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Matthew 5:1-12

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Best Sermon Ever

*5:1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.*

*5:2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

*5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*5:4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

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

*5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*5:8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*5:10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*5:11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

*5:12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Preaching a sermon on a sermon seems strange. Particularly when it is Jesus's sermon you are preaching on. How is one supposed to improve on the ultimate preacher's sermon? He wrote on the textbook, as they say. With the Sermon on the Mount, I feel like I should just read it and say Amen and sit down. But in case you would like a bit more than that. Here is what I can say about Jesus' preaching this incredible sermon. First, most scholars believe this is the real deal. Jesus said this stuff. Maybe with some additions by Matthew but basically Jesus climbed up on that proverbial mountain and proclaimed these words of blessing on the people who were gathered to listen. Just as Moses climbed Mount Sinai and then delivered the rules to live by to the people of God so Jesus ascended to a lofty perch and then made this address.

The sermon is all of chapters five through seven. We just read the introduction in these first twelve verses and then Jesus goes on to tackle many, many topics of interest and concern – like how to pray, fasting, not judging others, murder, adultery, loving enemies, not making oaths, asking and seeking God, just to name a few. But before all those specific teachings – Jesus sets a vision – we call this vision the Beatitudes. Tom Long suggested that, “The Sermon on the Mount is the ‘constitution’ of the church of Jesus Christ, and the Beatitudes are its ‘preamble.’ They proclaim what is, in the light of the kingdom of heaven, unassailably true.” With this sermon, Jesus states the values and attitudes of the kingdom of God. This is important stuff.

Unlike other parts of this sermon, in the preamble, Jesus is not telling us what to do. The beatitudes are not the cliff notes on the book titled: *How to be a Christian in ten easy steps!* Jesus is not saying what they should become, he is describing for them the kingdom of God. The grammar is

this part of the sermon in the indicative mode, not in the imperative. These are not commandments for how to be, these are descriptions of blessedness according to Jesus.

‘Blessed’ in Jesus speak is not the modern usage of this world where everything is coming up roses. Blessed does not have the character of happiness but of inclusion. In the kingdom of God, the poor in spirit are included. So are the mourning and the meek. Those hungering for righteousness are included. The merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted for righteousness’ sake – they are all in. Edwin Van Driel writes, “The Beatitudes are not entrance requirements for the kingdom but eschatological blessings. Jesus is not asking the crowd to become poor in spirit, or mourners, or persecuted for righteousness’ sake; instead, he offers consolation to those who find themselves poor and in mourning and persecuted.”

The vision Jesus sets out, looks so very different than the vision set out for us by our idolatrous world. Those who are included would probably not make the guest lists at any of our Washington parties. And yet, according to Jesus, they are blessed – they are included. The usual channels of influence and status, our halls of power and wealth and intelligence and vanity are not pathways to citizenship in the kingdom of God. And that is good news.

The beatitudes are not calls to action but promises from God. They are promises that you will not be forgotten when you find yourself with any of these adjectives attached to your name. They are promises to that stand alongside you when your path is not straight, or the world seems too dark, or the hope is hard to find. These blessings are promises to God’s people as Jesus begins his ministry.

Each one of these blessings is something Jesus lived; Jesus embodied the characteristics of this vision. Jesus was describing his own life; he was embodying the values of the kingdom. Blessed is Jesus who was poor in spirit, who mourned for the state of the world, who was meek in his treatment of others, who loved the world and hungered for righteousness, who was merciful towards the needy and the sinners, who was so pure in heart, who sought to be a peacemaker at all times, who was persecuted for righteousness sake, who was reviled for his work and his values. That was Jesus. Jesus lived these words with his life.

Jesus’ life needed no words. The example of Jesus was and is the best sermon ever. If you want to know how to be a Christian – look to Jesus. None of us can be Jesus yet all of us can strive for his vision and to honor it and try to live into it. The kingdom of God is what is now and what will be. We don’t just have to wait until we die to experience or participate in the kingdom of heaven. That is what Jesus was showing us, it is then but it is also now.

A few weeks ago, I was sitting watching a kids basketball game. There was a mom there I didn’t know, and she was confusing me by cheering for everyone. She cheered and clapped for every single player on both teams. She was so earnest and supportive and non-competitive. It was strange for me. After being totally confused for long enough, I just had to ask her. Which side are you on? “Oh,” she said, “my daughters on the blue team but I am just so proud of all of them. They are pouring their little hearts out and I just think they are all so great.” This is third grade basketball so none of them are actually great at basketball but that is not what she was talking about. I kept asking her questions to try and figure her out. She seemed so kind and positive and

present. Eventually I learned more of her story. She had two older boys who both played basketball. A few years ago one of the boys died of brain cancer. She said the basketball league treated him with dignity and love and let him play even when he was vomiting on the side lines. I was speechless.

Maybe if you go through something like that and then you watch some third graders playing basketball, all you can do is cheer for each and every one of them. Because they are all so great! And they are when you look at it with those eyes. When you have the vision of the kingdom you look at everything in a different way. It's not a basketball game anymore, it is life and we all just pouring our little hearts out. Maybe if you go through something like that then you realize the kingdom is to come and the kingdom is now.

When God gave Jesus to the world, God poured God's heart into the world and gave us a new vision. It was a vision seen through eyes of love and mercy. It was a vision where justice mattered and the humble were included. It was a vision where the last become first. It was a vision where sinners got new starts. It was a vision where ordinary people received extraordinary callings. It was a vision of belonging and acceptance and compassion.

The world every single day reminds us we are not there yet. And that is discouraging. And yet every single day if we look for them, we notice citizens of the kingdom of God, who walk among us. You can see them out there if you pay attention. In the letter to the Hebrews it says, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

That woman at the basketball game, she's one of them. \*Pure of heart.

The homeless man who covered his shivering dog in his own tattered jacket, he's included. \*Meek.  
The mother whose son was killed by the police who cries out for peaceful protests, she's one of them. \*Peacemaker.

The mother and father who daughter is killed by a drunk driver. \*Mourning.

The child who cares for the parent whose body is strong, but whose memory has vanished.  
\*Merciful.

They are out there. Citizens who give us glimpses of the character of Jesus. Citizens who do his work in the world. It is not our mission to have all these attributes and yet we often we do embody them at different seasons of our lives. The good news is that when we do, we receive God's blessing. God draws us in and gives us a seat at the table.

I am so grateful that Jesus climbed up on that mountain and delivered this sermon. Because while his work to feed and heal and teach was important, he just didn't get to everybody. There were lots of people, still are, lots of people, who feel left out. There are lots of people with mighty struggles and Jesus, with this inaugural vision counts them in. They are not lost or forgotten but included. Included - blessed by belonging to God.

That is maybe the very best thing to hope for, to be included in the kingdom, and its work on earth and its glory in heaven. May it be so.

Amen.