

Apprenticeship to Jesus

You're Blessed!

Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 30, 2022 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹When 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.” (Matthew 5:1-12, NRSV)



What sorts of people are blessed by God? What if I asked you to make a list? Who in this world do you look at and say, “That guy is so blessed.” “She has truly

been blessed by God.” Who would you put on that list? Would you put yourself on that list?

Jesus gives us his list. Spiritually bankrupt people, they are blessed. The broken-hearted...blessed. The powerless and the disenfranchised. The unrighteous. Those who allow others to take advantage of them. The simple and childlike. The ones who won't take a side and insist on standing in the middle are also blessed. And people who are attacked and ridiculed for what they believe, those people are especially blessed.

Are these the sorts of people you would put on your list? Not me. After reading his list, don't you want to ask Jesus, “Lord, exactly what standard are using to measure blessing in this world?”

The Sermon on the Mount, our name for the teachings of Jesus which Matthew records in chapters 5-7 of his Gospel account, begin with these blessings. At first glance, it seems like an odd way to begin a sermon. But consider the context. Jesus has just traveled through Galilee teaching and healing every disease and sickness of every person who came to him. Naturally, this attracted a crowd. Matthew tells us, in fact, that, “**Great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.**”¹

Jesus welcomed the crowds. He always did.² Sometimes he needed a break and snuck away, but generally he showed hospitality to anybody who wanted to hear him teach about God's Kingdom. And he healed everybody who came to him in faith. But as we've talked about the last few weeks, Jesus was ultimately looking among the crowds for more than just curiosity-seekers; he was looking for apprentices, for those willing to commit to him that they might become like him. And so that day as the crowd gathers, Jesus climbs up the mountain, sits down in the traditional posture of a rabbi about to teach, and invites all comers to draw close and listen carefully to what it is he has to say. And I think he begins his sermon with his list of blessed ones to make clear that, truly, all who want to

¹ Matthew 4:25. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

² Luke 9:11 - “**When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.**”

come, regardless of their station or condition in life, are welcome to come. Even the spiritually bankrupt people are welcome to come.

Now, scholars debate as to whether or not Jesus actually spoke all the words recorded in these three chapters of Matthew on the mountain that day and in the order recorded here. Maybe he did, or maybe Matthew simply collected the teachings of Jesus along the way and pasted them together into one sermon when he wrote his Gospel. In a way it doesn't matter, because since all scripture is inspired by God, I believe that we have this sermon in the form that God wanted us to receive it.

Our plan is to slowly walk through the Sermon on the Mount over the course of these next five months. If that seems like a long time, trust me, we could spend five years walking through these three chapters. What we will find in these teachings is Jesus' radical manifesto on what it means to be his apprentice. If you want to know what it looks like to follow Jesus as his disciple, this is the place to start? And as you'll see, Jesus' teaching here is both intensely practical and also extraordinarily demanding. For instance, we will hear Jesus tell us that his apprentices forgive everybody who does them wrong. They never lust, but remain faithful for life in marriage. They always speak the truth, even when it's inconvenient. They willingly let others have their way. They love their enemies. They give generously and secretly, and don't store up material wealth for themselves. They commit to prayer and fasting. They don't worry. They don't judge others. If nothing else, as the Sermon on the Mount spells out the demanding nature of apprenticeship to Jesus, it will separate out the curious from the committed in the crowd.

Many centuries earlier, Moses climbed up a mountain and received from God the 10 Commandments. This was the heart of God's law, and provided the way for Israel to live as God's people. It certainly was not by accident that as Jesus prepares to reinforce and reinterpret how God's people are to live, he also climbs up a mountain to do so. The difference, of course, is that this time there is no middle-man like Moses. This is God himself sitting there doing the teaching. For that reason, those among the crowd then and now would be wise to give heed to what Jesus says, not only listening to his teaching, but ultimately putting it into practice. That, by the way, will be our goal in the weeks and months to come, to not only listen to Jesus, but to obey him.

With that in mind, let's consider again how the sermon begins. These opening words are as famous as nearly any other words found in the Bible. They remain among the highest expressions of religious insight and moral inspiration in the entire world. They are also incredibly difficult to understand, full of mystery. If you came here today hoping that I would offer you once-and-for-all a clear explanation of these blessings, you will likely leave disappointed. Like the parables Jesus tells, these blessings force introspection. In fact, I think Jesus wants us to use our imaginations as he presents to us a different reality, a different world, a different status quo.³ And so I want to encourage you to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you through these words today. The Spirit today will be your best teacher, and likely has something unique to say to you through these verses, provided that you are willing to listen.

