

BLESSED ARE THE JESUS PEOPLE

MATTHEW 5:1-12

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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There's a pretty standard way of reading and hearing the Beatitudes, one that you might be familiar with.

We look at the list of things Jesus calls "blessed" and then we go out and try to do that.

We treat this passage as something like a curriculum for the Christian life or a moral checklist that the boss demands of us or preparation for an exam that the teacher will give us later.

If we can do all of the things on the list consistently, then we'll get a prize at the end: the blessing of Jesus.

The list itself is a bit of a puzzling one. We don't particularly *like* the idea of being poor (in spirit or otherwise) or mourning or suffering persecution. We probably aren't even that attracted to meekness even if we admire it (sometimes) in others.

Making peace? Well, that's pretty hard stuff. Again, we admire it but...

And we are quite fond of mercy (certainly receiving it!) and we like to think that we long for righteousness and justice. We want to be pure in heart, but we know our hearts are more often full of mixed motives and selfish ambition... All in all it's a foreboding agenda that Jesus sets before us!

But this is the price of admission, we think, so we roll up our sleeves and get to work.

What I want us to consider this morning is that maybe this passage is less about giving us a list of things to *do* than it is in retraining us in how to *see* and where to look for Christ and his kingdom.

And that Jesus is reconfiguring our conceptions of what blessing is and where it is to be found.

We should pause on that word: “blessing” or “blessed.” The Greek word is *makarios* and it’s not easy to translate into English. Some translations go with “blessed,” some say “happy,” others still say “fortunate.”

Whenever I’m not sure how best to translate a Greek word, I turn to people who are quite a bit smarter than me. When it comes to the New Testament, few scholars would stand above the eminent N.T. Wright. He insists upon “blessed” instead of “happy” because happiness, as we understand it, is mostly circumstance dependent. For Wright, “blessedness” can *include* happiness, but it’s a much bigger concept.

“Blessedness”... is what happens when the creator God is at work both *in* someone’s life and *through* that person’s life.”¹

We might say it like this: “Blessed” lives are lives that are lived according to God’s purposes *in* the present and *for* the future.

You probably noticed that Jesus weaves back and forth between the present and the future in the Beatitudes.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs *is*—i.e., right now!—the kingdom of God.

Blessed are those who mourn *now* for they ***will be*** comforted. Their mourning will give way to comfort and a future where there is no longer any need to mourn.

On and on it goes... the pure in heart *will* see God. The peacemakers *will be* called children of God. The merciful *will be* shown mercy. These are all future oriented.

¹ N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 104.

Interestingly, the two that describe a blessing in the present are what we might call the least desirable ones. Both in reference to the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for Christ's sake, Jesus says, "theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven."

The kingdom belongs to those we would never expect to embody it. Right now.

Jesus is giving his followers a vision of a future kingdom of peace and purity, whose citizens no longer seek to dominate and get ahead of another but are rather meek and merciful, a kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace. And he's saying that those who live that way right now are blessed.

He's also saying that those who suffer disproportionately in the meantime—those who are victims in all of our lesser kingdoms of exploitation and apathy, selfishness and idolatry—these ones by their poverty and their suffering for righteousness' sake, receive God's stamp of approval and are called "blessed."

They are also a judgment on of sorts on the way things are. They are God's indictment upon our false way of valuing one another and apportioning blessing.

Jesus calls "blessed" the little ones, the cast aside ones, the forgotten and vulnerable ones.

I encountered just such a one Friday afternoon. I had decided to avoid the snowy roads and work from home. Around 3:00, I needed to clear my head so I took the dog for a short walk. As I was nearing home—only about a block or two away—I saw a strange thing, at least for little old Coaldale.

A shopping cart full of miscellaneous items—bottles, clothes, a sleeping bag, etc.—covered in tarp sitting in the middle of a snowy sidewalk. As I was passing by, I looked down the lane toward the seniors centre and saw a man sitting under a blanket in the entrance to the shelter. The weather looked a lot like it does outside right now. Arctic.

