

Community Church of Issaquah
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The Beatitudes: Part 1

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In addition to the Ten Commandments, one of the most quoted and familiar Biblical list of guidelines for living can be found in the Book of Matthew in what we today call The Beatitudes. Interestingly, the comparison of these two lists of life lessons find that they are the exact opposite of each other. The Ten Commandments are given as warnings of what behavior is forbidden by God. They begin with the words, “Thou Shalt Not.” The Beatitudes, on the other hand are the exact opposite, beginning with the word “Blessed” meaning happy.

For the next four Sundays, we will be spending time in our worship service examining these powerful words of Christ and seek to find a meaning in these verses for our lives today. First, a bit of perspective. These verses in the fifth chapter of Matthew are not stand-alone verses. They are a part of a sermon or message that Jesus Christ is reported to have preached on a mountain side, or more likely a hillside. If you were to read the entire chapter and make note of all the subjects of the messages, you would likely be surprised at the depth of the content.

There you would find the referral of believers being the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the fulfillment of the law of prophecy, an admonition to never commit murder, the call to abandon our suffering at the altar of God, the

forbiddance of adultery, the use or abuse of oaths, the warning of retaliation and the love for our enemies. There is much more. You would quickly see the complexities of this Sermon on the Mount that we sometimes do not see in its entirety. It would surprise some and disappoint others to know that this sermon was not limited to ten or twelve minutes like mine are. I have an image in my head of the crowd who gathered there lending an ear to the Rabbi or Teacher Jesus for quite some time, perhaps hours. Though we do not know exactly where the Sermon on the Mount took place, it is widely believed that it was at what is now known as the Mount of Beatitudes near the Dead Sea.

As we begin our study, let me give a little introduction to the wording and structure of the Beatitudes. First, the name or word “beatitude” was not included in Matthew’s Gospel. When Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, “blessed” he uses the Greek word ‘*Makarios*’ which can be translated as “happy” or “fortunate.” Unfortunately, the modern-day use of either of those two words takes away from the deeper meaning that Jesus intended. The term “beatitudes” was actually first used in the 15th century with a common language translation of the Scriptures. It simply became the name given to the eight (or sometimes believed to be 9) specific teachings about doing the Lord’s will so that those mentioned will be rewarded for their current situation when they arrive in heaven.

The focus of Matthew’s retelling the teachings of Christ often focuses only on the speaker, yet the messages of each of these eight references is about the audience who is hearing the Sermon on the Mount. We don’t know the

number of listeners, but the assumption is that it is a sizable group, primarily of Jews and those who are beginning to see Jesus as the Christ, the promised Messiah. Using their history of knowing the scriptures they held sacred, which we call the Old Testament, the crowd is receptive to what Jesus is teaching them. Each of the eight beatitudes addresses a specific group of people with a unique message for each. We'll begin our study of the Beatitudes with the first two groups Jesus chose to recognize. Keep in mind that these statements by Jesus are not an attempt to push the listeners in some way to earn salvation by doing these things in order to get into heaven. These Beatitudes are statements about God's grace, not some kind of spiritual law.

Let us focus on the first two Beatitudes we find in verses 3 and 4 of the fifth chapter of Matthew. Here are the words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And "blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Let me attempt to give some clarity about these verses and some personal interpretation. Keep in mind that I am a simple teaching minister, not a theological genius. This will simply be my ideas about what I believe Jesus is saying to those listeners and to you and me today.

Whenever we hear the word 'poor' we automatically interpret that to mean someone who has little of value, whether money or material things. Poor people to us usually raises a sense of compassion or sympathy for individuals or families who are struggling just to stay afloat in society. Perhaps the most evident image of that would

be the increasing number of unhoused individuals and families. As we look at the words of Christ our minds turn to those who have encountered sad and unfortunate circumstances economically. When we broaden that concept to include the words poor in spirit, it certainly has a very different meaning.

Addressing a particular portion of the crowd, Jesus wanted to move beyond the view that all material things are a sign that God has given approval of someone's life. Material wealth or blessings do not automatically come from spiritual blessings. There is a concept of Christian doctrine that is called 'Prosperity Theology,' teaching that the more holy you become, the more money you will have. Certainly, there are some modern-day ministers who practice that and have received an abundance of funds. Oddly, this idea of prosperity connected to the spiritual life has been present long before Christ. The message in this Beatitude is the very opposite of that kind of belief.

When Christ talks about the poor in spirit, it refers to the belief that when we do acknowledge that our worldly possessions are not the gateway to heaven or God's kingdom. When we accept that we are poor in our spiritual lives and in need of the redemption and grace that God grants, then we will have our riches in our life here on earth and more so, after this one. My own belief is that when anyone comes to recognize that all the riches of the world mean nothing until we admit to ourselves that we are indeed poor in our spiritual beings and are desperate for God's compassionate grace and forgiveness. When I became a Christian, I saw myself as a pauper of faith,

knowing little and holding a strong desire to open myself to God's gifts of life eternal with Him. That's the promise of this first Beatitude – because we are poor in spirit, God has made a promise to us that we will indeed have a place in the kingdom of heaven. There are no riches on earth that can match that promise.

And there is the second Beatitude that also has a very deep and powerful meaning. “Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.” There's not a person in this room who has not gone through a period of mourning either for the loss in death of a loved one or personal failure or the uncertainty of our place in society. The loss of anything that you or I see as valuable will always produce mourning. This was not a message that fell on deaf ears with that crowd sitting near Jesus.

When my brother called me and said, “We lost her, she's gone,” I asked, “Who's lost?” When he said, “Mother.” I did not comprehend that he meant that my mother had died, and when we continued the conversation to learn that she had a massive stroke and was in a coma and brain dead, I was in shock. I had spoken to her just the day before and as was our custom, we each ended the conversation with the words, “I love you.” When she was removed from life support and finally took her final breath, the mourning that overcame me was at times unbearable. The process of grief that followed her death has been present for me since, but has transformed from overwhelming sadness to warmth of memories that remind me exactly how much I did and do love her. Each of you can tell your own story of

what has caused you grief. And each story is precious to the Lord who is with us always for comfort and healing.

What would have been the circumstances of mourning for some who were there with Jesus? Perhaps someone had lost a child at birth, or a parent who died from illness or old age, or even an earthly loss such as the failure of crops without water or sheep lost to wandering or attacks, or a loved one born with a disability that could not be cured or healed. We will likely never know the myriad of stories sitting in the hearts of the hearers, but Jesus must have felt their need in his compassionate heart. Had he not known these stories, it is doubtful he would have given these words of hope and encouragement. “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.”

It might be that the comfort we seek won't happen in our earthly life, but in our heavenly life with God. Though the thought of that could cause us to lose a bit of faith, but that is the very reason Jesus spoke these very words of hope. You will be comforted. Those who belonged to the blessed group of poor or the mourning might have seen themselves as the afflicted, but Jesus began each statement with the word, “Blessed.” What I wish for each of us is that whether we see ourselves as poor in any way or mourning for any cause, we have the assurance that God has already blessed us and will continue that blessing in our life eternal. You may choose to call yourself ‘blessed’ or ‘happy’ or ‘fortunate,’ but whichever you choose, acknowledge that as a gift of love for God through Jesus Christ. I know I am blessed, but some of my riches

are in the community I have right here. Yep, I'm blessed richly.