

THE REIGN OF JOY - PART ONE

Matthew 5:1-5

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August 7, 2011

PROLOGUE

Many people think that the Sermon on the Mount embodies the heart of Christ's teaching (Matthew 5-7). Apart from the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes are probably the most familiar verses of the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes both introduce and summarize the essence of the Sermon on the Mount and show us the way in which the Kingdom of God makes its impact on the lives of those who respond to it.

Kids in Sunday School are often asked to memorize the Beatitudes. A little girl from Eagle, Wisconsin proudly recited it like this for her family and guests: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall. . .they shall. . .they shall come home, dragging their tails behind them."

SCRIPTURE

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 (Matt 5:1-5 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Matthew tells us that Jesus withdrew from the crowds and sat down and then his disciples came to him. Sitting down was the typical position from which a rabbi taught weightier matters (cf. 13:1- 2; 15:29; 24:3-4; 26:55). The KJV uses a more literal rendering of Matthew's words, "[Jesus] opened his mouth, and taught them" (5:2 KJV). This sounds redundant to us but it is from a figure of speech meaning that what follows is not only important but it is also a summary of what has been taught on more than one occasion. Luke, for example, records a similar message often called the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17- 49).

The name "Beatitude" is derived from the Latin word for blessed and refers to the nine statements Jesus makes at the beginning of his sermon all starting with the words, "Blessed are." Coincidentally, the word "beatitude" helps us to remember what the Beatitudes are all about: The Beatitudes are the *attitudes* of the committed followers of Jesus. They are not requirements to fulfill in order to *become* a follower of Jesus. Rather, they are addressed to people who have already made the honest decision to join his cause.

The Beatitudes all have promises associated with the Kingdom of God, that is to say, to be comforted, to inherit the earth, to be satisfied, to obtain mercy, and so on. The first beatitude and the final two beatitudes have promises that are expressed in the present tense meaning they are a present possession of those who follow Jesus. The other six promises are in the future tense indicating that the Kingdom of God is also a future hope.

But the thing that is most striking for me about the Beatitudes is the nine-fold emphasis on joy as the chief characteristic of being part of the Kingdom of God. The Greek term that is translated as “blessed” is μακάριος. The ancient Greeks thought μακάριος was a kind of joy that only the gods could experience.

From a Christian perspective, this joy is a gift that can only come from God. It is independent of circumstances. Jesus speaks of profound joy in the context of impoverishment, grief, loss, conflict and even persecution. If such joy does not derive from worldly circumstances then it cannot be destroyed by them either.

So the Beatitudes are the attitudes that lead to a Spirit-produced Kingdom life of joy. Our attention this morning falls on the first three of these.

1. JOY IN SPIRITUAL POVERTY

First of all, there is JOY IN SPIRITUAL POVERTY. Blessed are those who know they are spiritually impoverished!

But this flies in the face of conventional wisdom. We feel that happiness must naturally be the result of finding prosperity even if it is only inner prosperity. But the word Jesus uses for “poor” refers to abject poverty. It is the poverty of the hopeless beggar of his day. How can there be any joy in that?

The answer lies in understanding how this beatitude reveals the truth about ourselves. The poverty of which it speaks is the realization that, though we may possess many things, without God all our things are as nothing. To be spiritually poor is to know your absolute dependence on God.

The truth is, we are a tangled mess of conflicting motives, continuous selfishness, and self-deception. We are at odds with our Maker and each other and we spend much of our lives either trying to hide this from others or running away from its reality. There is something wretched about the human condition. The Apostle Paul recognized this in his own life. He tells us:

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it...Wretched man that I am! (Rom 7:18, 24 NRSV).

Acknowledging our spiritual poverty is the key to being set free from our wretched condition. Jesus tells the story of two men who went into the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee boasted in his prayer but the tax collector did not even lift his eyes, but beat his chest and said, "God be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Jesus then told his listeners that the tax collector was the one who went home in the right with God and not the religious Pharisee.

I like the way Gavin Reid describes the first Beatitude:

What Jesus does straight away is to say that personal happiness comes from recognizing the truth about ourselves and realizing that our heavenly Father is happy for us to belong to him exactly as we are. The issue is not whether God approves. It is whether God accepts. And he does.

