

***Basic Training: Am I Among The Blessed?***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Genesis 1:26-31; Psalm 32; Matthew 5:1-12***

Our final Scripture reading this evening comes from Matthew 5:1-12. It's the famous passage known as the Beatitudes. Listen now to God's Word. "Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.""

Basic training tears down a recruit's concept of self. They come in 18 years old, thinking they know everything, and suddenly their world drastically changes. Everyone gets the exact same buzz cut and uniform. Everything you do is at the pleasure of the drill sergeant. The individual is gone, replaced by a unit, a team. I respect our armed forces because that kind of change is hard. By the time basic training is over, they won't all have the same responsibilities, but they will have a new paradigm, a shared way of thinking as a soldier.

Jesus does the same thing for us in the start of the Sermon on the Mount. He throws down the gauntlet, setting before the world a new way of life, one consistent with the Old Testament but fundamentally different from the world. Each of the Beatitudes, as they're called, cuts away one old way of thinking and establishes a new one in its place. For several weeks, Jesus has taught, "repent!" – change your mind towards God and act upon the change by turning from sin. The Beatitudes show us what a repentant life looks like, and it's a life of joy.

You may have studied the Beatitudes before, but tonight we'll spend most of our time seeing how different they are from the world's way of thinking. We need to see that because these aren't some nice thoughts or "maybes" for the Christian life. They define Christians. If you are a Christian, the Beatitudes will become a reality in your life. You will look different from the world. Tonight, we're going to see how different Jesus calls us to be.

To do that, we need to understand the word "blessed." There are a few words in Greek we could translate "blessed," talking about a gift or benefit from God. But the word here in Greek means simply to be happy. The most straightforward interpretation is that the people who are defined by the Beatitudes are first and foremost happy.

There's a good reason why the translators didn't use the word "happy." Our culture has an emotional, feeling-based sense of happiness that we get from anything good. Hey look, I got some extra fries at the bottom of my McDonald's bag; I'm happy. Gas was \$1.89; I'm happy.

That's not what Jesus was going for. He used the ancient definition of happiness – it included gladness, but it goes deeper than that. It's permanent joy that external circumstances can't take away. It's the peace that we long for. This deep-seated joy makes sense in English as "blessed." But at its core, it means to be happy. God wants us to be happy, in His way, in His happiness, happiness beyond the good thing that happened ten minutes ago.

We also need to see that this blessing, this happiness, is present tense. These folks aren't waiting around to be happy; they are happy in God right now. Their happiness often comes from believing in future promises; they're happy now because of what's coming. And in the opening and closing beatitudes, the promise is here now – those who are happy in God have ownership in the Kingdom of Heaven right now. That's something to be happy about!

The Beatitudes had to have shocked Jesus' first listeners, and they should still shock us. The Beatitudes are not nice concepts or ways to earn God's favor. Jesus tells us that certain people are genuinely joyful in God – and when we listen carefully, we realize these are the people we expect to be most miserable! Jesus says, "What the world teaches about spirituality is wrong. Pursuing this path instead makes you genuinely happy in God."

Let's look at them one by one. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Who are the poor in spirit? The poor in spirit are people who know they bring nothing to the table before God. They come to God, in the words of the old hymn, "just as I am, without one plea." It's anyone who knows they've failed; they can't hope to be saved by their own goodness or morality. They don't merit a spot in the Kingdom. This is the prostitute and the inmate and the delinquent, but it's also the businessman and the factory worker and the soccer mom; it's anyone that says, "Have mercy on me, O God, a sinner." That's who finds genuine joy in God because theirs is the kingdom of heaven, and it's theirs right now. We are ushered into God's grace the moment we confess and turn to Him in our spiritual poverty. Any of us who recognize our helplessness before God and come to Him for salvation will find Him.

The world believes two contrary things – first, it believes we aren't sinners, and second, anyone who is a sinner doesn't deserve God's grace. The world believes that God helps those who help themselves – which the Bible explicitly denies. The world believes you can earn your way to God. In fact, most Americans believe they are good enough to enter heaven regardless of what they believe. Jesus disagrees. If perfection is the entry ticket into God's Kingdom, either we have to be perfect or someone must give us perfection. That's what Jesus does for all who turn to Him. But worldly people believe they can force their way into God's Kingdom without submitting to Him. We believe that spiritual people like Gandhi and the Dalai Lama are safe; we think nice people are safe. But Jesus isn't having any of it. The ones who are truly happy, Jesus says, accept God's mercy because they know their own spiritual poverty.

Next is "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." It doesn't make sense. Happy are the mourners? It's a paradox! But remember, the Beatitudes are a unit. Jesus isn't talking about every sad person. He's talking about those who mourn their spiritual state, who mourn their spiritual bankruptcy, who are so moved by their despondency to turn to God asking for forgiveness. They will be comforted. They will receive mercy from God because they were sorrowful about the state of their souls.

