

“When Jesus Saw The Crowds” | Matthew 5:1-12
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FOX CHAPEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then 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. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Today Show reports that the world is unhappier than it has been in recent history, even if people are still finding time to laugh and get a good night’s sleep, according to a recent Gallup poll. Where do Americans fall in this happiness chart? Right in the middle. But nearly half of people in the U.S. say they are feeling stressed and 40 percent are worried. And, as you can imagine, that stress, worry, and sadness lead to pain, depression, and animosity, which affect those around us acted out with road rage, infidelity, and hostile behavior.

Gallup’s managing editor wrote, "Collectively, the world is more stressed, worried, sad and in pain today than we’ve ever seen it...but when asked to think about the nation this year, nearly six in 10 adults (59 percent) report that the current social divisiveness causes them stress. A majority of adults from both political parties say the future of the nation is a source of stress."

Polls reflect it, the news reports it...and we see it around us every day - that our neighborhoods, our families, our coworkers, our nation is stressed out - carrying stress about one thing, worried about another, and generally, as a society, we are living in a state of anxiety and sadness.

In Matthew Chapter 5, we hear what I assume for most of you here is a familiar passage in scripture. The Beatitudes. Jesus had already been baptized in the Jordan and led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. In chapter 4, we read that Jesus goes to live in Capernaum and starts preaching "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He calls his first disciples, and then, as chapter 4 verses 23-25 tell us: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him."

So, we come to chapter 5 with the understanding that the news was out -- there was a man who could heal the sick and make the lame walk. Naturally, people wanted to see for themselves if this person was real. Some wanted to actually be freed from their pain, others wanted to just touch the hem of his robe. And still others considered could this be him, the long-awaited Messiah. The people that day, those crowds -- they too were sad, anxious, worried, stressed out. It was a different day and time, sure, but they also had burdens, divisions, and societal pressures.

Jesus saw the crowds. Jesus sees us.

What does he do when he looks out and sees the mass of people? Jesus, the passage tells us, goes up the mountainside with his disciples close by, and he begins to teach.

Jesus goes up the mountainside, like Moses, the Old Testament conveyer of divine revelation who encountered God on a mountain. "Moses declared the words of the lord, and the laws that were given that day were an expression of God's will for God's people." So now we come to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, and it begins on a mountain, where he shares blessings that express the most important values and ways of living, telling the crowds to be attuned to the kingdom of God.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he begins by making declarations of who is blessed and what is promised for them. But these blessings were not what the people could have or would have ever expected. The Beatitudes were completely and utterly radical.

But before we talk about these radical words, let's be sure to understand what they were all about, blessing by blessing.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Often, we just focus on the word "poor" and assume this is a blessing for those who are poor in a material or worldly way. However, Jesus is actually more specific, declaring a blessing on those who are considered to be poverty-stricken in spiritual things, looked down upon because they are simple-minded or religiously unsophisticated. This type of poverty causes one to feel an even deeper sense of worthlessness. The poor in spirit are told that the kingdom of heaven is theirs. The Encyclopedia of the Bible explains: the kingdom of heaven is "that perfect order of things which he was about to establish," and in that kingdom, his followers will be "intimately united to God, and made partakers of eternal salvation."

Next, Jesus blesses those who mourn, or grieve. But the type of mourning or sadness Jesus is indicating is that which leads to repentance. Merrill C. Tenney writes, "It is the mourning of the guilt-confessing sinner...that mourning unintentionally yet inevitably brings the heart's ease of forgiveness, the comfort of reconciliation, as God welcomes the prodigal back to the joy of the Father's home." The mourners are promised comfort and consolation, in the form of love and grace and forgiveness.

We then read blessed are the meek. Perhaps one of the most misunderstood of the beatitudes, we can learn here that the meek are not weak or timid. Meekness in a spiritual sense refers to those who fully rely on God rather than their own strength and knowledge. "Gentleness or meekness is the opposite of self-assertiveness and self-interest. It stems from trust in God's goodness and control over the situation." And what is promised to them? Inheritance of the earth - the land! The Israelites sought it and expected to inherit the holy land under the Messiah; and for us, this is a promise of our eternal salvation. I read this about the meek in Tenney's commentary: "Renouncing force, domination, anger, violence, and revenge, the disciple in meekness does not press his own claim nor battle for his own interests. Related to God in submission and dependence, security and contentment, he in the end gets the most out of life. While anticipating heaven, he enjoys earth to the full."

