

The Way to Blessings

A fellow was arranging a blind date from an internet site. They agreed to meet at a certain time and place. The young woman asked, “How will I know you?” “I’ll be driving a Volkswagen.” Expecting the classic ‘Beetle’, she walked right past him toward one parked along the street. He, however, was standing beside a sleek sports car, also made by the Volkswagen company. Isn’t this like how we can approach the teachings of Jesus, expecting certain ideas or interpretations we’ve heard before? Yet when we really look at what he said, the true meaning is something very different. Not only that, but unsettlingly impossible to do on our own strength. But they must become the central focus of our thoughts and actions as followers of Christ.

The Beatitudes form the introduction to Jesus’ most important body of teaching. These sayings outline the basic way of living Jesus would model in his own ministry. From the Latin word *beatitudo* meaning “a state of bliss, supreme happiness, joy”, the original Greek word *makarios* indicates a divine gift, not some temporary rush of satisfaction because of something we’ve achieved or purchased. It’s an enduring state of serenity found only when one is in harmony with God’s will. The Beatitudes are instructions of how to get in harmony with that will. The first four beatitudes describe the heart of a person who is in right relationship with God. The remaining five describe a person’s right relationship to other people.

1) “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for there is the kingdom of heaven.”

This is the foundation of all the others, the most basic attitude a follower of Jesus needs. It’s the exact opposite of what this world teaches and to what many strive for: “Blessed are the rich because they can buy what they want”; “Blessed are the strong because they can take what they want”; “Blessed are the winners because it’s no fun to be a loser”; “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for the best restaurants because they’ll be indulged and filled.” Rather, the

Greek word for ‘poor’ (*ptochos*) indicates total poverty where one’s every need must be met by the grace and goodness of others. It’s not an ego-trip of pride in a powerful intellect or an inflated self-concept, but a humble looking to God to supply everything. In fact, one modern Bible version translates this verse as “God blesses those...who realize their need for him.” Even though Jesus was the Son of God, he remained completely attuned to God’s will, reaching out to the oppressed, the despised, and the broken in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is how we can experience God’s reign in our lives right now, an agent of growth for the kingdom in the present.

2) “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

This Beatitude expresses the grief God’s people feel over the present state of the world: environmental crisis, violence, wars, disease, addiction, corruption and many other kinds of brokenness that define the lives of people everywhere. However, God doesn’t leave us without hope, for the Holy Spirit comforts us with knowledge of God’s presence and plan for humanity. The last part of this phrase “will be comforted” is derived from the Greek *parakletos*, the Advocate or Comforter spoken of as the Third Person of the Trinity. People of faith live under the promise that, in the future, God will make all things right in the fulness of the Kingdom.

3) “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

The English words ‘meek’, ‘gentle’ and others used in translations of this verse unfortunately convey the idea of weakness and indecision. Such is not the case for either the Hebrew word *anawim* nor the Greek word *praus*, the former describing Moses and the latter describing Jesus. Neither of these leaders were weak or indecisive in their efforts at making sure God’s will was carried out. Notice that the reward for this firm but caring attitude is an inheritance, not in a heavenly future, but right here on the earth, right here and now in this life.

4) “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

To hunger and thirst is to be totally focused on a critical physical need – life-sustaining food and water. Similarly, we need to be totally focused on a critical spiritual need – life-giving personal holiness or righteousness that can only come from intimate closeness with God. It’s an intense yearning, an aching for a world where people live in right relationship with each other and God. The promise for them is abundance, filled with the certainty that what they long for will come true in God’s place and time.

5) “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

The Greek word translated ‘mercy’ is *eleemones* which means “sympathy that moves to action.” There’s a blessing on a person who feels another’s pain and takes action to relieve it. Notice that the result of it is mercy shown to the giver, exactly what Jesus would later teach in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our sins as we also have forgiven those who sinned against us.” (6:12) If it’s true that the merciful will receive mercy, it’s also true that those who’ve received mercy are more inclined to give mercy. This cycle of caring forgiveness would improve many human relationships.

6) “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Purity meant more to the Greeks than simply ‘clean’. The word *katharoi* also meant “devoid of foreign substances”. It’s this idea that gets at what Jesus is teaching in this verse. Someone ‘pure in heart’ is devoted completely to God, not divided by interests in competing values of this world like money, power or prestige. A divided heart trying to serve two masters will end up hating one and loving the other. They’ll never see God that way. No wonder the apostle James wrote,

“Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8).

7) “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

The Hebrew word *shalom* is closely related to the Greek word *eirene* used in this verse. Both convey a meaning beyond simply the absence of strife. It’s the presence of harmony and goodwill among people. And it doesn’t just happen automatically, nor can it be achieved by avoiding conflict, which often allows evil to exist unchecked. Peace-making is a deliberate act of creating the means for individuals and groups to get along based on respect, mutual trust, and considering others’ points of view. Peacemakers share God’s character in the present time, and will be part of God’s family forever.

8) “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the

kingdom of heaven.” Living God’s way often raises the wrath of those who don’t, hence the violence and marginalization that Christians experienced in the early church. Even today, many still must count the cost of their faith in parts of the world where following Jesus is a crime. The blessing Jesus extends are to those who practice true righteousness and suffer for it, not those who are persecuted for being obnoxious or ill-behaved. The promise in this verse has been and continues to be very important to disciples who strive to live by Jesus’ example.

9) “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven.”

Closely related to the preceding beatitude is this final one with encouragement to endure the tough times that had certainly come upon the new Christian community who first read Matthew’s gospel. Jesus plainly said that his followers could expect opponents to use every weapon at their

disposal to discredit and remove their presence from society, including ridicule, slander, imprisonment, torture and death. Although these weapons may appear to defeat the Christian, God continues to work in the hearts of those who witness to their faith in adversity. Notice that the qualifier for being able to “rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven” is that persecution is on account of Jesus, not because Christians are doing evil and suffering the consequences for it.

In the movie “God’s Not Dead”, university freshman Josh finds his faith challenged in the class of an atheist philosophy professor who demands that everyone renounce the idea of God by writing “God Is Dead” and signing it. Josh can’t do it, instead taking up the task of proving God’s existence to the entire class in a series of lectures. Preparing for them would require the total focus of undivided attention. The consequences would be severe for doing this: loss of his girlfriend and support from his family, increased work in the classes he’d have to skip in order to prepare for his talks and later debate with the professor. He would mourn their absence.

Humbly, Josh presents the case for God and counters every obstacle in defence against the arguments of the professor. Although he never makes peace with his instructor, he does with the class, who unanimously vote “God’s not dead” after hearing the convincing proofs. The persecution he endured was more than offset by the reward of having a classmate come to him wanting to become a Christian.

We may not have the opportunity Josh did at defending our faith, but we can live each day in the light of the Beatitudes and receive the reward promised for having done so. Amen.