. One writer puts it this way: God helps those who cannot help themselves, who need his help and ask for it, and God helps those who try to help others, engaging in actions of peace, justice and mercy. Both those in need and those who try to help are "Blessed".

We know that words have different meanings depending on how they are used and translated. A word's meaning can change from one person to another depending on the experiences and knowledge of the reader and hearer. We are supposed to be hearers and doers of The Word. Acting on what we hear depends on language and vocabulary. Some Bible translations use the word "Happy" instead of "Blessed" in Matthew 5:3-11. Happy is a feeling or emotion and to be happy or feel happy is a choice. It is not bestowed or given. Most people I know are happy when they are blessed. It makes a difference which word is used when trying to understand and apply The Beatitudes to daily living. One might argue that the word "Happy" is easier for readers to understand and for clergy or theologians to explain. Oversimplification contributes to misunderstanding and therefore misinterpretation.

Matthew 5:3 reads "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (NRSV). To be poor is to not have something you need. When asked the average person might respond that it means to lack money, friends, common sense, respect for others. I have never heard anyone describe another as lacking spirit unless they are referencing an individual with depression or an athletic team and their fans. As with other words, spirit has different meanings depending on how it is used, or if it is used appropriately. One writer suggests that to be poor in spirit is to know the need for seeking God. In his book *Beatitudes from the Back Side*, J. Ellsworth Kalas says, "The poor in spirit are blessed because in matters of the Spirit, only the poor get it." Many of us don't know or realize what we need until this journey called life presents new decisions or different paths for us to consider.

"Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." (Matt.5:4) To mourn is to grieve, to be sad about an event, a choice made or not made by self or others, an action taken or not taken. Grief and mourning are natural responses. As a young child, I thought to mourn only referred to when a person died. But it has a larger meaning. Parents mourn decisions their children did or did not make. We mourn decisions government leaders did or did not make. Action and inaction both have consequences that lead to sadness and mourning. Of course, we mourn the loss of family, friends and often people we did not know but whose lives impacted ours. We mourn with others in their loss. The upside is mourning can lead to action. Action such as forming an organization that educates communities about consequences of driving drunk or human trafficking. Taking such action can comfort those who mourn. Comfort comes also when we share a meal and stories with those who mourn. Comfort comes with giving and receiving forgiveness and unconditional love.

As I think about and study The Beatitudes, I begin to see how they are connected to each other, like rungs on a ladder. I also see how they are dynamic, ever changing the lens through which I see life in and around me. Like a ladder, you can go up and down with them. A work in progress just like you and me.

I encourage you to read, explore and study The Beatitudes. Then read the entire Sermon on the Mount. Compare and contrast Matthew 5-7 with Luke 6.

QUESTIONS AND THOUGHTS TO PONDER

1. Describe how Matthew 5:3-11 are related, connected, to each other.
2. Do you have to accomplish one before working on the next?
3. How often have you experienced “spiritual poverty” and how have you filled that void?
4. What is the kingdom of heaven? Where is it?
5. Thinking about circumstances when you have experienced mourning and grief, did you feel blessed? How did the Holy Spirit comfort you? Describe the actions of others that may have comforted you.
6. How have you ministered to others during their time of mourning? (Keep in mind there is no timeline for grieving but there is a distinction between a healthy and an unhealthy grief experience).
7. It takes strength and gentleness to be humble and meek. Describe incidences in scripture where Jesus exhibited these characteristics. Why are these necessary to “inherit the earth” and to be “poor in spirit”?
8. Righteousness is being in right relationship with God. To truly love God and neighbor. How do you hunger and thirst for righteousness? What blessings do you receive and share with others as you satisfy your hunger and thirst?
9. The pure in heart “shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). Do you see God when you encounter the actions and faces of others? Do you even look using the lens of the command to love your neighbor? Do others see God in your actions and face?
10. Matthew 5:9-11 are built upon our understanding of and experiences with the first six in our daily living. How and when do you see your self providing acts of peacemaking, mercy and justice? How do you respond when the world fails in doing these actions?

Resources I used:

NRSV, THE GREEN BIBLE

THE WESLEY STUDY BIBLE, NRSV

Howell, James C. *The Beatitudes for Today*, 2006 John Knox Press

Kalas, J. Ellsworth, *Beatitudes From The Back Side*, 2008 Abingdon Press

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