The next group who receive a declaration of blessedness are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These folks yearn to see God's justice in their own lives and in the lives of others. They pray fervently "Thy kingdom come." They are doing that hard, often unseen work in the trenches - in courtrooms, dark alleys, and factory floors. Jesus promises them that even if they don't completely finish the work they are called to do here on earth -- whether that is freeing slaves from brick kilns in India or helping a victim see his abuser gets the maximum sentence -- they are promised that they will see righteousness in its fullness, in and through him.

Next, Jesus blesses the merciful, and these are those live lives of compassion, who practice forgiveness, who consistently exercise and show mercy. “Liberated from pharisaic legalism compassionately and generously, with no expectation of return, NT disciples carry out the OT norm, ‘What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’ (*Micah 6:8*). Jesus promises them that they will receive the same love, compassion, and forgiveness that they show with their very lives.

The pure in heart are next. This group of people are those who strive to live free from corruption, sin, and desire. Those who are pure, and holy, with cleansed hearts. Remember, the heart was considered to be the center of one’s being, including the mind, will, and emotions. So, the purity is that of their entire being. They are not just outwardly pure, living with the promise - and I would even argue, the reality - that they are able to enjoy an intimate fellowship with God. It says this in 1 John 3: “*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*”

Jesus then blesses the peacemakers, who are makers and lovers of peace. This beatitude discloses that being a disciple means we are to do the work of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. Tenney explains, “In a world of money-makers, policy-makers, and war-makers, their role is that of peacemakers on every level of life.” The promise for them is this: they will be called children of God. Their work of peace means they will be known as people who, in character and in how they live, they resemble and joyfully trust in God. This is truly a promise of respect and dignity.

We now come to the final beatitudes: those who are persecuted. They, like the first group, the poor in spirit, are promised to be given the kingdom of heaven. Their reward in heaven, they are told, will be great. But Jesus basically announces that their lives will not be successful nor easy. Remember, his new disciples were sitting at his feet, hearing that they had not signed up for easy work. Jesus announces that some people there will suffer the same fate as martyred prophets.

Now that we have reviewed and have gone a little deeper into each of these blessings, I hope you can read and hear and understand them differently. But, as Pastor David Lose warns, “There is a trap hidden in the Beatitudes that I know I have fallen into countless times, and perhaps you have, too. The trap is as simple as it is subtle: believing that Jesus is setting up the conditions of blessing, rather than actually blessing his hearers.

When I hear the Beatitudes, it's hard for me not to hear Jesus as stating the terms under which I might be blessed...but Matthew is quite clear -- Jesus isn't set up conditions or terms but rather is just plain blessing people. All kinds of people.”

As Simon & Garfunkel wrote in their 1966 single *Blessed*, “blessed are the sat upon, spat upon, ratted on...” Those lyrics help us to see why the beatitudes were and still are radical statements and radical promises about God’s radical and unconditional love.

You see, the Beatitudes are a total inversion of who is to be blessed in God’s order. Jesus sees the crowds - and he sees the people who were considered to be unloved and unloveable....let alone unblessed and unbleisable...and he addresses them, one beatitude at a time. Jesus, like we read in many other instances in the gospels -- he saw the crowds, he saw their faith, he saw their need...Jesus saw their tears and their hope and he said *you are noticed, you are loved, you are blessed*.

Jesus sees us, each and every one of us here and says *you are noticed, you are loved, you are blessed*. No matter how stressed out, worried, anxious, hurt, ill, lonely or tired you are. Jesus still to this day wants to speak into our lives in a radical, new way!

The world is unhappy says the gallup polls - but isn’t it clear? Jesus will turn the frowns upside down.

Rev. Alan Brehm explains, “As those who seek to follow Jesus Christ we are called to embody a completely different vision of life. We are called to spend our lives working to extend God’s mercy to the left out and beat down in this world, to seek to establish God’s peace and God’s justice for all the dispossessed and disenfranchised of this world. We are called to align our lives with those whom the world despises and rejects—which means that we too will be despised and rejected because of our commitment to God’s mercy and peace and justice. But like those whom the world tramples, when we align our lives in that way we also can rejoice when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Rejoice, and be glad. Be happy. Be blessed. You know, that day, when Jesus said “blessed,” he was saying the Greek word that means “happy!” Know that when Jesus saw the crowds that day he also saw you - and you - and you ---- calling you to a radical new understanding of who he is and who you are in him.