This is what Paul discovered. After lamenting his own wretchedness (which I read to you earlier) he goes on to say:

I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions (Rom 7:24, 25 TMNT).

There is joy in spiritual poverty.

2. JOY IN MOURNING

Secondly, there is JOY IN MOURNING. That's a paradox isn't it? Happy are those who are sad?

It is important to note that Jesus is not referring to the pessimist who constantly looks for the bad in everything. The other day I came across this definition of a pessimist: A pessimist is someone who stops to smell the flowers and then looks around for the casket.

"Blessed are those who mourn." Jesus is not referring to the pessimist nor to the selfish person whose ambitions have been thwarted. He is speaking of the one who cares deeply about the hurts of others.

A dear friend of mine, who was a high school classmate, had cystic fibrosis. He was born with it. David had to go the hospital on a frequent basis. But even after he became an adult, he insisted that he be placed in the children's ward of the hospital. He did this so he could be of encouragement and provide some cheer to those young patients. David had embraced his own pain and willingly shared in the pain of others.

For his own funeral he requested Psalm 39. It is not a cheery reading by any stretch of the imagination. It says, in part, "Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears!" (Ps 39:12 RSV). I think this was David's way of affirming the reality of his faith amidst the realities of this life.

To mourn, in the sense of which the beatitude speaks, is to care deeply. It is to grieve over the suffering that is caused by sin, injustice and perversion in our world.

But I must confess I often find this beatitude to be problematic. The reason is this: I do not know of anyone who has spent a considerable time in a helping profession (such as ministry) who has not come to the end of a long day and said, "Why do I even bother?"

What helps me through these times is the promise that comes with this beatitude. Jesus does not promise an answer to my question but does promise to come alongside me and give me strength. This is the meaning of the word that is translated as "comfort." The same word is used elsewhere in Scripture to describe the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter (John 14:26) - God's personal, encouraging presence who comes along side of us.

This is a jagged and painful world. Jesus has allowed the barbs of this world to pierce his heart. He has shed more tears for the world than all of our tears put together. Sooner or later, if we love Jesus, then whatever breaks his heart will break ours, also. And it is through such brokenness that the Holy Spirit brings us closer to the heart of God. And no one close to the heart of God can remain sad forever. As the psalmist declares:

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning (Psalm 30:5 NRSV).

There is joy in mourning.

3. JOY IN MEEKNESS

Thirdly, there is JOY IN MEEKNESS. Unfortunately, our culture equates meekness with weakness. And we do not want to be weak. We prefer to be like the little boy whose mother kept calling him, "My little lamb." Finally, he said, "Mother, I don't want to be your little lamb. I want to be your little tiger!"

But this is far from the biblical understanding of meekness. To be meek is not to be numbered among the "weak-kneed, lily-livered, little people" of the world. Meekness here has the image of a great team of horses under the control and discipline of their driver.

The word that is translated as "meek" refers to moral character rather than physical

attributes. A meek spirit would be a disciplined or controlled spirit. An aggressive person is usually a weak person who feels the need to give the illusion of strength with harsh gestures and vulgar words. A meek person may appear to be weak but must, in reality, be strong in order to exercise self control.

To be meek not only means to live in self control but also to walk humbly. To be humble does not mean to be insignificant, but to know who you are in the sight of God. In the Book of Numbers it says of Moses, "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Num 12:3 KJV). Yet Moses led an entire nation of slaves to freedom. If to be meek is to be like Moses, then how can it be a virtue despised?

Meekness has an unusual reward: the inheritance of the earth! It comes as a gift because the meek would never seize it by force. Only the meek can enjoy the deepest satisfaction from God's created order.

Jesus was meek and *he* inherited the earth, indeed, the whole universe. Those who follow him will share in his inheritance. There is joy in meekness.

CONCLUSION

The Beatitudes teach us that the Kingdom of God is also the Kingdom of Joy. But such joy is not based on worldly happiness. It is the joy of coming to our senses about our lack of God and our desire for God; the joy of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to the concerns of the world in like manner as Jesus; and the joy of submitting humbly to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.

The Beatitudes are the attitudes that lead to a Spirit-produced Kingdom life of joy. They are the lifestyle goals of the committed followers of Jesus. Let us use them to shape the way the Kingdom breaks into our lives and let us allow God to use them to shape us for his Kingdom.