

Do We Want These Blessings?

^{NRS} **Matthew 5:1-12** When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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There are a lot of things we admire about people, often without being consciously aware of it. When we hire an employee, we hope that they'll be competent, that they'll be dependable, and that they won't be too much trouble. That is, we hope they won't get sick very often, that their family issues won't intrude during working hours and distract them, that nothing will interfere with their attendance, their efficiency, or their relationships with other employees or customers. If they're in product development, sales, or upper management, we value qualities such as ingenuity, ambition, drive, and aggressive zeal for company goals. Intelligence, education, and social skills are appreciated, as well. All of this culminates in a sort of high energy, aggressive competitiveness. We compete against other nations for prosperity, against other industries for consumer attention, against other companies for market share, and against fellow employees for promotions. The expected outcomes are promotions, perks, public recognition, and increased income.

We can find the same themes of aggressive competitiveness in some of our old hymns. We find phrases like "onward to the fray, the earth shall tremble 'neath our tread, battle every day, valiant endeavor, unnumbered foes," and other images of fighting, winning, and overcoming competition.

Then, today, we've heard the first twelve verses of the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel, a passage known as the Beatitudes. These are the opening lines to what is called the Sermon on the Mount. It doesn't take much thought to realize that the Beatitudes turn the world's standards upside down. The world admires those who are self-sufficient, assertive, and powerful. The ones who the world considers pitiful are the very ones that Jesus claims are truly joyful.

Many of us find it extremely difficult to understand or relate to the Beatitudes. You say "peacemaker" to some folks - and the first thing that comes to mind is the 1873 Colt single action revolver that was called the peacemaker. But nobody assumes Jesus is talking about a firearm eighteen centuries in the future. We're not sure what "poor in spirit" means, but we certainly hear strong negative connotations in the word "poor." Meekness is a trait for losers. Mercy is a sign of weakness. Mourning is a negative emotion and only wimps mourn for long. Hungering for righteousness and being pure in heart sounds like an unrealistic lifestyle sought by those who are religious professionals or fanatics. And if they're masochistic, they might even be happy to be persecuted because of their righteousness. In this list of "Blessed are" statements, we're not too sure we want a blessed one! In our drive to be successful, to be strong and competent, and to be self-sufficient, we often apply the same methods and the same expectations to our faith. In our self-sufficient competence, whether real or imagined, we look at the Beatitudes and it looks like those sayings are addressed to wimps, to weaklings, to timid losers. The Beatitudes sound like a list of consolation prizes given out to the also-rans, not something for those who are "true hearted, whole-hearted, faithful" warriors for the heavenly king.

This same reluctance to consider that the text might be addressed to us can carry over into the whole Sermon on the Mount. Some parts are a little fuzzy and other parts seem "over the top." Gandhi once said that the difference between him and Christians was that when he read the Sermon on the Mount, he thought Jesus meant it! But to us, these scriptures can seem too idealistic, unrealistic in their demands, and largely counter to how the world works.

On the other hand, looking only at the evidence of this world, there's little reason for hope or happiness. War follows war, might makes right, and the innocent suffer every day. Jesus challenges us to see another reality, the reality that God is wiser than we are, the reality that God's kingdom will come, on earth as it is already in heaven. Jesus said, "The kingdom is within you, the kingdom is near, the kingdom is coming." We've been doing things our way and we continue to hurt each other and ourselves. Jesus invites us to do things God's way, to move into the kingdom where God reigns, and to experience the joy that we don't expect. We're called to trust the truth that God's kingdom is being built, is coming, and will be completed. We tend to think of the kingdom of God as only a place of rest after our death and salvation as only existing after death. If that is all we believe, then our God is too small and we cheat ourselves out of so much here and now. Jesus said, "I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death to life." (John 5:24-25, NLT) Jesus said for us to rely on these words. We're to listen to his message. I'm sorry folks, but Jesus isn't just saying that you have to believe he existed, that all that is involved is your agreement that he is divine. More than that, we're to listen to his message, hear his words, study his message. That means that Bible study is a consistent part of what we do with our time and energy. Jesus continues by adding "believe in God." That doesn't mean saying, "I believe there is a God." It means putting your trust in God, relying on God, having a relationship with God, and trying to live in a way that illustrates how you are one of God's children; acting like you are part of the family. In doing that, you have eternal life, Jesus says – not that you will someday receive eternal life, but that you have it. Jesus says that these people have already passed from death to life.

If you're only concerned with making money like Ebenezer Scrooge, you aren't living – you're dead. If you spend your time trying to escape into entertainment by immersing yourself in soap operas, so-called reality shows, shopping marathons, or sports-watching binges – if you escape into alcohol or drugs or work – to the extent that you have numbed yourself by whatever means, to that extent you aren't living, you're dead. So, let's try to hear Christ's message in the Beatitudes, to try to get a glimpse of how we can live, live abundantly, live the life that is eternal.

