**“A Christian’s Character: The Beatitudes”**

**Sermon Series on *The Sermon on the Mount***

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**(Mt. 5:1-12)**

**Preliminary Remarks.**

This morning I begin the last series of sermons I will preach before I retire, with the exception of Advent, and I have given a good deal of thought and prayer about how I want to conclude my ministry of preaching at First Pres before I ride off into the sunset at the end of this year. Several years ago, my late wife Lorie told me she thought that before I retire I should preach through the book of Revelation. I responded to her by saying that there was only one book of the Bible that John Calvin never wrote a commentary on, and that was the book of Revelation! Still, I did consider this option. That would be a pretty cool way to go out.

But then I realized I only have 7 Sundays before Advent arrives, so I wouldn’t be able to get very far into Revelation. I needed to be more modest in my aspiration. In the end I settled on preaching through the Sermon on the Mount, and there are two reasons for this. The first reason is that it’s a remarkable passage of Scripture which contains the words of the first sermon Jesus ever preached, and many people consider it to be the greatest sermon ever – hence the title of the sermon series.

However, there is a second reason I settled on the Sermon on the Mount. It’s because in the summer of 1973 when I first sensed God’s call to become a pastor, I was an intern at the North Avenue Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. And my boss, who was also the man who discipled me in college, a guy named Jim Bankhead, spent that whole summer teaching me an inductive method of Bible study, and he walked me through the Sermon on the Mount one-on-one verse-by-verse. He said, “Peter, these are the first principles of the kingdom of God, and this represents the first teaching of Jesus. You need to master what God says here if you want to be Jesus’ disciple.”

Ever since then, in every church I’ve served I’ve spent time teaching or preaching on the Sermon on the Mount…that is every church except here at First Pres. So this seems to be a perfect way for me to conclude my preaching ministry at our church.

**Introduction.**

Among the teachings of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount is probably the most beloved and best known sermons of Jesus recorded in the gospels. But it is also perhaps the most misunderstood and the most challenging message to live out He ever gave. The Sermon on the Mount represents the first principles of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of His ministry, and Matthew 5-7 are a launching pad for anyone who is serious about learning what it means to be a disciple. However, it isn’t a rule book to follow. Instead, it’s an invitation to a different kind of life – a life that God blesses.

**I. What Does It Mean to be Blessed?**

The Bible says that when Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and He sat down, which was the normal posture for a rabbi when he taught. And the text says His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them in the hearing of the multitude, and the first thing Jesus talked about was what a blessed life looks like in the kingdom of God.

When you hear the word “blessed,” what do you think of? A common phrase one hears in the South is “Bless his heart.” It’s usually said just after an insult as a way of softening the criticism, like, “He’s got a brain the size of a pea, bless his heart.” Or someone might say, “God bless you,” after you sneeze. Nowadays, more often than not, whenever we hear the word “blessed,” we typically think of a high quality of life in which we have everything we need and life is going our way. I read a blog this week which pointed out a few ways God had blessed the author’s social network of friends in the past few months.

* God helped a friend get accepted into graduate school. (She was “blessed” to be there.)
* God made it possible for a yoga instructor’s Caribbean spa retreat. (“Blessed to be teaching in paradise,” she wrote.)
* He helped a new mom outfit her infant daughter in a tiny designer dress. (“A year of patiently waiting and it finally fits! Feeling blessed.”)
* And He graced a colleague with at least 57 Facebook wall postings about her birthday. (“So blessed for all the love,” she wrote.)

The author concluded her blog by writing, “God has, in fact, recently blessed my network with dazzling job promotions, coveted speaking gigs, the most wonderful fiancés ever, front row seats at Fashion Week, and nominations for many a ‘30 under 30’ list.”

More often than not, most people equate being blessed with enjoying the good life. But the Bible has a very different take on what the good life actually consists of and what a blessed life is all about. The word that is translated “blessed” in our passage this morning is the Greek word *makarios* (which is not to be confused with the dance named the macarena!). At its core *makarios* means “the state of experiencing the fullness of God.”

How does one experience the fullness of God? How does one live the flourishing life He intends for all of us? And what does a blessed life really look like? Jesus makes some radical statements, and He suggests that the good life, the blessed life, consists not in how you look, what you drive, where you live, or how much money you make. It’s not the job you have, the degrees you’ve earned, the family you’re in, or how many friends you have on Facebook. No, the good life, the blessed life God desires for every single person, is actually rooted in eight Holy Spirit-empowered character qualities everyone should cultivate.

And these character qualities are ones which the world doesn’t usually applaud or reward. Jesus said that the most blessed people in His kingdom are those who have learned the blessing of downward mobility and utter spiritual dependence. It is a radical teaching.

