

The Beatitudes

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – August 10, 2003

Scripture Background Study

Scripture Passage

Matthew 5:3-16(NRSV)

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

This is the second in a five-week series on the Sermon on the Mount. Today, we consider the Beatitudes.

Last week, we saw that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is not a new and more stringent system of rules nor is it an impossible ideal. Rather, when Jesus sits down to teach his followers, he is training them in the Kingdom of God. These nine beatitudes, with which Jesus begins his teaching, are not simply an introduction to what follows – they are its very foundation. These are not “entrance requirements” to God’s Kingdom. They are not conditional – none of them say “if you will x, then y.” These are straightforward declarative statements of what is. Indeed, Eugene Boring goes further.¹ He notes that the Beatitudes do not merely declare what it is; they bring it into being – much like an umpire crying out “strike” or a minister pronouncing a couple man and wife. The Beatitudes are Gospel – they proclaim to the world the Good News! Because these are prophetic pronouncements they point us toward the teacher. They are not self-evident. It is Jesus’ authority that makes the Beatitudes the foundation of the Sermon.

What is a beatitude?

The Sermon on the Mount is not the only place we find beatitudes in the Bible. For example, Psalm 1 begins “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked.” This is a beatitude. Many more are in Revelation: 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and 22:14!!

A beatitude is written so as to be a declarative statement of fact. It is not an opinion. It is not a command. (You English majors will know that a beatitude is written in the indicative mood!)

The first word of each beatitude in the Bible seems to pose a problem for translators. In Greek, the word is *makarios*. In the secular Greek world, it meant simply “happy” or “fortunate.” At times you find it translated this way, such as Psalm 1:1 in the NRSV. But in the religious context, “happy” is not the best choice; “blessed” is better, such as the NRSV translators used in Matthew.

This matters because a beatitude is centered on what God does, not some feeling on our part. It is God who blesses. The opposite of “blessed” is not “unhappy,” it is “cursed.” Our happiness comes from the many blessings God bestows upon us.

¹from Eugene Boring’s excellent commentary on Matthew’s Gospel in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Another excellent and readable commentary is by Douglas Hare in the *Interpretation* series.

The Kingdom of Heaven

Each of the nine Beatitudes points us to God's Kingdom (the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew). They either mention the kingdom directly (the first and eighth Beatitude) or to some aspect of it. In the kingdom of God, his people will be comforted and filled and shown mercy. They will inherit the earth. They will be rewarded in heaven. They will be called the children of God. They will see God!² All the rest of the Sermon on the Mount has to be read in this bright light.

For whom is the Kingdom of Heaven?

The kingdom of heaven is for the people of God. The people of God are those who place their faith in Jesus Christ, in God. Those who have faith in Jesus strive to be ever-truer disciples. Those who are disciples of Christ strive to be Christ-like, much as an apprentice strives to be like the master. In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches about his followers about the characteristics of disciples. Again, this is about training for the kingdom! Here are some thoughts on each Beatitude.

- Those who are “poor in spirit” are those who know that they are dependent in God. As Boring puts it: “Persons who are pronounced blessed are not those who claim a robust ego and strong sense of self-worth, but those whose only identity and security is in God.”
- “Those who mourn” doesn't refer only to the death of loved ones, but also to our lament for the condition of God's creation and his people. In other words, those who strive for the kingdom of God realize how far short of God's hope the present world falls.

The Light to the World

In the verses immediately after the Beatitudes, Jesus reminds his disciples that they are to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light to the world.” This was not new to Jesus. The Jews understood that they had always had a mission larger than themselves. For us, being the “light to the world” means that we are to lift Jesus up for all the world to see, so that all the world might be drawn to him, enabling all the world to see his saving love. Because Jesus announced and inaugurated the arrival of God's kingdom, we live in the “bright interval” between Easter and the final, great consummation of the story, the renewal of all creation and the “new heaven and new earth” (Rev 21:1)

The early Christians found great joy because they understood that they lived not in the last days, but in the first days of a new age! We live in such days as well and we should find such joy, a joy that will shine in us for all to see, inviting them to join us in the community of God's people!!

