

The Beatitudes: Receiving God's Favor

Matthew 5:1-12

Tappahannock Presbyterian Church

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The key to understanding the Beatitudes is the word in the original language that is translated "blessed". The word in the original language has a variety of meanings: to be blessed, fortunate, happy; but the most powerful one is "to be the privileged recipient of God's favor." That last meaning is, I think, the meaning we ought to understand when we hear these passages. Jesus is deliberately contrasting the "things of the world" with "the things of heaven." Those who aren't locked into the things of the world, who put the things of God first, will receive God's favor. And the things God wants from us all have this in common, in some way: they're all about putting others first.

The thing is, that's not what the world teaches. You know how we were all taught: don't do bad things, because you'll limit your options. Work hard at school, work at making a name for yourself, work hard at your job, and you'll reap the rewards. Those rewards are usually wealth and fame; you can add personal security to that. That's how you "play the game." The world teaches you to look out after yourself. That's NOT what God wants! God wants us to look out for others; God wants us to be rich spiritually, and to share that wealth with the world. No one who thinks about it would reject God's favor in order to receive wealth and fame! But we don't think about it, us humans. That's why Jesus has to tell it the way it is.

In every case, God chooses those who are the least, probably because they haven't "played the game."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." You will receive God's favor if you are one of those whose kingdom is not of this world, but of God. The word for "poor" in the original language also translates as "broken in spirit." These are folks who have had a hard life, and who seem permanently stuck on the bottom rung. It carries, too, the idea of being dependent on others, even of being reduced to begging. These words would have brought to mind instantly an image for the people who first heard them, of people dressed poorly, probably in poor health. I suspect an instant image of ghettos and shantytowns and people waiting in line for food might come to our minds. We need to remember how needy in *spirit* we are, and how much we are dependent on God. The world can't offer us things of the Spirit; only God can do that. So the right attitude is to do unto others as they would do unto us – acknowledging our interdependence, and making sure we do our part – no matter how small. That's what we're supposed to do. Sadly, that's a sure-fire way to remain off the lists of the rich and famous. The world doesn't want to hear about caring for anyone but yourself. But if we persevere, we will have from God an inheritance greater than any social status the world can confer.

"Blessed are those who mourn," says Jesus, "for they will be comforted." The word in the original has the meaning of being sad, having sadness or sorrow.

"Mourning" is about the care we have had for a departed one – the love in our hearts. That's the right attitude to have, because if you didn't care about others you wouldn't mourn their deaths or tragedies, would you? We are about people, because we are

NOT about our own selves, and wealth, and fame. All of us mourn, or grieve, or are sad, because we care about people. When they suffer loss, we suffer right along with them. We've been there to comfort others! That's the way it's supposed to be. That's what God wants, that we love others enough we mourn with them. And so God himself will comfort and console and encourage and cheer us. Of course he will, because God loves his children and heirs.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." This is probably the most misunderstood of the Beatitudes. The word in the original is variously translated "meek, gentle, or humble". But it also means "considerate, unassuming, courteous." What all of these have in common is that they show the right attitude: being concerned with others, and not being aggressive and self-centered. You're most likely to be a servant to others then, and therefore servants of God. The reward? You get to inherit the earth. That's no small statement, because the only people who inherit anything are children of the one who is passing on the inheritance. So these meek - or gentle - or humble - or considerate - or unassuming - or courteous - these people who put others first, are the ones God adopts as his sons and daughters. I think this is almost like the Golden Rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." We know that 's the way it's supposed to be. In a way, we've done it backwards. In our baptisms, we became God's children and heirs of his inheritance; so now WE are the ones being considerate, unassuming, courteous. We are the ones looking out for others, just as God wants; we are his hands and feet and voice to a hurting world.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." The right attitude to have is an unabated hunger, or thirst, or HUGE DESIRE, for righteousness. "Righteousness", you remember, is about having right relationships with other people, with the world, and especially with God. They are all related, because if you really are right with God, automatically you're right in your other relationships. Sadly, there have always been people on the wrong end of bad relationships. The examples are so numerous that I would be surprised if you needed more than a couple to get the point. The persecution of Jews during the Holocaust, the treatment of blacks during the last century, and the ethnic cleansing and campaigns of genocide we see all over the world are particularly potent examples of people denied righteousness, and therefore hungering for it. Matthew does something interesting here, by adding to hungering the idea of thirsting. You can go for fairly long periods without food, especially if you've built up a nice "reserve" like I have. But you can't go without water. Though the people of his day wouldn't have put a number on it, we know today that you can only go about three days without any water or moisture from food before becoming seriously dehydrated, and possibly even dying. Matthew is telling us that these folks are desperate for righteousness. What God wants from us, is for us to be desperate for their righteousness, too. God will be happy if we are, and if we act on it. As God's rightful heirs, it's as if we have a responsibility to distribute his estate of righteousness to all the world.

