

Beatitudes: Learning to See as God Sees

1Cor.1:25-29 Matthew 5:1-12

Our sermon series for the summer: the beatitudes, Jesus' pronouncement of blessings from Matthew 5:1-12. This will take us into late August.

The beatitudes are the very beginning of what we call the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.5-7), where Jesus covers all kinds of important topics like anger and reconciliation, responses to violent people, loving enemies, money, sexuality, prayer, and, of course, faith in Jesus Christ. And it all begins with these 8 beatitudes. This morning I'm going to give an overview of them, and then we'll look at them one at a time for the next 8 Sundays.

The invitation in this overture to the Sermon on the Mount is to see as God sees. To see the world as God sees it, to see people as God sees them. As I like to put it, we are invited to put on our Christ-colored glasses, to see as he sees, before we do anything.

So, when we talk about the beatitudes we are not talking about something we're supposed to *do* as much as something we're supposed to *see*. They tell us something about who *God* is, and what's important to God, and how *God* sees everything. At its heart, Christian spirituality is about seeing clearly; seeing

rightly. Jesus talked a lot about clarity of vision in his teaching, and we'll talk about that as we go along.

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 `Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 `Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 `Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 `Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 `Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 `Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 `Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 `Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 `Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is the word of the Lord!

With the pronouncement of blessings on the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, the humble, and so forth, Jesus is describing what has been called the upside-down Kingdom. Where everything the people understood from their culture at that time as to who was favored by God and who wasn't, and what it meant to live for God, is completely turned on its head, and turned around. Jesus often used backward, paradoxical phrases: the last shall be first, the least shall be the greatest, and so forth, which describe an alternative vision of the world.

Jesus is inviting us to see the world, and live our lives by a completely different vision—of the world, of ourselves, and of others, based on the reality of the Kingdom of heaven that Jesus came to show and teach about. And there is much about this Kingdom that is upside down and backward, as we heard in the reading from 1Cor., where God's foolishness is wiser than conventional wisdom, and weakness is strength. There's paradox for you!

With that in mind, in the beatitudes, Jesus is inviting us to see the world through God's eyes. Right at the outset of Jesus' ministry, he wants to make it very clear that God sees things very differently than the world typically sees them. That God sees *people* very differently than the world sees them, and we are invited to join God in seeing as God sees.

So the beatitudes aren't something we're supposed to **do**, as much as something that we're supposed to **see**. Christian writer and professor Dallas Willard puts it this way: *"The beatitudes are not teachings on how to be blessed. They are not instructions to do anything. No one is actually being told that they are better off for being poor, for grieving, for being persecuted, and so on... The beatitudes cannot be good news if they are understood as a set of how-to's for achieving blessedness. They would only amount, then, to a new legalism, a new Phariseism."*

So, there is nothing to do here except to adjust our vision. And Jesus will pepper all of his teaching with reminders to keep our vision clear. We might say he gives us corrective eye exams from time to time! This is Jesus, our faithful spiritual optometrist. This isn't a literal seeing, of course; it's about attitude, understanding, perception, & where our heart is. It's about seeing with the eyes of the heart. Helen Keller was sightless, but not heartless! She spoke and wrote a lot about the importance of spiritual insight.

With the beatitudes, Jesus is making a series of statements based on Kingdom realities; this is the world as God sees it. And it's the opposite of how people often see it—because of cultural conditioning.

Jesus is describing the upside-down, backwards Kingdom. Where everything is turned on its head, or turned around. For example, we might say that the world (conventional culture) sees, and says, "Blessed and happy are those who have it all together and don't need help because they are self-made people." Jesus sees (differently) and says, "Blessed by God are those who know they *don't* have it all together, and aren't afraid to admit that they need help, and know they can't make it on their own."

The world sees and says, "Blessed and happy are the go-getters and the persuaders who know how to get their way." Jesus sees and says, "Blessed by God are those who put *others* first, and are hungry for God to get *his* way."

The world sees and says, "How happy are those who have made it to the top and who have achieved the pinnacle of success." Jesus sees and says, "Blessed by God are those who live on a path of downward mobility." And so on.

And the rest of Jesus' teaching and ministry is going to reflect the upside-down, backwards nature of this Kingdom.

So, in a way, the beatitudes are really an introduction to Jesus' entire ministry and teaching: What Jesus is saying is, "Before I teach how I want you to live and *act*, let me first tell you what *I see*, and what I want *you to see* and affirm

as true, then the rest of my teaching will make sense to you. And, then, over time you will eventually live into what you see.”

