

“Yes, But ...”

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

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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.



“Yes, but ...” How often do you say that phrase? Or at least think it?

According to bestselling author Berthold Gunster, saying "yes, and" rather than "yes, but" is the key to creativity and innovation. An interview with Gunster went like this:

What exactly do you mean by “yes, but”? “Picture this: You have a good idea and the only thing you hear are ‘yes, but’s. ‘Yes, but that didn’t work before either. Yes, but what if it fails?’ If you have a ‘yes, but’ perspective, you look at what should be but isn’t. As a result, you continue to think in terms of limitations, hazards and obstacles. ‘Yes, but’ will kill any idea.”

Yes, but what’s the alternative? “The ‘yes, and’ attitude. This means you look at what can be done. You see chances and opportunities—not just the obstacles but also the path. You see what is there and what you could do with it. This enables you to think your way around problems. The result: creativity and innovation.”

How can you think your way around problems? “Start by looking at reality in a different way and deconstruct a problem into a fact, so you move from ‘yes, but’ to ‘yes.’ You then proceed from ‘yes’ to ‘yes, and.’ You look at the bare facts and examine what you can do with them.”

So is it wrong to think in limitations? “‘Yes, but’ is not wrong! ‘Yes, and’ people invent the airplane; ‘yes, but’ people invent the parachute. The two need one another. The trick is to find the right balance.”

It's the unofficial motto of the church, isn't it?

- “Yes, but ... what will it cost?”
- “Yes, but ... we've never done it like that before.”
- “Yes, but ... what if no one shows up?”
- “Yes, but ... young people don't care about church anymore.”
- “Yes, but ... I'm too old.”
- “Yes, but ... I'm afraid.”
- “Yes, but ... yes, but ... yes, but ...”

One of the problems with what we call the beatitudes is that we read them as if they are goals that we can never imagine accomplishing. As if Jesus will only bless us if we achieve the status of those he holds out as exemplary persons deserving of God's blessing.

Lets' list some “yes, buts” about these ...

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

- Yes, I want to inherit the earth ... but ...
- I'm not meek –
- Isn't showing meekness the same as showing weakness?
- Doesn't it go against human nature to be meek? Survival of the fittest and all that?
- Don't meek people get walked over?
- Well, maybe you could be meek in 1st Century Israel, but today that's a sure way to lose out on what I deserve.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Luke: Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh ... Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

- “Yes, but ...”
- Sure, when I mourn I know God will comfort me. But how often do I mourn?
- Doesn't mourning mean I have to show emotion? I have to let go and cry at the death of a loved one?
- What if I don't cry? Does that mean God won't comfort me?

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Luke: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God ... But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

- But I'm not poor. I'm just middle class.
- I don't want to be poor.
- Being poor goes against everything I've ever been taught.
- The goal in the world is to get rich.
- Being poor isn't what God wants for me, is it?
- Is that the only way to heaven?

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

Luke: Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. ... Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.

- Really? I have to be hungry for God to pay attention? But I don't want to go hungry.
- In fact, I don't even know what hunger is. When I say “I'm starving” I really have no clue.
- Food fills my belly and I'm happy. Food fills my cupboard and I feel satisfied. Food up and down the aisles of the supermarket – of course there's enough to go around.

- If there's no food ...

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

- Yes, but ...
- Well, maybe I can be merciful.
- I give my worn out clothes to the thrift store. Is that mercy?
- I bring food on Food Cupboard Sunday each month. Is that enough?
- I give a dollar to the guy hanging outside the Wawa sometimes. Is that mercy?

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

- Yes, but ...
- God already knows my heart isn't pure.
- I don't know anyone who's heart is totally pure.
- If I have an ounce of envy, a grain of jealousy, a speck of anger, a tidbit of lust, a smidgen of disrespect, a hair's breadth of spite ...
- Purity just doesn't come that easy.

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

- Yes, but ...
- It's just too darn hard to be peaceful all the time.
- What if I get angry? Does God hate me?
- What if I go to war? Does God disown me?
- If I fight, do I not get into heaven?
- If I'm a war-maker, does that mean I can't be called a child 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.”

Luke: Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. 23"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. ... Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.

The Kingdom of Heaven which is mentioned three times in these twelve verses is not referring to a place we go to when we die, which is what we all too often think of when we hear the word “heaven.” What Jesus is pointing to here is a not a place but a new understanding of God's reign experienced and lived right here and now on earth.

And these are not commandments which we must obey, as if Jesus was really trying to say “blessed are those who become...”. Rather, these are statements of the way the world really works, the way God's reign operates, the way reality looks when seen from God's perspective. Whatever the powers-that-be may tell us, however we may believe society functions, Jesus is revealing what's really going on from God's perspective, and inviting us to enter into this new (or rather eternal) life.

Is it all a lie? Is what Jesus promises here simply a sales pitch to get us to believe something which will appease us for the time being? Is it an attempt to get us to “drink the Kool-Aid?”