What does the world say? You're pretty good! Don't mourn; be glad and stand on your own two feet because you can do it! A third of the nation watched the Super Bowl and saw Katy Perry out there singing, "I am the eye of the tiger – I am a champion and you're going to hear me roar!" It's a catchy song, but it's a long way from when she was singing praise music with her dad who's a pastor. Sad, isn't it? We despise mourning because we don't know what to say to someone in grief. We want to say that everything is OK. But sometimes, it's not OK! We need to encourage people to grieve if they are far from God! That grief that will drive them to God, and they will be joyful when their tears move them to find forgiveness at the foot of the cross.

Then we reach, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." After Christians recognize their spiritual poverty before God and mourn their love of sin and rebellion against God, we reach a humble meekness. We are happy because we are forgiven our sin and have been brought into God's Kingdom despite our hopeless state. That changes our attitude. It leads to tenderness and thoughtfulness and a rejection of aggression. This isn't weakness or timidity. Jesus was meek, and He was so on fire for His Father's glory, He overturned the moneychangers' tables in the temple! Instead, this gentleness comes from knowing God's great grace to us.

Gentleness is not a worldly trait. We give gentleness lip service; "don't fight with your brother." We want people to be kind, but we aren't always kind in return. We give a lot of mixed signals. What did most of the country watch last weekend? A competition to see which set of freight trains could run over the other and score the most points. The whole thing ended with a fight! We want companies to treat us well, but we also want the best deal, even if it means someone's out of a job – and if we're shareholders, we want aggressive tactics that make us money. Roman culture prized strength and cunning; a gentle man was mocked, not emulated.

Then there's the surprise that the meek will inherit the earth. Who inherits the earth? Conquerors! The people sitting on the mountainside with Jesus knew that. They were under Roman control because the guy with the biggest armies wins. Countries around the world do it today. But Jesus has the future in mind. Those who are gentle and kind because they want to honor God and His compassion on them – they are Kingdom people. When God stages His final intervention with this world, when judgment comes and the new heaven and earth arrive, we who walk humbly with God will inherit a place as God's adopted children. How amazing is that!

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." What does this beatitude mean? The Christian, as their faith grows, longs more and more for righteousness. We want to know God. We aren't satisfied with our spiritual state, even though it's improved. We have a passion for God's holiness, to know it, to carry it out, to honor God through everything we do. It goes beyond rulekeeping because the Pharisees did that well enough. No, this is desiring God with all our hearts.

We struggle with this. We hear that heavenly-minded people aren't of any earthly good. I've had parents of thirty-somethings tell me that they were worried because their children became too devout! The parents thought going an hour on Sundays was enough! It says something that Sunday and Wednesday night church services are a thing of the past. There are so many other things to do. Who has the passion to go to three services and Bible study, and praise team practice, and a service project, besides everything else we could do?

But Jesus says that people who hunger and thirst for righteousness are happy! Fullness is coming. They not only receive the righteousness of Christ, purchased for them on the cross, but they will meet the One who is truly righteous. Their longings shall be filled.

You know, hunger and thirst are not sensations we like. They make our bodies react, and it's hard to be hungry or thirsty for long without pulling in somewhere to get a snack. The beauty of hungering and thirsting for righteousness is that they speak to us about our new spiritual state. When we desire food and water, it means we're human creatures; it's a natural part of who we are. When we hunger and thirst for true righteousness, it means that we belong to God; those desires are a natural part of our new spiritual nature that has been re-born through our faith in Christ Jesus.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.” Meekness is an attitude of the heart. Mercy is action based on that attitude. Mercy isn't just being nice. Mercy is an action of kindness that doesn't have to be done, that isn't owed. We give a second chance to the person that wronged us? That's mercy. Serving meals to addicts and visiting inmates in prison? That's mercy. By its very definition, mercy is a surprise, not an expectation. But Jesus says that those who are merciful, whose lives demonstrate mercy, will receive mercy from God.

The history of warfare is one of mercilessness. When the Romans defeated Israel in 70AD after they rebelled, they burned down the temple in Jerusalem, killed over a million people in the city, and disbursed the Jews so thoroughly that they didn't come back together again as a people until modern times. We see the same kind of barbarism in the modern world, whether in Islamic terrorism or the forced recruitment of child armies in parts of Africa. Even outside the field of war, mercy is a rare commodity.

But Christians throughout history became well-known for their mercy, even at the cost of their lives. They rescued discarded infants in ancient Rome. When the pagans fled plague-ridden towns, the Christians rushed in to show mercy to the sick and dying. We're known for mercy because we've been shown mercy, and God will continue to show it to us in eternity.

“Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.” This is an amazing promise on the one hand. Some of us will see God. That is astounding, that we will stand before the Creator of the universe. On the other hand, only through purity of heart can we see God when His Kingdom comes fully. We can't make ourselves pure.

