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## Sermon

### ***The Blessing of Following Jesus***

**Matthew 5:1-12**

29<sup>th</sup> January 2023

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As we come to look at the Beatitudes – this manifesto of Jesus. We see that what we do is dependent on our character. It is our character which qualifies us for service.

So many want to change the world – into what? The underlying presumption is that my idea of how the world should be is better than what it is. So the idea of changing the world, is dependent on our character as well as our aspirations. If our character is faulty – what we create will be faulty as is evident from the state of the world. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

To express character takes courage. Courage to be different; courage to stand for what you believe in. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount did not teach that we should change the world until after he had spoken about character. Then he said, we should be salt and light to affect the world – we will hear more about that next week.

The sermon on the mount starts with these nine character traits of the Kingdom of Heaven. One's kingdom is the extent of one's rule. The rule of Jesus Christ begins in your heart and mind and there develops a certain character. You don't find these attributes anywhere else - it's an unusual top nine list.

#### *Blessed are the poor in spirit*

That's an unusual place to start! It's good to think, "Where am I poor?" Jesus tells us the answer in your spirit! In other words, this is a recognition of the fact that each one of us is by nature desperately poor towards God. That word poor would be used of beggars. If you are genuinely reduced to begging you are desperate for help. That is the state Jesus is talking about.

We are in a fallen state. To quote the Apostle Paul, we are dead in trespasses and in sins.<sup>1</sup> Solzhenitsyn wrote in the "The Gulag Archipelago":

"The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart..."

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2:1

“The line separating good and evil passes ... right through the human heart.” We live in an age of self-esteem, self-realization and self-love and we resist the truth that the line of good and evil is not out there it starts right here.

“Poor in spirit” says I recognize that as Paul says, “in my flesh dwells no good thing.”<sup>2</sup> “Poor in spirit” says I have a desperate spiritual poverty. That is what some if not all of us have known as we have come to Jesus for salvation. It became a matter of desperation to find forgiveness and be saved.

We may have felt that way when we came to Jesus the first time. We may still feel that way from time to time and it's not a bad thing because it reflects something of the truth. The book of Isaiah says,

For this is what the high and lofty One says--he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite."<sup>3</sup>

God says he lives in the high and holy place **and also** with the person who is lowly in spirit and contrite. Contrite means feeling or showing sorrow and remorse for a wrong that one has done. Not because you have been caught, but because you realise the wrong you have done and how it has wounded your relationship with God and probably other people.

That's an important starting pointing for our character especially in an age of self-righteousness. Jesus starts from the other end of the spectrum entirely from this age - it's a completely upside down view.

### *Mourning*

The second beatitude is **mourning**. It's a very odd one it's the hardest to understand. All the others are clearly character traits: poor in spirit, merciful, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, peace-making. In what way is mourning a character trait? Jesus does not mean we should to a lot of funerals as a professional mourner.

In the gospel, we find that Jesus grieved from time to time. What made him sad?

He approached Jerusalem and he wept over it saying, “If you had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes.”<sup>4</sup> He wept over their rebellion and sinfulness.

He went to the grave of Lazarus, knowing that he was about to restore Lazarus back to life. The shortest verse in the Bible occurs right there: “Jesus wept.” What's he sad about? Surely, the impact of sin and death in the world and that he was compelled to act in the world to save it because of the horror and the sadness and the grief of its entrapment in sin and evil.

We are blessed when we mourn ... over our own sinfulness and over the brokenness of our people. It keeps us aware of our need and separation from the glory of God. What does Jesus say? They will be comforted. The Greek word *parakaleo* is the verb form of paraclete – the comforter. They will be consoled or even called alongside. We could think of the Holy Spirit the paraclete coming to the mourner to console and encourage him or her in that grief over the things that break God's heart.

### *The Meek*

Meek is a misunderstood word. Why would somebody be meek?

If you're poor in spirit as you realize your own deficiencies, if you're mourning over your sin and the brokenness you see in the world - all of a sudden it's not all about you. It's not all about your opinions and

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 7:18

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 57:15

<sup>4</sup> Luke 19:42

ideas – as if they were the most awesome thing in the world. No! The blessed person does as the psalmist said, “I lift up my eyes to the hills from where does my strength come? My strength comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and Earth.”<sup>5</sup>

There is an intrinsic humbling that belongs to this kind of person and their whole outlook is changed. They are not looking within for what they need. They know they don't have what they need - they're looking outside of themselves to God for what they need. The gospel brings us all low in repentance before it builds us up with the grace of God.

