

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 01/29/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, January 29th

Matthew 5:1-12

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A refocusing of life

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus begins His ministry with the first of five teaching blocks - the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). The connection here between the five teaching blocks of Jesus and the Pentateuch of Moses is unmistakable. Jesus' ministry also ends with an emphasis on teaching - the Great Commission in which Jesus calls His disciples to "*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*" (28:19-20). Jesus' ministry thus begins and ends with teaching. In this week's Gospel lectionary text, Jesus begins his inaugural address with a vision for life in the Kingdom of Heaven - the Beatitudes. Jesus here is making a pronouncement of the kind of life that God intends to produce in His people because of regeneration and sanctification through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 5:1-12 Commentary

Chapter 4 concludes with Jesus ministering to great crowds: "*And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan*" (4:25). The crowds had responded to Jesus' ministry but had not yet become His disciples.

¹ Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

The audience for the so-called Sermon on the Mount is clearly defined in v.1 - His disciples. These were those who had made a commitment to Jesus compared to those in the crowds of people who were curious but uncommitted. Interestingly, the Sermon on the Mount concludes, "*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching...*" (7:28).

Jesus adopts the teaching position common in Judaism - sitting. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes - a series of eight sayings beginning with "blessed" from the Greek *makarios* meaning blessed or happy. The Latin word for blessed is *beati*. Rather than a temporary, circumstantial feeling of happiness, the Beatitudes refer to a state of well-being and spiritual blessedness.

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

The poor in spirit are those who recognize they must rely on God and not themselves. It is the humility which comes from recognizing all one's gifts and blessings in life come from God's grace and are not our own

accomplishments. Such spiritual bankruptcy was in complete contrast to the spiritual self-sufficiency of the religious leaders of the day. This statement also contradicts the prevalent worldview at the time (and one that still persists) where material blessings are considered signs of God's approval in one's life. Notice the present tense – *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

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

Blessed are those who cry out to God in anguish and lamentation. Such mourning thus transcends bereavement. There is mourning and regret over our sins. There is mourning over worldly suffering. There are also those who mourn at the injustice in the world.

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

Those who place their trust in God - the humble - do not assert themselves over others to achieve their own agendas through their own strength and power. Yet it is the meek - the gentle, the non-assertive, those who exhibit self-control - who shall inherit the earth.

⁶ *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

Those whose one desire in life is to be in a right relationship of obedience and trust with God will be satisfied. This is very much a personal desire to live according to God's standards rather than human-defined standards. To live according to God's standards involves the pursuit of social righteousness or biblical justice, not the pursuit of human-defined social justice.

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

Mercy is reciprocal. The kindness and mercy shown by the merciful shall be reciprocated. Those who recognize the mercy that God has bestowed on them should be more apt to show mercy to others.

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

In contrast to the external ritual purity emphasized in Judaism, Jesus taught the internal purity of the heart is more important.

⁹ *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

The world is characterized by conflict and rivalry, often because of selfish ambition. Yet such selfish ambition is absent in those who exhibit the previous beatitudes and thus the basis by which one may become a peacemaker. God is the supreme peacemaker. This characteristic marks disciples as adopted sons of God through being in Christ. It was Christ who made the reconciliation between God and humans a possibility.

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

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

As in v.6, *righteousness* refers to an entire life orientation of pursuing a right relationship with God. This type of life stands in complete contrast to the cultural norms of a fallen world and thus attracts persecution.

Reflections

The Beatitudes are not statements of law where Jesus is calling His disciples to a meritorious attempt to earn salvation by living to such standards. This would emphasize law, not grace and such would lead to the same legalistic hypocrisy found among the Jewish leaders of the day. Neither are the Beatitudes a set of ethical

demands. The only imperative is “rejoice” found in 5:12 – to rejoice when one experiences the blessings of God when suffering persecution on account of pursuing righteousness or being persecuted for following Christ. The Beatitudes are not blessings that will only be realized at the end of the age, at some future time. These blessings are found both in the present tense (5:3, 10) and the future tense (5:4-9). The Beatitudes are the pronouncement of the kind of life that God intends to produce in His people because of regeneration and sanctification through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Beatitudes reflect the character of Christ. They are the goal of our sanctification. All true disciples of Christ, cooperating with the Holy Spirit, should progressively reflect the Beatitudes. This is where the Kingdom of Heaven is found and experienced on earth. Promises of the future transform the present. When we live this way, when we invite others to live this way, the Kingdom does indeed draw near.

Application

- How might you refocus your life to be more aligned to the vision of Kingdom life expressed within the Beatitudes?
- Where are you on the spiritually self-sufficient – spiritually bankrupt scale?
- What spiritual practices or behaviors can move you along the spiritually self-sufficient – spiritually bankrupt scale?



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