

THE REIGN OF JOY

PART TWO

Matthew 5:6-8

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PROLOGUE

Time and time again Jesus told his followers that it was not the appearance of faith but what was in the heart that really mattered. Charles Allen tells of a rather religious to the point of being self-righteous member of a church who got upset at his neighbor's frequent use of profanity and told him so. The neighbor replied, "Well, the way I see it, I swear a lot and you pray a lot, but neither of us really means what he says."

The Beatitudes help reveal what is truly in our hearts. They introduce and summarize the heart of Christ's teachings. They show us the way in which the Kingdom of God makes its impact on the lives of those who respond to it.

SCRIPTURE

"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" (Matthew 5:6-8 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

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." Because the word "beatitude" sounds like the word "attitude" this can help 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.

What is perhaps most striking about the Beatitudes is the nine-fold emphasis on joy as the chief characteristic of being part of the Kingdom of God. We know this joy as a gift from God that is independent of circumstances. The Beatitudes are the attitudes that lead to a Spirit-produced Kingdom life of joy. Our attention this morning falls on the second set of three.

1. JOY IN RIGHTEOUS DESIRE

There is joy in righteous desire. Hunger is a strong word indicating intense desire. But thirst is a stronger word, a concept that the people of the dry lands of Palestine would have readily understood. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." But

who is righteous? Can anyone claim that?

Fortunately, righteousness is not a requirement of this beatitude. Rather, the desire for it is what is needed. King David desired to build a great temple for the Lord. But he was not an altogether sinless man, as his affair with Bathsheba shamefully revealed. Still, it was his intention that was honored even though the temple was not built until after David's death. In 1 Kings it says, "...David planned to build a temple for the worship of the Lord God of Israel, but the Lord said to him, 'You were right in wanting to build a temple for me, but you will never build it'" (1 Kings 8:18,19).

The righteousness described in this beatitude refers to right-relatedness. It has to do with completeness, wholeness, equity, and harmony. It is a desire for justice held in love. This kind of righteousness is needed not only within our world but within ourselves. We need to be in right-relationship with our Maker and our neighbor. And the desire for such soon leads us to the discovery that our hunger for righteousness is really a hunger for Christ.

There are many kinds of hungers, but they are not always the right kind nor can they be truly satisfying. The ancient Roman upper-class were known for their great feasts. Did you ever wonder how they could eat so much food? Simple; they left the table, took an emetic, vomited what they had eaten, and went back to the table and stuffed themselves all over again. It was gluttony to the Nth degree. That kind of hunger is never satisfied.

Robert Louis Stevenson once commented that "to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive." But those who hunger for the righteousness of Christ are both hopeful and arrive. Other hungers may lead to temporary pleasure, but the person who hungers for Christ finds eternal joy. The Psalmist declares, "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness" (Psalm 17:15 NRSV).

The ancients believed that thirst was caused by a kind of fire in your throat. Our word "quench" as in "quench your thirst" relates to this ancient idea. Quench means to extinguish and so if you drink water you extinguish the fire in your throat. So strong must this desire for Christ be that it is described as a fire in the throat which no ordinary water can quench but only the living water from Jesus Christ.

Christ is both the object of our hunger and the quenching of our thirst. He alone can satisfy us. There is joy in righteous desire.

2. JOY IN MERCY

There is also joy in mercy. Mercy was scarce in the harsh world of the First Century A.D., where the Romans despised pity, and religious leaders saw suffering as punishment for sin.

Although the word “mercy” is a noun, this beatitude treats it like a verb. It is to practice mercy. It is to allow suffering to lay claim on you and to do something about it. The work of the Red Cross is an obvious example of the practice of mercy. It is to alleviate pain and cruelty indiscriminately.

The practice of mercy is not always external. Jesus told the Pharisees, “So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you: (Luke 11:41 NRSV). Mercy starts in the heart and is expressed through compassion.

The Associated Press carried a story a while back about an instructor from a dog training workshop in Salt Lake City who noted that a dog's disposition can be tested by the owner. If the owner will fall down and pretend to be hurt, a dog with a bad temper will tend to bite him. But a good dog will show concern and may lick the fallen owner's face. Susan Matice attended the class and then decided to test her two dogs. While eating pizza in her living room, she stood up, clutched her heart, screamed and fell to the floor. Her two dogs looked at her, looked at each other, then raced to the coffee table for her pizza! So much for compassion.

