

“Mountains, Valleys, & Caves: Jesus on the Mount of Beatitudes”

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Matthew 5:1-12

March 6, 2022

Jesus was a contrarian. He was not grumpy, but He saw things differently than the unrighteous Gentiles and the self-righteous Pharisees. The Mount of the Beatitudes shows how He flipped the blessing upside down. Blessing wasn't about grabbing, but about giving. His teachings were contrary to the way of the world. “*Don't be like them*” (Matthew 6:8). “Them” refers both to the Gentiles and the Pharisees. Seek the righteousness of Christ. APPLICATION: Our theme for the rest of the week is about **blessing**. Lent is an excellent time to not only receive God's blessings and to live it out, but to extend it to others. We said on Ash Wednesday: As we prepare for Lent, we apply the three means of grace Wesley used for the Methodists: Avail yourself of the means of grace (worship, prayer, Bible study, fellowship), do good (lots of opportunity here), and avoid harm. What are your plans for a holy Lent? Will you pray and read your Bible daily, come to worship weekly? Who could you invite to be in a Lenten small group? What is something new you can start? What should you give up?

Truly a “Mountaintop” experience for the Disciples! I think the Sermon on the Mount is about 3 basic things:

- 1) **Character** – who we are; what we value
- 2) **Relationships** – how we relate to Jesus, to other disciples, & to those outside our faith
- 3) **Commitment** – how willing are we to follow through

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Each Beatitude begins with the word “**Blessed**.” “Blessed” does not mean “happy,” though some translations render it so. Being happy is a subjective state – a feeling. Jesus is not declaring how people feel but makes an objective statement about what God thinks of them. When God “blesses” us, He approves of us. The objective fact can be a subjective response – we will be “happy” because the God of the universe has approved of us.

The Beatitudes are counter intuitive. They don't make sense in our normal world. The world doesn't value these approaches to life. A **Paradox** = a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement that when investigated or explained may prove to be true. Jesus reverses the order. To those outside the Christian faith, this sounds like absolute nonsense. This is not the way of the world. Political: Herod “The Great” v. Jesus “the suffering servant” – Hubris vs. Humility. When Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate as the prisoner, was actually free. Pilate was a prisoner of his own position, power, and pride. Jesus was the master of paradox: To die is to live. To give is to receive. To be last is to be first. The least is the greatest. The loser is the winner. Poor is rich. Serving is ruling. Weakness is strength. Jesus didn't teach “the survival of the fittest” but the one who stoops is the one who is living into the kingdom of God. Ultimately, the Sermon on the Mount is about which kingdom we will live in. To live in our own kingdom, we do not have to do a thing. To live in God's kingdom means we must change from our agenda to God's. That is a challenge we face all the time.

Jesus practiced it; He didn't just talk about it. He did not retaliate. He loved. Matthew 5:43-48 *You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

At the Last Supper, Jesus offered Judas the sop, too. When Judas came with the soldier to Gethsemane, Jesus called Him, “friend.” Jesus didn't quit on his friends when they betrayed, denied, and fled from Him. When Pilate confronted Him, He kept silent. He was mocked, ridiculed, and spat upon but didn't call fire down from heaven to consume his foes or those who didn't believe in Him. He prayed for His enemies on the cross: “Father, Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Unlike Pilate, who was confused and politically compromised, Jesus knew no confusion or compromise. Jesus, the crucified suffering servant, was the one in control, not the Governor of Judea, Pilate.

We naturally get this wrong. Taking a page from C.S. Lewis' “Screwtape Letters,” if the devil wrote his Beatitudes, they could be: *“Blessed are the Christians who are too tired, too busy, or too distracted to spend time with their fellow Christians – they are my best candidates to fall away. Blessed are the Christians who wait to be asked and expect to be thanked – I can use them to slow things down. Blessed are the Christians who are touchy. With a little luck they may stop going to church & influence others to quit, too. They are my missionaries. Blessed are the Christians who are very religious but get on everyone's nerves – they are my most effective stumbling blocks. Blessed are the Christians who are troublemakers – they are my best wrecking crew. Blessed are the Christians who have no time to pray – they are easy prey for me. Blessed are the Christians who are complainers – they are my best discouragers. “Blessed are you when you read this & think it's about other people and not yourself...I've got you.”*

The Beatitudes aren't so much a recipe for blessings or happiness, as they are a description of life in God. Blessed is the relationship we have with God. We could read them backwards: *"The way to heaven is through poverty. The way to consolation is through genuine sorrow. The way to earthly security is by not being possessive or stingy. The way to satisfaction is through a hunger & thirst for justice. The way to mercy is through mercy. The way to God is through the open, unobstructed pure in heart. The way to a full relationship with God is through the active practice of peace. The way to God's kingdom is through the struggle for right that leads through conflict, pain, and even death itself."* The Beatitudes are more like a road map that tells us how to arrive at our destination; or like going to a Mountain top and getting a commanding view of the landscape upon. This harnesses us to the power of God – we are the weak ox yoked to the strong ox. All we do is to stay together with the One who pulls us along. That's how I see Jesus – the strong one who is stooping to wear the yoke and to give us His strength. Matthew 11:28-30 *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

The Sermon on the Mount ends in 7:24-27 *"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."*

Dana & I have watched Season 1 and half of Season 2 of "The Chosen." Our knowledge of what actually happened in the Bible is SO limited. While we have all the information we need for salvation and for faith in Christ, there was so much more to these relationships. The Chosen creates conversations that could have happened. It gives us a fresh perspective. There was more to these gospel stories than we know. What was the Pharisee Nicodemus, Jesus' mother, and Mary Magdalene really like? The story about Simon the Zealot is enthralling. I love the character of Jesus. Jesus' character is wonderful. My second favorite character has been Matthew, the author of the Gospel. The former tax collector, who sold out his country to be rich by working for the Romans, though he struggles with relationships, is meticulous in detail. In our Interactive Sermon Journal guide, there is a link to Season 2, episode 8. It contains Matthew helping Jesus prepare the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew writes down his message and talks to Jesus about how to organize the message. Watch this clip:

23:55 Matthew: *"Do you realize how heavy laden your sermon is with these kinds of ominous pronouncements. I haven't even named half of them."*

Jesus: *"It is a manifesto, Matthew. I'm not here to be sentimental or soothing. I'm here to start a revolution. I said 'revolution' not a revolt. I'm talking about a radical shift. Did you think I was going to come here and say, 'Hey everyone, just keep doing what you've been doing for the last thousand years since it's been going so great?'"*

Matthew: *"What does the salt of the earth even mean? I'm not good at metaphors."*

Jesus: *"Salt preserves meat from corrupt. It slows its decay. I want my followers to be a people who hold back the evil the world. Salt also enhances the flavor of things. I want my followers to renew the world, to be part of its redemption. Salt can also be mixed with honey and rubbed on the skin for maladies. I want my people to participate in the healing of the world, not its destruction. I told you these things will make sense to some but not to others. I don't want passive followers. Those who are truly committed will peer deeply into it looking for truth."*

Asbury's mission is to Help Others Follow Jesus. That's what we are all about. Spring Break Missions is one way we can invest in our students so they can have an experience of sharing their faith to others. Their experience will help them see things in a new way.

We are called to live in a different way. It begins by making a decision to follow Jesus. You can make that decision right now as we share in our service of Holy Communion. If you would like to live into a new kingdom – God's kingdom, just let Jesus know. Make this the prayer of your heart now. Today is the day to begin. Now is the time to respond.