

Sermon: "Blessed"

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

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

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

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

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

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

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

Anyone who embarks upon a great task needs helpers, assistants and staff. So, Matthew goes on to show us Jesus selecting those who will be his fellow workers. But if helpers and assistants are to do their work intelligently and effectively, they must first have instruction. And now, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew shows us Jesus instructing his disciples in the message which was his and which they were to take to the people.

For that reason, one great scholar called the Sermon on the Mount "The Ordination Address to the Twelve". Just as young ministers have their task set out before them, when they are called to take charge of their first churches, so the Twelve received from Jesus their ordination address before they went out to their task. All are agreed that in the Sermon on the Mount we have the essence of the teaching of Jesus to the inner circle of his chosen disciples.

We speak of the Sermon on the Mount as if it was one single sermon preached on one single occasion. But it is far more than that.

There are good and compelling reasons for thinking that the Sermon on the Mount is far more than one sermon – that it is, in fact, a kind of epitome, a representative summary, of all the sermons that Jesus ever preached. Anyone who heard it in its present form would be exhausted long before the end. There is far too much in it for one hearing. It is one thing to sit and read it, and to pause and linger as we read: it would be entirely another thing to listen to it for the first time in spoken words. We read at our own pace and with certain familiarity with the words; but to hear it in its present form for the first time would be to be dazzled with excess long before it was finished.

Now we have seen, Matthew is essentially the teaching gospel; it is Matthew's characteristic that he collects the teaching of Jesus under certain great headings; and it is surely far more likely that Matthew collected Jesus' teachings into one whole pattern. The Sermon on the Mount is not one single sermon that Jesus preached on one definite situation; it is the summary of his consistent teaching to his disciples.

It has been suggested that, after Jesus chose the Twelve, he may have taken them away into a quiet place for a week or even a longer period of time, and the Sermon on the Mount is the distillation of that teaching. Actually, Matthew's introductory sentence goes a long way to make that clear. "When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them." (v.5:1-2). Again, the very use of this phrase indicates that the material in the Sermon on the Mount is no chance piece of teaching. It is the solemn utterance of the central

things; it is the opening of Jesus' heart and mind to those men who were to be his right-hand men in his task.

Matthew in his introduction wishes us to see that it is the official teaching of Jesus; that it is the opening of Jesus' whole mind to his disciples; that it is the summary of the teaching which Jesus habitually gave to his inner circle. The Sermon on the Mount is nothing less than the concentrated memory of many hours of heart-to-heart communication between the disciples and their master.

It can be seen that every one of the beatitudes has precisely the same form. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (5:3). The beatitudes are not simple statements; they are exclamations. That is most important, for it means that the beatitudes are not pious hopes of what shall be; they are not glowing but vague prophecies of some future bliss; they are congratulations on what is. The blessedness which belongs to Christians is not a blessedness which is postponed to some future world of glory; it is blessedness which exist here and now. It is not something into which Christians will enter, it is something into which they have entered.

True, it will find its fullness and its consummation in the presence of God; but, for all that, it is a present reality to be enjoyed here and now. The beatitudes in effect say: "O the bliss of being a Christian! O the joy of following Christ! O the sheer happiness of knowing Jesus Christ as Master, Savior, and Lord! In the light of the beatitudes, a gloomy Christianity is unthinkable.

The greatness of the beatitudes is that they are not wistful glimpse of some future beauty; they are not even golden promises of some distant glory; they are triumphant shouts of bliss for a permanent joy that nothing in the world can ever take away.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (5:3). It seems a surprising way to begin talking about happiness by saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit". Blessed are those who are abjectly and completely poverty-stricken. Blessed are those who are absolutely destitute. They began by meaning simply poor. They went on to mean, because poor, therefore having no influence or power, or help, or prestige. Because having no influence, therefore downtrodden and oppressed. Finally, those who, because they have no earthly resources whatever, put their whole trust in God. Therefore, "Blessed are the poor in spirit means: Blessed are those who have realized their own utter helplessness, and who have put their whole trust in God. They will become completely detached from material things, for they will know that things do not have the power to bring happiness or security;

and they will become completely attached to God, for they will know that God alone can bring them help, hope, and strength. Those who are poor in spirit are men and women who have realized that things mean nothing, and God means everything. That means that only those who do God's will are citizens of the kingdom; and we can only do God's will when we realize our own helplessness, our own ignorance, our own inability to cope with life, and when we put our whole trust in God.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (5:4). It is the word which is used for mourning for the dead, for the passionate lament for one who was loved. It is defined as the kind of grief that takes such a hold that it cannot be hidden. It is not only the sorrow which brings ache to the heart. It is the sorrow which brings the unrestrainable tears to the eyes. It can be taken literally: blessed are those who have endured the bitterest sorrow that life can bring.

Sorrow can do two things for us. It can show us, as nothing else can, the essential kindness of others; and it can show us, the comfort and the compassion of God. So many people in the hour of their sorrow have discovered other people and God as never before.

When things go well, it is possible to live for years on the surface of things; but when sorrow comes, we are driven to the deep things of life, and, if we accept it aright, a new strength and beauty will enter our souls.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (5:5). In our modern English idiom, the word meek is hardly one of the honorable words of life. Nowadays, it carries with it an idea of spinelessness, subservience, and mean-spiritedness. It paints a picture of a submissive and ineffective person. But it is

the happy medium between too much and too little anger. If we ask what the right time and the wrong time are, we may say as a general rule for life that it is never right to be angry for any insult or injury done to ourselves – that is something that no Christian must ever resent – but that it is often right to be angry at injuries done to other people. Selfless anger can be one of the great moral dynamics of the world. It is not so much the blessing of those who are self-controlled, rather, it is the blessing of those who are completely God-controlled, for only in his service do we find our perfect freedom and, in doing his will, our peace.