I'm not proud to admit this, but I walked on by.

But before I even made it to my back door, the words of Jesus that I had just been writing a sermon on intruded rather inconveniently into my brain.

Blessed are the poor in spirit... theirs is the kingdom of heaven. I remembered Luke's version of the Beatitudes which simply says, *Blessed are the poor...*

I squirmed a little.

Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.

I squirmed a little more.

I opened a book that I had been reading by Czech theologian Tomáš Halík about the love of God and read these words:

Jesus fundamentally links love of God with love for one's neighbor. And in so doing, he "grounds" it, rooting it deeply in the everyday reality of life. Should we be too tempted to be carried away by the romantic sentimentality of "celestial love," there is always a neighbor just outside our door....²

I stopped squirming and decided that I had better get up and do something before Jesus ran out of patience with me.

A few years ago, Naomi and I were in Las Vegas with some good friends for an accounting conference and we encountered a woman on the side of the road in similar circumstances (there it was oppressive heat, not cold!).

In that case, my friend Tanya dragged me back and forced me to act like a Christian. We got her some food, we heard her story, we prayed for her. Here, in the absence of a friend to do Jesus' work for him, he decided, evidently, that he would have to do it himself.

I made a pot of coffee and put it in a travel mug, threw some food in a bag, put my boots and gloves back on and trudged back out into the snow.

He was still there. I greeted him and asked if it was ok if I joined him. He smiled and nodded.

² Tomáš Halík, *I Want You to Be: On the God of Love* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 75.

I asked him what his name was. “Denis,” he said. His smile was broad and toothy. His beard was impressive and his hair was long. He was holding a bottle and smelled like cheap booze. I asked him if he was cold. He grinned and said, “not really” in a heavy French accent. He was used to this.

I asked him if he wanted some coffee, something to eat. He enthusiastically accepted. I sat there with him for a while and listened to a bit of his story.

He was from Quebec, had bounced around across the prairies to Vancouver and back. He liked the prairies the best.

I asked him about the weather. “Oh, this is not so bad,” he said. “I’ve been in way more extreme conditions than this.”

We talked for a while longer. He told me about some of the situations he had found himself in, about where the best places to sleep were. As I left, he was still munching away on his food. He had set aside his bottle in favour of the coffee. He looked content, although I couldn’t imagine how.

I said a prayer for Denis. It didn’t feel like much, but sometimes I don’t know what else to do.

And as I prayed, I pondered this blessedness that Jesus talks about. Was there a blessing exchanged in this brief encounter between one of the little ones Jesus was always drawn to and a reluctant Levite who Jesus dragged across the road by the ear?

Can the blessing of God make its way amidst mixed motives? I think it can. I pray it can, anyway.

I think that little encounters like this might be tiny little glimpses of the kingdom of God—of a future where mercy will come naturally, where divisions and inequalities will be no more, where justice and righteousness will prevail.

I think this is how the blessing of God makes its way in the world—in little encounters like this, away from the spotlight. I think this is who God chooses to be the agents of blessing—the easily ignored, the looked down on, the un-influential, the ones deemed insignificant or a drain on the social safety net.

On a snowy afternoon, Jesus had given me a lesson in how to *see* and where to look for him and his kingdom.

He had once again reconfigured my conception of what blessing is and where it is to be found.

To return to N.T. Wright's definition of "blessing," God had been at work in me through Denis and, I hope, in a very small way, in Denis through me.

The title of my sermon this morning didn't make it into the bulletin. I decided to call it "Blessed are the Jesus People."

This is what the Beatitudes are inviting us into, isn't it? To be Jesus people, in the broadest sense of the term.

We are to be those whose lives are ever striving to look like Jesus' life, in following his example and trying to obey his teaching.

But we are also "Jesus people" in the sense that we *belong* to Jesus and are *found in him* through faith.

