

Red Letters | The Sermons of Jesus Christ

The Beatitudes: On Human Flourishing

Matthew 5.1-12

1.30.22

When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. ² He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,

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

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

⁵ *"Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.*

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

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

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

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

¹⁰ *"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.¹² "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Here at Park Road, this part of the year is the Season of the Son, i.e. between Christmas and Easter (birth and resurrection), we look at the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God the Son, Jesus Christ... in the Four Gospels. And this year, we plan to look specifically at the major teachings of Jesus Christ.

Today, we launch into the Inaugural Speech, the constitution of His government, The Sermon on the Mount. It begins with a set of promises as a newly elected official might make a speech about what we can expect for the next four years... And Jesus Christ does something like that...except His promises are NOT what we might expect.

The promises of His administration seem to invert the basic values we hold dear; He offers benefits for things we all normally avoid.

And the unusual way this sermon begins (The Beatitudes) is just the start of more twists we find throughout this strange but also gripping sermon.

Scholars have debated the translation of the word rendered 8x as "blessed" in our version and one writer who's been a big help to ME, Jonathan Pennington has translated it "flourishing" – "Flourishing are the poor in spirit because theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

I'm going to GO with that idea... in fact I'm going to agree that it's the THEME of the entire sermon: how to flourish in life. What makes for a genuinely happy and good life...the "summum bonum" – the chief good? So today, we hear Jesus Christ's main speech on how to be happy... BUT...what is He really saying in this apparently shocking sermon?

Let's look at :

- 1) The Problem With the Sermon**
- 2) The Upside-Down Administration**
- 3) The Most Important Phrase**

Why would I say that the most famous sermon ever spoken and ever written...the MAIN teaching by the most influential Person who ever lived – WHY do I say there's a problem with this sermon?

Well, two reasons for this claim: 1) It tells you to do absurd/extreme/contradictory things 2) It's opposite of everything Christianity teaches (How's that?!)

It tells people to amputate their hand and gouge out their eyes... (5.29-30) It tells us to not resist evil – NO SELF-DEFENSE! (5.39). It urges us to live like the birds of the air – no savings, no planning/scheming just taking what God brings our way (like birds – 6.26).

In this charter of His Kingdom – this Declaration of Dependence – the Speaker commands, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged" (7.1) and then a few verses later we're commanded TO JUDGE whether people might be swine or dogs "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine." (7.6) Doesn't that require judgment?

The Sermon also points to the most morally flawless people who ever lived and tells us WE MUST BE BETTER THAN THEY WERE OR we will not enter the Kingdom: "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." (5.20) Absurd and undoable.

AND not only is THIS a problem – the undoable and preposterous... but (esp. for we Protestants!) Jesus Christ's words in the Sermon...the persistent focus on doing and reward, on requirements WE have to meet in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven – the whole emphasis of Jesus Christ's speech seemingly contradicts our whole understanding of salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

In other words – Christ opposes Christianity. And that's a real problem – don't you agree? I mean if we've developed a system of doctrine that contradicts the main speech of the Founder – that's a deal breaker. And it can't be the Founder's fault!

So what do we do? Well, the most common solution is to sort of throw up our hands and run back to last week's passage – John 3.16 – “for God so loved the world and all that... that's my religion! I can't get hung up on all that peripheral, philosophical stuff!”

I've heard that A LOT over the years... and while I sort of sympathize... I should point out that this isn't peripheral – it's the Constitution of the Kingdom! It's like the main idea! So EITHER we've misread the Sermon on the Mount or we've misunderstood the Christian faith altogether and salvation is NOT by grace alone through faith alone.

Others have jettisoned the rest of the Bible and have attempted to make THIS Sermon the whole thing...

The great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, took the words of the Founder very seriously and ended up an anarchist (belief in NO government at all – defund the police and all government all together!) BUT at least Tolstoy tried to take Jesus Christ's inaugural speech seriously albeit woodenly (Gotta give him that!)

Others have said the Sermon applied only to the original hearers – the Apostles and the original Jewish converts... Maybe it applies only to clergy, priests and monks... OR that it applies ONLY within the Church (this is how we should treat one another but not those outside the church).

Others have said that the Sermon is only another and even clearer way of saying that WE can't keep God's Law... and therefore (here, where we see the inner meaning/application of the Law) we're all shown that we can't save ourselves and we need someone to save us... but... is that really the point? If so, why does Jesus put (esp. at the end of the Sermon) put such an emphasis on keeping His words? – “whoever doesn't keep My words is like a builder on the sand...”

Are these words ONLY to show us how far short we fall and reiterate the “impossible ideal” of God's commands? BTW, I don't doubt that there's a real point there... and the Sermon DOES indeed expose us and send us looking OUTSIDE ourselves for salvation, for righteousness, happiness and wholeness!

But in the end...we have to ask: IS there a problem with the SotM...or is it OUR problem in failing to SEE and understand the Sermon in the whole context in which it was presented... and isn't it ON US to conform OUR notions of religion and spirituality to Jesus Christ's main teaching?

