

The Beatitudes
Matthew 5:1-12
Colebrook Congregational Church
November 6, 2016 / Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Later this month, we celebrate Thanksgiving, where give thanks for what we have, not what we lack. In today's selection, Jesus teaches us that we are blessed for what we, the faithful, have.

This is the first portion of the famous Sermon on the Mount, the best known & most quoted portion of the New Testament, containing among other things, the Greatest Commandment, the Lord's Prayer, and today's selection, the Beatitudes.

Luke's Gospel has a similar scene, the Sermon on the Plain, but it is more succinct than Matthew's version. Of importance to us today is that Luke has only four beatitudes to Matthew's eight. Because of this, scholars have really studied this portion of both Gospels. Now each Gospel is similar but a bit different, and that discrepancy has been an accepted fact since the fourth century. No two people tell a story in the same way, it's just how it is! In this case, scholars have wanted to know why there is such a big difference.

Now, an answer has never been definitively settled on. Scholars have speculated that there is a document out there that they call "Q Source" containing a list of Jesus' teachings, sayings, and parables that have helped the Gospel writers, and is the reason why they are so similar. The best guess is that Matthew just included more than Luke in this case.

Also, because of all the scrutiny focused on Matthew's version, something I found interesting, was discovered. When you line up the parts of the Beatitudes that both Matthew & Luke contain, you can see some glosses added by Matthew, to help the reader or hearer understand. When you remove those glosses, and translate all the Beatitudes back into the original language, this entire portion has the rhythm and rhyme of Aramaic poetry.

And these Beatitudes can be divided into two quartets, the first four are about the individual's attitude and their condition as persecuted disciples; and the second four are about the relationship between people and the righteous behavior that led to their persecution.

The Beatitudes and the whole Sermon on the Mount begins with: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”

Jesus opens with this to shock His audience with a deliberate inversion of standard values. The poor in spirit are fortunate and blessed? AND the kingdom of Heaven is theirs? That did not make much sense back then, but it would certainly make people stop and pay attention!

What is meant by poor in spirit? The vast majority of people were physically poor back then, but here Matthew takes a physical state and gives it a spiritual component, which he will do again with a later Beatitude. He is referring to the pious people who are self-aware of their spiritual needs, and so they look faithfully to God.

This is like the tax collector from a couple weeks ago, who was aware of his spiritual need and turned to God for help in his prayers, as we can turn to God for help in our prayers.

The next beatitude is: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Now, the word translated as “mourn,” does not have the same connotation as it does today. It does not refer to mourning as for the dead, but more like the feeling one has being oppressed by ones own sinfulness. So the following promise of comfort is referring to the assurance of forgiveness.

No one is perfect. So what Jesus is saying here is that if you know that you have sinned, and that you feel really bad about it, you can be assured that you will receive the comfort of forgiveness. A message that is truly a comfort to all of us imperfect beings.

The third beatitude: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,” also has a translation issue. Today, “meek” means submissive and not strong. But back then, it meant gentle, selfless, humble, and perceived as powerless. One of the great leaders in the Old Testament, Moses, was described as, “very meek, above all men.” Moses stood up to Pharaoh, received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and led the Israelites out of Egypt, through the Wilderness, and up to the Promised Land. Not the type of person that *today* would be called meek.

So what Jesus is saying here is that those who are humble, selfless, gentle, and the perceived powerless, will be given dominion over the Earth. This was revolutionary at that time! Mediterranean society back then placed so much emphasis on honor and status, that something like this did not make much sense or even seem proper to many of His listeners. However, to those who were humble, selfless and gentle, it obviously would have been a comfort to them.

The fourth beatitude, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled,” is where Matthew again takes a physical state, and gives it a spiritual application. Righteousness is a key concept in Matthew's Gospel, and here it is used to give assurance to those who strive for it, and depend upon God to help them. Righteousness cannot be achieved on one's own by sheer will-power, so Jesus is assuring those who truly seek it, who hunger and thirst for it, that God will help them achieve it.

The fifth beatitude marks the start of the second quartet of beatitudes that focus on our interpersonal relationships. Jesus says: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” Here, being merciful means those who behave towards the unfortunate with sympathetic loving kindness, in the way that the Good Samaritan acted towards a stranger. It is also less revolutionary than the others and is easier to understand, but not always easy to do. When we recall what Paul advised the Galatians about God's justice, “You reap what you sow,” it becomes easier.

