

“The Beatitudes”

Micah 6:1-8 • Psalm 15 • 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 • Matthew 5:1-12

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We're going to spend most of our time this morning looking at the Beatitudes, that series of blessings that Jesus showers upon his disciples at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount. But before we get there, I want to take a few minutes to highlight the passage from the prophet Micah. This is a particularly important passage, without question the most famous passage in the book of Micah, and I do not want you to miss it. Eight centuries before Jesus, Micah declared, “The LORD has a case against his people, and he will contend with Israel.” The Israelites had been doing many things that were contrary to the will of God: idolatry, dishonesty, unjust business practices, to name just a few. Micah expresses amazement at the way people have abandoned God's teachings. “O my people, what have I done to you?” asks God, through Micah. “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery.” Micah reminds them that they have a generous benefactor, and Micah chastises them for how they were living their lives, how they effectively rejected God. The question is, how can the Israelites get back in God's good graces? How can they make things right with God? Should they just start worshiping God again? Does returning to worship *alone* suffice to make up for the wrong things that the people had done? Micah's answer is *no*. No, it does not. It is not enough for a wayward people that has gone astray to simply start worshiping God again. *More* is needed. These people need to *change their ways*. They need to *repent of their sins*. They need to stop doing certain things, and start doing others. They need to actually *follow* the teachings of their Lord and Maker. The clincher comes in verse 8: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

This is a verse that is worth committing to memory. In one simple sentence, Micah defines what true religion look like. *Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God.* Three simple clauses. The first two have to do with our relationship with our neighbor; the last pertains to our relationship with God. This is very much like what Jesus says when he is asked what is the greatest commandment of all. His answer: *Love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might, and Love your neighbor as yourself.* Micah, like Jesus later on, way saying that true religion has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension: how we relate to other people, on the one hand, and how we relate to God, on the other. “Doing justice” and “loving kindness” is another way of saying “love your neighbor as yourself,” and “walking humbly with God” is another way of saying “love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and might.” We need to remember that our *neighbors* include *everybody*, not just our friends and family and the people we live near or work with, but *everybody* whom we encounter or whose lives we impact *in any way*, regardless of whether we know them or not. Micah stresses *doing justice* because the wealthy Israelites were going about their business dealings in such a way that they were impoverishing the common people. *That is wrong*, said Micah. No one can truly claim to be a

follower of God if they are fleecing the poor or depriving other people of their God-given dignity. What does the Lord require of us? Simply this: *Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with our God.*

That was a quick look at Micah. Now, fast forward eight hundred years, to the Beatitudes. These are, as I said, that series of blessings that Jesus showers upon his disciples at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount. These are called “Beatitudes” because in Latin the word for “blessed” is *beatus*. “Beatitudes” just means “Blessings.” Jesus was saying that some people are particularly *blessed* by God.

I’ve talked about the Beatitudes before. They exist in two versions: this longer version in Matthew’s gospel, and a shorter version in Luke’s. I talked about Luke’s version last year. Matthew’s version, which is more well known, occurs at the start of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, a long speech in which Jesus gives his followers a set of instructions on how to live – and how *not* to live – our lives.

We think it may have happened here: on a fairly large hill called Mount Eremos, not far from Capernaum, overlooking the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Here’s a view from the top. There is a large, spacious area at the top of the mountain; plenty of room for Jesus to gather with a large crowd. Matthew says, “Great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.” So Jesus is surrounded by a large throng of people, a mixed crowd of both Jews and non-Jews, all listening attentively to his teachings. Today there is a chapel at the top of this mountain, called the “Church of the Beatitudes,” commemorating the event. The design of the chapel is in the shape of an octagon; there are eight sides, one for each of the eight blessings.

There are eight groups of people whom Jesus blesses. They are as follows: (1) “Blessed are the poor in spirit;” (2) “Blessed are those who mourn;” (3) “Blessed are the meek;” (4) “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;” (5) “Blessed are the merciful;” (6) “Blessed are the pure in heart;” (7) “Blessed are the peacemakers;” and (8) “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” Now think about this for a second. Jesus is about to give one of his most important lessons, *ever*. He starts off with these blessings. Imagine that you were in the crowd there that day. Which of those blessings would have spoken most meaningfully to *you*? Which one – or more than one – of those categories do *you* find yourself in, right now, *today*? Where are *you* in this story?

