

“Blessed Are”

January 29, 2023

Matthew 5:1-12

¹ *When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

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.*

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.*



Today we begin a three-week adventure in the Sermon on the Mount. This passage in Matthew’s gospel is the longest teaching of Jesus that we have recorded in the scriptures. In

today’s first 12 verses from Matthew 5 we delve into the Beatitudes. As we consider these words today, our first gut reaction might be that these nine “blessed are” statements are a bit impractical and are really impossible to live up to. These nine statements that Jesus shared are not meant to function like the Law.

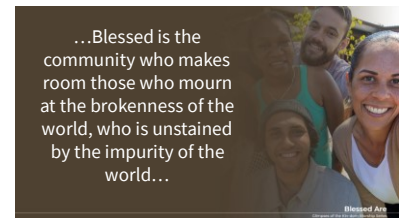
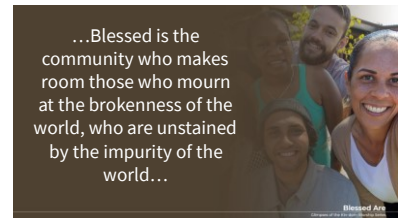
They are not meant to show us how far we fall short of who and what we are supposed to be. They are not a measuring rod for entrance into the kingdom of God. So why did Jesus begin his teaching on the hillside with these “blessed are” statements? As we begin to answer that question and to explore this teaching of Jesus, let us begin with a word of prayer...

As we begin this time together, let us consider that maybe the Beatitudes are something other than a challenge to better living or to psychological happiness. Maybe the Beatitudes are something more. These are the first words of teaching that Jesus shares with the world. Jesus came onto the public scene as he was baptized by John the Baptist. We looked at this passage two weeks ago. He then spent 40 days in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. We will consider this during Lent.

Emerging victorious, he calls the first disciples and begins to teach and heal in the land of the Gentiles. His first words were a call to repentance and an invitation to get on board, to turn around and follow him. This text was explored last Sunday. As his message gets out there, Jesus drew larger and larger crowds. As chapter 5 begins we actually hear the words that Jesus chose to speak as he “officially” began to teach the crowds. In that light, then, what if the Beatitudes were simply a snapshot of the community of faith? What if these nine statements were Jesus’ way of painting and laying out his vision for the kingdom of God? That is the angle that we will work from for the remainder of this time together. Taken as a whole, then, these statements sum up or encapsulate the ministry of Jesus and they provide detail about God’s plan for all of creation, about God’s plan for you and for me.

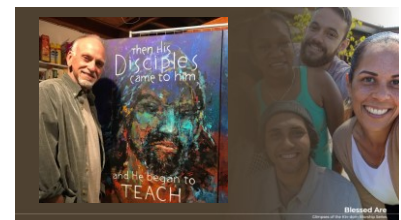
As Jesus gathered with the crowd and his disciples on the hillside, he was talking to a specific audience. He was not talking to the religious elite. Jesus was not addressing the political powers of his day – the Romans. No, he was talking to those groups whom God deemed worthy, not by virtue of their own achievements or status in society, but because God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, the justice seekers, the peace makers, and those persecuted because of their beliefs in Jesus Christ.

Therefore I ask, what if Jesus was really saying, “Blessed is the community who makes room for peacemakers. Blessed is the community who makes room for the meek, for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who are poor in spirit... Blessed is the community who makes room those who mourn at the brokenness of the world, who are unstained by the impurity of the world... Blessed is the community who knows persecution is inevitable and still decides to make room for those the world thinks are unimportant.”



As we turn to each “blessed are” statement, an image will be shared on the screens.

Each is an artistic rendering of the spirit of the statement as conceptualized by Alaskan artist Hyatt Moore. These works were the outcome of a request from a pastor friend in Anchorage. Hyatt admits that at first, he had no idea how to paint these words of Jesus.



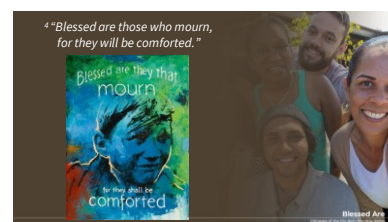
Yet in time, he did find artistic expression for each of the Beatitudes. The images are also displayed on one of the windows in the entry area so that you can see them up close if you would like to.

³ *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* In the culture of Jesus’ day, to be poor in spirit meant to be so impacted by their poverty that one would put all of their faith and hope in God. Due to their poverty, human hope was gone; all that remained was to hope that God would intervene on their behalf. The promise is that God will intervene. When we get to the place of realizing how lacking we are on our own – whether in physical or spiritual or emotional poverty – then we begin to lean in and to count on God. It is then, when we are humble, that we begin to experience the kingdom of God at work in our lives. To me, the painting reveals a person longing for God. When others encounter us, do they sense that we are one who puts all of our faith and hope in God? Do they see in us one who longs to be with God?