- Like “poor in spirit,” meekness (meaning gentleness and humility) flies in the face of conventional wisdom about what it takes to be “successful.” Of course, Jesus also challenges us to reconsider what we mean by success! (see Psalm 37:9,11 also).
- “Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” are those who long for the coming of God's kingdom and the vindication of right. At the same time we need to understand that Jesus brings comfort to those who are quite literally poor, hungry, and thirsty.
- Matthew chooses a Greek word for “mercy” that is not merely about having compassion for others – the merciful are those who *act* on their compassion.
- In v. 8, purity of heart goes beyond the avoidance of impure thoughts to a single-minded devotion to God.
- Many of Jesus' followers expected him to call for the overthrow of the Roman oppressors, by force if necessary. But Jesus disappoints them. The people of the kingdom are people of peace. In God's kingdom, swords are broken into plowshares.
- Jesus knows that to the extent that his training of his disciples moves them toward “Christ-likeness,” they will be increasingly out of step with the world around them. They will be reviled and persecuted as they shape their lives around the values of the kingdom. Jesus pronounces blessing on them and on their prophetic mission . . . our mission . . . to be the light to the world.

²In Revelation 22:4, God's people see his face. Compare this with Exodus 33:20 where God warns Moses that he cannot see God's face and live. We don't need to get too literal here. God doesn't have a face like you or I do. But just reflect for awhile on this imagery and the promise that we will see God as Adam once did, when, in the evenings, God would come and walk in the garden with his children. The significance and comfort of what the biblical writers are trying to tell us ought to take our breath away!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Day 1 Psalm 1 The two ways. What is the way of the blessed(NIV)/happy(NRSV)?</p> | <p>Day 2 Luke 6:20-23 Luke's version of the beatitudes.</p> |
| <p>Day 3 Isaiah 61:1-11 Jesus' beatitudes rely heavily on this passage from Isaiah.</p> | <p>Day 4 Revelation 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and 22:14!! These beatitudes are sprinkled throughout Revelation. What characterizes them?</p> |
| <p>Day 5 Matthew 4:23 - 7:28 The entire Sermon on the Mount. Please read it in one sitting. We'll do this once a week during this series!</p> | <p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p> |

Sermon Notes

This Tuesday night - August 12 - is the lecture on "Love"

This Tuesday, August 12, is the final lecture in our St. Andrew Summer Lecture Series – “Faith, Hope, and Love” presented by Scott Engle. We will gather at 6:45 in Room 4 of Piro Hall on the Garden Level of the new sanctuary. Registration is not required. Childcare will be available by reservation – call 214-291-8024.

For more info go to www.standrewccl.org.

Scott Engle’s new SS class, *Something More*, is at 9:30!!

We’ve begun a new adult Sunday School class at the 9:30 hour. The class is led by Scott Engle, the author of these background studies, and is open to all adults. The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is plenty of time for questions and answers.

We meet (for now!) in Room 4 of Piro Hall on the Garden Level of the new sanctuary.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Though the Kingdom of God is a present reality, we still await its final consummation. This presents a real problem. It is as if we live with one foot in God’s kingdom and one foot in the “dog-eat-dog” world of the present age. This isn’t easy! Make a list of five areas in your own life where the Kingdom of God and the “dog-eat-dog” world are in greatest conflict. Where is this most difficult and challenging for you? Be as concrete and specific as possible.
2. Now . . . for each of the five, discuss how you might go about bringing those two worlds together. (Yes . . . just like “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”!) When the Bible talks about the renewal of creation it is about the obliteration of the boundary between the realities of “this world” and the realities of “God’s kingdom.” As you consider each of the five, don’t move too quickly to the concrete. Reflect on the nature of the conflict and why it presents a problem in your struggle to be an ever-truer disciple. Don’t fall into the trap of dismissing Jesus’ teachings as an “impossible ideal.” Instead, allow Jesus’ actions and teachings to train us, to transform us, and lead us toward a better understanding of what is really possible with God!