

Sermon: How blessed you are!

Today we read through Matthew's version of the gospel and the story of the Beatitudes. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is teaching us the way of discipleship.

This is more than stewardship of our resources. It is a commitment to become as much like Jesus as possible, and to let that transformation show through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. It's a promise to do everything through Christ, who strengthens us.

This week, we're near the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, in a familiar passage we call The Sermon on the Mount. In this first and longest sermon from Matthew's gospel, Jesus lays out the foundation for his entire ministry. Jesus climbs up a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. His disciples are nearby, and other followers have gathered to listen to Jesus.

Jesus sits down to speak, showing his authority as a reliable teacher of God's ways. But instead of words about overcoming Rome, or driving out the oppressor, the people on that hillside hear words of blessing.

The pattern of the beatitudes follows a three-part formula: First the blessing, always in present tense. Then the description of those who are blessed, and finally, the reason they are blessed.

In these nine beatitudes, Jesus tells us who we are, and whose we are. He contrasts the world's expectations with the reality of the Kingdom of God, a reality that is here and now.

The first three beatitudes focus on those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those who are meek. Jesus begins by addressing us in our weakest, most vulnerable state. These three beatitudes seem to contradict what we think of as "blessing." How can such negative attributes as spiritual poverty, mourning and meekness be blessed?

I once asked a friend how they were doing, and instead of the usual "fine" or "great" they smiled and said, "I am at the end of myself."

My friend had exhausted all their own resources, they had used up all their own spiritual strength. You would think this would have been cause for despair, but here they were, completely at peace, smiling as they said, 'I am at the end of myself.' They knew what it is to be blessed when poor in spirit, because at the end of their self, they were finally able to depend completely on God.

Some of us have mourned the loss of a loved one in the past year. For some of us, that experience is fresh. For others, the process of grief has moved us further down the road toward healing. Sorrow takes a toll. It drains us of energy and makes our hearts heavy.

Yet, in our sorrow, God blesses us with hope and reminds us that we have a future in Christ Jesus that the world cannot see. Our hope is in the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, and in the promise, he has given us that where he is, there we may be also.

And what about meekness? We don't often use the word "meek" today, because this world sees meekness as a liability. Meek rhymes with weak, after all, and no one wants to be seen as weak. Those who are weak don't stand a chance in this world, where personal power is considered a premium virtue.

When we are at our weakest and most vulnerable, Jesus tells us, the kingdom of heaven will be ours, we will find comfort in our sorrow, and we will inherit the earth. We may see our present condition in a negative light, but our future is filled with great promise.

The fourth beatitude starts out sounding like it might belong to this group that includes spiritual poverty, sorrow, and meekness. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst," Jesus says. But what do they hunger and thirst for?

Righteousness.

And this puts the fourth beatitude in a category by itself.

For those who seek righteousness will be satisfied. They will be filled. In this one promise, Jesus turns our attention away from what we lack, and toward what we eagerly seek – the righteousness of God. Though the fulfillment of this promise is still in the future, it gives us great hope.

Instead of focusing on our deep need, Jesus turns our attention to God's great provision for us.

And this brings us to the next three beatitudes. As we are filled with God's righteousness, we are transformed into those who bring mercy, purity of heart, and peace to a broken world. If the first three beatitudes could be seen in a negative light, these next three must surely be seen in a positive way.

Those who offer mercy, whose hearts are pure, who make peace in every corner of creation are given an amazing promise. They will receive mercy. They will see God. They will be called the children of God. These blessings are easy to identify as positive blessings!

So, we have three 'negative' means of blessing, a pivotal blessing, and three 'positive' means of blessing. Now comes the hard part. Beatitudes eight and nine are so similar, it makes sense to consider them together, but that doesn't make them easier to accept.

If we started out at our most vulnerable, came through a desire for righteousness to the strength of mercy, purity, and peacemaking, you'd think Jesus would be building us up for the grand finale, the blessing to top all blessings.

Instead of "Blessed are those who finally attain the perfection God intended, for they shall live eternally with God in glory," Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" and I don't know about you, but those words make me pretty uncomfortable.

I don't want to be persecuted. Many people suffer persecution throughout the world because of their faith in Christ, and I pray for them daily, but I don't want to be one of them.

But look at what Jesus says about those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness: theirs is the kingdom of heaven. This is identical to the first beatitude, the one about being poor in spirit. And notice that Jesus doesn't put it in future tense, but the present.

Right now, both those who are poor in spirit, and those who are persecuted, receive the kingdom of heaven.

And then Jesus gets personal. For the first time, he isn't talking about some hypothetical "they". Now he looks us each in the eye and says, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

Not "if" but "when" people revile and persecute you and say awful things about you because of your faith in Jesus Christ, he says, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

You are on the right road when you are spiritually poor, when you are meek, when you show mercy, when you make peace, and even when you are persecuted for the sake of the gospel. Rejoice, and be glad! You are on the right path! Yours is the kingdom of God!

But there's one more thing you need to know about these beatitudes. The beatitudes aren't a prescription, or a "how to" lesson. They aren't commands, like the command to love God and love our neighbor. Jesus isn't telling us to get busy and become poor in spirit or start mourning or get out there and make some peace. And Jesus also isn't saying, "If you will do these things, this is what your payment will be."

Jesus is telling us that, no matter what circumstances we experience, whether good or bad, he is with us on the right road. Things may look bleak, or they may look great, but no matter how things look, we are on the right road if we are on it with Jesus.

And that road leads straight to the kingdom of God, a kingdom that is already here among us, even as we wait for its fulfillment. But to be on that road with Jesus means we have to trust him; we have to name him as Lord. We must believe that he is the Son of God, who died to save us, who rose from the dead, and who reigns with God the Father through all eternity.

Whether we mourn or suffer persecution, Jesus is with us. Whether our spirits are poor, or we hunger and thirst after righteousness, Jesus is with us. Whether we are meek or merciful, peacemakers or pure in heart, Jesus will be with us.

And when – not if – we are reviled or persecuted for the sake of Christ's name, he will be with us, giving us strength to do everything through him.

The Kingdom of God is yours. Come to be with our Lord. Amen