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

When we grieve, whether over a personal loss or over our sins, then we are promised that God will bring us comfort. In our world today, many people live as pleasure-seekers. They seek self-gratification and they do not grieve over their sin or evil. They do not see or consider the needs of others. When we are grieved by the plight or condition of others, when we mourn for others, then we align ourselves with God’s character and will. Seeing and responding, we are promised God’s ultimate consolation, yes, but we also experience the blessing of serving others in the name of Christ.



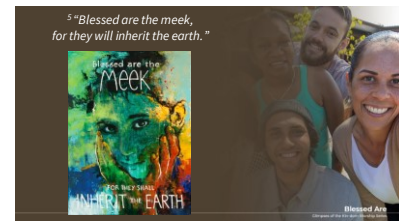
In this painting, I see a longing in the eyes – a desire to see others come to saving faith. For those we meet who are not yet connected to God, do they see in us a desire, a longing, to help connect them to the one who changed our life?

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

Biblical world meekness was used to describe someone who had learned to trust in God. Moses would be a good example of someone who was meek. Like the first two

Beatitudes, this one also points out that followers of Christ do not insist on their own rights or preferences. There is again a spirit of humility required to live out this call.

The promise here is that God will reward the faithfulness of those who trust in God rather than in themselves. The reward is their place in the coming realm of God, in heaven. As I look at Wyatt’s interpretation of this Beatitude, I see a face that is waiting – waiting for another to come to the point of realizing their need to surrender to something beyond themselves. In each of us, do others see a humility in us? Do they experience a nonjudgmental patience?



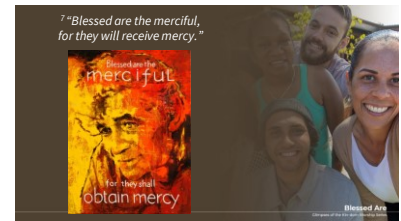
⁶ *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”* To thirst and to hunger is to intensely desire something. To hunger and thirst for righteousness is

to deeply desire to live in right relationship with God and with one another. Upright living should characterize us as servants of Christ. And the promise here is that our thirst and hunger *“will be filled.”* God will satisfy our deep and intense longing for right relationships. In our day and culture it is important to note that this is not something that we can achieve on our own. That is what the world would tell us.

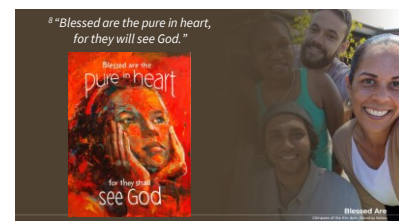


The blessing comes as God fills us with righteousness. To be righteous is to experience a gift from God. In these eyes I see a soul searching for more, one who is eager to plunge further into the depths of God's love and grace and mercy. When others look at our lives, do they see our hunger and thirst for more of God?

⁷ *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."* Here we experience a shift in the blessings. The first four focused on one's dependence on God. Beginning here Jesus shifts to the working out of that dependence. To be merciful, this encompasses both compassion and forgiveness towards others. This is not living out the occasional act of mercy or kindness. This implies living with a bent to always being merciful. When we practice mercy and compassion and forgiveness with others, then the promise is that God will be merciful and compassionate and forgiving with us. Again, this is not a sometimes act but an always act. An "always" character rises out of this painting. In the man's face I perceive a compassion and a patience. The kindness in his expression speaks of a person who will offer grace again and again. In times of crisis or trial, in times when someone needs to know they are unconditionally loved, when they need to experience mercy, is this what people see in you and me?



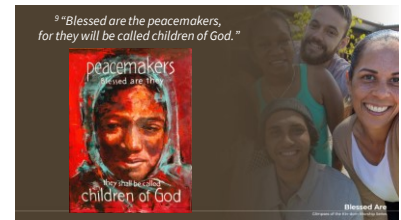
⁸ *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."* To be pure in heart means that one can stand in God's holy presence. It means that our heart is clean, untainted. It is only then that we can be in God's presence, only then that we can "see" God. By placing purity in the heart, in Matthew's gospel Jesus moves beyond how one appears as he connects purity to the intentions or the will of the person.



In other words, a pure heart would encompass our whole being for Jesus. When we live with “unmixed” intentions or with an undivided heart, then the promise is that we will experience an intimate relationship with God. From a place of purity we will truly see and know God. That is what this painting conveys to me. In her face I see one looking to God, gazing upon God’s face as she soaks in God’s majesty and perfection. When the world observes our lives, do see one who strives to be pure in heart? Do our words and practices, both in our professional lives and in our personal relationships, do they convey one who will always hold ourselves to the highest standard?

