

How Blissful His Disciples Are

Essay 1 in the series “The Beatitudes”

This week we begin a new series of essays on “The Beatitudes” in Matthew 5:1-12, one of the most familiar texts in Scripture and one of the most disregarded. Almost no one pays them much attention. Almost no one feels any great concern for being more poor in spirit, more meek, or more pure in heart. So one can only imagine what might have happened if followers of Jesus instead of reveling in doctrine – in right doctrine, right practice, right church – had truly devoted themselves to being poor in spirit, to mourning, to learning what it is to be meek, to passionately pursuing what is right, to being merciful, to becoming pure in heart, to becoming peacemakers, and to holding on to these counter-cultural values even in the face of the inevitable persecution that goes with them. It was undeniably the intention of Jesus that his followers would do this.

It was undeniably the intention of the writer of the Gospel of Matthew that this would be absolutely clear to whoever read him. These Beatitudes are the keynote to this Gospel – what he most wants everyone to know. After the basics of Jesus’ birth, baptism and temptation, when he turns his attention to what Jesus taught, this is what the writer leads off with. The Gospel of Matthew, remember, is a primer in Christian discipleship, a handbook for students of Jesus, a manual for “the few” who really get it and want to do something about it. Maybe only a few will find it at first, but this is it, this is the manual, and it has to go out to all nations, he says at the very end of the book. It’s a global mission. It’s a global story.

Disciples, those who would really follow Jesus, Matthew is saying, have: to master their anger; to let their ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and their ‘No,’ ‘No;’ to know how and when to turn the other cheek; and to go the second mile. They have to know to stop worrying not just because it’s bad for you because it elevates your blood pressure, or because it suggests a lack of faith, but because worried people can end up doing very destructive things to others. Those who would really follow Jesus have to know: that the way you judge others is the way God will judge you; that the way you forgive others is the way God will forgive you; that the way to find yourself is to lose yourself; and that the things that matter most in life are not done by force, that, in fact, “all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” Hmmm. What do you suppose that would mean in our troubled time?

And so Jesus asks his followers to get these teachings out, knowing that everything depends on disciples being made of all nations, knowing that the safety, the security, the sanity of the world depends on this. So Jesus came into the hill country of Galilee launching a revolution, a revolution of the heart, a revolution in the ways people live and think and feel, a revolution in the ways they respond to one another. He came not so much to start a new religion as to launch a revolution of love and forgiveness worldwide. He came not so much to demand a set of doctrines and rituals for the few but to teach a way of being for everyone.

And it all begins with what we have come to call the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Jesus comes announcing the kingdom of heaven. Elsewhere it’s called the kingdom of

God. This is the revolution of which he speaks. And he stuns his audience. When he starts speaking of God's kingdom, of revolution, they expect to hear, "Take up arms. Attack Rome. Fight off the tyrants." Instead Jesus tells them that his kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit. It belongs to those who genuinely grieve. It belongs to those who master their impulses through meekness. It belongs to those who find justice not in vengeance but in doing what is right. It belongs to the merciful. It belongs to those who seek God with all their heart. It belongs to those who renounce violence and work for peace, and who will do so even in the face of violent resistance. And the people who get this and become this, Jesus calls "Blessed."

So we think, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Yada yada. One day they'll get to heaven and we guess things will eventually turn out well for them. Maybe." But still we entirely miss what Jesus is saying. We are deeply, profoundly mistaken. What Jesus is saying is simply a statement of what is. How joyful, how radiantly joyful, how radiantly, unshakably joyful such people are. No one will be able to take away their joy (John 16:22). How blissful such people are! In their very poverty of spirit, in their grieving, in their unanticipated meekness, in their passion for just doing what is right regardless of the consequences to themselves, in their mercy, in their single-mindedness pursuit of God, in their renouncing violence and making peace, in all circumstances, even persecution, it is they who have found unshakable peace. It is they who sense eternity all around them. It is they who live enchanted lives. Not needing to possess or control anything, all things are theirs. They are open to all that life offers them, trusting that no matter what happens in their lives, it may just be for their highest good. Deep in their souls it is they who are born again. It is they who are free. God's love pours into them; joy and vitality pour out of them. It is they who feel one with God, who sense the divine flow all around them and in them. They are surrounded by grace. For them time becomes eternity. They are filled with previously unimaginable power. They feel they can touch the heavens; that kingdom is theirs!

They have found a joy that is nothing short of euphoria. And even when they slip – and they will sometimes slip – they now know life in the Spirit and the way back to it. At first you try a little, a little poverty of spirit, a little purity of heart. You let go of your narrow, fearful, little ego. Maybe you're hurt, deeply disappointed. You've hit what feels like bottom. And for a moment you just let go and trust. And it is just then that you sense this deeper life, how free you could be, how good life could be. And it's almost something like euphoria, a state you have never quite felt before. In that moment you realize that out there just beyond your grief is unshakable joy. But the moment leaves you. At first such moments do. They come and go. But now just maybe you can see the bliss, the deep soul happiness, that the God who is Love intends for you.

So the call of this God who is Love is a call to a state called beatitude, to supreme blessedness, to bliss, to euphoria. It's there for the taking. For anyone. Anytime. This is, it turns out, the foundational wisdom of the world God created. It can be yours starting now. Yeah, you'll fall off it. Old habits die hard. But you'll get back on. Now

you'll know the way, and the way back. It's this poverty of spirit. It's this purity of heart – this single-minded quest for God. Yours is the kingdom of heaven. Every morning it will be as if you arose in heaven. You will be comforted. You will inherit the earth. You will be filled. You will be shown mercy. And you will see God. All this is yours in a state called beatitude.

– Dale Pauls