

Blessings: Reflections on the Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-12

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Do you think of yourself as a blessed person? What does it mean to be blessed? Are we blessed only when things in life are going well, or does it include when things aren't going our way? This morning we are going to look at a familiar passage of scripture from the Gospel of Matthew that deals with the topic of blessings. You may know it by its common title, "**The Beatitudes.**" Have you ever wondered why it's called that?

Beatitude is a Latin word. The Greek version of this word is *makarios*, which happens to be the word used in Matthew to begin each of the verses from Matthew 5:3-11. This word has been translated into English in different ways. The most common, as we heard from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, is "blessed." Other biblical translations use "happy" or "fortunate" or even "congratulations".

A beatitude, used in this particular biblical context, is a blessing or pronouncement of God's favor. You may have noticed that I close every email, letter, or my "Word from the Pastor" article in the monthly church newsletter with that word, "Blessings." I indeed mean to imply: May God's favor be upon you. But now that I think about it, since I believe that God's favor is always upon us, perhaps what I really mean to express is that **I hope you recognize the blessings and grace of God in your life.**

Before we take a closer look at the specific list of blessings from Matthew 5, let me briefly set these verses further in their biblical context. Chapters 5-7 in Matthew begin the first of 5 major sections in this particular gospel that focus on the teachings of Jesus. These three full chapters are commonly referred to as the **Sermon on the Mount**, and it begins with these verses that we call the Beatitudes.

A modern understanding of biblical scholarship suggests that the author used this "sermon" as an opportunity to combine together lots of Jesus' teachings, which were most likely given at different times and places throughout his ministry, and put them together in this one long message. Such a view, however, does not rob any of the sayings of their meaning or authority.

The setting for this Sermon on the Mount is found at the very beginning, in verses 1-2. "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down [which is what Jewish rabbis did when they taught authoritatively], his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them..." In this instance, disciples refers to all those who followed Jesus, not just the 12 disciples.

As we will learn throughout this lectionary year that focuses on Matthew, **the author uses certain locations more for theological purposes than for actual geographical locations.** We know this, in part, because in the Gospel of Luke, the setting for this sermon takes place not on a mountain, but on a "level place." In Luke, therefore, it goes by the less-familiar name, the Sermon on the Plain.

It is important to ask, then, what significance is attached to a mountain as the setting for this sermon in Matthew. Throughout his gospel, Matthew presents the story of

the life and ministry of Jesus in such a way as to evoke the figure of the great prophet Moses from the Old Testament. And what did Moses do? He went up a mountain to receive the Ten Commandments and other laws from God. A mountain, from a theological perspective, is the place of God's revelation. This is thought to be true in all world religions, whether is Mt. Fuji, Mt. Kilimanjaro, Mt. Olympus, or Mt. Sinai.

Matthew's readers are meant to see Jesus as the new law-giver – the new and improved Moses – in the new covenant with God which began with Jesus. What Matthew is saying is: Pay attention! All these teachings you're about to read are imperative for those who choose to follow Jesus.

So let's look at how this all begins with the blessings that Jesus proclaims. It immediately becomes apparent that **this isn't what folks would typically expect:** Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and those who are reviled and persecuted because they are followers of Jesus.

Simple observations of the ways of the world, then and now, suggest that it is the rich – financially or spiritually – who are blessed, not the poor; that those who rejoice are blessed, not those who mourn; that those who have power are blessed, not the meek; that those who are treated fairly and respectfully are blessed, not those who are reviled and persecuted. **The Beatitudes, it seems, have things backwards! It's the old 'reversal of fortunes' in the realm of God. What kind of good news is that?**

A common misinterpretation of the Beatitudes is that these traits are a call to action, and are demanded of us as some sort of entrance requirement to be received into the kingdom of God. But note, **Jesus is not asking the crowd (or us) to become poor in spirit, or mourners, or persecuted for righteousness' sake; instead, he offers consolation to those who already find themselves poor and in mourning and oppressed.**

Jesus wants us to recognize God's favor and blessings not only when life is good, but also when life isn't fair or going well. **Jesus is saying that God is already blessing those of us who are hurting.** And perhaps even more importantly, we are meant to simply receive and recognize a blessing, rather than attempt to achieve one. **For God's favor comes to us before we try to achieve or earn anything. That's what grace is!** Admittedly, grace is still a hard concept for many of us to accept.

It becomes clear in the gospel of Matthew that **God chooses to be on the side of the weak**, the forgotten, the despised, the justice seekers, the peacemakers, and those persecuted because of their beliefs – and I would suggest that includes, in one way or another, each one of us.

What Jesus does is extend the blessings of God upon the victims in society. They are blessings that are spoken both in the present *and* the future tense. For instance, "Blessed are those who mourn (present tense), for they *will be* comforted (future tense)." **According to Matthew, Jesus takes our difficult life circumstances and proclaims that they will be reversed. And from Matthew's perspective, if not in our lifetime, then certainly in life beyond this life in the eternal kingdom of God.** We call that eschatological – the '*what will be*' in the fulfillment of the realm of God. These blessings, then, are something that have already begun, yet haven't been completed. And it may help to remember, as one biblical commentator puts it:

Christianity is not a scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance in one's career, or preserve one from illness. Christian faith, instead, is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, and that God's future will be a time of mercy and not cruelty.

So blessed are those who live this life now, even when such a life is difficult or seems foolish, for they will, in the end, be vindicated by God.

[M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, 1995.]

So hear Jesus' proclamation of blessings not as impossible ethical standards for you and I to meet, but as words of hope, encouragement and reassurance to you in your present circumstances. Jesus offered hope to those without hope. That, in turn, should help us to **approach life with a spirit of hope, even when the outward sings indicate otherwise.**

Hear this as a word of good news. For God is a God who cares about the poor in spirit, the humble, those yearning for right to be done, the merciful, the pure-minded, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for righteousness' sake. God will not abandon such people, us, or leave us without hope!

To be blessed, therefore, is not simply to be happy, but to know that you already are, and always will be, included in the realm of God.

Amen, and blessings!