It is this meekness, Jesus says, which will inherit the earth. We cannot lead others until we have found our own direction in life; we cannot serve others until we have put aside self; we cannot be in control of others until we have learned to control ourselves. But those who give themselves into complete control of God will gain this meekness, which will indeed enable them to inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (5:6). The fact is that very few of us in modern conditions of life know what it is to be really hungry or really thirsty. In the ancient world, a working man in Palestine ate meat only once a week, and were never far from the borderline of real hunger and actual starvation. It was still more with thirst. It was not possible for people to turn a tap and find clear water. So the hunger which this beatitude describes is no gentle hunger which is satisfied with a snack; the thirst which it speaks is no thirst quenched with a cup of coffee or an iced drink. It is the hunger of someone who is starving for food and the thirst of someone who will die unless given something to drink.

In effect, it demands; “How much do you want goodness? Do you want it as much as a starving person wants food, and as much as someone dying of thirst wants water? How intense is our desire for goodness? This beatitude is the most demanding, and indeed the most frightening of them all. But in its own way it is the most comforting. Those who are blessed are not necessarily the people who achieve this goodness, but the people who long for it with their whole heart. In his mercy, God judges us not only by our achievements but also by our dreams. Even if we never achieve goodness, if to the end of the day we are still hungering and thirsting for it, we are not shut out of his blessedness.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” (5:7). The New Testament is insistent that to be forgiven we must be forgiving. As James states, “For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy” (James 2:13). The Lord’s prayer is followed by the two verses that explain:

“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt. 6:12, 14-15).

Mercy, means the ability to get inside other people until we can see things with their eyes, think things with their minds, and feel things with their feelings. Literally going through what they are going through. Most people are so concerned with their own feelings that they are not much concerned with the feelings of someone else. There is one principle in life which we often forget – there is always a reason why people think and act as they do; and, if we knew that reason, it would be so much easier to understand and to sympathize and to forgive.

“Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.” (5:8). Here is the beatitude which demands that all who read it should stop and think and examine themselves. If we give generously and liberally to some cause, it may well be that there lingers in the depths of our hearts some contentment in basking in the sunshine of our own self-approval, some pleasure in the praise and thanks and the credit which we will receive. If we do some fine thing, which demands some sacrifice from us, it may well be that we are not altogether free from the feeling that others will see something heroic in us and that we may regard ourselves as martyrs. This beatitude demands from us the most exacting self-examination.

Is our work done from motives of service or from motives of pay? Is our service given from selfless motives or from motives of self-display? Is the work we do in church done for Christ or for prestige? Is our church going an attempt to meet God or a fulfilling of a habitual and conventional respectability? Are even our prayers and our Bible-reading engaged upon with the sincere desire to keep company with God or because it gives us a pleasant feeling of superiority to do these things? To examine one’s own motives

is daunting and a shaming thing, for there are few things in this world that even the best of us do with completely unmixed motives. So, says Jesus, it is only the pure of heart who shall see God. It is a warning thing to remember that as by God's grace we keep our hearts clean, or as by human lust we soil them, we are either fitting or unfitting ourselves someday to see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (5:9). First there is the word peace, it does not mean that they wish for the others only the absence of evil things; they wish for them the presence of all good things. In the Bible, peace means not only freedom from all trouble, but it also means enjoyment of all good.

The peace which the Bible calls blessed does not come from the evasion of issues; it comes from facing them, dealing with them and conquering them. (EXPLAIN). What this beatitude demands is not the passive acceptance of things because we are afraid of the trouble of doing anything about them, but the active facing of things, and the making of peace, even when the way to peace is through struggle. This beatitude says, blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God; what it means is; blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be doing a Godlike work. Those who make peace are engaged on the very work which the God of peace is doing. Blessed are those who make this world a better place for everyone to live in. That is what Jesus means.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (5:10-12). Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." One of the outstanding qualities of Jesus was his sheer honesty.

He never left people in any doubt what would happen to them if they chose to follow him. He was clear that he had come not to make life easy, but to make "us" great. Their Christianity might well disrupt their work. (Build pagan temple). Their Christianity would disrupt their social life. (Sacrifices at meal). Christianity was liable to disrupt their home life. (One Christian other not). The penalties Christians had to suffer; they were flung to lions or burned at the stake; covered with pitch and set alight, tortured on the rack, molten lead poured on them, eyes torn out, and body parts cut off for just a few. But these are the things they prepared for, if they took a stand with Christ. To have to suffer was a opportunity to show one's loyalty to Jesus Christ. When someone is called on to suffer for Christianity, it is the great occasion, it is the clash between the world and Christ. To have a share in such a moment is not a penalty but a glory. Rejoice at such a moment and be glad.

PRAYER: God of grace, let our concern for others reflect Christ's self-giving love, not only in our prayers but also in our practice. Help us to speak up and take action for what is right.

BENEDICTION:

Finally, the heart of the beatitudes is a call to be disciples who live out the virtues of the blessings, in pursuit of righteousness grounded in God's steadfast love, goodness, justice, and mercy. God's blessings are our command, because God first loved us, giving us the blessings of Jesus Christ, our salvation. GO IN PEACE.