I said meekness is misunderstood. It is not about being a doormat – it is about self-disciplined strength. We can understand this better from an old English usage ‘to meek a horse’. It means to break a horse in. It means to bring a wild horse, an unruly horse, a horse that been acting in its own strength into submission to the authority of a master. This independent, assertive and self-willed, wild animal becomes loyal, obedient, humble and under authority. And then looks like this is the very thing it was made for - to be work with that rider and to have its strength and its direction channelled to a good end. This is illustrated by this clip from a video about the actor Samuel West who plays Sigfried in the 2020 TV series remake of “All Creatures Great and Small.” Here he talks about learning to ride and handle horses for his role in the programme. {Video}

I don't know if you have learnt to ride a horse. When I had lessons, I became aware of the stubborn refusal of riding school horses to move. I could kick and say, “Giddy up”, all I liked and nothing happened until my teacher quietly raised her riding crop, then the horse would move! Quite unlike that beautiful cooperation Samuel describes where a mere the tightening of his stomach muscles is enough to cause the thoroughbred to move to a trot. That is meekness. The horse is strong and powerful but submitted to the rider.

When we are meek we are under the authority; God calls us to do things out of position of meekness - not weakness. The Bible says Moses was the meekest man on the face of the Earth.<sup>6</sup> The secret to that was in his call. God told him to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Hebrew people go. In the natural, that would be a crazy – Moses wouldn't come out of it alive. Moses argued that he couldn't do that and he couldn't even talk properly. Then God said, “Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.”<sup>7</sup> There's the key, obedience to God relying on his strength.

From that position of meekness – humble obedience, we're filled with a range of things and Jesus runs through them:

#### *Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness*

The first one is hunger and thirst for righteousness. When you have been mourned over your spiritual poverty, you become hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Our normal appetite for food is designed to get us to eat so we don't starve. If you didn't get hungry you wouldn't go to the trouble and expense of getting food. Appetite is a powerful thing - It demands satisfaction. Here Jesus tells us that if we hunger for righteousness we will be satisfied. If we don't hunger for righteousness, we need to pray for God to change our desires.

#### *Mercy*

Then Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful.” This is not a common character trait in the world. To be merciful means that you don't act towards others according to what they deserve. Psalm 103 says that God hasn't rewarded us according to our sins; he hasn't given us what we deserve. Rather – what? “As high as the heavens are above the earth so great is his mercy to those who fear Him.”

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 121:1

<sup>6</sup> Number 12:3

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 4:12

He's dealt with us altogether differently not based on who we are but based on the fullness of who he is! We need to show mercy to our world. It is not about what they deserve but what is God's ultimate good for them. Understanding this, should help us avoid the trap of sentimentality – being concerned only with their feelings. It is not about making them feel nice it is about God's ultimate best for them.

#### *Purity of heart*

It means we serve God alone. Pure means unmixed. We don't have mixed motives. We serve him for his sake. Joseph is a good example. He was a slave in Egypt, yet he remained true to God and his morals under heavy temptation and pressure. He had real integrity.

Another way of thinking of this, is living for an audience of one. God is your audience not other people. Aim to please God not a human audience – be pure of heart and Jesus promises you will see God.

#### *Peacemakers*

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God." It does not mean cheap peace which avoids issues. The Son of God created peace between God and humanity. It wasn't easy. It was not a case of saying, 'There, there it will all be OK.' Jesus paid the price to make peace. We might say that sacrificial peacemaking is in the DNA of God. If you do that, you are displaying the inheritance of God's nature in your life – you are a son/daughter of God.

#### *Persecution*

I will take the last two together.

Matthew 5:10-12 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.

Jesus lists persecution as one of the blessings of following him. Note it is because of righteousness and because of him not if we are objectionable or insufferable.

Why would he say that? I don't like it; I suspect you don't either. I think it is because the world is opposed to the things of God. If we live for God, we will run into opposition. Jesus said in John 15:18-19:

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Jesus says that of those who are persecuted like this – theirs is the Kingdom of God and their reward is great in heaven. That is why one can rejoice under persecution – for what lies ahead - not for the persecution itself.

There's something to be gained which is far greater than the losses and suffering we may endure here. Jesus bore his cross, the offense, the ridicule and the underdog status - he bore it all the way to death. From the first time he mentioned his death, he said anyone who would follow him was to take up his cross daily. That is God's power in the world. When we experience the darts of a hostile society - remember: it is God's power in the world. It is as you go through it that God will work through you, your testimony, your witness, through every dart that hits you, and every stone that bounces off your back - he will use it all to reach and to save a lost world.

It is not an easy call to follow Jesus; it takes courage. Courage is about loving the other person more than yourself. All of these beatitudes are expressions of that life which is devoted to loving God and loving others. It is a blessed life which results ultimately in being heirs of God, receiving the kingdom of God, the

consolation of the Holy Spirit, the satisfaction of our desire for righteousness, seeing God, and great rewards in heaven.

So, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 12:2