

Blessed? Me?

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 5: 1-12

January 30, 2011



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Matthew 5: 1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then 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.

¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.



[From Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*]

JESUS CHRIST: How blest are those who know their need of God. How blest are the sorrowful. They shall find consolation. How blest are those of gentle spirit. They shall have the earth for their possession. How blest are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail.

RANDOM: *cough cough*

JESUS: They shall be satisfied. How blest are those whose hearts are pure. They shall see God...

MANDY: Speak up!

MAN: Shh.

BRIAN: Quiet, Mum.

JESUS: How blest are those of gentle...

MANDY: Well, I can't hear a thing.

JESUS: ...spirit. They shall have the earth for their possession.

It’s a very funny scene from Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* and ever since I first saw it I can’t read the Beatitudes without thinking of it. But either you love Monty Python or you don’t. [Warning: if you go search for it online the language can be a bit rough.]

JESUS: How blest are they who have suffered much...

MRS. BIG NOSE: Don't pick your nose.

MR. BIG NOSE: I wasn't picking my nose. I was scratching.

MRS. BIG NOSE: You was picking it, while you was talking to that lady.

MR. BIG NOSE: I wasn't!

MRS. BIG NOSE: Leave it alone. Give it a rest.

MR. CHEEKY: Do you mind? I can't hear a word he's saying.

The Sermon on the Mount devolves into an argument by those so far in the back of the crowd they can’t hear what Jesus is saying.

MRS. BIG NOSE: Don't you 'do you mind' me. I was talking to my husband.

MR. CHEEKY: Well, go and talk to him somewhere else. I can't hear a bloody thing.

MR. BIG NOSE: Don't you swear at my wife.

MR. CHEEKY: I was only asking her to shut up, so I can hear what he's saying, Big Nose.

MRS. BIG NOSE: Don't you call my husband 'Big Nose'!

MR. CHEEKY: Well, he has got a big nose.

GREGORY: Could you be quiet, please?

JESUS: They shall have the earth...

GREGORY: What was that?

JESUS: ...for their possession. How blest are those...

MR. CHEEKY: I don't know. I was too busy talking to Big Nose.

JESUS: ...who hunger and thirst to see...

MAN #1: I think it was 'Blessed are the cheesemakers.'

JESUS: ...right prevail.

MRS. GREGORY: Ahh, what's so special about the cheesemakers?

GREGORY: Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.

MR. CHEEKY: See? If you hadn't been going on, we'd have heard that, Big Nose.

JESUS: How blest are those who...

MR. BIG NOSE: Hey. Say that once more; I'll smash your bloody face in.

MRS. GREGORY: Ohh.

MR. CHEEKY: Better keep listening. Might be a bit about 'Blessed are the big noses.'

The Beatitudes. The word "beatitude" is a Latin word meaning "blessings." "Blessed are," says Jesus.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit."

"Blessed are those who mourn"

"Blessed are the meek"

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness"

"Blessed are the merciful"

"Blessed are the pure in heart"

"Blessed are the peacemakers"

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake"

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

"There is a trap hidden in the Beatitudes that I know I have fallen into countless times," wrote one preacher [David Lose], "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."

It's how most of us hear the Beatitudes. Blessed are the meek. "Am I meek enough to be blessed by God? Probably not."

Blessed are the peacemakers. "Well, I yelled at my neighbor the other day because he wouldn't use his snow blower on my sidewalk ... I guess I'm no peacemaker ... I guess I get no blessing." Blessed are those who mourn. "Well, frankly, I don't want to mourn. It's just too darn depressing. I want to move on with my life and pretend there's no sadness."

Or the other thing we do with the Beatitudes is read them as if Jesus is giving us a list of behaviors that we have to live up to if we want to be as good as he is. Reading them that way only makes us feel inadequate about not only our abilities but our worth according to God. "I'll never be meek enough. I'll never be enough of a peacemaker. I'll never be persecuted for Jesus' sake. I'll never be righteous enough to be blessed. If I can't achieve these goals what good is it even trying?" Holding them out as model goals of the "true Christian" just leaves most of us feeling hopeless that we could ever be good enough and not worthy enough to be blessed by God.

We're better off just being a cheesemaker. Maybe better – then even if we're wrong about what Jesus said at least we still have cheese to eat and can make a reasonable living doing it. Or any kind of dairy product manufacturer. Right?

But the truth is, if we slow down a minute and hear what Jesus is saying we come out with a different conclusion. [Says David Lose] "Jesus isn't setting up conditions or terms but rather is just plain blessing people. All kinds of people. All kinds of down-and-out, extremely vulnerable, and at-the-bottom-of-the-ladder people. Why? To proclaim that God regularly shows up in mercy and blessing just where you least expect God to be – with the poor rather than the rich, those who are mourning rather than celebrating, the meek and the peacemakers rather than the strong and victorious."

This is not where typically we look for God. We think of God as strong and powerful, victorious and mighty. I'm afraid too often we think that God would rather bless those who fend for themselves, those who always do good, those who are able to survive and thrive enough to make it to the top. That's partly – or maybe primarily – the message of the Prosperity Gospel preachers, isn't it? God wants you to be rich – money and success and good things for you and your family. All you need do, the Prosperity Preachers tell us, is believe that God will reward you and you'll be rewarded. When Joel Osteen tells us, "God wants to bless us where we are," what he's implying is that that blessing will be financial success in your life.

I wondered what Osteen actually says when he preaches so I did a quick Google search.

