

The Grand Invitation

July 24, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 5:1-12

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

If a worldly person would be asked what would make them happy in life, he or she would likely respond: wealth, partying, power over others, having all the food and drink you might ever want, being able to punish others who have hurt them, being able to do whatever they want regardless of the consequences, being able to take what they want, and live above reproach. Probably the last things a person might say would make them feel blessed are exactly what Jesus lists here in the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount: those who are poor, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst, those who are merciful, those who are pure in heart, those who make for peace, and those who are persecuted.

One has to keep in mind that the crowd which was gathering around Jesus were people who were among the poor, the hungry and thirsty, the meek, those who mourned. In other words, these were the people that were the marginalized in Jesus' world. The dominant narrative in Jesus' day was that only those who were pure Jew would be allowed entrance into the kingdom of God. Non-Jewish people and half-breeds, like the Samaritans, were to be excluded. Recipients of the kingdom were to

be male only. Women were treated as inferior and in many cases, as pieces of property rather than as human beings. The ones who were considered to be the rightful (or righteous) recipients of the kingdom were the faithful keepers of the law, those who were holy and ritually pure. The kingdom was not open to people who did not keep kosher laws or keep the Sabbath, much less those who were considered to be known sinners, like tax collectors and prostitutes. Those who were unhealthy were treated as outsiders to God's kingdom, since sickness was considered to be a sign of displeasure from God. Those who were poor were considered abandoned by God. None of these people were believed to be on the kingdom guest list. Jesus turned all that upside down with his sermon. These were people who know they needed to depend on God for sustenance and for justice. As far as Jesus was concerned, not only were these people welcome into the kingdom; they were going there ahead of the those who consider themselves righteous (Matt. 21:31).

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount begins with what has been called "The Beatitudes."

Each Beatitude begins with the words *blessed are*. Some translations say "happy are." Neither one of these does true justice to the Greek word used here, which is *makarios*. *Makarios* means something like "truly well off" or "those for whom everything is good." *Blessed* is a religious word to many of us today and is associated with being pious. *Happy* refers to temporary condition based on externals; it denotes a more shallow state of being. Today, the most accurate translation of *makarios* might be "well off." This translation heightens the shock value: "The poor in spirit are truly well off, because . . ."

... When Jesus delivered his Beatitudes, I imagine his hearers gasped. He looked out at the crowd of desperate, sad, broken and persecuted people, and called them *makarios*.¹

Poor in Spirit. "Dallas Willard translates 'poor in spirit' as 'spiritual zeroes,' meaning the kind of people who humans typically think have no place before God. So the opening beatitude might read something like this: 'Blessed are you who are feeling marginalized from God, who have nothing going for you spiritually—for you too are invited to the kingdom.'"²

Those who mourn. "Those who mourn may refer to people who have undergone loss and are feeling overwhelming grief. It refers to a person 'whose situation is wretched.'" Those in God's kingdom have a changed approach to mourning. "We still feel pain, but we take comfort in knowing that we will see our loved ones again, and there will be no more tears. Laughter and joy await us."³

Those who are meek. "This likely refers to land. The people in the crowd were too poor to own land (as most people were in that day). The landowners were often oppressive, charging large fees and asking for a lot of work simply to live on rented land. So when the meek hear that they will "get their due," it was very good news."⁴

Those who hunger for righteousness. "Hunger and thirst are conditions of great need. These people are starving for something they do not have. They yearn for things to be made right. Perhaps the wrong is in them or is an injustice foisted on them. This is an admirable but not an enviable condition. But as before, there is good news available to them. Jesus has a promise for people such

¹ Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ (The Apprentice Series Book 2)*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

as these: their hunger will recede. God will restore them to a new place where forgiveness and love will dominate.”⁵

