

WHAT IS A BEATITUDE?

(Fourth Sunday, Ordinary Time)

Chapter five of Matthew's gospel reports Jesus' teaching of eight powerful, puzzling, challenging statements about life called "The Beatitudes." Jesus says that true bliss/joy/blessing/happiness is to be found where we might least expect to find it. It lives in those who are poor, who mourn for others, who are gentle, who long for total righteousness, who get right inside other people, who always act from unmixed motives, who establish right relationships from person to person, and who suffer persecution for their beliefs rather than give them up. This is the core of Jesus' preaching and the key to entering into God's kingdom. The beatitudes dramatically point out that the blessing of God is not found in the same place as the blessings of this world. Matthew summarizes the heart of Jesus' message in chapters 5, 6, and 7 of his gospel, a section known as the Sermon on the Mount. This is not one ultra-long sermon but a summary of what Jesus proclaimed during his whole public life. First comes the Eight Beatitudes; then in the following 97 verses Jesus unfolds and exemplifies how a life directed by God is to be lived in daily practice.

Getting Down to Basics

Gifted biblical commentators like William Barclay have studied the languages, the history, the ancient Jewish customs and usage of words, and have come up with some very helpful renderings of the Beatitudes for us today. But we must understand that what is at stake is our own salvation, not just some clever way of putting interesting ideas together. It is the core of Jesus message, so we need to put it into our lives and keep it there. The text exclaims that those who live these beatitudes have *already* entered into blessedness and bliss. What we really have is a declaration, "How blessed are they who...."

(1) How can poor be good?

It is the "*poor in spirit*" Jesus speaks of—a person who has realized that things mean nothing in the end, and God means everything. Until I can accept my own dependence upon God and accept being loved by him with my sins and limitations, I will not find the peace and bliss that comes only to the humble. Ask yourself what has helped you move in this direction—poorer but richer. Have you ever wished to be more like someone who has much less than you do and yet has so much more inside?

(2) Life on the surface or life in depth?

What kind of blessing does mourning confer? It means that I can truly feel what others feel, and see how alike we really are. It means that I can see what sin can do to God's image in people, and especially in me. This is the kind of twofold mourning Jesus is referring to—(1) getting beyond my own sadness and living in others, and (2) seeing sin as the destruction of what we are meant to be. For example, do I cry for *others*? Can I look at the Cross and say, "That is what sin can do. Sin can take the loveliest life in all the world and smash it on the Cross" (Barclay). We need hearts broken for the world's suffering and for our own sin, and only then will be getting to the depth of our being and finding the joy that God alone gives.

(3) Too bad about the word "meek"

The bible says that Moses was the "meekest of men." And he was one of the strongest characters in all of biblical history—a leader in every sense. Obviously then, meek in its scriptural context does not mean weak and spineless, but a person ready to deal with challenges and mistakes, and always to draw something right from them. It means a person who admits to not "knowing it all," who accepts that he is the creature and that God has given him something important to do, something that cannot be done without obeying God. Such a person knows his own weakness and God's strength. There is plenty of room for God's joy to live in such a heart!

(4) Nothing less than total righteousness

Some people are very religious but downright nasty, unjust and selfish to those around them. Some people are enmeshed in all kinds of sins and vices, but are so basically generous they would give you whatever they had. There is a basic disconnection here. But the person who hungers and thirsts for full and total righteousness is neither of these. He or she is not content with any partial, controlled service of God and neighbor. Their watchword is, "Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will!" Even though that person never reaches full righteousness and justice, he or she is haunted by it, pulled towards it always, hungers for true goodness, not just for "good enough." The world always looks for a deal or a compromise; but Jesus doesn't operate that way.

(5) God inside our human skin

"How blessed merciful people are!" says Jesus. The Hebrew word for mercy (*chesedh*) means "the ability to get right inside the other person's skin until we can see things with his eyes, think things with his mind, and feel things with his feelings." This is not something most people even try to do. But love always does this! If we know the reason why a person thinks and acts as he does, it is so much easier to understand and to sympathize and to forgive. And this is exactly what Jesus Christ has done for us by becoming one of us. He is the supreme instance of mercy. When his spirit gets inside us, we just naturally show mercy to everybody. And that really does produce blessing and happiness., doesn't it?

(6) What do the pure of heart see?

A heart cluttered with jealousy, egotistical motives, and habits of vice and sin is incapable of recognizing the goodness of others or the reality of love. Only if our heart is clean of lust and our motives are absolutely pure will we be able to see God. People see what they are fit to see and capable of seeing. A pure-hearted person sees the glory of God everywhere. A sinful-hearted person gets fixated on what is

wrong, no matter what else is going on. In every situation, however, God is there; and the pure of heart will always be seek out what God is doing, and what God wants done next.

(7) Peace-makers lift the world up

Evading issues in order to have people "just get along" is not at all what Jesus commends. The one who is declared blessed faces the issues and gets involved in the work of *making* peace, even when the way to peace is through struggle. Working for justice through peace-making is an endless task but a divine task, and blessed is the one who follows that path. It takes place in the raising of children, the interaction of employers and employees, the relationship of neighbors, and the world-scale encounters of those who wield power. Peace, in the biblical context, was always be guided by two principles: what makes the world a better place to live in, and what establishes right relationships between person and person. As a little reflection, Who would you say is the best peace-maker you know?

(8) It is right to suffer with one you love

The people hearing Jesus' Sermon on the Mount will pay a steep price for being Christian. Certain kinds of work will conflict with their faith. Many accepted social activities will be prohibited as immoral and unacceptable. Families will get disrupted by religious differences, causing bitterness that can last for generations. The church, if it really follows Christ, is bound to be the conscience of the nation, the family, and society. And this will never be a popular position to be in. It invites the scorn of those who call it arrogance or hypocrisy or stupidity. But, as Peter would respond when asked if he would walk away, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." We are promised that if we suffer with him, we shall reign with him. Only a great love and a firm heart can be purified by persecution, not destroyed by it. How are we doing, brothers and sisters?

(Father Patrick Thompson)

