

Live the Beatitudes

By: Jon Heerboth

February 2, 2020. The Beatitudes are the way of the cross. Jon Heerboth preaches today on how Jesus lived them perfectly, and how if we are to follow Christ they must become our way too.

*** Transcript ***

Last winter I had to make a trip to a hospital emergency department in the middle of the night. The waiting room was full of sick people and injured people. Everybody needed help. Some were incapacitated by chronic illness. Some had no obvious illness, but were clearly in misery. And none could wait until morning for healing or for care. That waiting room experience reminds me of the crowds that followed Jesus around the Sea of Galilee. In Matthew 4 he had just called his first four disciples. They were fishermen, people I think of as business people. They were capable of catching fish with their nets or with their boats. They could make a living and sell the fish in their communities. They probably had enough to eat most days, and they did alright for themselves and their families. And they probably paid taxes to the Romans like everybody else. Well, these small-town men were used to a quiet life, I bet, and they might have found the crowds following Jesus to be overwhelming. Jesus taught in the synagogues and it says he cured every disease and sickness among the people, according to Matthew. You can imagine the excitement throughout the region. They brought him all the sick: those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them, according to verse 24.

Those of us in the waiting area of the emergency room, we were not a pleasant or appealing group of people. I wonder if Jesus' new disciples were put off by the crowds: their misery, their dependence upon others, their insistence on being healed, the stench of sickness, the impatience of those at the back of the line. Like healthy people walking through an emergency room, perhaps the disciples felt superior to the crowd. Did they recoil from the sick and from their caregivers? Maybe Jesus saw how the disciples reacted. We know he took them up the mountain where he sat down to teach. He didn't *preach*. Jesus *taught* them his values, like parents telling their children what is important to them and how they want their children to get through life. For Matthew, Jesus was the teacher of all righteousness. Jesus laid out a course for them to follow. Like any good teacher, Jesus connected the disciples with ideas that were larger than their own life experiences. The Sermon on the Mount was the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, in the book of Matthew. Jesus used the Beatitudes to teach the disciples how they should think about others as they live their lives, and to show them that being a disciple is to be the consummate student.

Matthew, right at the outset of the stories of Jesus' ministries, demands that our first act of discipleship is to recognize Jesus as our teacher. Many of us have been taught or have learned to get ahead by acquiring power, strength, position, awards, or wealth. We think that if we are rich we can have what we want. If we have power we can take what we want. If we are clever or insistent we can argue our way to get what we want. Winning brings us respect. Beauty and outward appearance can make us desirable. Does this sound familiar? Is this how we get through our lives? Have you ever been to a ball game where people waved signs that said, "We're Number Two?" Of course not. Everyone knows we are number one. That's the attitude that fills the headlines in magazines, the television, the social media, and our own lives. We seek our fortunes, as they say. They're our life coaches and public relations firms. We look out for number one, because if we do not, who will? That's what we hear. That's what we've been told. That's the myth of success that constantly surrounds us.

The words of Jesus from the mountain fly in the face of that myth. Jesus offers us a different pathway through life, a path of blessings that he has cleared for us. As God's people, we can find our way through life, but not through power, strength, accomplishment, or possession. As followers of Jesus, it is not enough to focus only on our lives or our little corners of the world. It is not enough to try to reform our politics or our economic systems. We don't navigate the Christian life by overcoming other people. We follow our true course in life by overcoming ourselves. What does that look like? Let's look at the Beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit. If we open our hearts to Jesus, we acknowledge our weakness and need, and we are able to see the weakness and need of others. We understand that our riches did not come from our own effort, but from God's gift of an eternal kingdom that Jesus proclaimed to his first followers and to us. God blessed us with salvation so that we can be a blessing to others.

Blessed are those who mourn. In our world of endless violence, in times of loss or crisis within our families, in nostalgia for loved ones long gone, we realize that our only comfort comes from God. In the worst of our times, our hope is in the risen Christ, even when we are not feeling his comfort and peace.

Blessed are the meek. If we think about it, we will realize that in the end we have no real power at all. We cannot take the Earth. We understand that God has given us all we have and all we need. In our meekness then, we respond with thankful stewardship, gratitude, and generosity toward others.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. God calls us to be God's own people, knowing that only God's gift of grace through faith can ever satisfy us.

