

Community Church of Issaquah
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The Beatitudes: Part 4

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Today we finish our study and review of the Eight Beatitudes. This has certainly been a learning experience for me as I have studied and prepared the messages for each week. In the past, I more than likely browsed through them thinking they were simple little promises. Now after spending several weeks with these portions of Matthew's Gospel, I think I have a clearer understanding of what Jesus was telling those listeners about living a life that is closer to God's desire for them and for me as a follower of Christ. My hope is that perhaps you have been able to learn something as well.

Now, for the final two Beatitudes in Matthew 5: 9-12:

“Blesses are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God; and Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”

Some scholars say that the latter part of the eighth beatitude is really a separate ninth promise, and others think that it is simply a further explanation of the simple

“Blessed are the persecuted.” We’ll take the shorter optional path today and keep it simple.

The Beatitudes mark a significant change in the world of the Jews and those who had become believers and followers of Jesus. This change marks the beginning of what Christ will preach all his life – the kingdom of heaven. The proclamation of hope for those who have pursued God by striving for a place alongside God in heaven is a very different message than had been preached or prophesied before. Jesus is telling his disciples that the kingdom of heaven has arrived through him. These promises called the Beatitudes acknowledge that the gates of heaven are now open to those who seek righteousness, who are pure in heart and who are merciful.

Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus says, for they shall be the children of God. The very term ‘peace maker’ calls every Christian believer to the task of making peace or resolving conflict. We tend to think of making peace as something to be done to stop a war, such as the need for peace between Russia and the Ukraine. That type of militaristic view isn’t quite what Jesus had in mind when he spoke these particular words. The intent here is more about personal conflicts that arise when people have different opinions. The term ‘peacemakers’ would include anyone who seeks to make peace between human beings, whether as individuals or communities.

Real peace is not the absence of conflict. Real peace is what you do to resolve conflict or disagreements or anything that comes between you and others.

Peacemakers are the ones who follow Jesus, who was called the Prince of Peace. It was the work of Christ to reconcile us with God, to bring peace to us. We are called as followers of this Prince of Peace to take this work very seriously. We are to work to bring peace in our own world.

The world often tries to turn us against each other in small and large ways. Differences of opinion or beliefs can cause us at times to want to put on our boxing gloves and fight it out. Jesus says it is those who do the opposite, who work diligently to bring about peace, who are doing His work. None of us can say that we have never had arguments or feuds with family members, neighbors, coworkers, and even fellow church members. How do you fix that? How do you bring about peace? Conflict resolution is the hardest work for believers. We have seen it, even here in churches familiar to us.

It's when we willingly take on the task of making peace that we truly become the children of God. Those of us who are parents know quite well what it is like to have disagreements with our children and how the work of resolving those family feuds is very tiring. But when we finally do come to an agreement or the end of conflict, we feel like these are truly our children and perhaps they see us as good parents again. Here's an example from my life.

I had gone to the mall to the record store to buy a birthday gift for a friend, back in the day of cassette tapes. Before we went into the mall, I had a firm conversation with my 6-year-old son telling him we would go only to one store, then home. We weren't buying him anything, just birthday gifts.

He reluctantly agreed. But as we entered the store, there was a huge display of Star Wars merchandise which I tried to ignore, but which caused him to stop instantly. I went on down the aisle looking for a gift and he came to me quickly with toys in hand asking me to buy them for him. He was not pleased when I said no and had him take it back to the display. As he was coming back to me, he stopped at the young woman in the same aisle, tugged at her arm and said, “That’s the meanest daddy in the whole world” – pointing to me – “that one right there.” We couldn’t help but laugh. She thought he was so cute.

We resolved the disagreement and I became his favorite dad again when I bought him an ice cream cone on the way home. Peacemaking. Now granted, that is a silly story, but the point is simply this. Once we resolve any conflict we become peace makers and our relationship to the Lord is made closer. We are indeed his children. There is an enormous amount of peace just in that knowledge that we have his blessing for doing his work. Blessed at the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God.

The eighth and final Beatitude on first reading sounds very negative and very unlike the previous seven. “Blessed are those who are persecuted. . . .” Somehow that just doesn’t have very positive and uplifting wording. We’ve focused on all positive qualities prior to this one – humility, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity of heart and peacemaking. Now Jesus chooses to end this portion of his Sermon on the Mount with a very different attitude.

For us as Christians today, we don't really comprehend the very difficult lives early believers had to endure. We don't have a ruling power like the Romans who wanted to eliminate this new religious start-up and wasted no time in not only persecuting them but also killing thousands of them. In addition to that, the established Jewish leaders were adamant that these who had chosen to believe in the teachings of Jesus were in direct opposition to their Jewish heritage and they spent much time punishing them for leaving their past.

Though the Gospel of Matthew was written well after some of the better-known New Testament epistles, it was filled with the same message that Paul or Peter had written, encouraging the followers of Jesus to live a righteous life in a solid relationship with God. In truth, this is the very reason why they were persecuted – because they would not give up their commitment to Christ as their gateway to eternal life with God. Let me read Matthew 5 verse 10 again so you can see the reason Jesus felt compelled to include this promise in his message.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Aware of what was happening in the world in which his listeners lived, Jesus wanted to offer a reward for their faithfulness. It was as if he was saying, "If you endure this type of persecution, I want you to know that the kingdom of heaven will be given to you for your faithfulness." Though we might not identify with the early Christians in their enduring great hardship and difficulties, we can identify in a smaller way with how difficult it seems at

times to be a Christian. We want always to be on the right side of life in our effort to be righteous, but that might not always be the case.

Have I been persecuted? If you consider being thrown out of my starting denomination, terminated by my church, and blackballed by the leaders of that faith tradition, then perhaps a small bit of persecution. If we consider being cast as part of the liberal churches and criticized for our inclusivity in our doctrine and mission, then perhaps we know a little bit of that sense of rejection. For me, I see those who endure any kind of exclusion as included in this beatitude. I firmly believe that the people, like you, who think it is an honor to stand up for Jesus and the things he teaches, regardless of the scorn or ridicule we might endure, you are those who strive to live always in a right relationship with God. And you and I are promised a place in the kingdom of heaven.

Why are these eight beatitudes even important? First and foremost, these teachings are contributed to the direct statements of Jesus. He said them. They are quoted as the very words of Jesus. But a second more important reason these promises are important is that each one offers some recognition of how we behave as believers and what the reward for our faith is. Each of these beatitudes begins with the words, "Blessed are" which indicates that those named are already doing God's will and will receive a promised benefit for it.

Perhaps the bottom-line question is this: Can you find yourself in any of these eight teachings? And even more

important, do you feel blessed for doing the Lord's will and work? Are we blessed? I'd say yes, big time.