This past week was the official five hundredth year anniversary of the Reformation so I'm guessing you might have heard Martin Luther's name come up now and then.

Luther was big on a doctrine called "justification by faith alone." This is the idea that is perhaps most widely attributed to him.

We are not saved by our good works. We do not accumulate merits based on our good behaviour or by dropping enough coins in the coffers of the state church. We can never do enough, be enough, or advance far enough in the Jesus curriculum to earn salvation.

We are saved by the grace of God alone. Salvation is the work of God in Christ, not us.

Now, Mennonites have at times looked askance at some understandings of this doctrine. We have been critical of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously called "cheap grace"—the idea that God has done everything so we don't have to.

We have rightly focused on the importance of actually *doing* what Jesus said. The life of faith isn't about just kicking back and celebrating all that God has done for us, but pursuing lives of righteousness, justice, peace, and holiness. This is all very good.

But I wonder if Mennonites could occasionally use a reminder from Luther and other strains of the Christian tradition that emphasize the primacy of God's work—that it's not all about how much we can *do* for Jesus.

We *are* saved by grace. We *can't* do enough.

As I've said this morning, it's tempting to think of the Beatitudes as a kind of moral checklist. If we can just manage to be meek enough or mourn appropriately and often enough or make enough peace or whatever, we will get the prize.

But if anyone could ever actually *do* this consistently—actually *live* the Beatitudes completely—they would be, well, *Jesus*.

Come to think of it, the only one who ever *did* live out the Beatitudes was Jesus.

His entire life was an enactment of the Beatitudes. And we know where this led him. To his death.

The cross is the logical and theological culmination of how the world so often deals those Jesus called “blessed.”

Holy Week is, in many ways Jesus' final enactment of Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are the poor in spirit... My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Blessed are the those who mourn... Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me...

Blessed are the meek... But Jesus gave him no answer...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing...

Blessed are the merciful... Today you will be with me in paradise.

Blessed are the pure in heart... If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?

Blessed are the peacemakers... Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs?... Put your sword away...

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake... For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely... He saved others, let him come save himself!

There are all kinds of theological explanations for why Jesus died and what was happening on the cross. But whatever else we might say by way of “explanation,” we must surely start by observing that Jesus died the way he did because he lived the way he did.

On the cross, Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves.

In his *life*, Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus lived the life that we were made for on our behalf.

They go together and must never be separated.

Christians sometimes treat Jesus’ teaching as a kind of prelude to the theologically important stuff that happened at Easter. That’s where God accomplishes our salvation! And it’s true. But it’s not the whole story.

But Jesus’ entire career—birth, life, teaching, miracles, example, death, resurrection, ascension, reign, and future return—was grace. God Incarnate living and dying *for us*—for all that we cannot do for ourselves.

And we are invited to pursue the lives we were made for in response to what Jesus has done and in anticipation of the kingdom that he will one day usher in in its fullness.

We approach the beatitudes as descriptors of a kingdom we wish to be at home in in the future, and which we are learning to *want* to see come here and now.

This rings true to how we learn and grow as human beings, doesn't it? As parents, we sometimes give our kids checklists—things they just have to do, no matter how stupid they might think they are at any given moment.

Tell the truth. Follow the golden rule. Clean up after yourself. Respect those in authority. Think for yourself. Watch your tongue. Don't seek revenge. Be a good friend. Pay attention to those on the margins.

Some of us have rather long lists.

But even though there are times in a child's life where we will say, just follow the list because it will help you to get something good (a reward) or avoid something bad (a punishment), the end goal is that we want our kids to *want* to be a good human being and to live life as God intended it to be lived.

The same is true of Christ and us. Jesus wants us to *want* to be citizens of his kingdom. He wants us to want to see God, our neighbours, and the world as he does.

He wants us to live lives of joyful response to all he has done for us. Dying for our sins, yes, but also living for them as well.

This is very good news.

Amen.