The thing that all of the last five Beatitudes have in common is that they all deal with righteousness, just as we have defined it: right relationships with others. You'll hear it easily in the first one: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." It does no good to talk about being merciful without any actions. It makes no sense to think of someone who is merciful inside, but never shows it in actions. . When we speak of someone who is merciful, we're talking about someone who has *shown* mercy or who *shows* mercy. So we might as well translate this as "blessed are those who DO mercy", because that's what it means. And what does "mercy" mean? It means something more than just withholding punishment of some kind. The original word, just as our word, also has the meaning of having pity. The other meaning of the word is "helping", in a very strong, active way. The two go together: the pity you have is an active thing, requiring you to help. The attitude of this Beatitude is: look out for the welfare of others, as best you can! Don't pass up an opportunity to really help someone. God needs your hands to do His work. It's supposed to be that way, because then God can have contact with us as we work together. And if God has that contact with us, we have truly inherited something great.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." This one's all about attitude! But it has an action component. You can only know a person's purity by what a person does. It makes no sense to talk about decisions that have no action or consequences, just as we said about being merciful. Then it must be that the person who is pure in heart is the one who doesn't think, decide, or act from any motive except

a will to do what God wants. Their reward? They will see God. And this is startling! Only Moses in the Old Testament saw God, and then only his back; because to see God face-to-face meant death. Those who are pure in their efforts to do God's bidding, even more than Moses, get to see God; there's no death because they see him as his children would. Now, I know this one is hard to hear for us, because when we hear the word "pure" we tend to think of something like distilled water, and so we equate "pure" with "100%". Jesus' listeners knew that no one could be like that, and they wouldn't have expected it. They knew that men and women made mistakes in judgment, too. The point was, what motivates your life? What is behind what you do? How would someone characterize you? *What's in your heart?* Those who would be characterized as "pure in heart" are the ones who do what they think pleases God. So shall it be for us: we are "pure in heart" when we make God the center of OUR lives. That's why we're able to become God's heirs.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Again, the attitude is "care for others." Once again, we're back to talking about right relationships; peace is the state of right relationships between nations or between groups. Since peace is one of the main characteristics of God's kingdom, those who seek it are REALLY doing God's will. That's the way God intended it to be. Those who do God's work as peacemakers receive adoption as heirs for it. But it may not be easy, and it may require sacrifice. And then there's this: *peace*, in Biblical terms, is about more than the ending of violence. Both *shalom* in the Hebrew and *eirhnh* in the Greek mean overall

well-being, a sense that all is right with the world. THAT'S the inheritance we have, and ought to be sharing with the world!

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Yeah, this life as God's people might not be easy! You will receive God's favor when you stand strong for righteousness, and especially when you suffer for it. The attitude of this Beatitude is hard to hear, at first: we need to have courage when we stand up for others. We here in the twenty-first century - especially my generation - hear this and cringe, because we know what kind of price you might have to pay. "Go along to get along" might have been the theme of the late 'Fifties and the 'Sixties; if you took a stand on anything, you were regarded as a "nonconformist" and you were isolated, maybe even singled out for ridicule. In the "Fifties, you might even have been accused of being a Communist. In the Sixties, you'd be called a radical. You and I tend to conform today, because that's what our society and culture teaches us. We're taught to hold on to our piece of the pie, our standing before others. That pressure is so strong, we seem to lack the confidence to stand up when things aren't like they should be. But the reward is a two-part reward, or at least it shows up in two ways. If we hold out for righteousness - which we know means right relationships all the way around - then the world will truly become God's kingdom, and we will have our rightful place in it. That's the way it should be: we stand up for others, and God stands up for us. God needs his people to stand up and be counted, and he rewards them with his powerful inheritance.

"Blessed are you when people revile you, and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." The attitude here is this: stand strong in the faith, and you will be rewarded. The first generalized persecutions of Christians were on the horizon at the time Matthew was writing; no doubt Matthew's audience had experienced some of this already on a smaller scale. So it's little wonder that he would recall these words of Jesus, and remind his listeners that God was their support. "Rejoice and be glad," Jesus says, "for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." To be compared to the prophets is to be compared to the people who had the highest place in the Jewish religion, because they were called by God, and sent to deliver his message to the people. They met persecution, too, and yet they persevered. That's the way God wants it to be: those who believe in Jesus are entrusted with his message. When they speak it boldly, they will encounter opposition, hatred, and maybe even death. *But even in their persecution*, they'll bring others to God. In the end they will be welcomed into heaven and given their great inheritance, just as God did with his prophets of old.

So the attitude of the Beatitudes is that we should look out for others as much as we can, in every way, including preserving the faith for them in the face of persecution. Since God works through us, that's how it should be. That means you and I should seek out the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger for righteousness, and care for them as God would do. We should be the gentle and considerate people who are merciful to others. We should be the people who are pure in all of their thoughts and

decisions. We should be the ones who live in peace, and insist on peace for all people, and work to make that a reality. We may not get much reward in this world's terms; in fact, we may become a target for those who want the ways of the world to win. But if we are faithful, we'll get all the help we need.

You want to know something? You and I are already receiving our inheritance, or at least a major part of it. It's going up over there at 360 and Kino Road. What do people usually do with a big inheritance? *They invest it, and it grows larger.* In this scripture today, you've been given directions as to how to invest this great inheritance you have, to make it grow and grow and grow. When we do these things, we will receive blessings beyond what you ever imagined. All glory be to God for this great inheritance we have received.