

## **Blessed by Jesus**

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

November 15, 2020

Matthew 5:1-12

The Beatitudes take us to the heart of Jesus. Not his thought so much, not his theology, what he believed. His heart. And that is important because the goal of the Christian life is to become Christ-like, like him not just in what he believed, the way he saw things, but in the way he was. His heart as well as his mind. The Beatitudes give us a glimpse of the heart of Jesus.

There are a couple of things I would like to say at the outset.

First, Jesus did not invent beatitudes. The beatitude was a well-recognized literary and verbal form. We often speak of the Beatitudes, as if the 8 or 9 beatitudes in the Gospel According to Matthew are the only ones in the Bible. Not so. There are 30-35 beatitudes in the Psalms alone, including the very first verse of the first psalm: "Blessed are those who do not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stand in the way of sinners . . . ."

There are beatitudes scattered throughout the New Testament. For example: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." (Revelation 14:13) There are even beatitudes of Jesus besides the ones in the Sermon on the Mount.

Second, there are two versions of the Beatitudes in the Gospels. The version everyone is familiar with is found in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's version. But Luke has his own version. (6:20-26) Here is what is significant about that: the Beatitudes in Luke are different from those in Matthew and different in a very interesting and potentially important way. For example, in Matthew Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," whereas in Luke Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor." In Matthew Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;" in Luke Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are hungry."

That raises all sorts of questions – like, which did Jesus really say? -- but we're not going to chase that rabbit. I will probably quote beatitudes from both lists.

Let those remarks serve as a backdrop, the wallpaper for our thinking together.

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When we want to know what a word means, we look it up in the dictionary, right? We even talk about "the dictionary definition" of a word. But sometimes that doesn't help as much as we would like.

Take, for example, the word "blessed," which obviously is critical to understanding the Beatitudes.

The Merriam-Webster on-line dictionary offers several things "blessed" can mean, none of which are very helpful in understanding what Jesus might have meant when he declared certain categories of people "blessed."

One possible synonym is happy. "Happy are you poor." "Happy are you when you can't pay the rent, and you're about to be evicted." I can't imagine Jesus saying that. Jerry Schmucker, the former village blacksmith who was my pastor when I was a youth, used to say, "It ain't a sin to be poor. It's just awfully inconvenient." Having been a pastor during the Depression, having been paid in potatoes and turnips, he knew a thing or two about being poor. But he would never have said that people who were poor should be happy about that.

Another possibility Merriam-Webster suggests: Fortunate. This is suggested by a biblical scholar I respect. What sense would it make to say, “Fortunate are those who mourn? Fortunate are you who grieve?”

I want to suggest an entirely different approach. I will say up front that I have never read this anywhere. And when I think of something that I have not read, I automatically assume that I must be wrong, because if what I am thinking is correct, why hasn’t anyone thought of it before? Maybe someone has thought of it before, but if so, I haven’t read it. Nonetheless, it makes sense to me.

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Sometimes we can figure out the meaning of a word not by looking it up in the dictionary, but by considering what we are trying to do when we say it. That’s not as complicated as it sounds. In fact, it isn’t complicated at all.

For example, a regular feature of wedding ceremonies is the Blessing of the Parents. The minister asks the parents, “Do you give your blessing to this marriage?” The parents answer, “We do. We give our blessing to this marriage.” What do they mean when they say that? Do they have a pocket full of blessings that they hand out like candy?

In saying those words, the parents are doing something. They are voicing their approval of the marriage. And they are making a commitment to support the couple in their marriage. Just by offering their “blessing.”

Consider an example that I could not have used when I was a pastor in Massachusetts. But I know that folks in North Carolina would understand, and I suspect that folks in Waco will understand when I say, “Bless your heart.” I assure you that I am not trivializing the Beatitudes when I make this comparison.

If you grew up in the South, you have had your heart blessed many times. Sometimes those words were said playfully, sometimes teasingly, sometimes sarcastically. But when we experienced loss or hurt and the pain was deep and sharp, and a friend – in my experience it has often been an older woman -- wrapped her arms around us and said, perhaps through tears, “Bless your heart,” we understood that in that moment, in those words, she was sharing our suffering, taking our pain on herself, and making a commitment to us – to be with us in our hard time.

We understood that sometimes, if you want to know the meaning of a word, you have to consider what we are doing when we say it.

With that in mind . . . .

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What if, when we hear Jesus say, “Blessed are those who mourn,” instead of trying to find a synonym for “blessed,” we asked, What was Jesus doing when he said that? What was he doing when he said, Blessed are you who are grieving? Wasn’t he identifying with them in their loss, taking their suffering on himself, perhaps saying a silent prayer for their healing?

When he gave his blessing to those who stepped into the breach and took shots from both sides as they attempted to be peacemakers, wasn’t he voicing his support for their seemingly endless task, offering encouragement to them: “You shall be called the children of God”?

When he gave his blessing to those who made the world a fairer place because of their passion for justice, wasn’t he putting their thankless sometimes dangerous task in

a larger context by linking them to the great prophetic tradition of ancient Israel? “So persecuted they the prophets who were before you.”

When he gave his blessing to those who made the world a softer place because they responded with mercy when others would have gone for the jugular and exacted their pound of flesh, wasn't he pointing them to their spiritual parent, a merciful God?

Understood in this way, the Beatitudes give us a glimpse into the heart of Jesus.

When thinking about Jesus, we usually focus on his teachings – what he believed and taught – and on his actions – the things he did – as well we should. But the Gospel record is clear that he felt deeply. To understand him, to know him, we have to know what moved him, what gave him joy, what angered him, what broke his heart.

We must see him, looking on a mass of hurting people, being moved with compassion because they were “harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:36)

We must see him angrily overturning the tables of moneychangers, because he was incensed at the business that was going in his father's house of prayer.

We must see him as he watches in amazement as a poor widow puts her last two coins in the temple treasury and as a woman weeps grateful tears that fall on his feet, and wipes his feet with his hair.

We must hear him offer his blessing to the poor in spirit and to the poor, to the meek and to those who mourn, to those who hunger and thirst for justice and those who are hungry for bread, those who are pure in heart and those who are persecuted for their love for him, those who make peace and those who show mercy.

We must see the heart of Jesus in the Beatitudes, because the goal of the Christian life, according to Paul, is to be “conformed to the image of the Son.” (Romans 8:29) To become like him. Not simply to believe as he believed and do as he did but to be as he was. In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul offers a provocative picture. It is as if we're standing in front of a mirror, he said, but what we see in the mirror is Jesus rather than ourselves. And the longer we stare into his image the more we become like him. (II Corinthians 3:18)

That is what we are about: seeing Jesus again, as if for the first time. Amen.