

The Beatitudes

Bible Reading Matthew 5 verses 1 to 12 (NLT).

'One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them.

*"God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*

*God blesses those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

*God blesses those who are humble,
for they will inherit the whole earth.*

*God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice,
for they will be satisfied.*

*God blesses those who are merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.*

*God blesses those whose hearts are pure,
for they will see God.*

*God blesses those who work for peace,
for they will be called the children of God.*

*God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*

"God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way."

SERMON

Last month we looked at chapter 4 of Matthew's Gospel - in particular the last 13 verses. We saw that as Jesus begun His earthly ministry, He was obedient to God and went off to wake up a group of people who were living in darkness. Next he preached - and His message was: **'Repent for the forgiveness of your sins, and turn back to God'**. He also told people to follow Him, and as they did

so He enabled them to fulfil their God-given purpose for their life. He taught people about God's Kingdom and He healed people. In fact, He healed everyone that was brought to Him.

Today, I believe God wants me to talk about the next section of Matthew's Gospel; the first part of Chapter 5, a passage that has become known as 'The Beatitudes'.

I've never come across this word outside the Biblical context and so when I checked to see if it had a specific meaning, the most simplest meaning I found for the word 'Beatitudes' was: 'blessings' or 'supreme blessedness'. A typical dictionary definition of the word 'blessed' includes words like: 'happiness, pleasure and contentment.'

Although the scriptures I am using today come from the New Living Translation, the NIV Study Bible definition also helps throw some light; it says 'Blessed means more than' happy' because happiness is an emotion often dependent on outward circumstances. 'Blessed' refers to the ultimate wellbeing and distinctive spiritual joy of those who share in the salvation of the Kingdom of God'.

And so, in the Beatitudes, Jesus says if you want to experience supreme happiness, pleasure, contentment, - if you are looking for the secret to your ultimate wellbeing, then these are the things to aim for:

**To be poor,
be in mourning,
be humble,
strive for what is just,
be merciful,
pure,
work for peace,
and be prepared to be persecuted.**

Not exactly what **most** people think of as happiness or contentment – wouldn't you agree?

So why does Jesus say, those who are blessed are those who, by the world's standards, seem to be poor, suffering, mourning and doing what is right even in the face of persecution?

Well, let's examine each of the phrases in the passage Jesus shares with us.

On further investigation, we find the Greek language used in the first phrase actually means 'blessed are the 'poor in spirit' rather than the physically or financially poor.

Oswald Chambers, an amazing early 20th century man of God says 'The Doorway to the Kingdom' is being poor in spirit (or as he puts it) 'paupers in spirit'.

In effect Jesus is saying we will be blessed if we realise in our spirit that we don't know it all, that we have much more to learn about God's Kingdom, and that without Him we can do and achieve nothing of any real or lasting value. That, I believe is God's definition of humility, the opposite of pride.

Returning to the scripture passage, secondly, Jesus says 'blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted'.

Why will we be comforted when we mourn?

Well the simple answer is 'because Jesus says so' (and in John 14 v 6 it says '**Jesus is the Truth**' so what He says can be trusted) but I think it's more than that. God knows what it is to mourn. He must have deeply mourned the cold-blooded torture and death of His one and only Son on the Cross, even though He planned in advance that this would be His way to offer salvation to mankind. He understands the pain we bear when we lose a loved one and so He knows how much we need His comfort, and so He promises to give it.

The King James Version of Psalm 30 says '***weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.***'

It may not come as soon as we want, but eventually comfort comes to those who mourn; that is Jesus's promise.

Third, Jesus said '***Blessed are the humble***' and that links in with the poor in spirit. As I have already mentioned, humility is the opposite of pride. Jesus repeats something King David said 1,000 years previously. In Psalm 37 and verse 11 David said:

'The meek (or the humble) will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity'.

Jesus said: 'God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.'

The humility Jesus is talking about is our disposition before God. Humility guards us from the sin of pride.