**II. A Golden Chain of Character Qualities.**

In preparing the Latin translation of the New Testament in the late fourth century, the ancient church father Jerome translated the Greek word *makarioi* with the Latin word *beati,* andthat’s where we get our English word “Beatitudes” from. The eight character qualities Jesus mentions in the Beatitudes do not describe eight separate people. Rather, they are characteristics that describe every person who is being transformed by Jesus. It’s like the colors of a rainbow. Each is distinct and beautiful in its own right, but they are inseparable in making the whole.

Let me be quick to add that the Beatitudes aren’t qualities one needs to acquire in order to gain entrance into the kingdom of God. Instead, as we become more and more rooted in Jesus, and He becomes rooted in us, we will discover that a new character begins to form within our hearts, and we develop new motives, new ambitions, and new behaviors.[[1]](#endnote-2)

Jesus begins the Beatitudes by saying, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven.”* What Jesus was saying here is that the person who is poor in spirit recognizes their need for God, and they realize they are spiritually bankrupt apart from Christ. They have let go of the illusion that they can do life on their own, and they acknowledge they are utterly and completely lost and need a Savior. Jesus begins His sermon with these words because they are foundational, and they’re the starting point for any walk of faith.

Until you come to the place where you acknowledge that you are spiritually bankrupt and can’t save yourself, you’ll never experience the blessed life God intends for you. The blessed person is the one who is quick to say, “I can’t.” I can’t fix this problem, heal my marriage, overcome my anger, or get rid of my shame. I can’t, but God can, and I’m going to look to Him to help me. That’s what it means to be poor in spirit.

In the second Beatitude Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”* Most of us know what it’s like to mourn a loss, especially the death of someone we loved. We experience grief, sadness, sorrow, and at times we can’t stop weeping. That’s what it was like for me when Lorie passed away. While the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus comforts us in our grief whenever we experience profound loss, that’s not what Jesus has in mind here. Instead, He is referring to those who grieve over the sin in their lives.

When you begin to realize just how spiritually bankrupt you are without God, you begin to see your sin for what it really is. And you gain a new appreciation for just how ruined your soul actually is and how much it needs the kind of spiritual transformation only God can bring about. The good news in all this is that when we mourn over our sin and see just how spiritually lost we are, the Holy Spirit reminds us that when Christ comes into our lives, we are forgiven and there is no longer any condemnation. There can be no deep and lasting comfort in our lives apart from a restored and reconciled relationship with God. It’s the second step toward a blessed life.

The third Beatitude is, *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”* When most people hear the word “meek” they think of weak. Meekness isn’t a quality the world admires, and typically we think meek people won’t inherit anything in this world. It’s the strong, the assertive, and the powerful – they’re the ones who are going to get everything worth having in life. But Jesus has a different take on things, and He suggests that it’s actually the person who is meek who will inherit what is most important.

The word that is translated “meek” in our text is the Greek word *praus,* and it was drawn from the world of domesticated animals. It referred to an animal that had learned to accept the direction of its master, like when a wild stallion is broken. The strength and power of the horse is harnessed and channeled in a positive direction under the control of its rider. Interestingly enough, only two people in the entire Bible are described as being meek. Moses and Jesus. Far from being weak, these two spiritual giants had the strength of humility and were utterly committed to listening to the Father and following His lead. Are you like that in your walk with God?

Next Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”* Notice that each beatitude seems to build on the previous one, and there is a logical progression from acknowledging our dependence on God to mourning our sin. Biblical meekness follows naturally from godly repentance, and it produces a hunger and thirst for the kind of life that pleases God.

The word that is translated “righteousness” is a Greek word that means “a right standing which leads to right living,” and it refers to our right relationship with God and with neighbor. Jesus taught that holy living isn’t some kind of duty that is imposed by a contractual obligation. Rather, it’s inspired by a covenantal relationship of love. Obedience isn’t meant to be a duty as much as it is a privilege, and the follower of Jesus is committed to a person, not an ideology.

E. Stanley Jones once said, “Come to the Sermon on the Mount with a legalistic mind, and it is impossible and absurd to live. But come to it with the mind of a lover, and nothing else is possible. The lover’s attitude isn’t one of duty, but one of privilege.”[[2]](#endnote-3) Do you hunger and thirst to live a life that is pleasing to God? Do you view Him as the lover of your soul? Or do you think of God’s call to holy living as just a heavy burden or an onerous obligation? How does your perspective need to change?

The fifth beatitude is, *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy” (5:7).* Of all the beatitudes this one may appear to be the most obvious. Just about everyone feels they have a fairly good idea of what mercy is, and for the most part we all hope we are merciful people. On the surface, Jesus appears to be giving a simple equation: You have to show mercy if you want to receive mercy. It’s *quid pro quo.*

However, this common view of mercy isn’t what Jesus was talking about, and it is a rather weak version of the real thing. It substitutes tolerance for truth, and sensitivity for sacrifice. Biblical mercy doesn’t depend on human kindness. Rather, it’s based on the grace of God. The follower of Christ who shows mercy to others are people who have been transformed by God’s mercy themselves. They become so overwhelmed with gratitude for the mercy that they have received that they feel compelled to extend it to others. They know that they have been saved by grace alone, and the reason they are merciful is because they live in awe of the God who first showed them mercy. That’s what the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector is all about.