Jesus gives eight blessings here. We sometimes call these the Beatitudes, a word that is derived from the Latin word for "blessing." Notice that Jesus isn't describing blessings here; he's delivering them! That's not something you and I could do. Just imagine the sort of person you'd have to be to stand up and declare who is blessed by God. Nobody has that authority except God himself. And so there is great and unquestioned power here in Jesus' declarations. Commentator Dale Bruner uses the modern day example of a baseball umpire. An umpire behind the plate doesn't *describe* balls and strikes, he *declares* balls and strikes. The pitch might be 10 inches off the plate, what most people would describe as a ball, but if the umpire calls it a strike, it's a strike. The pitch might be in the dirt, also a pitch most people would call a ball. But if the umpire calls it a strike, it's a strike. No questions asked. In fact, argue with him and he will send you to the locker room for an early shower. It's what Bruner calls "performative speech", words that don't just *say* something but *do* something.⁴ The people declared blessed here by Jesus are blessed in the moment he makes the declaration.

The word we translate "blessed" is the Greek word *makarios*, and it's a notoriously difficult word to translate into English. Sometimes translators use the word "happy". I don't think that works well, especially considering the way we think about happiness in our society. The blessed person isn't just on an emotional high, but is one who is in a good place, well-off, fortunate. His or her life is flourishing. From the perspective of heaven, which is the perspective we have here, this is the person who has received God's favor. God is on the side of this blessed person and is with this

³ I'm indebted here to Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Sermon on the Mount* (Zondervan, 2013), 30-31.

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1, (Eerdmans, 2004), 160.

person. Certainly God is the source of his or her blessing.

With this in mind, let's acknowledge again that the people Jesus declares blessed are not the people we might imagine he would name. These are unlikely subjects, people most others might actually consider unblessed, or even unblessable. Let me show you what I mean as we walk through these eight blessings.

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

The word “poor” here in the original text is taken from a word that literally means “one who crouches.” Think of the destitute beggar on the street who has nothing to offer and so can only crouch to beg from those who pass by. This is the only place in the New Testament where this word is used to form the phrase “poor in spirit.” It literally means one who is destitute in spiritual matters. In the same way that a materially bankrupt person possesses nothing of material value, a spiritually bankrupt person possess nothing of spiritual value. These people are spiritual zeros, and yet Jesus declares that they are blessed, that God is on their side.

The church for ages has struggled here with this declaration. We've tried desperately to find some redeeming quality here that makes this group worthy of God's favor. Even biblical translators have tried to massage the language here to find something deserving of blessing. They often can't bring themselves to translate the text as it is written. For example, one translation reads, **“Blessed are they who know their spiritual poverty, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**⁵ But that's not what Jesus said. He said nothing about these people *knowing* they were spiritually poor. He doesn't even say that they are blessed *because* they are poor in spirit. He simply says that people who have nothing to offer spiritually are nonetheless blessed. In fact, he says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to them, and belongs to them *now*.

Don't miss the point. Right from the opening words of his manifesto on discipleship, Jesus makes clear that he is in on the side of those who have nothing to offer him. He is about to give us all a vision of what it means to be his disciple, a vision that is going to seem to us, if we are listening and if we are honest, totally unattainable. Many of us will hear Jesus' standards over the coming weeks and want to disqualify ourselves from consideration as apprentices. And yet, can we hear Jesus at the outset siding with those who are totally

inadequate to do what it is he is about to tell them they must do? We must allow the first words of the Sermon to echo through the rest of the sermon. Nobody is disqualified at the outset from entering into the Kingdom of God.

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

Blessed are the ones who can't stop weeping. The man whose wife deserted him after 25 years of marriage. He's blessed. The middle-aged woman who never find her soulmate in the first place. She's blessed. The mother in gut-wrenching grief over the death of her little daughter. The 60-year-old who just lost his job and his life-savings and now has no idea how he will face the coming years with so little. The couple who are beginning to realize their dream of having children is quickly evaporating with every failed pregnancy. They are all blessed!

So many things break the heart in this world!⁶ That includes the broken and breaking world itself. Some among us weep because it seems we live in exile in this world so full of hatred, division, war, and suffering. We are so far away from the world we thought was supposed to be home. It's heartbreaking. But apparently the broken-hearted are blessed, for there will come a day when they will be comforted. According to Jesus, when you are in deep sadness you are in God's hands more than you realize, maybe more than at any other time.

