

## **Blessed are the who?**

Matthew 5:1-10

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*Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach 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 be shown mercy.*

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

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

*Matthew 5:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version)*

It is one of those passages that seems familiar, maybe too familiar. It is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Maybe we have seen this passage called The Beatitudes on a poster or an embroidered wall hanging or a pillow. These seem like lovely thoughts. Or is more going on here?

I grew up in Orange County near Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral. I believe his ministry did meet some people's needs and provided helpful spiritual guidance and worship. However, there was much about his teaching, preaching, leadership style, and theology I did not agree with. He wrote a book about these verses and called it The Be Happy Attitudes. I really don't think that is what Jesus was saying. Let's look at little more closely.

In Matthew, Jesus is speaking to his twelve disciples. The crowds, while also there, feel almost secondary. In this account, Jesus withdraws to a mountain to teach those who would follow him. Jesus in Matthew's story is a teacher, an interpreter of God's law, and is meeting with his disciples on the mountain like a rabbi with his students.

And the first thing Jesus teaches them is how to recognize blessedness. Not how to become blessed, or even to bless each other, but rather to recognize who is already blessed by God. And the import of all this is that it's not who we necessarily think are blessed.

Every community has its own definition of what constitutes blessedness. We may not always use such a pious word, preferring instead to call it "the good life" or "success." But we all have definitions of what it means to have made it, and usually it's not those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek or pure in heart or thirst for righteousness and all the rest. In our world, when we think of someone who is blessed we most often think of someone who is wealthy or powerful or famous or successful or beautiful or enviable. Blessing, at least according to the standards of this world, is most often of the material kind. (1)

But Jesus teaches something different. Jesus teaches us to see how God calls blessed those who hurting, humble, open, passionate about promoting righteousness and working for peace, or persecuted for doing the right thing. It is an inner quality, not a possession.

I think it's important for us to recognize that those we don't often perceive as valuable to be precisely those God blesses and honors and loves.

Read this way, I almost see Matthew's version of the beatitudes as akin to Luke's Magnificat, where Mary sings that God favors those in need. So also here in Matthew's gospel, Jesus urges his disciples – then and now – to look at those around us differently than the culture does. Rather than measure persons by their possessions, we are invited to see their character.

What if we recognized that God always comes where we least expect God to be — in order to bless that which the world refuses to bless, to love what the world calls unlovable. And what if that is what shapes our lives, our decisions, our words, our actions? What if that is who we are called to be - Be a community fashioned by God's grace to be different from the world around us, to be places of forgiveness, mercy, grace, and goodness.

In a very difficult and sobering week in our country, when lawyers spoke before the Senate about actions, words, power, truth, and what makes for an impeachable offense. I heard very little from certain lawyers or leaders or the president mercy or humility or peacemaking or helping those who mourn or being people of compassion or valuing those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. .

One voice I have appreciated in this time in our country is Dr. John Fea, professor of American History at Messiah College in PA. He identifies himself as an evangelical Christian and has written extensively about his critique of how many evangelical Christians support the president in ways that are in direct conflict with biblical values and ethics. He recently posted this piece on his blog.

*I recently had the honor and privilege of being a guest on Rob Schenk's podcast "Schenk Talks Bonhoeffer." We chatted about my book Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump and evangelicals and politics more broadly. Schenk is the evangelical pastor who had a seat at the table for many of the conversations and initiatives that launched the Christian Right in the 1980s. In the last few years he realized his words of hate and vitriol were actually causing acts of violence. He has changed the ways he talks and invites other Christians to embrace a more civil discourse while rooted in biblical vision of God's kingdom.*

*During the conversation, Schenk talks about his attendance at a prayer meeting on the day of Trump's inauguration. He bumped into an Evangelical Christian leader (court evangelical) who often meets with the President. Schenk suggested that evangelicals needed to "recalibrate our moral compass" to bring it more in line with Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount (and the Beatitudes.) The person responded: "We don't have time for that, we have serious work to do." (2)*

Maybe some politicians and leaders think these blessings and the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are not serious, but I would beg to differ.

