

"HE MUST BE KIDDING!"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto, California
January 29, 1984
Matthew 5:1-12

He must be kidding! He can't be serious, expecting his disciples, expecting you and me, to be poor in spirit, mournful, meek, righteous, merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers in this kind of world. Those qualities just do not resonate with the values of this world. At least, Jesus was realistic by ending the beatitudes with the admonition, "you can expect to be persecuted when you live like that!"

Was Jesus serious? Do you take Jesus seriously? His teachings seriously? Many don't. They dismiss Jesus as being idealistic, a dreamer, perhaps relevant in another age and time; but certainly not relevant in this competitive, violent age in which we live. Others say Jesus spoke in poetic terms and did not expect to be taken literally. Still others say Jesus was giving the ethical code of the kingdom of God which will not come until the end of time; in other words, Jesus was discussing some future age, and not ours. That sounds like a convenient cop-out, doesn't it. Anything you don't like in the Bible, just apply to some future time!

But, for those of us who want to take Jesus seriously, who believe Jesus has called us to live out our salvation in this time, in this age, in this nation, what do we do with the beatitudes? Was Jesus kidding? No, Jesus was not kidding. He was perfectly serious. Let's look closer at this passage because part of the problem are the misconceptions surrounding this passage. You are invited to follow along. Use the pew Bible, or if one isn't handy, the beatitudes are listed in the hymnal, No. 620.

First, "Jesus sat down," verse 1. Often a Jewish rabbi, as did Jesus, would teach while walking around; but when he taught officially, he sat down. The central truths, the main part, the core, would be delivered while sitting down. We still speak of a professor's chair; a chair is endowed to provide funds for the professor. The pope sits when he makes an official statement, when he speaks in cathedra. So, immediately, we see that these next verses are very serious. Jesus is not kidding. He sat down.

Secondly, verse 2, "he opened his mouth." That is obvious, you might say; how could he teach with his mouth closed? But, this is the translation of a Greek phrase which signifies that a grave, solemn utterance is about to be made. Perhaps this is the Greek way of expressing what in the Old Testament is translated, "Thus says the Lord." This phrase was also used when a person opens his heart and speaks his mind. So, the beatitudes are central to Jesus' teaching because he sat down to teach and he opened his mouth.

Thirdly, also in verse 2, "he taught them saying". That could also have been translated, "This is what he used to teach them." In other words, the Sermon on the Mount is not one sermon of Jesus given at one particular time and on one particular occasion. It is the summary and the essence of all that Jesus continuously taught his disciples. Matthew is a teaching gospel. He organized his material by general categories in order to instruct new converts in the faith. Matthew 5, 6, 7, is the teaching passage in which Matthew consolidated teachings delivered over the three year period of Jesus' ministry. And the beatitudes, which begin the sermon, are the core, the essence, the summary, the very heart of Jesus' teaching. He is not kidding and we are expected to take them very seriously.

Now, notice the first word of each of the beatitudes, "Blessed". The title "beatitude" which has been given to this passage is derived from the word "blessed" meaning beatific, blissful, happy. Jesus is not demanding these qualities of his

disciples. They are not given as commands. Jesus is not "shoulding" on us - you "should" be poor in spirit, you "should" mourn. Jesus is stating a fact of life. It's the way it is. Jesus is not imposing something contrary to experience which is how many of us interpret the beatitudes. Quite the contrary, Jesus is saying that this is as the world is, and if you want to be happy, the way to happiness is poor in spirit, mourn, etc.

The word "blessed" just does not convey to us the impact of what Jesus is saying. He is really exclaiming. He is not "shoulding". He is not pointing fingers. He is exclaiming. He is observing life, and then stating what he observes. And it is an exclamation, "Oh, how completely happy in God are they!" Those persons who are the happiest, the most serene; those who have it all together, who are living their lives at a level far deeper than superficiality; those who have roots so deep they are solid, stable, resistant to winds, comments, opinions, who do not vacillate; those who make a difference in this world are those who are poor in spirit, mourn, meek, etc. Jesus is not kidding. He is not being idealistic, unreasonable, irrelevant. Jesus is being very relevant, reasonable, and realistic.