Those who are merciful. Jesus is describing people who are more than just nice; these are people who give until it hurts. “As in every beatitude, the merciful are given a promise. Those who are merciful will receive mercy. In a society bent on revenge, being merciful is not often seen or highly valued. But God is merciful and loving and forgiving, and he will show mercy to the merciful. In the kingdom their kindness does not go unnoticed.”⁶

Those who are pure in heart. “Most of us live in a broken and depraved world, and we find a lot of darkness in our own hearts. ...Our motives are often mixed and selfish. We would like to speak without guile, to love with pure intentions and to serve with the right motives. But it eludes us. We find that we are a mixture of good and evil. We long to do right, just as the person who hungers for righteousness, but in this case our yearning is to be pure so that we can see God.”⁷

Those who are peacemakers. “Using force to make an enemy bow is not peacemaking. Peacemakers are willing to suffer and even die for the cause of peace. Peacemakers will be called the sons and daughters of God because they do what their heavenly Father does. Our God is a peacemaker, and human peacemakers resemble him.”⁸

Those who are persecuted. “Jesus observes that those who pursue righteousness are going against the grain of society, and that will result in persecution. Following Jesus is dangerous—if we lead the kind of life he calls us to. When we choose to fight for justice and peace or not to lie or judge others, we will face backlash.”⁹

It comes down to this: every attribute that Jesus said is blessed could be used to describe himself, as he hung upon the cross. Jesus was poor. He mourned. He was meek. He knew hunger and thirst. He is merciful. He is pure in heart. He is a peacemaker. And he was persecuted. In other words, if we live like Jesus, we will be blessed. For those who follow the King, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. It’s just that these attributes are not typically what people who follow the ways of the world would call blessed.

James Bryan Smith writes of an individual named Kevin who was at a small church where he was attending. Kevin was asked to give his testimony in church. There was one problem, however, and that was Kevin had Down Syndrome and was unable to speak except in grunts and snorts that only his mother could completely interpret.

The pastor therefore had to speak for Kevin, asking him yes or no questions, to which he would nod and grunt, and occasionally light up with a smile that said more than words could. “So, Kevin, you just got back from the Special Olympics, where you won a medal. Was that a lot of fun?” Kevin nodded furiously and smiled as he held his medal high. The pastor then turned to the congregation and explained how Kevin might have won more medals that day, but he stopped in every race to help other runners who had fallen or were lagging behind. “Isn’t that true, Kevin?” the pastor asked. Again, Kevin nodded, but this time with a kind of shyness and humility. The pastor then said, “Kevin, you are about the happiest person I know. To what do you attribute the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

joy in your life?” Kevin pointed up. “God?” asked the pastor. Kevin shook his head yes, several times, then raised his hand as if to correct him, or to add to what was said. “Something else?” the pastor questioned. Kevin grunted as if to say yes. “What else?” Kevin then held his arms outstretched, as if he were Jesus on the cross. “Do you mean Jesus, and his dying for you?” Kevin not only nodded, but with great excitement started grunting and jumping up and down. He used sign language to say that Jesus loves us all, and that he, Kevin, loved us as well. He gave the pastor a huge hug, and most of us in the pews were misty-eyed if not downright crying. It was the best testimony I ever heard. And that was the moment [author James Bryan Smith stated he] first began to understand what the Beatitudes are all about.

...Many people in this congregation were elderly, and every few weeks one of our members would pass away. Kevin would look the surviving spouse in the eyes, touch his finger to his eye and run it down his cheek, to indicate tears. Then he would put his hands together in a posture of prayer. Finally, he would give them a big hug and walk away. Without words he conveyed, “I am sad with you. I am praying for you. I love you.” The people who receive his blessing say the same thing: “Of all the people who tried to help me after I lost my spouse, Kevin helped me the most with my grief.” Kevin, rejected by the world but one in whom Christ dwells, brings comfort to those who mourn.¹⁰

If you feel like an outsider, know that Jesus died for you and welcomes you to the kingdom. You are blessed if you, like Jesus, are reaching out to the world with love and salvation.

¹⁰ Ibid.