

“The Blessed Life”

Reading: Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

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This passage of Scripture is known as the Beatitudes, which comes from the Latin word for “happiness.” The Beatitudes are wonderfully poetic, encouraging, and uplifting. It’s like the 23rd Psalm in that it’s one of those passages you can read for comfort when you’re feeling downtrodden or lost; Jesus assures us that we’re not alone or forgotten even in the dark times. Even the name “Beatitudes” sounds nice; it makes my ears happy just hearing the word pronounced. But this is much more than just poetry. This is a pivotal moment in history; this is Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon, this is the signing of the Magna Carta, this is the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. It’s much more than just Jesus giving us some comforting words to hold onto while we wait to get to the more important parts of His story, and it’s much more than just an example of one of Jesus’ sermons. This is a new King coming to earth and proclaiming how His kingdom operates. It’s a moment when Jesus declares His agenda by revealing the truth of creation, and in so doing He confronts the lies we live with.

It really is that important. In fact, the Beatitudes bear more than a little resemblance to the Ten Commandments, another of those pivotal moments in history. This is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, one of the longest and most detailed teachings of Jesus we have in the Bible, and the fact that Jesus is going up to a mountain to preach this sermon calls to mind another mountain many years previous, Mount Sinai where Moses met with God to receive the Ten Commandments and the rest of the laws that would guide God’s people’s lives for centuries. The law of Moses begins with a smaller section of laws that set the tone and communicate the most important things first, and that’s what Jesus is doing, too. He’s taking the authoritative, life-shaping instructions of Moses and reinterpreting them for a new sort of life.

If we were to read straight through the first four chapters of Matthew’s gospel to set the scene for what we’re reading today, we would watch as Jesus is announced as the new King in a variety of ways. The book opens with a genealogy of Jesus – not the most exciting start, maybe, but it’s an important one. The point is to show that Jesus is in the line of the great King David, which was an expectation of the Messiah. Then an angel comes to Joseph, Jesus’ adoptive father, and tells him that this child has been conceived by the Holy Spirit of God. Then in some way the very heavens themselves announce that this child has been born, which leads a group of foreign dignitaries to travel from faraway lands to worship Him. Then we get to the story of John the Baptist, this startling figure of an old-time prophet, who not only announces that Jesus is the Messiah but also watches as Jesus is anointed by God – in ancient times, one of the functions of prophets was to anoint a new king. Then Matthew immediately tells us that Jesus announces that the kingdom of God has arrived, and Jesus proves it and demonstrates the power of that kingdom by healing the sick and casting out demons. So He has been foretold as the King, worshipped as the King, anointed as the King, announced the arrival of His kingdom, and shown the power of that kingdom. Now it’s time to proclaim the law of His kingdom and explain how His kingdom works. This is the inaugural address that explains how to live in His kingdom.

The thing with the Sermon on the Mount is that even with as important as it is, very few people take it seriously. Even among people who follow Jesus, we don’t really take this sermon

seriously. We like Jesus and we like what He has to say and we think that it sounds really nice, but He can't possibly mean it. There have historically been a couple of ways of avoiding the impact of what Jesus has to say here. One way might be what we'd call a theologically liberal way, by saying that Jesus has lots of nice ideas but just isn't grounded in reality. The Sermon on the Mount is nice as an ideal, but it's not any more binding than, say, the writings of Plato or Immanuel Kant or any other ethicist. Lots of people outside the church would agree that this is one of the greatest ethical teachings ever, but they wouldn't say it's realistic, and they certainly wouldn't say that this is the will of God. The other direction is more theologically conservative, but it still tries to avoid the impact. The other direction is to say that this is indeed the will of God and Scripture should be taken literally, but the ethics of this Sermon aren't intended for us to live in the here and now. Jesus is just telling us the ideal of what the kingdom of God will be one day. Kind of like the streets of gold we read about elsewhere: that's what it will be like one day, but it doesn't mean we need to try to pave our streets with gold now.

The practical upshot of either direction is that we can admire Jesus for His idealism, but we don't have to take Him seriously. It's that old problem of liking it when Jesus is my savior, but not being so sure that I want to make Him my Lord. I'm willing to ask for forgiveness for my sins, but I'm not willing to shift my allegiance to Jesus as my Lord and shift my understanding of how the world works to His kingdom.

But if that's true, what's the point? Remember, the whole story of Jesus up to now has been about showing how everything is set up for Him to be King: He's been foretold, announced, anointed, He's demonstrated His power over the kingdoms of sickness and darkness, and He's announced that the kingdom is at hand. So when He tells us what life looks like in that kingdom, why would we stop there? Do we believe He's really the King or not? Do we believe He's really powerful enough to rule His Kingdom or not? If we do take Him seriously, we need to take His words seriously, too. So what do we learn from the Beatitudes if we take them seriously?