The proud say *'There is no God, it's all about me. I will live my life my way'*. Humility says *'Without God I am nothing, and I can do nothing of any value.*

Everything I am and everything I have come from you God and I am eternally thankful to You!

I believe that is the kind of humility Jesus is seeking in you and in me.

Fourth, Jesus says blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice (some translations say 'righteousness' because the Greek word can mean either),

Oh, that the world would do what is right and just. Oh that our politicians and councillors would do what is right and just, rather than what is politically expedient. As I wrote this page of my sermon I had earlier in the morning heard on the BBC TV news that the Govt of Thailand (formerly Siam) were turning away all migrants that wanted to try to come by boat, illegally I guess, into their country.

A fishing boat with 300 sick or dying men, women and children fleeing from persecution in Myanmar (previously Burma) had been at sea for 3 months. These powerless people were screaming and begging for food and water but the Thai patrol vessels mercilessly turned them away from Thai waters and took them out deeper into the ocean! Oh that leaders would do what is right.

Our job as Christians is to be just towards all who cross our path, just like the Good Samaritan took care of the man who had been beaten and robbed. If we do so, God promises a blessing.

Fifth, Jesus tells us that we will be shown mercy if we are merciful.

I am sure there are times when we all find it quite difficult to express mercy to some people, don't we? But in verse 44 of the chapter we are studying, Jesus says 'Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you!'

God's nature is to love and forgive, He goes on doing it all the time and He calls us to be like Him.

In Matthew chapter 28, Jesus contrasts how merciful God is, when we ask for mercy, with how merciless we can, be when others ask it of us. God is depicted as a master who completely let off a servant who owed him an enormous debt, simply because he asked for mercy.

That same servant himself had a servant who owed him a somewhat modest debt and he demanded that servant to pay back what he owed him. The man asked for mercy but was shown none; instead he was taken to the authorities and thrown into prison! You probably know the story – listen to how Jesus said God responded:

‘Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

“That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.” ‘

God is gracious and merciful to us daily - and he expects us to do likewise!

In Luke 6 v 35 we read ***‘God is kind to the ungrateful and wicked’***. And in Matthew 5 v 45 it says: ***‘For God gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike’***. God is truly merciful – blessing both the bad and the good – but He is a just God too, and He will ultimately judge evil and wrongdoing, on the approaching day of judgement.

Next the Lord says we are to be ***‘pure in heart’***. What does that mean?

The heart in this context is the centre of one’s being – including the mind, the will and the emotions. When the psalmist said in Ps 4, v 7 ***‘You have filled my heart with great joy’***, he wasn’t referring to the organ in his body that pumps the blood around. He was saying that his whole being was full of joy.

In the flesh (that is our unsaved, natural self, without God), I would suggest being pure in heart is extremely difficult. Certainly ‘people of the world’ (that is those without any faith or moral compass) seem to want the opposite of this, many want to be carefree and enjoy selfish, maybe even perverted thoughts and deeds daily. Oswald Chambers says being ‘pure in heart’ is the result of continued spiritual harmony with God. It is not just ‘innocence’. It means refusing to do or even think certain things. It also means some things,

which others may consider acceptable (even to other Christians), will become unacceptable for us.

And so it is that King David said in Psalm 24:

Who may climb the mountain of the LORD?

Who may stand in his holy place?

***Only those whose hands and hearts are pure,
who do not worship idols.***

Next Jesus tells us there is a blessing for those who '***work for peace***' (or 'peacemakers' as it says in the NIV and the King James versions).

Now there is a big difference between a peacekeeper and a peacemaker. Let me explain.

I am a peacekeeper but Michele is a peacemaker! I always seek to avoid confrontation - so I tend to keep my thoughts to myself and brush things under the carpet; anything to avoid tackling a relational issue. Many of us are like that...

In Ephesians chapter 4 though it says '***Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil***'. What that really means is 'sort it out'.