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

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer described this group this way:

When reproached, they hold their peace; when treated with violence they endure it patiently; when men drive them from their presence, they yield their ground. They will not go to law to defend their rights, or make a scene when they suffer injustice, nor do they insist on their legal rights....To these, the powerless and the disenfranchised, the very earth belongs.⁷

Dallas Willard describes the meek as “the shy ones, the intimidated, the mild, the unassertive.” Perhaps we like to think that meekness is a quality we admire in our day. But I'm not so sure it is. Who among us would aspire to be powerless and disenfranchised? And yet

⁵ The Berkeley Version.

⁶ I'm indebted here to Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (Harper, 1997), 116-117.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Collier Books, 1959), 122-123.

Jesus says it is the meek who will one day inherit the earth. The last really do end up first in the end.

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

If you are hungry for righteousness in your life what does that say about you? It says that you are not righteous. If you were righteous, you wouldn't hunger for it! Right? We might expect Jesus to say, “Blessed are the righteous.” That makes sense in our world, where favor follows accomplishment. But that's not what Jesus says. The Spanish mystic, St. Teresa of Avila is reported to have once prayed, “I don't love you, Lord. And I don't want to love you. I only want to want to love you.”⁸ Perhaps her words could be your words, her prayer your prayer. Perhaps you also hunger for righteousness you don't now possess.

Those who are hungry to be made right are blessed because, according to Jesus, they will be “filled,” a word that was used to describe somebody who gorges on food to the point of absolute and utter satisfaction.

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

We have to be careful with these next three blessings. In our day, a merciful person might be admired. Same with the person who is pure in heart, or a peacemaker. Not so in Jesus' day. And if you think about it, not so much in our day either. To show mercy is, in some ways, to allow yourself to be taken advantage of, to not get what you have coming to you, to back down from standing up for your own rights. Some of us might think admirably of a person who makes such a sacrifice, but even we might have a hard time considering such a person blessed. Jesus does, and points out that in due time there will be somebody else who allows Himself to be taken advantage of for their sake. The merciful find mercy.

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

In Jesus day it wasn't the pure of heart who were necessarily considered blessed, but rather the pure of *religion*. The condition of your heart was irrelevant. Did you practice Sabbath, eat all the right foods, associate with the right people, bring your offerings to the Temple on time. That's what mattered, pure religion that others could clearly see. In our day as well we tend to associate blessing with external religion. You can tell a blessed person by the way she prays, or

spends her Sunday mornings, or avoids curse words and raunchy movies, or volunteers at the soup kitchen. But Jesus looks beyond to the heart, knowing that what he finds there will ultimately determine whether or not a person will see God.

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

When you are a peacemaker neither side trusts you. You can't possibly be on my side if you're open to listening to other side as well! In our day, just like back in Jesus' day, it's recommended that you choose sides. Who admires the middle these days in politics? Even in something as trivial as sports, people want you to choose sides; you can't cheer for both teams! In your family, have you ever tried to be the mediator between two people who are at each other's throats? Are they glad to have you there trying to bring peace? Not usually. Again, perhaps peacemakers are admired by some for their courage, but would anybody call them blessed? Jesus does. In fact, he says that one day they will be called something even more than blessed, specifically sons and daughters of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Do you know what would really make me a blessed person right now in my life? If people started harassing me and mocking me for standing up for what is right. Wow! How blessed would I be if that started happening? How blessed would we be if it got to the point in our nation that people started to revile us for being Christians, started putting us down, and throwing us out of places, and making up lies about us to discredit us. If that happens we should rejoice. In fact, let's start praying that this would happen. Who's with me? It's crazy!

To be clear, Jesus doesn't say that persecution is in and of itself a blessing. How could it be? What he does say is that the persecuted, specifically those persecuted for their association with him, are blessed. The very kingdom of heaven belongs to them, just like it belongs to the spiritually bankrupt!

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What a list. The spiritually bankrupt, the broken-hearted, the disenfranchised, the unrighteous, the taken-advantage-of, the pure of heart, the unpopular in the middle, along with the scorned, these are the blessed

⁸ Source unknown.

ones? Who is this in our world? Where are these people? Who fits these categories? I thought about that question long and hard this week. In the end I could only come up with only one person who fits them perfectly.

