

“Blessed”
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1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

Let me be perfectly clear right at the beginning. If you have not already seen the movie I’m about to mention, I am *not* hereby suggesting you go out and rent it for good Sunday afternoon entertainment. The movie in question has perhaps more than its fair share of objectionable content and the humor is of a particular type that I would guess, for many of you, is not your cup of tea. My sense of humor leans a bit toward the unconventional, though. I do enjoy different types of humor and I am a fan of the Monty Python movies, which, again, I am *not* suggesting that you watch. This morning, though, I want to briefly talk about one scene from “Life of Brian.” This scene is a bit fictionalized, but it is a humorous retelling of the passage which we read about today in Matthew. Jesus is shown giving the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with what we generally call The Beatitudes. As He speaks these wonderful words, the camera draws back to show what a large crowd has gathered. As the camera draws back further and further, the sound level drops off, so that the viewer gets an idea of what it might have been like to strain to hear what Jesus was saying from such a long distance away. At one point, a character asks “what was that?” and another man turns around and says, “I think it was ‘blessed are the cheesemakers!’” Someone asks, “What’s so special about the *cheesemakers*?” and another man responds in an overconfident tone, “It’s not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturer of dairy products.”

Maybe we get the words of Jesus right and don’t confuse “peacemakers” with “cheesemakers,” but even if we get the *words* right, we often get the *meaning* wrong, don’t we? And sometimes, like the one who interpreted what he misheard, we do so with so much self-assurance that we couldn’t possibly be wrong. My sense of humor also extends to the musician “Weird Al Yankovic.” You may know him as the author and singer of many parody songs, but he also sings original compositions, such as one called “Everything You Know is Wrong.” In that song, the chorus goes like this:

Everything you know is wrong
Black is white, up is down and short is long
And everything you thought was just so important doesn’t matter

“Everything you know is wrong.” I think that’s probably pretty close to what Jesus was saying in the Beatitudes. We typically think the way the world around us thinks. The world tells us that blessed are the *rich*, but Jesus says the *poor* are the ones who are blessed. The world tells us that blessed are the *powerful*, but Jesus says the *meek* are the ones who are blessed. The world holds up those who are *cruel*, but Jesus says the *merciful* are the ones who are blessed. The world pays attention to those who are *violent* and *vengeful*, but Jesus says the *peacemakers* are the ones who

are blessed. And so on, leading up to the point where Jesus tells them – and us – that blessed are those who are reviled and persecuted. *What kind of sense does that make?* How are we blessed if we are poor, mourning, reviled and persecuted? Jesus says, “Everything you know is wrong.” Paul tells us it’s the wisdom of God.

So, what does Jesus mean by “blessed”? Scholars have debated that over the centuries. The word in the Greek can be translated as “blessed” or “honored” or maybe even “happy.” The problem is that Jesus wasn’t speaking Greek in this setting and so what we have is an English translation of a Greek translation of someone’s recollection of the words Jesus actually spoke, likely in Aramaic. Probably closer to what Jesus said was the Hebrew word, *baruch*, and we’ve got a good usage of this word in the first Psalm – in the first word, in fact. Psalm 1:1 says, “*Baruch* – happy – are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, but delight in the law of God.” It is likely *that* kind of “happy” that Jesus was referring to. Not a “happy” that says “blue skies, smiling at me, nothing but blue skies, do I see.” No, this is a recognition that possessions and contexts are fleeting and don’t lead to lasting contentment. Blue skies or gray skies, we still are blessed by God. Lasting contentment and blessing can only come from an eternal God.

Or, as some scholars argue, “honored” is a better translation. *Honored are the poor in spirit, Honored are those who mourn, Honored are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.* In the cultural setting of Jesus’ day, shame and honor were of extreme significance to everyday life. If you didn’t have important connections -- family, patrons, clients -- you couldn’t possibly be of importance. Think about in the first chapter of John when Jesus is calling his disciples. Philip shares with Nathanael about Jesus, saying “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” In other words, we have found the Messiah and he’s from Nazareth, not from Jerusalem or some other powerful place. Nathanael replied “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” To Nathanael, Jesus couldn’t be a person of honor, because he didn’t come from an honorable setting. It is hard to overstate the impact of shame and honor on the culture of Jesus’ day, and the people following Jesus around were not those in important positions. They were those who were reminded everywhere they went that they were without honor, that is, *except when in the presence of Jesus*, who pronounced them honored, blessed. The world didn’t see it, but Jesus did.

What about us today? We don’t live in the same type of shame and honor society as the culture of that day, but we still are called to a countercultural life. Jesus says that blessedness comes from situations which are quite counter to our way of thinking -- and that’s part of the point. As N.T. Wright wrote, “Jesus is not suggesting that these are simply timeless truths about the way the world is, about human behavior. ... Mourners often go uncomfited, the meek don’t inherit the earth, those who long for justice frequently take that longing to the grave. This is an upside-down world, or perhaps a right-way-up world; and Jesus is saying that with his work it’s starting to come true. This is an announcement, not a philosophical analysis of the world. It’s about something that’s starting to happen, not about a general truth of life. It is gospel: good news, not good advice.” Jesus announces blessings on those who wouldn’t feel blessed by the world, truly good news.