Michele will do everything in her power to ensure she does what she can to resolve a difficulty as soon as possible. She will do the hard work of resolving conflict and restoring the relationship; she will of course need with the willingness of the other party. Once the matter is resolved, it is not brought up again. That's the kind of peace-making Jesus is talking about - and I am now learning the benefits of being like that. If ever the world needed more peacemakers it is now.

Finally Jesus says not only will you be blessed if you are persecuted for doing and speaking out what is right - and being one of His followers - but a great reward awaits you in Heaven. That suggests to me that Jesus knows how hard it is for us to do what is right in the face of persecution; surely it is more natural and much easier to do and say nothing if it will avoid confrontation, and even worse, persecution.

I believe that is why Jesus reassures us of the importance of not caving in when under pressure, He offers us a great reward in Heaven if we will do what is right when we are challenged over truth and righteousness here on earth.

In this politically correct world, are we prepared to stand up like the Christian teachers Johnathon Cahn, Andrew Wommack and others and say 'abortion is murder'?

Consider the case of the Irish baker who is appealing against his conviction for saying 'no' when asked to bake a wedding cake for a gay couple. Or the British Red Cross worker dismissed for privately sharing his thoughts about gay marriage, outside of his role within the organisation? Are we prepared to say gay marriage is wrong?

Are we prepared to tell people what the Bible says about homosexuality?

Would the threat of a fine, loss of our job, or - maybe soon to come – imprisonment, affect what we say, when faced with people scoffing at us and ridiculing us because we stand by what God's Word declares, and what is right and wrong in His eyes?

When you pluck up the courage to speak out the truth in love to someone you know, have you found yourself recoiling from the reaction from those who are hurt by your sincere honest words?

Unbelievers can more easily get hurt when you tell them the truth because their consciences may be seared and the truth cuts them to the quick. The Bible tells us in Hebrews 4 verse 12:

'For the word of God (in other words God's truth) is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.'

I have been rejected, on occasions, by people in the Church, for speaking the truth to them. Maybe you have too.

A close member of my own family, who is not a believer, was most indignant when I wrote a letter to him many years ago, concerning a very painful and embarrassing matter, attempting to show him what I believed to be the error of his ways. The fall-out was not pleasant. Maybe I should have known better. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said in Matthew 7 and verse 6:

“Don’t waste what is holy on people who are unholy. Don’t throw your pearls to pigs! They will trample the pearls, then turn and attack you”.

King David was described as a man after God’s own heart but he too was persecuted because of His faith.

In Psalm 31 he tells us he was scorned by his enemies and despised by his neighbours. Nevertheless his hope and his trust was in God alone!

When I was working full time in business, I backed away from telling people I was a Christian for fear of rejection or ridicule. I heard others describing Christian business people in uncomplimentary ways. But later I came across the scripture in Matthew 10 where Jesus said to His ***followers ‘If you deny me here on earth, I will deny you before my Father in Heaven’***, so I plucked up the courage to be more open about my faith; some rejected me but others were encouraged because they too were people of faith. I have some Sikh friends in London who still do business with me – I can’t be sure, but I think it’s because they respected me for my faith. Some of them were interested in talking about Jesus too!

In John’s gospel chapter 15 Jesus reminds us ***‘Apart from me you can do nothing.’***

To conclude, as I studied this Bible Reading and prepared for today, it occurred to me that in effect, the beatitudes describe what God is like. His ways are not our ways which is why we don’t find them easy to follow; but if we ask His Holy Spirit to come and dwell within us, only then does it get easier to be like God, because His promise is that His Holy Spirit will sanctify us – if only we will let Him..

What are the benefits of being the kind of people Jesus calls us to be?

Well in the Bible reading Jesus listed them for us:

He said these kind of people will be comforted, they will be filled (content if you like), they will be shown mercy, they will see God and inherit God’s Kingdom - which means they will be a citizen of God’s kingdom, here on earth now, and for all eternity with God in Heaven.

Wonderful blessings indeed!