Jesus also told his followers that by doing a kindness to anyone they had done it to him personally (Matt 25:40). Not only does this provide us with a powerful motivation for showing mercy it is also an encouragement about the result. The way I can help someone who is out of my reach is to help someone who is. The act of kindness done in Jesus’ name causes ripples that spread outward to others.

The merciful shall obtain mercy. This is a double reward. The merciful are too aware of their own shortcomings to be critical of their neighbors'. They have received the forgiveness and mercy of God and are less likely to stir up contention. In effect, they receive mercy from those neighbors who have received mercy from them. But even if bitterness comes to the merciful, God deals with them as they have dealt with others. They obtain mercy and need not fear a day of judgement.

Thomas Hooker brought his congregation to America and founded what would later become the State of Connecticut. As he lay dying, someone said to him, "Sir, you are going to receive the reward of all your labours." Thomas looked at him and replied, "Brother, I am going to receive mercy."

There is joy in the practice of mercy and practice makes perfect. Practice at home. Practice at work. Practice at church. Practice, practice, practice. Deeds of mercy must be held within prayers of mercy, and prayers of mercy come from having Calvary in your heart. Jesus said from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). And later James would write, “For judgment will be without mercy

to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13 NRSV).

3. JOY IN PURITY

There is joy in purity. This is perhaps the brightest of the beatitudes. It also seems the most unreachable. It is hard to know which is more unlikely, the condition or the promise, to be pure or to see God?

Purity is a rare phenomenon in the United States. The phrase, "pure bologna", once a satirical word-play, is now a watchword for the American way of life. If our food is largely processed then perhaps our lives are as well.

Bologna sausage is commonly believed to be created from low quality scraps of meat cuts. This may be the origin of the slang word baloney, meaning "a lot of nonsense." But an alternative etymology suggests that baloney is a corruption of the City of Bologna, Italy. As the University at Bologna was known for graduating a great many lawyers, the French, and later English, began referring to all legal clap-trap as baloney.

In the world of making food if you throw a bunch of different things together you get baloney. In life, if you throw together a lot of things that make little or no sense then you get a life full of baloney, and it is anything but pure.

“Blessed are the pure in heart.” The heart in the Bible usually refers to the whole personality. Purity can be translated as “unmixed.” When it is used of linen, it refers to white linen, of gold, unalloyed gold, of glass, clear glass. A pure heart is one with unmixed motives.

A man was riding in a taxi in New York City when he noticed that the driver slowed down to avoid a pedestrian. Trying to compliment the driver's actions he said, "I noticed you slowed down?" The driver responded, "Yea, if you hit them, you've got to fill out a report!"

Purity of heart means singleness of motive. But those with clear intentions are difficult to find. Yet this beatitude does not mock us. God can cleanse the heart in response to one sorrowful prayer. Jesus said to the double-minded religious authorities, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt 21:31).

Many philosophers and theologians believe that our deepest wish is to see God. But is this beatitude promising a mere vision? Will there be a day in the far future when we will be standing before the beauty of the Lord? Or does it refer to something that can happen much sooner than that?

In order to answer that we need to consider that, in a manner of speaking, there are three kinds of sight. There is the sight of the natural eye with which we see flowers and trees, road signs and buildings, faces of people and printed words on a page. There is the mental sight of the mind as when a student understands a concept that the teacher has been trying to explain. If you understand what you read then you see with your eyes and your mind.

But there is also a third sight which comes by way of the heart. A poet looks at flowers and sees thoughts too deep for tears. A man can look at a woman and know that he loves her. He not only sees her with his natural eyes but also with his heart. Many can read the 23rd Psalm and understand the words and phrases. But some read it with their hearts and feel the message because they know the Shepherd of whom the psalm speaks.

Jesus looked upon people with compassion because they were helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matt 9:36). He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11 NRSV). He saw them not only with his eyes and mind but also with his heart. We need to look at others in this same way. And if we look with compassion on those around us, we also get the privilege of seeing Jesus.

The pure in heart will see God in the world when the vision of others is obscured. The pure in heart are aware of the work of the Holy Spirit even and especially in the midst of pain. When others despair they feel God's love. They see his hand in the lives of people and are filled with assurance. The pure in heart wait upon the Lord. As John says:

"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3 NRSV).

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 being rightly related to God and working on making our relationships right with others; the joy of appreciating the great mercy we have received from God and generously extending that mercy to others; and the joy of having a compassionate purpose so we can see with the eyes of the heart and recognize the Risen Lord in our midst.

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.