

LIFE WORTH LIVING

Matthew 5:1-16

Our reading from Matthews's gospel today commences with Jesus teaching about a set of statements which are usually known as the Beatitudes, and are sometimes called the 'Beautiful Attitudes'. They are part of what is often called the "Sermon on the Mount" in chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel. The beatitudes are one of the best known and probably one of the least understood parts of Jesus' teaching. This is very rich and dense material, so please open your Bibles at page [***] so that we can study it together.

Jesus took his disciples into the hills to teach them – look at verses 1 and 2:

"Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:" (Matthew 5:1-2 NIV)

At the end of Chapter 4 we are told that large crowds were following Jesus and here he retreats into the hills in order to teach his disciples – not the crowds – in peace. Although this teaching is for the disciples we see in Chapter 7 of Matthews gospel that the crowd – probably the fringes of the crowd who were closest – have been listening in, they were not excluded. Generally, the Greek word *oros* which the NIV translates "mountainside" means 'hill country' rather than a specific hill or mountain – so the name "Sermon on the Mount" is really a bit of a misnomer. The Gospel of Luke has a parallel account of these teachings in Chapter 6, which was apparently on a level place. So probably the teaching was on a flat place, a plateau, in the hill country.

Jesus begins his teaching with a summary of the values of the kingdom of heaven in eight separate statements which is cleverly constructed so that it has great impact and is also easy to memorise – see verses 3-10:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are

the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3-10 NIV)

As is so often the case with our God, the commendations made are sharply paradoxical and reverse the conventional values of society. Those who are blessed are those whom the world generally dismisses as wimps and losers. The beatitudes thus call on those who would be God’s people to stand out as different from those around them, and promises them that those who do stand out in the ways recommended will not ultimately be the losers. Whilst most of the recommendations do not specifically mention God, it is clear that it is *God* who will comfort, satisfy and show mercy etc. The first and eighth statements each have the same second clause, “.. for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” In the style of writing of those times this tells us that all the statements have a common theme. The repetitive format and the tightly controlled structure would have made this body of teaching easy to memorise – a pocket guide to life in the kingdom of heaven.

These eight statements are called “beatitudes” because they all start with the phrase “Blessed are ...” There are similar statements in the OT, especially in the Psalms and in various places in other teachings of Jesus in the NT, mainly in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. They are saying that the people referred to are fortunate, they are in good or happy situations. They are saying that if we as Christians embrace Jesus’ values we will be blessed by God – not necessarily materially and not necessarily in this life at all, but we *will* be blessed. Let me make it absolutely clear at this point that the Beatitudes are not a doctrine of salvation by works as opposed to salvation by faith. Indeed the values espoused here are inner values as opposed to the outward obedience required by Jewish Law and are thus even more impossible for us to keep to. Anyone who looks at the Sermon on the Mount seriously will go straight back to Jesus for justification. The beatitudes set forth the blessings which God bestows (not as a reward

for merit but as a gift of grace) upon those in whom he is working the character of a reborn Christian.

We don't really have time for a detailed analysis of each of the eight beatitudes this morning, so I'm just going to draw out a few points of particular importance. In verse 3, the poor in spirit, really means those who are contrite, God's faithful people – those who know their need of God and acknowledge their abject spiritual poverty before him – for we are all sinners deserving nothing but God's judgement. That is why Jesus welcomed the prostitutes and other rejects of human society, for they knew they were so poor that they could offer nothing – only such persons can possess the kingdom of heaven. Certainly this verse is not referring to material poverty and should not be misused to either justify material poverty or as a call to voluntary poverty.

We might almost express verse 4 as “Happy are the unhappy” – a complete paradox. But the sorrow referred to here is not that of bereavement, but that of repentance. This follows on from verse 3. It is one thing to confess spiritual poverty, but quite another to grieve over it. The Christian life is not always laughter, sometimes we need to weep Christian tears. When we grieve in this way we receive the only comfort that exists – God's free forgiveness.

In verse 5, those who are meek, or humble and gentle, echo those who wait on the Lord in Psalm 37, and this probably refers to a general reversal of fortunes in our heavenly life rather than to a specific inheritance. In verse 6 the idea of hunger and thirsting recalls the idea of living not on physical food, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God in Matthew 4:4. Such hunger and thirst should be characteristic of all Christians and will be fully satisfied, although not in this world. Remember that this righteousness is not just private between you and God, but extends to social righteousness. So Christians are to be concerned about civil rights, justice in the courts, integrity in business dealings and many other such matters.

In verse 7, the Lord's prayer tells us that the idea of forgiving others, or showing mercy is closely linked with our receipt of God's forgiveness or mercy. We cannot truly claim to have repented of our own sins if we are unforgiving of the sins of others. This verse is not speaking of how others will respond to a merciful person, but of the treatment such a one will receive from God. In verse 9, Psalm 34 tells us that it is a characteristic of God's true people to seek peace and pursue it. This goes beyond merely having a peaceful disposition; it is a call to reconcile those who are battling each other and also a call to reconcile people to God. In verse 10 the pursuit of righteousness often arouses fierce opposition from those whose interests or self respect are threatened by it.