In the life of Jesus, and especially in the death of Jesus, we see one who is blessed by God. When Jesus rode on the donkey into Jerusalem the Sunday before he was executed, the crowds, quoting Psalm 118, cried out, **“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”** They were right. Jesus was the blessed one. But then five days later, as he hung beaten and bloody, dying on the cross, nobody was calling him blessed anymore. Instead they cursed him, spit at him, mocked him. But they should have known better. He told them that day on the mountainside what a blessed person looks like. How did they miss it that day? Let’s make sure we don’t miss it.

As he died Jesus gave up his spirit and, in doing so, became utterly impoverished. His heart was broken wide open as every friend turned against him, and his own Father abandoned him. It’s hard to imagine a more definitive picture of meekness; he almost just rolls over and lets them take his life. The righteous One, now cursed with the sin of all humanity, became the most unrighteous of all. And such mercy, crying out even for the forgiveness of those who take his life. The purity of heart is unmatched. He hangs there in the ultimate middle, dying so that peace can be made between heaven and earth. And nobody in history has known more scorn than Jesus knew that day. In all this he is blessed. Blessed is the one who comes - and dies! - in the name of the Lord.

Pay close attention. Through Moses, God gave to Israel the Ten Commandments on the mountaintop. But the people had no ultimate resource available to help them to keep those commandments, no way to fulfill them in their lives. As a result, they violated them time and time again. But on another mountaintop centuries later, God, this time in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, renewed for his people the way to follow him and become like him. You see, Jesus didn’t come to do away with God’s law; he came to see it lived out. He says so himself later in this chapter: **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”**⁹

Jesus did this in two ways. First, he fulfilled the law in his own life. If ever there was a teacher who practiced what he preached, it was Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount is for apprentices, because everything we find

there can be seen in the life of the Master. He is the blessed one.

But the second way Jesus fulfilled God’s law, and is in fact still fulfilling it, is in and through us, his apprentices. Because Christ died, rose, and came back in the person of the Holy Spirit to take up residence in the lives of willing apprentices, we now have the power and grace available to us to actually begin to live as he intends us to live. As the great Scottish evangelist Oswald Chambers once put it, “Jesus Christ did not come to teach only; He came to make me what He teaches I should be.”¹⁰

If you are willing to go along with us on this journey these next few months through the Sermon on the Mount, there are going to be several points where Jesus’ teaching will bring you to the point of despair as you realize that your life is so far from the life he is describing here. That’s actually part of Jesus’ intention, and why he begins the whole Sermon declaring that the spiritually bankrupt are not excluded from blessing, but invited into the Kingdom of Heaven. You are not disqualified by your lack of qualifications. It is grace that qualifies you, grace given to you by the blessed one who is qualified. From Oswald Chambers again, “As long as we have a self-righteous, conceited notion that we can carry out Our Lord’s teaching, God will allow us to go on until we break our ignorance over some obstacle, then we are willing to come to Him as paupers and receive from Him.” The Sermon is full of commands, but it begins by blessing those who, on their own, can’t keep a single one of them.

I’ve heard from some of you these last few weeks that you are hesitant, even discouraged, about the idea of being Jesus’ apprentices because you can’t imagine that you could ever actually become like Jesus. But that sounds to me like the perspective of somebody who is poor in spirit, which also sounds like the person Jesus wants to declare blessed and ready to inherit the kingdom of heaven. Do you not believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead, that he has a way of bringing dead things to life? Do you not believe that this same Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, has come to take up residence in your life, meaning that the same power that raised Christ at Easter is literally present in your life?

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

Amen.

⁹ Matthew 5:17

¹⁰ Read the context at <https://utmost.org/classic/the-gateway-to-the-kingdom-classic/>



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the passage again from Matthew 5:1-12.
2. Which blessing grabs your attention? Which seems most startling or mysterious?
3. What is it that Jesus is saying here to me/us through this scripture and message?
4. What is the next step I/we need take to obey Jesus?
5. Do you consider yourself blessed according to Jesus' categories of blessing?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



What do we mean when we say that somebody is blessed? What kinds of people does Jesus bless?

Suggested Scriptures for the Week, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday:	Luke 20 / Psalm 66
Tuesday:	Luke 21 / Psalm 67
Wednesday:	Luke 22 / Psalm 68
Thursday:	Luke 23 / Psalm 69
Friday:	Luke 24 / Psalm 70
Saturday:	John 1 / Psalm 71
Sunday:	John 2 / Psalm 72