They are part of a moral compass, an ethical framework by which we discern right and wrong, just and unjust, loving and hateful.

Live by these words. Think about Chuck Fischer. At his memorial service yesterday, his sons, one daughter and friends and Kay offered words yesterday about the way he lived his life, I thought yes – he embodied the saying – share the gospel, when necessary use words. He lived it, showed it. He was a person of kindness, compassion, integrity.

What if we reflected these verses as a way to live rather than words to say? As one translator reminded me, “Honored” is a good and accurate word in place of “Blessed.” God honors the merciful, God honors the peacemakers, God honors those who mourn. I believe this is radical discourse, not warm devotional sound bytes. Perhaps these pronouncements offer us a way of describing the pursuit of the good life, noble life, integrity, and non-conformity. (3)

How can we hear the Beatitudes anew, opening ourselves to a deeper connection to the holy and the ways of Jesus?

I received one answer from a friend who posted the daily devotion from The Church of the Savior in Washington DC. Here is the introduction. (4)

The Beatitudes is one of the most moving spiritual passages ever written.... I would like share a new translation of the text from the **First Nations Version of The Gospels, Acts, and Ephesians** (2017). The FNV editors expect to release the full New Testament translation in June 2020.

Not only does this version share an eloquent and novel perspective on the text, but in it we hear the timbre of American Indian Christian voices as they read the scripture for assurance in their struggle. As Choctaw Rev. Steven Charleston explains in his insightful theological treatise *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* (2015), many Native peoples when first encountering the Christ story were moved by Jesus’ life and teachings, and saw in him a “Wisdomkeeper.” Like their own spiritual leaders Jesus “went to the mountain to pray” (Luke 6:12, Matthew 14:23), he experienced spiritual visions, worked the Spirit’s healing power, spoke in interpretive metaphor, and revered the teachings of nature, bringing its elements into the most sacred ceremonies of baptism and communion. Like Jesus, vast numbers of Indigenous People of the American continents and beyond had to face the power and injustice of the Empire, and died under its violence.... But like Jesus at Easter, the story is not finished. Great Spirit lives!

Matthew 5:1-10 (First Nations Version)

“When Creator Sets Free (Jesus) saw this great crowd, he went back up into the mountainside and sat down to teach the people. His followers came to him there, so he took a deep breath, opened him mouth and began to share his wisdom with them and teach them how to see Creator’s Good Road.

Creator's blessing rests on the poor, the ones with broken spirits,  
the good road from above is theirs to walk.

Creator's blessing rests on the ones who walk a trail of tears,  
for he will wipe the tears from their eyes and comfort them.

Creator's blessing rests on the ones who walk softly and in a humble manner;  
the earth, land, and sky will welcome them and always be their home.

Creator's blessing rests on the ones who hunger and thirst for wrongs to be made right again;  
they will eat and drink until they are full.

Creator's blessings rests on the ones who are merciful and kind to others;  
their kindness will find its way back to them—full circle.

Creator's blessing rests on the pure of heart,  
for they are the ones who will see the Great Spirit.

Creator's blessing rests on the ones who make peace;  
it will be said of them, 'They are the children of of the Great Spirit!'

Creator's blessing rests on the ones who are hunted down and mistreated for doing  
what is right, for they are walking the Good Road from above." (4)

May we go out to walk the Good Road, noticing those whom God honors and being open to blessings.  
Amen.

- 1) David Lose, "Recognizing Blessing," 1/24/2017, Davidlose.net  
<http://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-4a-recognizing-blessing/>
- 2) John Fea, "Chatting About Evangelicals and Trump With Rob Schenk," 1/31/2020  
<https://thewayofimprovement.com/2020/01/31/chatting-about-evangelicals-and-trump-with-rob-schenk/>
- 3) D. Mark Davis, "Honoring the Dishonored," 2/2/2020  
<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/01/honoring-dishonored.html>
- 4) Matthias Everhope, "The Great Spirit Lives!" 2/2/2020, Church of the Savior weekly devotion  
<http://inwardoutward.org/great-spirit-lives/>