The next beatitude is, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Like I said before, no one is perfect, and in Semitic, the concept of pure of heart did not mean perfection. The heart also referred to the mind, as well as to emotions, essentially the whole personality.

Elsewhere in the Bible, a pure-hearted person is described as one who is not a liar and has a clean heart, which is strong through fulfilling the Commandments or are *trying* to do God's Will. As my favorite theologian emphasizes, ones intentions are very important. We may not succeed in living the Commandment to Love our neighbor, but it is our intention and motivation to try do so, which is paramount.

The seventh beatitude is, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” The peacemakers are not pacifists, as we might infer today, but actually refers to, “those who bring conflict to an end,” and peace was more the concept of personal and social well-being.

In Jesus' time, it was part of the Pax Romana, and there hadn't been any actual wars for over 50 years, so it is thought that Jesus is referring rather to conflicts in the community, reflecting that the Roman legions had not brought about harmony or cooperation and other things impossible to impose by force.

This is a recurring theme in Matthew's Gospel, the desire to bring about reconciliation with other people. Jesus is telling the Disciples, and us, to bring to all relationships a harmonious quality. As a faithful community, we must work together.

The final beatitude is, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Many of the beatitudes, but especially this one, are similar to apocalyptic literature, like the Book of Revelation, where those who are oppressed, outcast, or persecuted for their faith are promised vindication in the end, and rewards for their faithfulness.

So what does Jesus want us to take from the Beatitudes?

- We are to be open to receiving the Spirit of God.
- We are to be self-aware of our sins.
- We are to be humble.
- We are to strive for righteousness.
- We are to be kind.
- We are to try to live the Commandment to Love.
- We are to bring about reconciliation.
- We are to be strong in the face of persecution.

It is a lot to work towards, and it is not an easy path to walk, but remember that Jesus is also assuring us, the faithful, to be strong and to keep the faith, and it will be all good in the end.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer,
Loving God, We turn to You to help us take Jesus' words from upon the Mount into our very hearts. May we be filled with Your Spirit that draws us ever closer to You. Guide us to ensure that no one is isolated and without hope. Help us to see the common humanity of all who live on this earth. Make us aware of the troubles and concerns around us. Inspire us to seek justice for the wrongs done, but not be defined by them. Move us to be merciful with ourselves and merciful with others, so that all may receive mercy. Grant that any adversity we face may bring us closer to You. We promise to never walk the easy path of complacency, ever seeking to speak your truth, and never stopping, Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

O God, You invite us to hold the needs of our sisters and brothers as dear to us as our own needs. Loving our neighbors as ourselves, we offer our thanksgivings, our confessions, and our petitions on behalf of the church and the world.

We give You thanks for all the ways that you bless our lives: the beauty and abundance of nature, the love of family and friends, and the joy of knowing You and hearing Your word.

We ask for Your forgiveness. We recognize that we live in a broken world, and we acknowledge that we can always do more. Help us to see when we forget to love our neighbors. And we pray that we may have the opportunities to right any wrongs we have knowingly or unknowingly committed.

We offer prayers for our neighbors, known and unknown, the world over. We pray for full bellies and solid walls; for peaceful fields and quiet nights; for wellness of mind, body, and spirit; and for every home to be safe from harm. We pray for those who keep us safe, and for those who keep us well. We pray for those in harm's way. We ask for peacefulness and an end to conflicts in our own country and around the world.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, and for Your strength of spirit to do what is right, and to act generously towards all, full of Christ's Love. May we also remember to be tolerant of those whose opinions are different from our own, seeking harmony in all relationships. We offer to You, the prayers of our hearts, both silent and spoken, confident that You will hear them and respond.

We especially pray for:

Our Baptist Brothers & Sisters in Mississippi who have lost their house of worship, and the misguided people who caused it's destruction.

Loving God, open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to You, that we all may be one with You, as You are one with us in Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

Psalm 98

98:1 O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

98:2 The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

98:3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

98:4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

98:5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.

98:6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.

98:7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.

98:8 Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy

98:9 at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.