But God can. If we have gone through the Beatitudes up to this point, faithfully believing God's promises, trusting in Jesus, then God will clean our hearts and make them pure through the sacrifice of His Son. As theologian Stuart Weber writes, “This quality [purity of heart] is a natural by-product of the preceding blessings and character qualities. Purity of heart is not manufactured by the believer, but is granted by the God of mercy to those who mourn their spiritual bankruptcy and who seek his righteousness.” If this is our destiny, to be pure in heart because God grants it to us as a free gift, to see God someday face to face, we are blessed!

Purity of heart wasn't on the radar of the first century Jew. If you asked who the "pure" were who might see God someday, you would have gotten three possible answers. First, you had to be racially pure – the promises of God were only for the Jews. Then you needed purity of doctrine – even Samaritans who were racially related to the Jews didn't count because their doctrine was off. Then there was purity of rulekeeping. Those who kept God's law faithfully and stayed ritually pure might see God. Jesus says, "None of those external things matter. What matters is your heart before God." Scholar Iain Campbell put it this way: "the life of the Kingdom is principally a spiritual life, a matter of the heart; and it has to be a matter of the heart before it can become anything else." Purity of heart is something we have not by what we do, but Christ's gift to us on the cross, purchasing our forgiveness and holiness.

Moving on... "blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." This isn't a world leader who stops a war. A peacemaker is a reconciler who brings harmony back into relationships. It's the mother who gets feuding siblings to settle, the friend who gets coworkers into a room to talk troubles out, and the pastor who helps squabbling families sort out their differences. It's the person who works for reconciliation even when it seems impossible. Peacemakers are promised adoption into God's family, to be God's own children. We are part of the family. We who are peacemakers take after Jesus, our brother who reconciled us to God.

Peacemaking is a godly thing, because ungodly people don't want anything to do with it. The world around Israel wouldn't be reconciled to them. The sons of Esau, the Edomites, constantly attacked Jacob's descendants. Abraham and Isaac made peace with the Philistines, but they became the fierce enemies of Israel during David's day. Even today, the Arab Muslims consider themselves to be the descendants of Abraham's son Ishmael. With the violence and hatred around the world, we think peace would be great – but are we willing to pay the cost?

And that's where the final beatitudes come in. "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

The persecuted are happy? Isn't the whole point of persecution to stop people from being happy? And yet Jesus says that those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for the name of Jesus, for the Kingdom of God, they can truly rejoice! Their happiness is eternal. The kingdom of heaven is theirs even now. We shouldn't be running away from persecution and doing everything we can to avoid it. We know we're living out our faith well if we do it faithfully and there's real pushback! If they killed the prophets who brought news of sin to Israel, why should we expect that anybody today is going to want to hear about sin? Don't fear the person who hates you for standing up for truth. God is with you.

The whole construction of the beatitudes tells us that following Jesus and finding new life in His Kingdom is a journey, a lifestyle, a continuing promise. Not everyone who is poor in spirit is merciful yet, but they have begun on the path. Each Beatitude moves us closer and closer to God; as we move through the cycle, we grow more faithful to Him in our attitudes and our actions. We reject the world's way of thinking and embrace God's way.

Jesus will spend the rest of the Sermon on the Mount telling us how the Beatitudes play out in the Christian's life and actions. But Jesus isn't presenting us with a laundry list of His demands of what we must do to get into the Kingdom. He brings blessings and happiness. As Martin Luther put it, "He does not come in like Moses, or like a teacher of the law, with commands, threats, and terrors, but in the most kindly manner, with attractions, and allurements, and most sweet promises." Jesus will break us of our worldliness, but He will do it through His own meekness. He will do it not as commander in chief but servant of all. He will do it not by sword but by cross, His own life given so that we might be happy and blessed.

So what do we do? We ask a few simple questions: am I among the blessed? Am I happy? Is the happiness I have based in temporary things that will someday go away when I die, or are the things I'm striving for and pursuing going to make me eternally happy? Have I bought into the world's lies about spirituality and peace and desire, or am I following this new paradigm of what life looks like as a follower of Jesus Christ?

Examine yourself and ask if you've gone through the first two beatitudes – have you recognized your spiritual poverty before God and mourned that you are a sinner who has rebelled against Him? Have you asked Him for forgiveness and a place in His Kingdom as His child? If not, don't delay. Call upon the LORD for salvation; ask Him to show you His way. If you aren't fully convinced of His truth and presence, get into the Bible. Pray that He would show Himself to you, and He will.

And if you're on the road with Christ, if the Beatitudes resemble parts of your life, ask God to take you further along the path. Keep them in mind often. When your anger flares when somebody goes 80 on the ice and nearly slides into you, remember the happiness of the meek. When your relative wrongs you and causes fights in your family, remember the happiness of being a peacemaker. When an opportunity crosses your path to show someone God's grace, even when you don't have to, remember the happiness of being merciful.

That happiness is yours to grasp; God has promised it for you; it's happiness that will last beyond the grave itself, a true blessing. Cling to Christ and His new paradigm. Repent – change your mind – live this out. And you will find that you are indeed blessed beyond measure.