Each one of those eight blessings is followed by a second clause. The second clause offers some further elaboration of the blessing. The second clauses all begin with the word “for.” “Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for* theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Or: “Blessed are those who mourn, *for* they will be comforted.” Look down the list; every single one of them has the word “for” after the comma. But then something interesting happens. Two of the eight have these words: “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Those are the people who are poor in spirit, and the people who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. For both of those groups, Jesus says, “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” I take this to mean that God has reserved a special place in heaven for these people: the poor in spirit – the crushed, the downtrodden, the ones who struggle to find joy in life, often because of circumstances beyond their ability to control, one the one hand; and the persecuted – the ones who get teased, mocked, ridiculed, treated unfairly, beaten, or broken, simply because they were trying to do or to promote what is *right*, in a world that is too often filled with too much *wrong*. Those two groups of people, who have received less from this world than they so rightly deserve, will be given a special place in the eternal kingdom of God. And they *already* have a very special place in God’s *heart*.

But what about the other six groups? Jesus doesn’t say “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” He offers them something different; he offers them a *promise*. In each of those six cases, after the comma,

the second clause begins with the words, “*for they will.*” Jesus moves from “blessed *are*” – present tense – to “*they will*” – *future* tense. God promises to *do something* for the people in these six groups.

“Blessed are those who mourn ... *for they will be comforted.*” Death happens in this life. Some of you have lost loved ones recently; others of you are in the process of losing loved ones, or may be facing your own mortality. Losing someone we love really, really *hurts*. But there is also *comfort* that comes in the midst of our pain: comfort, on the one hand, from people who reach out with loving arms and a warm embrace; comfort, on the other hand, from knowing that your loved one is now eternally at peace, free from pain, free from suffering, restored to the fullness of their glory, at home, with God.

“Blessed are the meek ... *for they will inherit the earth.*” The meek are those who do not seek power or fame or glory, those who are humble and patient and content with their circumstances, even in the face of adversity. They do not seek great things in life ... but God will *give* them great things.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ... *for they will be filled.*” These are the people who have an earnest and sincere desire to do what is *right* in God’s sight, and to create a world free from every form of injustice. That hunger is deep; for we all know that there is *much* that is not right with the world. But never fear: God is not going to let injustice go unchecked. There will be, for all of us, a reckoning. Sooner or later, *everyone* will have to answer for what they have done, and for what they have left undone. For Jesus Christ *will come* to judge the living and the dead.

“Blessed are the merciful ... *for they will receive mercy.*” Merriam-Webster defines mercy as “compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one’s power” or as “compassionate treatment of those in distress.” Mercy is one of the attributes of God; it is one of the things God is known for. God is merciful with *us*, choosing to forgive us for all our sins, instead of condemn us with what we deserve. Some people find themselves in a position in which they can demonstrate this kind of compassion ... if they choose. The merciful are the ones who so choose. God looks upon the merciful with favor. As they have shown mercy to others, so God will do also to them.

“Blessed are the pure in heart ... *for they will see God.*” Something that is “pure” hasn’t been mixed with anything else. Gold is pure; so are diamonds. A heart that is pure is a heart that is free from any taint of sin or evil. This depth of spirituality is attained by very few people, and comes about as the result of focused discipline on the person’s part as well as the work of the Holy Spirit. These people attain a kind of mystical union with God; they *see* God in ways that the rest of us do not.

Finally: “Blessed are the peacemakers ... *for they will be called children of God.*” Jesus is, of course, the Prince of Peace. A peacemaker is one who promotes, by word and deed, the peace that Christ embodied and lived out. We see examples of Christ’s peacemaking all through the Gospels: in his ministry to the lowly and the marginalized, in his rebukes of the wicked and the unjust, and perhaps especially in his selfless and sacrificial death on the cross. Being a peacemaker does not mean being content with the status quo – remember, Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple! – but it also doesn’t mean being reckless. The best peacemakers are the ones who have found peace in their *own* hearts, a peace that gives them strength and courage and tenacity and a willingness to suffer, when necessary, for the greater good. These people become like Jesus to some extent; and just as he was the Son of God, so too do these people become beloved children of God.

There you have it, true believers: the Beatitudes, eight special blessings from Jesus. Look at the list again. Which category, or categories, are *you* in? What blessing is Jesus offering *you*?

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