One of the first things we notice as we read the Beatitudes is the repetition of the words "blessed are the..." or occasionally you'll see it translated as "happy are the..." To begin to understand what Jesus is calling us to, we need to think about what it means to be blessed. Eugene Peterson points out that there are two different senses of being blessed, and sometimes we get them mixed up when we read the Beatitudes. There's being blessed in the sense of receiving a blessing, receiving a good thing from God or someone else. I want to bless this person by writing them a note of encouragement during a hard time or helping them financially when they're having trouble. And that's how a lot of folks understand the Beatitudes: "blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" might mean that we're supposed to think our mourning is somehow a blessing, like we should be grateful to God for the fact that we're mourning the loss of a loved one. And so we look at the Beatitudes and we think that's the sort of blessing we're talking about, and we think that's just not realistic. It would take a saint to have that kind of an outlook when it comes to mourning and persecution and insults.

But there's another sense of blessing, and it's not something you receive, it's a state you live in. Being blessed means that you're living in God's favor, you're in a state of being smiled upon by God. That's a much different meaning, and it gets us back in the direction of Jesus and His announcement of the kingdom of God. Jesus is saying that when you are in these kinds of places in

your life – when you're poor in spirit, when you're mourning, when you're merciful, when you're being persecuted, when you're meek – when that's what's going on in your life, that's when you're in a position of relying on God and being ready for Him to do something with you. These Beatitudes are examples of the things God wants to see in us, so when we live that kind of life, God smiles, and we live in a state of blessing.

The consistent message throughout history is that repentance and humility come before blessing in God's economy. Lasting hope comes when we stop relying on ourselves. Resurrection comes after crucifixion, and eternal glory comes after shame. That's what Jesus is saying here. When you are merciful, you are blessed, you are doing and living the sorts of thing God smiles upon, and because you're living that life, God will be faithful – you will in turn be shown mercy. Pay attention to all those future tenses in the Beatitudes: "will be comforted," "will inherit the earth," "will see God," and so on. There's a future promise of God's faithfulness if in our present lives we trust Him enough to live the life He calls us to.

Because make no mistake, this sort of blessed life takes an awful lot of faith. Almost everything Jesus said in the gospels was a challenge to someone's kingdom, and this is no exception. The Beatitudes might be pleasant to read, but they're hard to take seriously. Because in what kingdom are these sorts of people truly blessed? We might admire merciful people or peacemakers, but we invest trillions of dollars each year in weapons and warriors. We might feel sorry for those who mourn and we might want to help them, but their mourning is hardly taken as a sign of their blessed life. Not many would claim to value meekness as something to pursue, and in fact a meek person would be scoffed at in the world of business or politics. How can you get ahead when you're meek or interested in building peace? You're going to be a doormat, and our culture values strength and productivity and self-sufficiency. If these are the values of God's kingdom, then His kingdom is very different than the kingdom of America, or the kingdom of Rome, or any other kingdom in history, because the value in God's kingdom is relying on God for your strength and security. That is directly contrary to the values of our culture, our economy, and our government.

The only way to do this is to rely on the presence of God, which is exactly what Jesus is calling us to. God's kingdom has come, so which kingdom are you going to live in? Jesus very carefully removes any option for self-righteousness. To live this blessed life, you can only do it by rejecting the lies of the world and embracing the truth of God, by renouncing the kingdoms of the world and declaring allegiance to God's kingdom. Those who are not meek, who are strong in their own strength and are braggarts and bullies, are not blessed, because they don't need God and they aren't living in His kingdom. Those who are rich in spirit don't need God's Spirit. Those who persecute other people aren't blessed, because they don't need God. The problem with the law Moses gave in the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments and all the others, is that you can theoretically follow the letter of the law and do what it says. You can't do that with Jesus' law. There's no doing this on your own strength or out of your own goodness. There's no claiming that I'm holier than you are because I've done the letter of the law and then some, and you've done less. The blessing only comes in nearness to God, because that's what it's all about: recognizing our own need and relying on Him and His faithfulness. You can't live the blessed life of God's kingdom without being in His kingdom, and His kingdom is only present where God is present.

It's not that God wants us to suffer and be weak-minded slaves, and so He commands us to be meek and enjoys our persecution and mourning. It's that God wants us to be in a position of seeing through the world's lies to see the truth of God's kingdom, and we can best do that when we've either lost or given up the support of those lies. So what are those lies? For Jesus' audience, maybe the lie was that you deserve a place in God's family simply by virtue of being born a Jew, and as long as you fulfill your end of the deal, you're good. So the Beatitudes cut through the self-righteousness by showing that the letter of the law isn't enough; God examines your internal attitudes as well as your actions, and even the state you live in because of other peoples' actions toward you.

What might be some of those lies in our world today? Maybe the lie that you can only live the blessed life if you're happy and healthy, and that there must be something wrong with you if you're not always having the time of your life and posting pictures of it on Facebook, and you're defective and to be pitied if you're not healthy. Maybe the lie that strength and self-sufficiency are virtues, that "God helps those who help themselves." (That's not actually in the Bible, by the way.) Maybe the lie that security and peace come by forcing your will on others, rather than taking the posture of God's child. Maybe the lie that having a full belly and a fat wallet are the signs of success in life, rather than hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Jesus calls us today to see through the lies of our world and call them what they are. He calls us to live in God's presence instead, to live according to His kingdom. We can only do this by assuming the posture of those in need and humbly seeking to live in that kind of blessing. Is that the sort of blessed life you want to live?



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