My guess is that far too often we don't want to be blessed as Jesus defines it, but not just because of that final kind-of scary Beatitude – blessed are those who are persecuted. We hesitate to embrace being blessed because the hardest question we have for the text haunts us: “*is it all a scam?*” Jesus offers this simple formula – be like this and this other nifty God thing will happen.

We've all been around enough to see the merciful get trampled, the mourners give up all hope, the pure in heart walk away from God, and people who hunger and thirst often die of hunger and thirst. Yes, *sometimes* it works out and the merciful receive mercy, but that's only sometimes and our experience tells us all too differently.

“Yes, but ... that's not how the world works.” “Yes, but ... I don't want to get trampled because I'm merciful, die because I'm hungry, be faced with giving up hope when I truly mourn.”

What's going on here, though, is not a lie or a sales pitch. What Jesus does here – and throughout the Gospels, by the way – is simply offer a new perspective and possibility for a new way of seeing and living and being. These are not rules, these are realities, says Jesus. This is not a sales pitch or an easy way to get to heaven – it's not even a list of the only attributes that “get you to heaven.” And “getting to heaven” isn't even an acceptable goal, says Jesus. This is how God's reign exists here and now.

I'm not usually taken to preaching other people's sermons, but in a sermon titled “Get The Picture?”, John van de Laar summarizes these sayings in a way that helped me get beyond “Yes, but ...” so I share his summary with you:

Blessed are the poor: “God's reign is known and possessed by those who are poor – not just financially, but also in ‘spirit’, in themselves, in their humanity, in their lack of dignity and acknowledgement from the rest of the world. They may not have two cents to rub together, they

may be ignored and marginalized, but just watch the poor discover creative ways to live, to enjoy, to celebrate, to access the blessings of God's reign.”

Those who mourn: “God's comforting presence is felt by those who know true grief, who lament not just for themselves and their own loss, but for the world's loss of compassion, grace, love and respect for life.”

The meek: “Those who reject coercion and force, but seek to achieve their aims through collaboration, dialogue, consideration and allurements are the ones who inherit a world, a life, a wealth, that cannot be taken from them and that is not short-lived.”

Hunger and thirst for righteousness: “Those who long for justice so desperately that they can taste it, and for whom it is not just a nice option, but a matter of survival and urgency will so give themselves to bringing this justice to reality that they will see it happen, at least in some measure that satisfies.”

Merciful: “The ones who experience the world as a compassionate and gracious place are those who reject “eye-for-an-eye” balance-keeping, and embrace forgiveness and mercy.”

Pure in heart: “Those who value integrity, ethical living and honesty, refusing to condone corruption, expediency or “the-means-justify-the-ends” ways of living will truly experience God. They will recognize and perceive the signs of God's presence all around them, and will experience God's wholeness.”

Peacemakers: “The ones who are viewed as God's children are not those who rely on violence and weaponry to control or change the world. God's children are not

those who draw dividing lines wherever they can between religions, races, genders, languages, cultures, geographical locales, relationships or expressions of love. No, God's children are the ones who seek to bring people together, to reconcile, to resolve conflict and to facilitate understanding and appreciation."

Persecuted: "Those who are attacked and harmed because they seek to live out the mission of Christ and because they work to bring wholeness and goodness where there is brokenness and evil, have a cause to celebrate – they will discover that they have tapped into the true, vibrant abundant life that Jesus promised, and that whatever suffering they may face, their joy and life cannot be taken from them."

When people revile you: "The realities of the world as Jesus describes them in the Beatitudes, and the 'realities' as we experience them or perceive them from a purely human perspective could not be more different. Once again we cannot help but see how Jesus turns everything upside down – or rather, right side up. And if we can find the courage, the faith and the 'eyes' to see the world as Jesus does, we are blessed because God's life, God's reign and God's presence become the realities in which we live."

You see, our response to this piece of Jesus' teaching doesn't have to be "Yes, but ..."

Remember Gunster from the beginning of the sermon? If you have a 'yes, but' perspective, you look at what should be but isn't. As a result, you continue to think in terms of limitations, hazards and obstacles. 'Yes, but' ends possibilities. 'Yes, and' means you look at what can be

done. You see chances and opportunities—not just the obstacles but also the path.

"Yes, and ..."

Go for it. Live the life before you. Even if you're poor, even if you're hungry, even if you are meek or resist the world's allure or appear weak because you won't fight. Go for it ... it is what God's reign is all about in our lives right here, right now.

This is a perfect text for All Saints' Sunday because God's promise that keeps us leaning forward is that there is life beyond here – that those we name today experience a full understanding of God's reign than we can know only in part now. Yet what these beatitudes want to remind us is that eternal life begins not after death, but as soon as we begin to live in God's realm in this place, in this time. What we live now is a piece of that which continues to be our life eternal.

"Yes, but ..." "Blessed are ..." Reject the former. Accept the latter.

Amen.