

KINGDOM ATTITUDES (3)

Matthew 5:9-12

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PROLOGUE

One of the challenges to peacemaking is our tendency to assume the worst about others. For example, there was this guy who invariably left off the cap to the toothpaste and for years his wife had hounded him about it. Finally, on their 25th anniversary, he made a commitment to himself to break the annoying habit. With faithfulness and regularity he screwed on the toothpaste cap every time he used it. After a week of unbroken success he was blind-sided by his wife who cornered him at the breakfast table and said, "Why did you stop brushing your teeth?!"

SCRIPTURE

"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.

¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:9-12 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

There are nine beatitudes found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Through them Jesus is trying to shape ordinary men and women into extraordinary disciples. It is a kind of revolution because our world must be turned upside down in the way we think about life and faith and happiness. The watchword for this revolution is joy. The Beatitudes are the attitudes that lead to a Spirit-produced Kingdom life of joy. Our attention this morning falls on the third set of three.

1. JOY IN PEACEMAKING

There is joy in peacemaking. The practice of peace is uncommon and unpopular. Notice, Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the peaceWANTERS" or "the peaceHOPERS." There are plenty of those around. But he said, "Blessed are the peaceMAKERS." People who work at bringing about peace are all too rare. It is much easier to fuel the fires of prejudice than it is to strive for understanding. Being a peacemaker requires practicing justice and love and living by Kingdom standards. It is to follow a calling that separates the children of God from people of hatred and war, a calling not simply to put an end to conflict, as worthwhile as that may be, but to also actively promote the well being of others and seek their highest good.

The word “peace” occurs repeatedly in the New Testament and its central meaning is reconciliation with God. Therefore, the central task of a peacemaker is to reconcile others with God. For as long as people are at odds with God they will remain at odds with each other. We do not treat each other right because we are not right with our Maker. Therefore, peacemaking and true evangelism, go hand-in-hand.

A missionary family in the western end of the island of New Guinea (formerly West Irian) had a difficult time getting the native Sawis to cease their violent and cannibalistic ways.¹ To the Sawis, violence and treachery were considered virtues. Don Richardson, the husband and father, tried teaching the Sawi men Bible stories in between conflicts, but they were generally uninterested until he told them about Judas Iscariot and Jesus' betrayal. When that story was finished the Sawi men all cheered, not for Jesus, but for Judas, who in their eyes had become a super Sawi for betraying such an impressive figure. The Richardsons were about to give up when one morning a strange event took place. Two of the villages gathered and the leaders of the villages exchanged sons. Each son was called a “peace child” and everyone who wanted to make peace had to lay hands on one of the peace children. There was a great celebration. For as long as the peace children were alive, the two villages would not fight.

Richardson was at first confused, but then he got an idea. He talked to the Sawi about what had taken place. He affirmed what they had said, that peace could not be obtained without the painful giving of a son. Then Richardson declared that the Spirit whose message he bore, declared the same thing; true peace could never come without a peace child. There was silence. He went on to say that because this Spirit wants all people to have peace with him and each other for all time, there must be a once-for-all peace child. The Sawis asked who he chose. Richardson said he chose his own dear Son. He went on to say that it was this Jesus, which he told them about earlier, who was that Son. As a consequence, legions of villagers sought peace with God through Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Apostle Paul tells us:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Col 1:19-20 NRSV).

¹Don Richardson is the author of, *Peace Child*, a book about his mission work with the Sawi people in Irian Jaya. It has sold about half a million copies in 27 languages.

And elsewhere:

For the kingdom of God is... [about] righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17 NIV).

There is joy in peacemaking.

2. JOY IN THE FACE OF PERSECUTION

There can be joy even in the face of persecution. This seems as paradoxical as the Second Beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn.” But again, Jesus is not saying that persecution, in and of itself, is blessed, rather we can rejoice if we suffer for doing what is right. It is to discover that truth and righteousness are more important than status or reputation. To lay hold of the truth and to know that not even the pain of death can take it from you is to be blessed with an ineffable reward and know that you have been received into the Kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, one aspect of our troubled world that we dare not forget is that Christians continue to suffer persecution. In spite of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948, Christian believers living under totalitarian governments or as minorities in countries where the majority religion is antagonistic to the Christian faith frequently face harassment and persecution.

Of course, Christians are not the only ones who experience persecution. And, sadly, we also have to admit with shame that sometimes it is Christians who are the ones who are doing the persecuting of others. We need to clearly communicate that this is an un-Christ-like behavior and humbly pray that those involved will repent of this and resolve to demonstrate Christ-like compassion to one and all.

