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# You Are Blessed

BY BURT L. BURLESON

To the crowd on the Galilean mountainside, the first words out of Jesus' mouth are "You are blessed." This is where it always begins—with God's grace coming down from this mountain. If we cannot get this, then we cannot get Jesus. We can spend a lifetime hearing those words.

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*Matthew 5:1-11*

**T**he Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' first sermon in the Gospel of Matthew, begins with the Beatitudes. It is kind of like Jesus opening his preaching with a poem, which—as they taught us in seminary—is not a bad way to begin. Though he starts with a poem, what follows is no mere three-points-and-a-poem sermon. It is a dazzling and brilliant teaching that we cannot grab hold of. It grabs hold of us.

We experienced that at a "lectionary breakfast" several years ago when a few members from DaySpring Baptist Church gathered at a downtown Waco restaurant to help me think through the lectionary readings for the week and prepare this sermon. The Beatitudes were in charge of us. Someone said, "They are beautiful and musical." And so they are—blessed are..., blessed are..., blessed are.... "They are comforting in their rhythm, and sort of lull you at first." Another pointed out, "Yeah, sort of like a children's song, they invite me in but then they really unload." "Like a knife in me that's being turned," a third added. That prompted a lot of heads nodding "amen" and someone confessing, "I am not like any of this yet. I cannot check off any of these."

That is the way it began among my friends. Our conversation just kept bouncing wildly off the text and our lives, back and forth.



It is not hard to imagine this text bouncing around in an ancient congregation. Perhaps members are gathered in a simple living room in AD 70 – not a fun time for Christians. In many ways their commitment to Christ is not paying off. They know plenty of persecution and isolation and rejection. They do not go home for the holidays anymore. Being followers of The Way has provided no insulation. Their lives are full of everything lives are full of – they still get sick, lose loved ones, and deal with difficult people. They are not so blessed.

Though Jesus never promised them any insulation from life's troubles, still they are wondering. It is just human nature to figure if you are following the right savior, then you are going to get some blessing, some payoff. But they are dying from this and that plague just like everyone else. In addition they are members of a despised sect, ridiculed on a good day. So they wonder if they are doing it right, getting it right, believing it right.

Where is God's blessing? The question burns in the hearts of these first-century believers who have snuck off for another worship service. Their leader pulls out a scroll that has just arrived and reads this part of Matthew's new Gospel. They listen to the Beatitudes with the curtains drawn, for they are hiding.



Whether you are in a lectionary breakfast in Waco, a first-century house church in Antioch, or among the crowd of people that follows Jesus "up on the mountain" and hears him speak this blessed poem, who you *are* makes a difference in what you *hear*.

The crowds who follow Jesus through Galilee, Matthew tells us, are ill in all sorts of ways: they are suffering from severe pain, demon possession, seizures, and paralysis (Matthew 4:24b). Jesus' congregation is pretty much the walking wounded, if they are walking at all. And in the midst of their suffering, not only is human instinct telling them the gods must not be pleased with them, their religious culture teaches them "If you are ill, there must be a skeleton in your spiritual closet." Even his own disciples, when they meet a blind man, ask Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). The fellow must be paying for something. Someone has broken a commandment, someone has come up short on a Levitical list that determines who has been naughty or nice, and now he is suffering because of it.

So Jesus' congregation "on the mountain" is suffering not only from every sort of disease, but also from the deep suspicion that God does not like them and is making that apparent in their twisted bodies and disordered thoughts. Whoever has God's blessing, it is not them.

“When he saw the crowds,” Matthew begins his account of the Sermon. This is no incidental transition, but an insight into God with us. Jesus *saw them suffering* outside and in, and when he did, he went up on the mountainside.

Luke says Jesus “came down with them and stood on a level place” (Luke 6:17), but Matthew says he “went up the mountain; and...sat down.” This is not just “You say *po-TAY-to*, I say *po-TAH-to*.” Matthew, the evangelist who writes with an eye towards the Jews, has this new teacher go up the mountain, because the old teacher, Moses, went up the mountain to bring down the law. Jesus is about to give them his law, so he goes up on a mountainside to sit down and say, “Let me tell you about who has the blessing of God.”