Blessed are the merciful. Mercy is the gift that we can give to other people, because we know the mercy that God has shown us through Jesus Christ.

Blessed are the pure in heart. We can only see God when we admit we need God.

Blessed are the peacemakers. We may not be able to fix all the problems of the world, but we can make peace in our own lives, in our families, and among our friends. We make peace through forgiveness, patience, and understanding. When we make peace, we set aside our human instinct for revenge. We follow Christ. Christ makes his people a new creation, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians, chapter 5: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. Christ reconciled the world without counting our sins against us. We are free to do the same for others.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Jesus warned his listeners, as Jesus warns us in Matthew, that the world stands in opposition to his words. People with power, people who oppress others, people who seek wealth above all, will not give up without a fight. Opposition may not only come from the outside, but sometimes the worst persecution might come from voices within us -- voices that speak to us of unworthiness and shame. But we know that our places in the kingdom of God are secure. We can endure with the blessings of God. We overcome ourselves by living the Beatitudes, day after day, year after year, for a lifetime.

The Beatitudes -- in fact, the entire Sermon on the Mount -- these words are not an advice column in

the newspaper, some TV preacher spouting a gospel of prosperity. They are not hints for happy living. These words came from the heart of the great teacher, Jesus. These words reflect God's values and teach us what life is like in the kingdom of God. If we live by the Beatitudes, our lives and longings will come to be like Jesus' life and longings for his people. It is the opposite of what we often like to do, our attempts to twist God's will to fit our own longings. Meek? That's not me. That's not our world. That doesn't even sound like the church sometimes. I can look at the Beatitudes and say that they reflect everything that I am *not*. God, however, focuses on what we *can* be as the people of God. These ideas seem weak and foolish when we read the tabloid covers in the checkout lines, or see the people who ride in private jets. But to those who follow Jesus, the Beatitudes are the power of God. In 1 Corinthians, it says "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

The Beatitudes are the way of the cross. Jesus lived the Beatitudes perfectly, and the result was his crucifixion. If we find our lives in the Beatitudes, we will follow them to Jesus on the cross. Now we've all worked very hard to be successful in our lives. But eventually we all find ourselves in the emergency room. We need help from others. We face a crisis in our families. We lose a job. We're out of money. A bank wants to foreclose. A loved one is ill. We are very ill. Perhaps we must deal with abuse or addiction or a broken relationship. These are the events of life when the self-sufficiency we prize so much gives way to weakness. We begin to see ourselves as poor in spirit. In our despair, we awaken to the pain of the entire world, and we cannot help but mourn. We think less about ourselves then, and become more merciful to others. We remember our offertory prayer, that all we have comes from God. In our depths, there is nowhere to turn but to the face of Jesus. The more we think of God, the more we seek the righteousness we have in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We want to seek peace. We want to be reconciled with God and our neighbor. Regardless of our circumstances, as Matthew wrote, we should rejoice and be glad, for our reward is great in heaven. Jesus already paid the price for our sins and weaknesses. Matthew wrote that the crowd at the Sermon on the Mount came from all over. There would have been Jews and Gentiles alike, all living in Roman-occupied territory. They were looking for healing or seeking relief from the problems of their day. Jesus didn't ask anything of them. He simply healed them, and then tried to explain to his disciples what he was up to.

When I was in college, well before we could scan people's brains, we defined learning as "changed behavior." Jesus calls us to change our thinking and the way we live our lives. We have the good news. We are blessed. Our blessing is not for the sake of some pie-in-the-sky reward after we die. We are blessed so that we can make it through the tough times of our lives here on earth. We are free to put aside our self-seeking in favor of giving ourselves over to God and to our neighbor. We are free to set aside our tribalism, our blindness to the suffering of others, and our own fears in favor of love. We know that we can do that, because we understand that we have already received the blessings of God and we are the people of God. In a few minutes, together with God's people here and everywhere and in every time, we're going to gather at the Lord's table. We will be refreshed in our faith and our fellowship. We may follow the model of Jesus and live the Beatitudes as our response to God's blessings in our lives. The Beatitudes were Jesus' way. And if we are to follow Christ, they must become our way.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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