These beatitudes are an invitation to a new way of seeing. To affirm as blessed what & who God affirms as blessed. Jesus wants us to get to a place where we can hear these words and say “yes.” Yes, the poor in spirit are blessed—I see it. Yes, the meek are blessed—I see it. Yes, those who hunger and thirst for right relationship are blessed—I see it.

Now, when the disciples first heard these words, these pronouncement of blessings (and the teaching that follows), this was so shocking to their right side up, ‘the-first-shall-be-*first*’ worldview, that their gut reaction would have been to say (inwardly, if not outwardly), “No! That isn’t how the world works. That isn’t how God works.”

The poor, the meek, those who are mourning are **not** blessed—by definition and by cultural norm. Having it all together and being prosperous and happy all the time was a sign of God’s *true* blessing in their Jewish/middle eastern worldview at that time. So, no, Jesus! What are you talking about?!?

And a lot of Jesus' teaching comes as a shock as well: Turn the other cheek and not retaliate? No! *Love* your enemies? You can't be serious!?! Consider the lilies of the field? That's unproductive and a waste of time; get to work!

To get an idea of how radical and upside down and odd this would've sounded to the ears of Jesus' followers, picture just about any conflict between people groups from just about any place in the world today. And the prevailing world views and attitudes they hold, and the actions they take against each other. Can you picture it? Can you see these people hurling insults at each other, planning attacks, planting roadside bombs, or worse? Can you picture it? Can you hear them defending how right they are? And defending their use of force, even invoking God's name to defend their beliefs and actions? Now, picture Jesus stepping into *that* and saying "Blessed are the meek;" "Love your enemies," and so forth.

How do you think they would respond, today, to these beatitudes and the rest of this teaching in the Sermon on the Mount? If you think about it, these are the same kinds of people Jesus was speaking to back then; many of these conflicts are very deep, and very old. How would they react *today* if they heard these words from Jesus? Would they respond by saying, "Oh yes, of course, let's do

that instead”? Of course not (except for maybe a handful, who really do want peace). I think some would laugh at him; some would run him out of town; and some would want to kill him. They would say “no!” Get out of our way. You’re idealistic and impractical.

So, it takes a while to get to “yes” with regard to Jesus’ teachings.

Remember the disciples, who return from a short-term reconnaissance trip among the Samaritans who did not welcome them, because Jews and Samaritans hated each other, and Jesus and his group were heading to Jerusalem, the Jewish capitol? When Jesus sends a few of his people ahead of the larger group into Samaria to make their air b&b reservations and announce Jesus’ arrival, the Samaritans told them they’re not welcome—because they’re Jews headed to Jerusalem. How did the disciples react to that? When they came back to give their report to Jesus, they said (Luke 9:52) “*Jesus, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them??*” That was their solution to their problems! Incinerate ‘em!

After the disciples ask that question, all Luke tells us is that Jesus rebuked them, and they went on their way. Whatever Jesus said got censored out by Luke. But that was, and still is—as we know—the prevailing cultural mindset.

Where you do hold grudges; you do get even and retaliate. Or even try to obliterate perceived enemies. The disciples weren't yet seeing as Jesus sees. And he rebuked them. But think of his rebukes like this as correctives to their seeing; adjustments to their vision. Jesus is saying to his followers, "Eventually you are going to see and live differently. I know, it's odd. It may be difficult for now. However, this is the Kingdom way."

Initially, the reflexive reaction to Jesus' blessings, and the rest of his teaching, was to say "no." We all do this. I do. It's human nature. Which is why, by God's grace, ***we have to learn how to see and think and do things that may not come naturally to us.*** We have to learn how to see and think and do things that may not come naturally to us—at least not right away. Because the natural reaction to a lot of Jesus' teaching, if we take it to heart, is to say no. Or not yet, or not me, or that sounds like a good idea, but what planet are you coming from, Jesus? Be realistic. C'mon. Like the disciples did at first.

But we know that over time these disciples began to say "yes." It took them a little while—not until the middle of the book of Acts, especially in Acts 10 when the apostle Peter has a transformative experience, an aha moment, where he finally realized, "Oh; other people who aren't like me ***are*** acceptable to God."

And it came by a *vision*, by the way; another corrective measure to Peter's *seeing*.

So it took them a while. And it may take us a while too—to learn to see as God sees, and affirm as blessed what & who God affirms as blessed, and then act accordingly.

So, as we go along in this series my prayer will be, “Help me to see more of what you see; help me to see as you see.”