It's been said that the Sermon on the Mount is a bit like the constitution of Christianity. It contains in three chapters much of the essence of Christian standards for our lives. To continue the analogy, the Beatitudes are the preamble to that constitution. Right off, we can trip over the word "bless-ed." It sounds a bit odd pronounced with two syllables and we're a little fuzzy about whether it has some sort of unusual meaning here. Some translations have used the words "happy are" or "fortunate are." (see Psalm 1:1-2) Another translation says, "Congratulations to you who are . . ." Perhaps those translations give us some understanding of the meaning here.

Congratulations to those who are poor in spirit. Poor in spirit includes those whose spirits are broken – spiritual beggars – those who are at the end of their resources. They throw themselves on the mercy of God. They're forgotten by society but not abandoned by God. It also includes the affluent who regard themselves as if they were poor, humbly remembering their dependence upon God and their subservience to his will. Rather than seeing their prosperity as something they've accomplished and earned, they see it as a trust to share with those who are in need. (See Isaiah 57:15 and Psalm 51:17)

Fortunate are those who mourn. We usually think of mourning as our grief over a personal loss, especially the death of someone we love. Scripture uses the concept more broadly. Isaiah writes about how the Israelites mourned in captivity over the loss of their homeland, and their responsibility in that. Those who mourn include those who lament over the difference between the world as it is and the world as God wills it to be. Some of you may remember the ad showing the litter and pollution along our highways and rivers and the Native American standing on a rise looking at it all and shedding a tear. He was mourning because the world isn't as God intended.

Blessed are the meek. Meekness isn't timidity, but patient trusting in God, being non-violent in a violent society, content with necessities in a possession hungry world, taking delight in the gifts of God. This beatitude is a restatement of the message of Psalm 37.

Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Righteousness is a way of life for people who're generous with what they have, who speak for justice, who seek to do good on behalf of others. Here

again, Jesus confirms the message of Psalm 37. This beatitude also brings to mind Micah 6:8 where we are told that God wants us to love kindness, seek justice, and to walk humbly in his path.

Congratulations to those who are merciful. Those who are merciful are more eager to forgive than punish, more ready to show compassion than to get their due. Knowing that God is merciful frees us to be merciful, to follow his example, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Blessed are the pure in heart. Psalm 24 talks about pure hearts. The heart is the inner person. The heart is who a person truly is rather than their façade. For the pure in heart, their deeds match their convictions. They'll see God, that is, they will be in communion with God in the kingdom.

Fortunate are the peacemakers. Remember that for the Jews, shalom was the word for peace. Shalom covers so much more than the absence of war; it's about the well-being of all of creation. Making shalom – peacemaking - includes halting wars, seeking harmony in personal relationships, fostering harmony in neighborhoods, and bringing serenity to distraught minds. Shalom is clean drinking water and medical attention for the sick. It's respect for those who are different, a casserole for a neighbor, and rehabilitation for those damaged in mind and body by war, both those who wore a uniform and those who suffered collateral damage.

Fortunate are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, when people falsely accuse you of all kinds of evil. Many of those who are in prominent positions, who are rich, or powerful, have achieved their success by walking over other people to get there. When they're challenged, they inevitably respond with name-calling, rumors, and social antagonism. Those who take advantage of others don't want the world to be fair and just. Those who take advantage of the weak aren't compassionate. They seek only their own power, prestige, and prosperity and they don't take kindly to exposure or barriers placed in the way. As one minister put it, "Seeking the right . . . stirs up the snakes"¹ It's helpful sometimes to think about whose ox is being gored. For decades, the tobacco industry presented all kinds of arguments, sponsored dubious scientific studies, and fought tooth and nail against any criticism of their industry, much less any regulation of it. When some sought to warn people of the risks involved, the tobacco industry threw up every smoke screen (pardon the pun) that they could think of. Jesus declares in the last beatitude that your efforts to do good for others will anger those who profit in some way by doing evil to those same people.

The beatitudes are not a consolation prize for the weak and the wimps. They're a challenge for us all to begin living in the kingdom of God now. They declare that God loves us all, that suffering isn't a sign of God's displeasure with us, but that God is acutely aware of suffering and cares deeply for those involved.

There is so much depth in the beatitudes that we've only scratched the surface. They're written for all of us. As we read and study the beatitudes, as we live the beatitudes, we'll find deeper and deeper meaning and ever greater beauty. Gradually we'll come to great contentment as we begin to realize that we're living in the kingdom of God now, with even greater joy yet to come. Amen.

Luke 17:21 Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.

See also the "Sermon on the Plain," Luke 6:17ff

^{NRS} **Psalm 1:1-2** Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;² but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.

^{NRS} **Proverbs 8:32** And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways.³³ Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.³⁴ Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.

^{NRS} **Isaiah 57:15** For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

^{NRS} **Psalm 51:17** The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

^{NRS} **Isaiah 61:2-3** to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

Ps 37:8-11 Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret-- it leads only to evil.⁹ For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.¹⁰ Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.¹¹ But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

^{NRS} **Psalm 37:26-30** They are ever giving liberally and lending, and their children become a blessing. ²⁷ Depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever. ²⁸ For the LORD loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones. The righteous shall be kept safe forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off. ²⁹ The righteous shall inherit the land, and live in it forever. ³⁰ The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom, and their tongues speak justice.

^{NRS} **Psalm 24:3-6** Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? ⁴ Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. ⁵ They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation. ⁶ Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 50