

Matthew 5:1-12 – Epiphany 4 – A Hunger for Holiness – January 29, 2023
+In Nomine Iesu+

There are three participants in our Gospel reading today. Jesus is on the mountain preparing to preach what we call the *Sermon on the Mount*. And we have the crowd. The sermon isn't really for them—not just yet. They are not the audience, although Jesus fully intends for them to hear.

But He preaches to the disciples. His newly called followers. Not long before, the disciples were part of the crowd. They viewed their lives through the demands of the crowd. They were just like all of the others.

But Jesus called them. “Follow Me,” He says. We saw it last week with Andrew and Peter, James and John. And they left everything—parents, possessions, passions—and followed Jesus. And their lives would never be the same.

Something happened to them that did not yet happen to the crowd. And as we can see, when Christ determines to call us, He also changes our hearts. He turns us to obedience by His Holy Spirit. And now the disciples see the truth. They can hear the voice of the Savior. They follow the call of their Lord. And it is light of this change—this renewal in the lives of the disciples—we might call this regeneration—that the *Sermon on the Mount* makes sense.

Preachers don't usually open their sermons with a list of aphorisms. But that is precisely what Jesus does in the *Sermon on the Mount*. Maybe the rest of us preachers could learn a little something here. Aphorisms are short, witty sayings that contain a surprising truth. They are memorable—clever—thought provoking sayings. They are proverbs.

In fact, the beatitudes of the *Sermon on the Mount* sound much like the Proverbs. Here we find Jesus as a new Solomon, bringing His wisdom to bear on our lives.

In the Proverbs, we hear, “Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding.” “Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.” “Blessed is the one who fears the LORD always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity.”

Maybe even more insightful is a connection to Psalm 1. The whole Psalter begins with a beatitude. And I think Jesus intends the *Sermon on the Mount* to begin in the same place. “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.”

And so we find this list of aphorisms—these pithy statements of blessing. And let's start by getting a right understanding of the word, *blessed*. Some have interpreted this word as *happy*—“Happy are the poor in spirit.” But that's not quite right.

Blessed is a prophetic word. It is the opposite of the announcement of *woe*. And here, it is Jesus who renders the judgment. And therefore, these beatitudes are absolutely true, regardless of what the crowd thinks of them.

Now, all of this blessedness is spiritual. Each beatitude comes from Christ renewing human hearts. And we might even say that the beatitudes are the very opposite of worldly happiness. *Blessed* certainly includes joy for those concerned with the kingdom of heaven. But *blessed* could just as easily be translated as *saved, rescued, regenerated*. The beatitudes

describe one that God has brought over from the domain of the crowd—from the domain of darkness—into His kingdom of marvelous light.

So, with a right understanding of *blessed*, we see that the beatitudes are not quippy pieces of advice. Rather, they describe a people. Jesus is speaking to His disciples—and about His disciples. He is speaking to those who are already under the power of His call. Jesus calls His disciples *blessed*.

And this does mean there is something lacking in the lives of the crowd. Busy with their own distractions—their own ideologies—they are missing out on what matters most. All of the promises of God are being awarded to this little community of disciples. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

And maybe these kinds of statements press in on our lives too much. They make us a little uncomfortable. We are not sure we are ready to reflect such attitudes in our lives. Maybe we like the ideas of love and grace and mercy and forgiveness, but the blessedness of discipleship makes us uneasy. It sounds like it might cost us something. It sounds like we will have to leave some things behind. And so, maybe we simply find it easier to avoid pondering the Beatitudes with much depth.

Then, there are issues of timing. This might not appeal to us either. We may not like the order of events that these beatitudes suggest. With some of the beatitudes, the blessings happen in the present. But most of the reasons occur in the future.

For example, Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart.” This is a statement with present implications. It is a description of the people of God. But the real promise remains in the future, “for they shall see God.” How is it that these pure ones are blessed while the real implications of that blessing happen so much later?

Last week we talked about this *already* and *not yet* tension found in the coming of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew’s Gospel. And with the first coming of Jesus, we find that we are blessed now—yet in ways we haven’t yet experienced in full. There is a lot of waiting for Jesus’ disciples.

I like the way Isaiah says it though. In a chapter full of God’s people stubbornly ignoring His Word when things get hard, the Prophet announces God’s direction, “Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him...In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.”

And thus, it’s in the very hardship of spiritual poverty—and in the persecution that results from faithfulness to Him—that Jesus comes bringing heaven’s kingdom. And it’s this shock factor of what God’s kingdom actually looks like—and what His disciples experience—that drives the beatitudes.