Jesus said to the crowd that day that the poor in spirit are blessed “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” He also said that those who are persecuted are blessed, for the same reason – “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” And the kingdom of heaven is not just a “by-and-by, pie-in-the-sky”

kind of thing, for Jesus also taught us that we should pray that God’s will be done here on earth, as it is in heaven. We are all a part of bringing the kingdom of heaven to existence, here and now. We are to follow the patterns of life in the kingdom, rather than of the culture around us. Jesus’ coming has brought the kingdom near, and so we are called to live into that reality, even when -- especially when -- it runs counter to the culture around us. Maybe you’ve heard the expression “Don’t be so heavenly minded that you are of no earthly good.” The truth is that this is not an either/or situation. We should be so heavenly minded that we are *above all* else earthly good. There’s a song by Jason Gray which says “we bring the kingdom come with every act of love.” It says “God put a million, million doors in the world for his love to walk through. One of those doors is you.” By living as citizens of the kingdom of heaven in our everyday interactions, we are part of bringing the kingdom to bear here and now.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon wrote a book many years ago called *Resident Aliens*. In that book, they speak of the Beatitudes this way:

The Beatitudes are not a strategy for achieving a better society, they are an indication, a picture. A vision of the inbreaking of a new society. They are indicatives, promises, instances, imaginative examples of life in the kingdom of God... an imaginative metaphor, which hopes to produce a shock within our imaginations so that the hearer comes to see his or her life in a radical new way. It is ... to help us see something so new, so against what we have always heard said, that we cannot rely on our older images of what is and what is not.

Or, as Weird Al put it in simpler terms, “everything you know is wrong.” We have heard the Beatitudes so many times that they no longer *shock* us, they no longer push us to see something new, they no longer make us realize that “we cannot rely on older images of what is and what is not.” It is like so much in the Gospels – we have domesticated the wildness into something tame, something we can wrap our heads around. But Jesus didn’t come to be tame. Jesus didn’t come to be something we can wrap our heads around. The inbreaking of the Kingdom of God is wild; it is not something to ever be tamed. It turns upside-down all of our previous notions. It takes the wisdom of the world and calls it foolishness, as Paul wrote. Paul reminds us that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” He tells us “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

Everything you know is wrong. What the world tells us is backwards. God’s ways are not our ways. God even works with things that are *not*, to reduce to nothing things that *are*. Nonsense, the world says to us, and we respond that it is the *perfect* sense of the God who created us, rather than the imperfect sense of the creations of humans. “Foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God,” as Paul puts it.

Hauerwas and Willimon continue:

The basis for the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount is not what works but rather the way God is. ... This is not a stratagem for getting what we want but the only manner of life available, now that, in Jesus, we have seen what God wants. We seek

reconciliation with the neighbor, not because we will feel so much better afterward, but because reconciliation is what God is doing in the world in the Christ.

So, we are given a choice – we can be and act like citizens of this world, heeding the words and images of commercials and movies, responding to others with force, showing no mercy, dominating those around us, seeking vengeance, and keeping quiet in the face of evil. OR, we can be and act like citizens of the kingdom of heaven, living the way that Jesus taught us to live.

If we choose to live like citizens of the kingdom of heaven, then we’ve got to unlearn what the world has taught us because everything we know is wrong. We’ve got to expect that sometimes we are going to be oppressed or persecuted, but we can know that we are blessed, anyway. Sometimes, we may be poor in spirit, but Jesus calls us blessed.

Jesus gives us a whole list of descriptions of times which are not enjoyable, but He calls us blessed in those situations. He reminds us that our true contentment is not rooted in the temporary circumstances of this life, but in God, and it is through life lived God’s way that we will be truly, eternally contented. As a devotional which Kristi read to our children recently says, “When God promises to bless you, he is saying, ‘I’m going to make you into everything I ever meant for you to be!’” When a person gets a new car or a new TV and says we are blessed, I’m not sure that’s the kind of blessings that God most wants for us. God wants to form us, ever more and more, into the creation that we were made to be. *That* kind of blessing is much better than a new TV!

In a wonderful song titled “My Jesus,” contemporary-Christian artist Todd Agnew sings “Blessed are the poor in spirit, Or do we pray to be blessed with the wealth of this land? Blessed are they that hunger and thirst for righteousness, or do we ache for another taste of this world of shifting sand?”

The choice is ours – to live a life of fleeting pleasures or to live the lives we are called to live. It’s an upside-down way of living in this world of foolishness, but it is the way of the wisdom of God. Living in the way of the kingdom of heaven is not a “get rich quick” scheme. It is not a guarantee of health or popularity or career advancement. In truth, living in the way of the wisdom of God will have us so counter to the culture around us that we often will *not* be popular and our careers may *not* advance in ways that seem like success to the world. Yet, living a life of Christian faith now is a way of showing that we know that God’s way is ultimately the wisest, that injustice and vengeance and cruelty will *not* have the final word, that righteousness and peace *will* ultimately prevail. Living in such a way assures us of the blessings of God, even if not the blessings of this world. The world may look at these ways of living and see them as impractical, but we were never called to be practical, to be safe or conventional.

N.T. Wright also wrote that the beatitudes “are a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God’s promised future; because that future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth. It may seem upside down, but we are called to believe, with great daring, that it is in fact the right way up.”

So, live upside down. Be foolish in the eyes of the world, and be blessed by our loving God.
Amen