It was a Hellenistic environment (Greece and now Rome with their pagan views and philosophies). AND it was a Jewish environment based on the Law, the writings and the prophets and also on the clergy who perfected holiness but only outwardly. Here Jesus presents His answer to the question that consumed the philosophers i.e. “what is the good life?” “Jesus, what answer do YOU give to that all-important question?” And the corresponding Jewish

question: “What is true holiness or perfection? as in 5.48 “you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

And the answer we begin to introduce today but will hopefully unpack over these many weeks is that like Nicodemus (the Pharisee who came by night – last week) we THINK we see what the good life is – but until we’re made inwardly alive by God’s Spirit, we can’t see the essence of the good life. Without life from God, true happiness will look upside down and absurd to us.

In our old self, we BUY what the world is selling. We’re convinced that to be really happy is to be self-confident and inwardly strong. The essence of the good life is to avoid sorrow and grief; to have the upper hand when we clash with others – to be assertive and in control. To be happy is to be totally self-sufficient and never in need, never hungry or thirsty.

And Jesus says, “You believe these things because this is what the world has taught you and the devil and your own fallen, dead hearts... But when the Wind from heaven breathes on you and you come to life...when the LOVE OF GOD resurrects you and you know the infinite relief of sins forgiven and peace with God... when you come to know God as Father who KNOWS everything about you and LOVES YOU ANYWAY... it inverts the values you've always taken for granted!”

You look into your self-confident heart because you know you are “ALL THAT”! But this time, under the beautiful influence of the Spirit of Life, you see your own inner poverty. You stop trying to compare yourself to others (especially notoriously bad people) but this time you see yourself in relation to God and like Isaiah, you say, “Woe is ME! I am toast!! I have nothing good inside me – I’m morally bankrupt/poor!”

“Flourishing are the poor in spirit because theirs is the Kingdom of God.” See, they're blessed because their poverty has revealed their need for God to come and rule them! As it says in James: “But the brother of humble circumstances should boast in his high position; and the rich man should boast in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away”. (1.9-10)

We HATE to see how morally weak and poor we are before God...but Jesus is saying, “When you see it, THEN you’ll welcome the Reign of God and you’ll flourish in that truth...”

Seeing that inner poverty will be devastating – you’ll mourn BUT– “Flourishing are those who mourn because they will be comforted.” If you're convinced you're good because, “I’m not like my neighbor who cheats on her husband...” then you won’t mourn over your OWN failings and if you don’t mourn, you can’t be comforted.

If you’re assertive and aggressive and fooling yourself into thinking the way to be happy is to GET and USE power over people – that you're influential and folks JUMP when you snap your fingers... “and I gave that guy a piece of my mind!”

But the True King says, “Blessed are the gentle for they shall inherit the earth” – they see their own need and have wept before God and have experienced God the Righteous Judge who freely forgave and was gentle with ME... so now, I can be gentle with others. Grace given TO me is now grace coming OUT OF ME.

And right down through the nine Beatitudes until we meet one inevitable result of living this way – that people who are living according to the world’s happiness plan – they will look at you in this upside-down-kingdom and the true, deep flourishing you know and they will hate you for it because you’re living by a new and different kind of right-ness.

Your life – NOT because you’re smug or tactless or self-righteous – but because you’re truly righteous – and others will hate you for exposing them. The way of true flourishing has found you out and you no longer have to frantically inflate your own ego in the desperate attempt to be “happy”.

Now, I’ll close by pointing out what I believe is the most important phrase in this introductory section of the Sermon on the Mount – in fact I believe it’s the most important phrase in the whole Sermon.

At the very start, it says “Jesus saw the crowds”. He saw that they were like sheep without a shepherd. He HAS what THEY NEED. Super important but not the phrase I have in mind.

Then, HIGHLY SIGNIFICANT, in that first verse, that Jesus Christ “went up on a mountain”. Here we remember some of the VERY important mountains in the Bible. Abraham takes Isaac up on Mount Moriah (Gen 22). And Moses on Mount Sinai from where he gave the Law to Israel... and here Jesus Christ is like the New and Better Moses (Rev 15: “they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb...”). Moses gave the Law; Jesus has come to fulfill it. And Jesus will ascend yet another Mountain called Golgotha to die for my sins. That’s a super important idea – not exactly what I have in mind.

And then it says “He sat down” – like a king, THE King we’ve been waiting for. We thought it was David but David was NOT able to be the model of his own teaching – he failed. But here is the Son of David who embodies all that He teaches, the King with clean hands and pure heart who sits, enthroned and is describing His own character – He is the PICTURE of the summum bonum – the Good Life.

But even THAT is not the MOST important phrase.

It’s the last five words of verse one, “after He sat down, His disciples came to Him” – When He taught the parable of the Sower, the crowds wondered what it all meant...and so did the disciples. The crowds went away but the disciples came TO Him with questions and He says, “TO YOU it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them (who

don't come) it has not been granted." They came to Jesus and He gave Himself, gave LIFE to them. "His disciples CAME to Him."

The Sermon on the Mount is the Constitution of His government, the Kingdom of Heaven. It yields its fruit NOT to those who are the best scholars or the smartest and wisest among us but to needy ones who GO TO HIM... Martha worked but Mary went needy to Him to get what only He could give – grace and truth. And she flourished.

His disciples depend on Him... and He ushers them into the flourishing life... sometimes a suffering life...not what the world has in mind...Seems upside-down but it's True Life... and HE is the Source.

"His disciples came to Him..." – There is no True Life and no true and lasting happiness, righteousness, wholeness without Him... You must come to Him and give Him your ear, trust Him (a Person, not a plan).

As we work through this sermon...and it's confusing and disorienting, please know that even today, the answer is the same: "His disciples come to Him..."