

LIFE TOGETHER

2) "Beyond the Rules"

Exodus 24: 9-18 / Matthew 5: 1-11

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During this season of Lent, we are using the Gospel of Matthew as our guide as we trace the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem and the experience of the cross. Those of you who were present last week will remember that we began this journey by focusing our attention on the premise of the writer of Matthew that Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. It was not Jesus' desire to negate the importance of the tradition of his people, but to preserve it as a foundation upon which to build a new understanding of the law and its true intent—that of "fulfilling all righteousness," as Matthew frequently phrased it.

I suggested last week that, in the eyes of Matthew, Jesus was the "new Moses" and the Church was the "new Israel." The ways in which Matthew makes this connection through his gospel narrative are fascinating. Both Moses and Jesus came out of Egypt. Both were hidden to avoid the royal slaughter of babies. Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness and Jesus spent 40 days. And both delivered their key teachings from a mountain. For Moses, that happened to be the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai. For Jesus, it happened to be the Sermon on the Mount from an unnamed hillside. These parallels, you see, were not by accident. Instead, they are a part of the writer's intentional design to link Moses and Jesus, Israel and the Church.

Given this understanding, our focus shifts, on this second Sunday of Lent, to the second book (or section) of Matthew's five book gospel. In this section which details Jesus' "sermon on the mount," we gain a clear sense of Jesus' expectation of those who chose to follow him. This is a book about discipleship. While the section itself stretches from Matthew 3:1 to Matthew 7:29, I would like to limit my focus what might be considered the "preamble" to the Sermon on the Mount—that succinct group of teachings known as "The Beatitudes," found in Matthew 5:1-11.

How many of you are somewhat familiar with the Beatitudes? Even though I can remember memorizing them as a boy, I am aware of the fact that there is more—so much more—to the meaning of these pithy sayings than I had ever imagined. In fact, I tend to believe that the true intent and meaning of the Beatitudes is often overlooked.

In his excellent lecture on the Beatitudes, Eugene Peterson suggests that these are not "entrance requirements" to the Kingdom of Heaven, but are tools that can be used to uncover a vital faith. They are not "ethical demands," but are instead, "congratulatory announcements" about a reality that exists whenever these teachings are taken to heart.

Even more to the point, Peterson suggests that the Beatitudes are "clearing grounds for the human ego which is always trying to assert itself, always trying to take up space and be in control." To take the Beatitudes to heart and to really put them into conscious practice is take your ego out of the equation and set it on the shelf. For this reason, it is much easier

for us to speak about the Beatitudes sentimentally as beautiful thoughts fit for a Hallmark card, rather than to actually act upon them and put them into our daily practice of living.

There is one other introductory point and that is this: The word, “Blessed” as it is used in these sayings, comes from the Greek word, “Makarios” and means, “The highest happiness, the greatest joy—often associated with the experience of the Holy or the Divine.” In this sense then, it refers to more than everyday happiness, but the great happiness that comes as a gift from God.

With this understanding in mind, I would briefly, like to walk you through the Beatitudes, one by one, as we consider their message and invitation for us today.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

There is blessing, says Jesus, in knowing your need for God. When you are at the end of your rope, when you are broken and don't have all the answers, there is a receptivity to God and God presence that is nothing less than blessed.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

How can there be blessing in mourning? Joy in grieving? Jesus suggests that, once again, it is only when we are empty that we are open to being filled by the love of God. When we mourn over the loss of one that we have loved, there is often the blessing of experiencing the love of God and others in ways that we have never experienced before.

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

"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

As it is translated in the culture of today, meekness is often equated with weakness. But that, says Peterson, is not the meaning of the word that Jesus uses. Instead, meekness refers to what he calls, “A disciplined, focus energy that has a purpose in mind.” This is not self-willed fire and zeal, but a God-willed fire and zeal—not spineless, but Spirited.

William Barclay, in his commentary puts it this way: The one who is truly meek is always angry at the right time (and for the right reason) and never angry at the wrong time (for the wrong reason).

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

"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat."

Peterson comments: “Our need for God is as frequent as our need for a meal. We can’t store it up, but must continually satisfy our hunger—our need for God. This is not a casual or convenient longing, but a “hunger pang” type of yearning. Jesus is suggesting that to have this longing, this hunger, is a true blessing—a true happiness.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.”

One of our greatest stumbling blocks as human beings concerns our pronounced tendency to judge others. In doing so, we often feel exonerated and elevated above those that we condemn. But the practice of mercy is the great leveler of the human ego. It recognizes that fundamentally, we are all broken and all stand in need of the mercy of God and the forgiveness of others. There is great joy, great blessing, says Jesus, in this mercy-filled understanding.

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

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.”

Peterson asks a critical question: “Do we really want to see God as God really is—or do we want to entertain our own fantasies or theories about God?” So often, we would rather pursue our fantasies about the kind of God we wish God would be. Those who are pure in heart, those who are truly open to the truth, choose to give up their fantasies and seek instead, the very face of God. And they discover that as they do so, they are blessed.

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

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.”

As Peterson and many others have pointed out, peace-making is not peace wishing or peace hoping. It is the conscious choice to respond to violence—and the threat of violence—through the action of making peace, the action of sowing seeds of kindness, compassion, justice and love. Peacemakers are not passive bystanders, but are proactive participants in the difficult and demanding work of reconciliation. And yes, once again, there is a blessedness, a holy joy, that is discovered in this fundamental choice to work for peace.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. *“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.”*

This, of course, may seem like a strange thing to say, given our natural desire for safety, security and comfort. How can persecution possibly be a blessing? And yet, if we are able to crawl inside the words and wisdom of Jesus, we begin to understand that there is joy and gladness in the choice to live faithfully and the conviction not to compromise with the values and principles of our faith. To be a Christian, says Peterson, is to cultivate a

“minority mentality” that often finds itself at odds with the “majority mentality” of the surrounding culture. As strange as it may seem, there is joy and there is blessing in the choice to adopt a minority mentality that may invite the ridicule and persecution of the majority. This has been and will continue to be a trademark of vibrant faith.

We have, in the brief span of a few minutes, touched about radical teachings upon which volumes could easily be written. Yet, it is my hope that in this succinct survey of the Beatitudes, we might gain a renewed appreciation for just how transformational they really are. To take these words of Jesus and to translate them into the actual context of our day to day lives might well prove to be the most difficult and yet, the most meaningful choice we could ever make.

While the ten commandments of Moses provided a solid foundation for the formation of the nation of Israel, the new teaching of Jesus—represented in the Beatitudes— chose to build upon that foundation by challenging people to move beyond the rules of legalism and the letter of the law in order to embrace the true spirit of the law—that which makes possible a right relationship with God and a right relationship with others.

When all is said and done, this is, you see, what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about. Amen.