We ignore Jesus' wisdom to our own peril. As a result, we live superficially, without roots, drifting, vacillating, going from fad to fad, church to church, religion to religion, searching for depth, looking for God. What Jesus is saying to us in this passage is, "Look I'm leveling with you. I'm letting you in on life's secret. Complete happiness, fulfillment in life, satisfaction, the best of rewards, are experienced by those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, who make peace."

Part of our difficulty in taking Jesus seriously are the misconceptions many have about this passage. The English translation of the Beatitudes which we have in our Bibles is inadequate. You realize we are getting this material third-hand. Jesus spoke in Aramaic, a Hebrew dialect. Then it was translated into Greek by the gospel writers. We do not have any copies of anything written in Aramaic, nor do we have any of the original Greek writing. They are copies. So, the English is a translation of the Greek, which was a translation of Aramaic. What Jesus really meant is a subject of study for the scholars. Based on my reading, I feel the closest translation of the original is as follows. (A series of sermons could be preached on the Beatitudes, but it is also helpful to get the overview).

Verse 3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," might better read, "O, how completely happy in God are those who realize their utter helplessness and have put their trust in God, for they can enter the kingdom of God." Jesus begins with this teaching. This is the foundation for all the rest. Those who are humble, who realize they can't make it on their own, who have lost their pride and pretentiousness, can now receive the Holy Spirit. God can fill a vacuum; God can find no room in a life where it is filled with good works, pride, accomplishments, arrogance. How happy are those who know they need God, for they will receive heaven.

Verse 4: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," might read, "O how completely happy in God are those who have experienced sorrow and have been driven to the deep level of compassion. Happy are those who sorrow for their sins, who sorrow for the suffering of the world, and who seek to make the world a better place. Happy are they, for in their sorrow, they shall experience the comfort and joy of God."

Verse 5, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." This perhaps is the least understood of the Beatitudes for the English word "meek" in our time has come to mean, "weak, mild, milk-toast, wimpy," and that is not at all what Jesus had in mind. Jesus was far from meek, and the example of his life gives us clues as to what he really intended in this Beatitude. This Beati-

tude might deserve another sermon, but let me summarize the meaning, using William Barclay's interpretation for most of this summary. "O, how completely happy in God are those who are angry at the right time and for the right reasons, and are never angry at the wrong time. Happy are those who have every instinct, impulse, and passion under control because they themselves are controlled by God. Happy are those who have the humility to realize their own ignorance and weaknesses. Happy are those who are disciplined and who stand up for the oppressed and mistreated. Happy are they for they are the persons who get things done in this world, commanding respect, exerting leadership and power, i.e. inherit the earth".

The next two beatitudes are quite clear, but let's look at verse 8. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." "O, how completely happy in God are those whose motives are absolutely pure, clear and uncluttered, for they shall see God." Meaning: you will see only what you are able to see. I look at the sky on a clear night and see moon and stars. But, an astronomer knows their names, sees relationships I don't see, identifies planets, and moves around the sky as with friends. S/he sees more because s/he is equipped to see. We may see God limited, clouded, but the pure in heart will see God clearly.

Notice in verses 9 and 10, Jesus talks about persecution after describing the happiness of the peacemakers. This relationship is especially true in our day, for peacemakers soon experience persecution. To make peace in our day is to disturb the Pentagon, military-industrial complex, and multi-national corporations. Peacemakers interfere with big money and you can expect persecution. But, Jesus observes and exclaims, and it is a marvel, "How completely happy in God are those who are persecuted for doing what is right."

No, Jesus is not kidding. He is observing life and stating what he sees. Complete, fulfilled happiness is a result of a life-style which is not popular today, but a life-style in the example of Jesus himself who lived it and revealed it. Dr. W.R. Maltby summarizes the Beatitudes in a compelling manner.

"In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promised his disciples three things - that they would be entirely fearless, that they would be absurdly happy, and that they would get into trouble. They did get into trouble and found, to their surprise, that they were not afraid. They were absurdly happy, for they laughed over their own troubles and only cried over other people's troubles."

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JANUARY 29, 1984