Together, the beatitudes paint a comprehensive portrait of the true Christian. He is first alone on his knees before God, acknowledging his spiritual poverty and mourning over it, but not acquiescing and humbly thirsting for righteousness. He is not set apart from society and is merciful to others following a constructive role as a peacemaker. Yet he is not thanked for his efforts, but rather opposed, slandered, insulted and persecuted on account of the righteousness for which he stands and the Christ with whom he is identified.

After the eight Beatitudes, Jesus moves on to teach about the distinctiveness of the disciples, look at verses 11 and 12:

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12 NIV)

This statement has been called the ninth Beatitude, but in reality it is an expansion of the eighth Beatitude from verse 10 specifically applied to the disciples. Perhaps the main difference is that the disciples are told that they will be persecuted not because of their righteousness, but because of Jesus. They will be persecuted just because they are Christians. This remains true for masses of Christians today. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all

surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of his grace”. But verse 12 makes it clear that those who are persecuted in this way will be rewarded in heaven. Unlike many modern Christians, Matthew is not coy about the rewards that await those who are faithful to their calling – although the parable of the workers in the vineyard told in Matthew chapter 20 warns against any crude and simplistic quid pro quo concept of earning our reward. Jesus is really saying that God’s reward will be enormously generous and will far outweigh any bad experiences in this life. Note carefully though that the blessings are only promised to those who are persecuted on account their righteousness or their following of Christ, not to Christians who are persecuted for other reasons.

The call to accept persecution with joy is followed by a series of images which explain why the disciples must be both different and seen to be different – look at verses 13-16:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-16 NIV)

It’s difficult for us to imagine salt losing its saltiness, but in biblical times their ‘salt’ was not pure salt but a mixture of minerals and so it is possible to imagine all the real salt being washed out leaving a useless residue. In biblical times salt was listed as one of the essentials for human life. It was used as a preservative for meat to stop it going rotten and as a flavouring. There was also a purity about salt, Jewish sacrifices were offered with it. So here we are being told that the distinctiveness of the disciples is absolutely essential for human life. In the same way, as Christians, we need to retain our Christlike character and be distinctively different in our world today to stop it from going completely rotten and give it a good flavour. As R. V. G. Tasker puts it, Christians are ‘to be a moral disinfectant in a world where moral standards are low, constantly changing, or non-

existent'. One of the most hurtful (but unfortunately often true) comments a Christian can receive is "you are no different from anyone else." If that becomes true then we may as well be thrown out like the saltless salt and trampled underfoot. The whole thrust of the teaching we have looked at today and indeed that of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is the distinctive differences between Christian and non-Christian standards. But let us not forget that salt bites. The Christian message is not one of sweetness and honey, it has always been a difficult thing – we have already spoken of persecution and Christian tears.

In verse 14, the light symbolises the new hope which comes from Jesus' preaching of the coming of the kingdom of God. With Jesus a new age had dawned and the rule of God had broken into our world. When there is light we can find our way and everything is clear. When there is darkness we stumble and are lost. Here the light which Jesus brings is provided also by his disciples. Similarly it is to be our duty and our joy to go out and bring light into our dark world. But we cannot reflect Jesus' light until he has illuminated our hearts.

This light needs to be where it can be seen. That is the message of verses 14 to 16. The lights of the city of Quito in Ecuador situated 10,000 feet above sea level can be seen for 75 miles around. Apart from the fact that the oil lamp of verse 15 would soon go out if placed under a bowl, the point is that it is completely absurd to hide it away when its whole reason and purpose is to shed its light as widely as possible. We must also spread the light of our faith as widely as possible. The "job description" of a disciple is not fulfilled by private personal holiness, but must include the witness of public exposure. Our Christianity is of no use if its light is not shining in our daily life.

In verse 16 we are told that the light of the disciples is to be their good deeds – the conveying of the qualities set out in the Beatitudes, especially that of righteousness which was mentioned in verses 6 and 10. The effect of the distinctiveness of the disciples – and indeed our distinctiveness as Christians today – is now said to be not only the improvement and enlightenment of society as such but also the giving

of glory to God by those outside the disciple community. The giving of glory by those who came to believe through the faith and acts of the disciples and who will come to believe through the way we live our lives as Christians today.

The goal of the disciples' witness and our witness is not that others emulate this way of life, or applaud its probity, but that they recognize the source of this distinctive lifestyle in God - "your Father in heaven." And give him (and not us) glory and praise.

So, in summary then what can we learn from this teaching on the beatitudes we have studied today. Firstly, we see that there is a fundamental difference between Christians and non-Christians, between the church and the world. The greatest tragedy of the church is that it tends to conform or be conformed to the prevailing culture, rather than forming a distinctive counter-culture. Secondly, as Christians, we must accept the responsibility this distinction puts on us. In this we are not helpless, for we have Jesus, his gospel and his ideals and power and also the power of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly we must see our Christian responsibility as twofold – we need both to arrest the decay in secular society and bring light into the darkness of the secular world. To fulfill these responsibilities we need both to spread the gospel and live our lives in a way that is worthy of that gospel. If we do these things we will bring blessings to ourselves, salvation to others and glory to God.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father, in the power of your spirit give us the courage and the will to live distinctive Christian lives and to be salt and light to this fallen world and so bring much glory to you – in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.