- "A good thing to remember is somebody's got it a lot worse than we do."
- "Choosing to be positive and having a grateful attitude is going to determine how you're going to live your life."
- "God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us."
- "It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty. It's God's will for you to pay your bills and not be in debt."

Really, Joel? I've only really heard about Osteen – I've never actually read anything he's written or watched him on TV. I thought I might have to search a little to find some of this stuff. I had no idea how not subtle Mr. Osteen is.

Joel Osteen must not be reading the same Beatitudes we hear this morning when he preaches and teaches like this. I'm not even sure what scripture he's reading which leads him to this message that God will bless one person at the expense of another. If you ask for a blessing you get it; if you don't ask you don't get it. Joel

Osteen's god is unbalanced in this way – the blessings are not equal for all people.

Reverend Ike in the 1970's may be the best known of the Prosperity Preachers. His television program included a "Blessing of the Cadillacs," and his mail ministry offered items such as lucky coins, shower caps, prosperity bracelets and prayer cloths. He even suggested that by rubbing the prayer cloths on lottery tickets and horse betting slips, it would bring prosperity.

But that's not what's going on in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is telling his audience that no matter who you are, no matter what you feel like you have going for you – or not going for you – you are blessed. Period. No matter what.

Blessed are ... whatever, whoever, whenever, wherever. There's nothing you must do to be blessed by God. There is nothing God asks of you in order for you to receive God's blessing. It just is – you just are – blessed. And if God shows up here blessing the weak and the vulnerable, the mourners and down and out, the peacemakers and the persecuted then God will be everywhere, showering all creation and its inhabitants with blessing.

In the 1st Century world that Jesus lives in and the author of Matthew's Gospel writes in, the concept of honor and shame is extremely important. Your esteem in society was based on how important your connections are – your family members, your patrons, and your clients. If you were by birth, or adoption, or by being a slave or freedperson part of a very important family, you were important. If your family was less important, you were less important. If you weren't connected to others, that didn't make you "your own person"; it made you a nobody. That's serious stuff, because nobody wants to do business with a nobody; being pushed out of your network of social relationships could also mean being left with nothing to live on and no way to get out of that position. (Sarah Dylan)

Glad things aren't like that these days, right?

That situation brought about all kinds of other hardships. The one pushed out could be destitute (*ptochos*), like the person Jesus honors in Matthew 5:3, and the hunger and thirst that Matthew 5:6 talks about -- literal hunger and thirst incurred for righteousness as Jesus redefined it -- would certainly follow, as would mourning (Matthew 5:4). If you didn't have the right connections, you were shamed, shunned, pushed even farther to the margins of the community.

God has flipped that system on its head, says Jesus. No matter what your status or what your shame might be, you are blessed by God. We don't really believe that, do we? We think some are blessed more so than others. But that's us, that's not the Jesus message here. You are blessed. Or "you are honored" is perhaps a better English translation of the Greek word used here – *makarios*. "Honored are they ..." is what Jesus is preaching. Honored. You. Blessed. Me. "These verses don't show Jesus as pop psychologist," writes one preacher about this, "telling people how to be happy; they show Jesus giving honor to those pushed out to the margins of their culture." (Sarah Dylan)

Blessed are you. Honored are you.

How about we update the Beatitudes? My friend Rev. Matt Staniz from Temple Lutheran Church in Havertown posted on Facebook earlier this week a request:

"Alright friends...I need your help to get a list of Beatitudes for today. I'll start with some examples:"

Blessed are the unemployed.
Blessed are the bullied and abused.
Blessed are the broken-hearted and abandoned.
Blessed are those trapped in bodies that hurt.

Blessed are parents who really don't know what they're doing

Blessed are those who don't think they have anything to offer

Friends began to add theirs:

Blessed are the doubtful.

Blessed are the lonely

Blessed are those who are excluded

Blessed are those who teach in schools

Blessed are the lowly in spirit

Blessed are you when you've tried every treatment and every treatment has failed

Blessed are those who know they do not have it all together

Blessed are the foreclosed upon.

Blessed are those who are told they are less

Blessed are nursing assistants who aren't appreciated

Blessed are those who have to hide their true selves.

Blessed are those caring for loved ones who are dying

Blessed are the brother-in-laws cause they are married to sisters...

Blessed are those who know how to listen.

Blessed are those who want what they have.

Blessed are the frightened and fearful.

Blessed are the autistic, the depressed, the bi-polar.

Blessed are we who are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses

Blessed are those who think they are never enough

I added a few of my own. Maybe you can too:

Blessed are the underpaid and overworked.

Honored are you who are searching for God.

Honored are those who care.

Blessed are they who are more than tolerant.

Blessed are the disheveled.

Blessed are all who struggle for life and survival.
Blessed are the unloved.

Can you name those who God blesses no matter what the world says about them? You know them. We are them at one time or another in our own lives. If we have the courage to finally believe that God's grace is sufficient enough to grant us/you/me a blessing – like Jesus says – then maybe we can start to believe that God blesses that neighbor who won't share his snow blower, that kid at school who never has lunch money, that guy on the bus who smells pretty nasty, that woman who walks down the street talking to herself.

Me? Blessed? When we start to believe it about others we can start to live it out ourselves.

“What would it mean if we honored those whom God honors? What would happen if we stopped playing all of our culture's games for status and power and privilege? What would it cost us if we lived more deeply into justice, and mercy, and humility? And more importantly, what blessings await us on that journey? It's quite an adventure.” [Sarah Dylan]

You are blessed. You are honored. By God, you are.

Amen.