That is the big word in the Beatitudes: blessing! The Living Bible substitutes “happy.” Do not even go there. This is not about us getting happy. It is about who is blessed of God, and *blessing* in the Bible is miles beyond *happy* in Hallmark.

Recall the story of Jacob tricking his dying father Isaac into giving him the blessing rather than his older brother, Esau (Genesis 27:1-40). Later, Esau is beside himself and he goes to his father, unbled. “Don’t you have one for me?” he pleads to Isaac. But his father doesn’t, and Esau’s weeping could be heard all over. To be unbled is worth weeping about. Blessing gives us something we cannot get for ourselves. It comes as a gift from

another and we need it. We know if we have it and we know when we don’t—the painful weeping is impossible to miss. The blessing is core deep and deeper. It penetrates. It is not, “I sure like the way you color, son.” No, it is, “I like *you*. There’s a gleam in my eye when I look at you.”

And that is what this poem is about first. Those people on a mountainside in Galilee—who were suffering, and those disciples gathered in a first-century living room—who were wondering, and my friends at the lectionary breakfast—who were bouncing ideas around, hear this teacher who is come from God say, “You are blessed.” Those are the first words out of Jesus’ mouth. “You are blessed if you are spiritually poor, if you do not have it together spiritually. You are blessed of God.” It is

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amazing that this beatitude is next: “You are blessed if you mourn – if you have lost what seems like everything. You have God’s blessing.”

Don’t you know that Jesus was still seeing the crowd, looking individuals here and there in the eye as he said, “Blessed are you and you and you. You are blessed, if you are meek, if you have no power.” What was it like for them to hear this word, this good news? “You have God’s blessing. You who are starving for righteousness, who need it so much and feel like you have not eaten in years.” “You are blessed,” he kept saying. “You are blessed.”

The crowd heard it on a mountainside in Galilee, the first-century disciples heard it in their shuttered rooms, and my friends and I heard it around our lectionary breakfast table. Are you hearing it now? “You have God’s blessing – what you need most, what is essential to live.” It is not because of anything you are or have done or will do. It is simply yours.



Jesus sees us and we hear him say, “You are blessed.” This is where it always begins. It has to begin here with God’s grace coming down from this mountain. If we cannot get this, then we cannot get Jesus. This teaching is amazing and exasperating. We can spend a lifetime hearing it.

Once you really hear the Beatitudes, this sermon starter begins to bounce around in your life like it did at our lectionary breakfast table. You may see a great vision (as one of us said) “dangled by God in front of the community, challenging us to something beyond us. Be this way.” Or you may find a path that changes who you are from the inside out – a contemplative path where you see your spiritual poverty and emptiness, where you embrace suffering, where your hungers and passions are transformed, where you practice forgiveness over and over and over. Or you will look out a window (as one of us did) to see a person going through the trash can by the window and you will ask, “Can I even get this, without getting to the bottom of life? Is the gospel so bottom up, so inverted, that I have to go *there?*”

You will find yourself thinking, “Jesus calls me to be a peacemaker. He calls me to mercy. He wants me to hunger for righteousness and justice.” The Beatitudes bounce around and challenge us to live like Jesus in our world, in our relationships. And having heard – core deep and deeper – that you are blessed of God, you will find yourself caring about everything else that Jesus said that day on the mountainside. What is more, you will seek it – meekness, peace, humility, mercy. Knowing that you have God’s blessing, you will live a life of blessing.



The Beatitudes that Jesus shared are his self portrait. They depict one blessed of God who lives a life of blessing in the world. One who sees a vision of another way of being and invites us to see it and live it with him.

On that hillside by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus described for us a blessed life. On another hillside outside of Jerusalem, on Golgotha, he showed us what it is. Matthew records that ironically it was a Roman soldier and his friends who recognized the truth, "Truly this man was God's Son" (Matthew 27:54).

Each time we come to the Lord's Table for Communion, we are saying "Yes" to Jesus' teaching that we are blessed, and we are declaring our desire to take that blessing into the deepest part of who we are, to internalize Christ and his gospel in ways that change us forever.

In mystery and words beyond our comprehension, Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you...unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood...you have no life in you.... Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 3:53-56).

"Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (Matthew 26:26-28).



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