It will take a miracle to believe all of this—to trust a Lord who will take the path to the cross and call upon us to follow. It will take a miracle to wait for the full scope of His blessings—for a really long time. But that is just what Jesus works in the hearts of those He calls His disciples.

From the perspective of the crowd, there’s absolutely nothing blessed about mourning, meekness, or mercy. The crowd asserts the opposite. “Blessed are the powerful, for they shall

inherit everything.” The crowd operates according to values and principles we’ve come to expect and accept. It is everywhere around us.

So in highlighting the strange and unexpected values of His kingdom, Jesus challenges us, repeatedly, to realize His way is full of surprises. His kingdom doesn’t look like all the kingdoms of the earth to which we’re so accustomed.

Those who get ahead in Jesus’ kingdom are not those with unlimited power or the strongest determination—nor those with impressive resources or intolerance for mistakes. Instead, they are those who experience hardship and those who forgive—those who hunger and thirst for righteousness—those who seek holiness rather than happiness.

And I wonder if this is another reason we’ve come to neglect the beatitudes. Perhaps they’re simply so countercultural that we’re unwilling to give up our own expectations for life to turn to the values and virtues of Jesus’ kingdom.

It’s just easier to import the priorities of the crowd into our own lives. We don’t want to live in meekness; we want strong, independent, carefree lives. We don’t want to be peacemakers; we want to continue our personal and family squabbles. We don’t want to hunger and thirst after righteousness; we want to continue lusting after things that satisfy both imperfectly and momentarily.

Even so, the beatitudes are not prescriptions or postulations; they are proclamations. Jesus isn’t primarily instructing us in the pursuit of certain set of virtues. Though there’s certainly an aspect of this. We should grow in meekness, be merciful, and pursue pure hearts, for instance. But rather, Jesus is announcing where His kingdom is found and who will inherit its fullness—so that we can recognize it when we see it—so that we might find our place in what Jesus is doing in the world.

The beatitudes, then, demonstrate what it looks like to counter the empty pursuits our culture values so dearly. They’re not trivial promises of ease or security. Instead, these statements assure us of the full realization of our fundamental human desires. The things that we were made for—to know Christ—to be His followers—to know His wisdom—to know His comfort and satisfaction—and to dwell with him forever.

In the beatitudes, Jesus shows us the beauty of renewed people—a renewed world. And it is a reality that we would fail to recognize or imagine without His revelation. He invites us to see life as His disciples—so that we may continue to explore the depth of these blessings—have our expectations disrupted—and live in light of His eternal kingdom.

There are nine beatitudes. And they tell us what Jesus has in store for us—both now and in eternity. This is the blessed life that Jesus has for His disciples. Blessed are the poor in spirit—disciples need everything Christ has to offer. We depend on Him for all things.

Blessed are those who mourn—disciples mourn over the spiritual poverty of this world. They stand apart as strangers to the crowd. Blessed are the meek—disciples renounce all rights of their own for the sake of Jesus Christ. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness—disciples live now and into eternity in the righteousness of Christ.

Blessed are the merciful—disciples are quick to forgive—slow to become angry. Blessed are the pure in heart—disciples’ hearts are ruled and guided by the pure purposes of

Christ Himself. Blessed are the peacemakers—disciples don't need to hold grudges—they seek reconciliation in the family and in the church.

And to combine the last two—blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. This list ends in such a surprising place. Disciples are an offense to the crowd. They will be rejected. Their way of life will be criticized as legalistic, hateful, narrow, simplistic. They will live at odds with all that the world prioritizes.

And this is why it is so important that *Jesus* calls His disciples blessed. Not only when they directly confess His name—but also when they are persecuted for their association with all that Jesus is—with all that Jesus will have to say in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

When Jesus says that His disciples are blessed—we just are. His Word does what it says. And maybe even more importantly—we will be—blessed with all the promises of this text. And so, we hunger for holiness. We are His set apart as His people—His disciples. We heed the call of Jesus Christ. And our lives start to reflect these beatitudes. This is who we are.

Let me call you to a simple application of this text today. It's nothing too serious. I want you to take one of these beatitudes—and here I mean a specific one—the fourth one—*blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied*. Take this beatitude and write it down. Put it in your pocket—or put it on your nightstand or mirror—somewhere you will see it every day.

And let this word from Jesus fill your mind. Think about Jesus saying this to you—saying this about you. Talk about this blessing with others. Pray about it. And let the Word of God renew you—so that you begin to reflect that reality.

He has called you. You are now a disciple. You don't belong with the crowd anymore. And now the only valid response is for us disciples to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Let the Spirit turn you towards obedience until you hunger for holiness. Find satisfaction in His righteousness this week. And let me know how it goes. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied*. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+*Soli Deo Gloria*+