In terms of sheer numbers, though, it is far more likely that someone in the world who is suffering for his or her faith will be a follower of Jesus. Church historians often refer to the first three centuries of Christianity as the “Age of Persecution.” But the reality is that more Christians were martyred in the 20th Century than all other centuries combined. And even today, upwards of 200 million Christians around the world face the possibility of persecution on a daily basis.

There is a significant relationship between faith and persecution. Under the scourges of pagan emperors of Rome, Christianity flourished. When Christianity became the state religion under Constantine, although the political influence was stronger, Christianity became complacent. This gave rise to a whole series of migrations to remote areas in search of spiritual leaders who had strengthened their faith through tough disciplines. This would later be known as the Great Monastic Movement. In the absence of

persecution, they sought enemies from the hot sands of the desert and a life of loneliness.

In more recent times, Christianity not only survived but thrived behind the so-called Iron and Bamboo curtains. While during this same period, churches in North America (especially Canada and the United States) experienced a combined loss of more than 3,000 members per day!

This beatitude is not saying that the loss of persecution will mean the loss of faith. Rather, if you cling to what is right and true, do not be surprised if there are people who despise you. Jesus said to his followers, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (Jn 15:20). Now they may not openly persecute you. You may have to deal with subtle hints of unacceptability, the "goody-two-shoes" label, remarks about hypocrisy or being judgmental, as well as the double-standard that the world gives religious types.

But the real question is not so much, "Are you willing to die for your faith," as it is, "Are you willing to live for your faith?" If you are serious about your faith, you will stick out. Christianity falls short whenever it is so wishy-washy that the wicked of the world no longer persecute it, but ignore it. If you wanted a comfortable religion, according to C. S. Lewis, you should never have picked Christianity; it is the most uncomfortable religion in the world.

3. JOY THROUGH SACRIFICE

There is joy in sacrifice. If the Eighth Beatitude has to do with being persecuted for what you do, then the Ninth Beatitude is concerned with the sacrifice you make because of who you are. It is to identify with Jesus, to be one of his own, to be willing to receive the same treatment he did, which is the meaning of carrying the cross. It is to love others so much that you would be willing to yield your life for them, to devote your energy to serving Christ, and, if necessary, to die in service of the Gospel. It is to become like Christ.

This beatitude challenges us to be aware of opportunities where we can voluntarily undergo some hardship in order to show the love of God to others. Now this could be something as dramatic as risking one's life to help someone else. But the more frequent challenge is to "do good and share what you have" on a more mundane and daily basis. It is to treat people the way Jesus would treat them. If you cannot do a kind deed you may at least be able to say a kind word.

The story is told of a sales representative named Joe who had been away from his family for three weeks and was lonely. As he sat down in a little café to eat, the server asked, "What would you like?" Joe responded, "I want some lasagna and a few kind words." The young woman soon returned with his order, set it in front of him, and turned to leave when Joe said, "Say, what about my kind words?" She leaned down to his ear and

whispered, "Don't eat the lasagna."

The First Beatitude is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The Ninth Beatitude is, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on [Jesus'] account." If the first is the basis for all the rest, then the ninth is the culmination of all that has preceded it. It is the joy of recognizing that the Holy Spirit is shaping us into the image of Christ. It is to reap a heavenly reward, that cannot be measured because it consists of a great and wonderful salvation. It is a blessing all out of proportion to the service rendered. In the final analysis, it is a gracious gift. Jesus told this parable to explain it:

"Suppose one of you has a servant who comes in from plowing the field or tending the sheep. Would you take his coat, set the table, and say, 'Sit down and eat'? Wouldn't you be more likely to say, 'Prepare dinner; change your clothes and wait table for me until I've finished my coffee; then go to the kitchen and have your supper'? Does the servant get special thanks for doing what's expected of him? It's the same with you. When you've done everything expected of you, be matter-of-fact and say, 'The work is done. What we were told to do, we did'" (Lk 17:7-10 MSG).

If we do what God wants us to do then we have only done what has been expected of us and nothing more. But the truth is, we do not even do that. So it is in vain that we boast of our "sacrifices." Besides, any sacrifice we make on behalf of Christ cannot begin to compare to his sacrifice for us. And yet, if we are willing to stand up and be counted because we belong to the Lord, we join a noble company. Jesus declared, "For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." It is to join with the prophets of old and share their same fellowship. It is to be numbered with all those who have given themselves to the grand and glorious adventure of serving God in the world.

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 making peace as ambassadors of Christ, allowing God to make his appeal through us for the reconciliation of the world; the joy of knowing that even if we lose our lives for doing what is right we gain an entire Kingdom; and it is the joy of willingly giving ourselves over to the greatest cause the world has ever known.

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.