The next beatitude is, *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (5:8).* The heart symbolizes who we are at the depth of our being in both positive and negative ways. The Bible cautions us to understand that the heart can become spiritually compromised if we’re not careful, and it can go after the wrong things in life. I recently read where the comedian Woody Allan had an affair with his adopted daughter who was 34 years younger than him, and it broke up his marriage to Mia Farrow. His answer was, “The heart wants what it wants.” An impure heart has led to the downfall of many people.

All too often in my life, I have to admit that there are times when my heart is impure, or I have mixed motives. I can be duplicitous just like everyone else. That’s when I need to look to God to reorder the affections of my heart and purge from me what isn’t of Christ. What is the state of your heart today? Is your heart pure, or is there a mixture of some kind of alloy in there? And what would it take to purge the impurity from your heart so you can see God more clearly and love Him more dearly?

Jesus continues, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God” (5:9).* Notice that Jesus didn’t say, “Blessed are the peace lovers.” He said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Making peace is hard and costly work, and many people who sweep the problems in their relationships under the rug and think they are being a peacemaker in doing so are sadly mistaken. They just want the absence of conflict, but that’s not what real peace is about. Real peace isn’t the absence of conflict; it’s the healthy resolution to conflict.

The meaning of Jesus’ seventh Beatitude is rooted in the OT understanding of peace, and if one word captures the essence of true peace, it’s the Hebrew word *shalom. Shalom* means harmony, wholeness, completeness, and tranquility. To be at peace is to be whole. It is to be at rest in our souls, and to extend this peaceful reign of God to all our relationships. We cannot create *shalom* any more than we can save ourselves. It depends on God, and we must draw upon His power to become peacemakers. Whenever we are a peacemaker, it is reflection of our family identity, and we demonstrate we are indeed children of our heavenly Father who sent His Son to be the Prince of Peace.

The final Beatitude is, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:10).* As we have already seen, the Beatitudes are full of surprises, and the kind of people God blesses aren’t the ones we normally think of as living the good life. How can Jesus possibly call persecution a blessing? Is that what the good life in Christ is all about?

This blessing follows logically from the previous one about peacemaking, because not everyone will agree to live in peace in this world. Some people prefer to be at war rather than experience peace, and living for Jesus will at times put us at odds with those in the world around us. Remember, Jesus Himself experienced severe persecution, and He was executed on a cross at the hands of the Romans and the Jews of His day. Jesus told His disciples that a student isn’t above his/her master. If people persecuted Jesus, they will persecute us as well.

You and I know very little of the kind of persecution Christians are experiencing around the world today in places like China, North Korea, Iran, and Afghanistan. And we should pray for these brothers and sisters in Christ.

Just this week I read about Nvou Dauda who lives in Nigeria. She knows what it’s like to be persecuted for Christ. Militant Muslims raided her village on December 8, 2002, and she was shot in the hand, stomach, and leg, because she refused to convert to Islam. Her attackers burned down her home after dousing it with gasoline, and her 2-year-old son died in the inferno. When she was asked about the awful ordeal she endured, she replied, “I have handed everything over to God, and I pray He will take care of me. I will continue to work for Jesus, and even if I am killed, it will mean I was killed in the name of the Lord.”

More Christians have been martyred for their faith in the last century than in the previous 19 centuries combined, and in many parts of the world it has never been more costly to say Jesus is Lord. In times of persecution, remember the words of Jesus when He said, *“In this world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).*

**Conclusion.**

The Beatitudes are eight simple lines, but they help capture the essence of what it means to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are eight tracks of grace which guide us in the way of Jesus. G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “The first time you read the Sermon on the Mount, you feel like it turns everything upside down. But the second time you read it, you feel like it turns everything ride-side-up.”

As I’ve begun to prepare for retirement, I’ve received a number of ads which have offered to help me get ready for living the good life when I retire. They’ve got all kinds of ideas and suggestions for what to do with the leisure time I’ll have when I don’t have to work for a living. But you know what? I think they’ve got it all wrong. The good life, the life that God blesses, isn’t about the wealth I can accumulate, the wonderful trips Cyndy and I can take, or the way I can spend my time in leisure when I retire. No, the good life, the life God blesses, is found the character I develop and the life I lead in the normal activities and challenges of each new day whether I’m retired or not.

I hope that is what you discover these next seven weeks and that our study of the Sermon on the Mount will take you deeper in the heart of God and further down the path of faith. To God be the glory! Amen.

1. I am indebted to Doug Webster for some of these insights into the Beatitudes. *The Soundtrack of the Soul: The Beatitudes of Jesus* (Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Mount: A Working Philosophy of Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)