⁹ *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”* It can be easy to read this as “peace lovers”

but that is not the meaning here. The Hebrew word Jesus



would have used was “*shalom*” – a word which implies a total well-being rather than an absence of conflict. This is the only place in the New Testament where we find the word ‘peacemakers.’ The blessing here comes to those who do the work of bringing well-being or good to others. The blessing comes to those who seek to end hostilities and seek to bring together those who quarrel. And the blessing: these peacemakers will be known as children of God. In this woman’s smile I see a knowing wisdom. Her smile conveys trust to me too. In the warmth of her face, there is one that can be trusted. Peace is God’s intent for humankind and with her wisdom and trust in God she is willing to work hard for peace. When we enter a difficult situation or a time of distress, is there a peace about us and an evident desire for others to experience wholeness and well-being? Put another way, do we bring a spirit of *shalom* into all of our encounters?

¹⁰ *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* Here God promises grace to those who endure persecution because they are righteous. This promise echoes the promise of verse 3, where the kingdom was promised to those who sought God with all that they were. This word about good coming from persecution would have been a surprise to Matthew’s audience. To almost all people, it is never pleasant to experience persecution. Yet here we find a connection. For those who seek God, for those who are *“poor in spirit,”* they will strive to live righteously. This righteous living will draw persecution from the world. And in turn these too are promised the kingdom of God.



As we turn to the last Beatitude, found in verse 11, we see that the painting does not change. There is a subtle shift here and this is the reason that the painting remains the same. In this verse we read, *“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”* The subtle shift is from the third person to the first person. In the first eight Beatitudes it is *“those.”* Here, in the last one, Jesus shifts the focus to *“you.”* In the image of this man holding his head in his hand, I can sense both the corporate and the personal connection. Persecution is never easy to endure, even when we know the cause is right and holy. There is a personal toll and an empathy for others who are enduring persecution. When those who are suffering cross our path, do they sense our empathy and our consolations?



Connecting in a personal way, Jesus closes this section by saying, *“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”* Those who endure persecution are promised to share in the treatment that the prophets received in their own day. Persecuted believers are in good company with the prophets. They too are counted worthy of suffering for God. It was a great privilege for these followers of Christ to share in some small measure in the lot of these great men and women who were the prophets of God.



These words from the hillside would bring great hope to those seeking to follow Jesus. Just as the early followers of Christ would come to understand, we too can see how living daily into the spirit of the Beatitudes involves looking at them as a collection of the whole, rather than looking at each one individually. Each is related to the others, and they build on one another. For example, those who are meek, meaning humble, are more likely to hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they remain open to gaining continued knowledge of God. If we approach the Beatitudes this way, we see they invite us into a way of being in the world that allow us to be in the world, yet to not totally be shaped by it. We, as followers of Christ, offer an alternative to what the world seems to be pursuing.

As we reflect on these statements and think back to when Jesus taught them, we can see that Jesus was getting out the family album and inviting us to look again and to see who we are, to see what is among us, to see what we can be. These images create a call to what it means to be the community of faith. And it is also a picture of something that already exists right here at Grace.

As we look around the community of faith, we will see that God has already blessed us with these gifts. Within our community of faith, some are gifted with the spirit of peace, some with the gift of comfort, some with each of the other gifts. As we grow together as the community of faith, we will discover the blessings that we can be to one another and to the larger community.

As Jesus proclaimed, “*Rejoice*,” I too say rejoice, yes, rejoice! Rejoice when you receive the spirit, when you are comforted, when you receive righteousness, and when you receive mercy. Yes, rejoice when God touches your life! We also most certainly must rejoice when others experience peace, belonging, and strength through us. Yes, rejoice! Rejoice because then you are being the hands and feet and heart of Christ, engaging the world, ministering to those Jesus sought out. And, my friends, rejoice when you stand out enough from the world to draw a little fire, to attract a little friction, for then the kin-dom of God has drawn near to the world. May that be so as we continue to strive to be all that God gifted and created us to be as we seek to build the blessed kin-dom of God in this time and place. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Thinking about the nine Beatitudes, when have you experienced blessing through mourning or hunger or persecution? Did growth in your faith occur?
- 2) *Pray*. Where might God be calling you to walk alongside someone who is in need of comfort or mercy or is in need of “seeing” God? Cover them in prayer.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 6:17-26. How are these verses similar to what we read today? How are they different? What do verses 24-26 add to your understanding of this teaching from Jesus?