

Did Jesus Really Say That? Matt. 5:1-12 10/31/21

You may not have heard of this, but there are bike races all over the world in which the slowest rider wins! That's right! Everyone begins at a starting line and moves forward as slowly as possible. Racers are disqualified if they tip over or if their feet touch the ground. The finish line is 10 yards away. Whoever crosses it first, loses, and whoever crosses it last, wins!

Now imagine if you entered this competition, but no one briefed you on how the race works. When the gun sounds, you would accelerate up to top speed, feeling great because everyone else is far behind you in your rearview mirror! Only when the race ends, would you find out that you've been playing by the wrong rules, and rather than winning, you finished last!

In the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus summarizes his rules for living as a disciple. And they are often exactly the opposite of what we would expect. And because they are so out-of-step with popular beliefs, we can be confused by them. Listen as I read the Beatitudes from Matt. 5. *When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

<sup>3</sup>*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:1-12)*

See what I mean? Some of them seem to be nonsense- *“Blessed are they that mourn?”* Really? Have you ever been overcome by grief? It doesn't feel like you're blessed, does it? In these sayings, Jesus takes the conventional wisdom about what makes for a good life, and turns it upside down. For example, the American dream assumes that in order to be blessed or fortunate we need lots of material comforts, a sense of control over our lives, a good education, and things that bring us security (like a big 401K, along with health and homeowners insurance). None of those things are found in the beatitudes! In fact, Jesus and his disciples lacked all these

things. (By the way, these sayings are called beatitudes because the Latin word for “blessed” is “beatus.” The original Greek word can be translated as “happy” or “blessed” or “fortunate.” I think “fortunate” is probably the best translation.

Anyway, let’s look at a couple of these beatitudes in a little more detail to see if we can figure out what’s going on here. We’ll look at the rest of them next week. <sup>3</sup>*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matt. 5:3) There has been a lot of discussion about what it means to be “poor in spirit,” but the consensus today is that it means to be humble. To be poor in ego. To know your limits and failures.

Robert Morneau puts it like this, “What is humility? It is that habitual quality whereby we live in the truth of things: the truth that we are creatures and not the Creator; the truth that our life is a composite of good and evil, light and darkness; the truth that in our littleness we have been given extravagant dignity.” (end quote) Humility is knowing and acknowledging the truth about ourselves. And it’s one of the starting points for any kind of relationship with God and for any healthy relationship with another human being. Humility acknowledges that while we have been made in the very image of God, we have fallen far from that grace-filled state, and are now for the most part, self-centered sinners in need of God’s grace. Not a pretty picture, but an honest one.

Notice why Jesus says humble people are blessed- "*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" or the Kingdom of God. That's the theme that runs through the Beatitudes and the whole Sermon on the Mount- the kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God exists wherever God rules. And the Beatitudes tell us what it looks like where God rules. Unfortunately, the values of God's kingdom do not come naturally to us, and they often don't even make sense to us.

Listen to the next one. <sup>4</sup>*"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* (Matt. 5:4) Huh? We have a grief support group meeting for a couple weeks right now. What do you think would happen if I crashed their meeting and announced how fortunate all of them are to be grieving? They might rise up and collectively punch me in the nose! And I'd deserve it! So, what on earth does this beatitude mean?

The obvious meaning of "mourn" concerns people who have suffered a significant loss- the death of a loved one, a divorce or end of another significant relationship, the loss of a job, a miscarriage, or a serious health problem. People naturally grieve such losses, but how are they blessed or fortunate? I think Jesus means that grieving people are fortunate because God will comfort them in this life and the next, where there will be no more crying or grieving. Grief drives us to acknowledge our dependence on

God's provision for us, so we will learn to depend on God in all things. And that is good for us.

It seems to me that all of the beatitudes are undergirded by a deep faith in God and in God's goodness. Otherwise, they don't make much sense.

Let's keep going. <sup>5</sup>*"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* (Matt. 5:5) It's important to point out that the Greek word translated as "meek" here doesn't mean "wimpy!" As a Marine chaplain once told me, "Meek is not weak!" In ancient philosophy meekness represented the mean between being too angry and not being angry enough about what was going on around us. It suggests a person who is self-controlled. Jesus certainly wasn't meek in the sense of being wimpy! He got in the face of religious authorities when he believed they were keeping people from God with all their impossible rules. And remember, he drove out the money changers from the temple with a whip! But he had self-control, and was gentle toward most of the people with whom he came into contact. In that sense he was "meek."

And he said that those who are meek are fortunate. Why? Because they will inherit the earth! That's a quote from Ps. 37:11, by the way. The idea is that the meek will have a place in the world to come where God will

reign over all things. Self-controlled people understand that God is in control of everything now and in the future, so they can relax a little bit, rather than being unduly aggressive toward others.

Let's look at one more. <sup>6</sup>*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.* (Matt. 5:6) The people to whom Jesus was speaking knew a lot about hunger and thirst from their own experience. Common people were very poor in Jesus' day, where any unexpected set-back could lead to hunger. And in a hot, dry climate, thirst was a constant presence. When Jesus said that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are fortunate, they knew what he was talking about in a way most of us can't understand.

When the Bible talks about righteousness, it is often linked with justice. Just like today, people in ancient times cheated one another, and rich people exploited those who were poor. Often the courts did nothing to stop this injustice and the rich continued to get richer while the poor got poorer. In addition, the Romans occupied Palestine in Jesus' time and levied heavy taxes on the people, transferring wealth from Israel to Rome. They enforced both their occupation and their taxes with violence. Injustice abounded in Jesus' day, as it does today, where Amazon, one of the wealthiest corporations in the world, pays little or no federal taxes in this country.

God cares deeply about injustice, and here, Jesus says that God's people should, too. We've witnessed that from time-to-time. During the civil rights movement in this country, churches, black and white, were leaders in the movement to grant basic rights, such as education and voting, to all our citizens, especially citizens of color. Some of our churches were also ahead of the curve regarding equal rights for women, those with disabilities, and LGBTQ people.

In God's time, justice will prevail, whether that be in this life or the next, and in that sense Jesus can say that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. In the meantime, we're called to continue hungering and thirsting for righteousness, and doing our part to make it a reality, for that is one of God's values, a value that is seen wherever God reigns.

Next week we'll look at the rest of the Beatitudes. Read them over this week in Matt. 5 and reflect on them. Feel free to send me your comments and questions about them! I'll do my best to respond.