

Sunday, August 9, 2020

Bible Study **Matthew 5:1-12**

Listen to Pastor Maury's sermon for August 9, and then read Matthew 5:1-12.

This passage of Matthew contains what has become known as “The Beatitudes”. You may have heard these described as “Be”-Attitudes — that is, these are the ‘attitudes’ we must have to ‘be’ part of God’s kingdom. There is some truth to that, but we must understand that these qualities, these characteristics of those who follow Jesus, are not efforts done and attitudes cultivated in order to receive God’s grace or to enter God’s kingdom. These qualities are responses to having received God’s grace and mercy and the gift of everlasting life. They are the “culture” of people who belong to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus explained this culture of Kingdom life in nine ways. We may understand these characteristics as nine different qualities of a citizen of God’s kingdom, but they are more than that. Just as the Fruit of the Spirit is singular (nine qualities of one “Fruit”), the Beatitudes are nine qualities of Kingdom culture. To truly possess one of these is to possess them all.

Going further into describing these Kingdom qualities, Jesus pronounces those who possess them as being “Blessed”. The Greek word found in this passage (*makarios*) means “blessed” or “happy”. As in, “Happy is the one who does these things.” Is that how you would describe someone experiencing any one of these attributes of Kingdom life? Jesus said, “Blessed (happy)” are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, and those who are reviled and falsely accused for His sake.

We sometimes interpret that word “blessed” to mean happy, but really it denotes oneness with God. The Aramaic word that Jesus uses is ‘*ashar*’. *Ashar* means more than simply “happy.” It means literally, “to be congratulated.” It conveys the idea that one has found the true path in the midst of false paths (e.g., *Psalms 1:1-2; Proverbs 3:13-14*). And so Jesus says you are blessed (happy and to be congratulated because you’ve found the true path of life) when you exhibit these qualities. Why are you happy and to be congratulated? Why is this the true path of life?

Because with each one of these qualities comes the comfort of God’s very presence. With each one of these, Jesus highlights landmarks along the road that

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He himself walks. Orienting our life toward and recognizing these landmarks helps us understand that we walk on the very same road and Jesus walks with us. The promise for each quality is the presence of God with us. Those who live this way “will possess the kingdom of heaven”, “will be comforted”, “will inherit the earth”, “will be satisfied”, “will receive mercy”, “will see God”, “will be called children of God”, and “will receive a great reward in heaven”. Essentially, what each promise points to is the comfort, and peace, and power, and righteousness, of God’s very presence with us.

Much of the road leaves us blind to this eternal truth. There are many distractions and hindrances. Tunnel vision and “highway hypnosis” can easily set in, and before we realize it we despair, and begin to wonder if God has left us alone and broken down on a dark and dangerous road. In the Beatitudes, Jesus is telling us, “don’t despair, you’re on the right road AND I AM WITH YOU.”

In *The Horse and His Boy*, (one of the books in the Chronicles of Narnia series) C.S. Lewis tells the story of a boy named Shasta, that captures well this orientation of life and its qualities and landmarks that Jesus teaches about. The boy goes a journey that has been especially difficult because the task has been given to him to warn the king of an impending attack by his enemy’s armies.

In one scary scene in the book, Shasta is riding alone on a mountain pass that he is unfamiliar with. It is nearly completely dark and his horse will not obey his commands. Somewhere along this unfamiliar mountain pass Shasta becomes aware of a large presence alongside him in the darkness.

That large presence is the Great Lion, Aslan, but Shasta doesn’t know that yet. So, he speaks out of fear, “Who are you?” Aslan says to the boy, “Tell me your sorrows.” Then Shasta complains in a loud voice about his dangerous journey, his frightening experience with lions, his unhappy childhood, and now the fact that he is hungry, thirsty, and cold.

Aslan’s response to all of this is a big surprise to Shasta, he says, “I do not call you unfortunate...” In other words, Shasta is blessed. He’s blessed, because he is on the right road. Then, as they continue to talk Shasta learns many things about his own life and journey.

The path he is on and the task he still has to do are dangerous, and that danger is real. He is still tired, hungry, cold, and thirsty, but he has been blessed because now he knows that where he is, dangerous as it really is, is where he should be, and

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even where he wants to be. But best of all, it is on this road that he has met the great Lion himself.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus explains this road. He says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, and those who are reviled and falsely accused for Jesus sake... Blessed are these because they are on the right road.”

It is the road that Jesus himself is on, and that is why they are blessed.

So, may you live into these qualities and discover that you are living in God’s kingdom. May you recognize these landmarks along your journey and experience Jesus’ very presence. And may these qualities be so visible to others that they “hunger and thirst” as you do, and join you on the road.

Questions for Further Reflection

How do the nine qualities that describe “kingdom people” relate to the promises that follow them? How do they relate to each other? How would you describe the opposite of each quality?

Is Jesus “describing” who his followers are, or “prescribing” what they must do? Why do you think so? How do the Beatitudes (and Sermon on the Mount as a whole [*Matthew 5:1-7:29*]) explain the nature of God’s kingdom and the culture of those who live in it?

How do these promised blessings compare with what most people in the world prize? Are people who live this way admired in our society? Of these nine qualities which two do you desire most in your life? Which of these qualities are you most tempted to avoid?

How might these qualities be cultivated to such an extent that they become your very “culture”?