

## How to Be Blessed Matthew 5:1-12

The Beatitudes of Jesus are not the happy sappy attitudes of the positive thinking crowd. These are the beatitudes for the broken, hurt, persecuted, sometimes down, people of Christ.

Pat Conroy, in *My Reading Life*, describes his encounter with a high school librarian in Beaufort, South Carolina. With apologies to all wonderful librarians, I tell this story. Conroy writes, “For Miss Hunter . . . the state of nirvana would be a library cleaned of all readers and the books all shelved and accounted for. She was famous for her need for absolute control of her book-lined fiefdom. She seemed agitated every time a student disturbed the airspace of her private domain. “In the years I knew her I never saw her reading a book or talking about a book she’d read. Her familiarity with literature was suspect, and she placed the Sherlock Holmes collection in the biography section. Don’t you think that church members can be like Miss Hunter? We can live among the people of Jesus, worship in his church, and have no organic relationship to who he is and what he teaches. But if we live anywhere in proximity to Jesus we will have to face his primary teaching – The Beatitudes, and believe me these are not hints for successful living or recommendations for the good life or the secrets to happiness, health, and wealth.

Make no mistake. Jesus is not setting up an impossible obstacle course for individuals; he’s setting the agenda for his church. Private, personal, and pietistic readings of the Beatitudes lead to pride and frustration. Don’t call this a list of requirements, but a picture of a real church. Don’t call this a universal ethic that can be practiced with a little hard work and effort. Such a rendering of the Beatitudes leaves us where the church too often leaves folks: with a guilty feeling. For all of you trained from childhood in the fine art of feeling guilt and despising yourself, this sermon is for you.

The Beatitudes challenge us because they are aliens in our culture. Meekness, mercy, and peace – the language of church – incomprehensible to the world. The world, hearing our language, reacts like a Frenchman outraged when an American butchers the French language. After all, in Paris friendliness is one of the seven deadly sins. An American novelist, living in Paris, says that his French was so bad, that the concierge (kon-see-airzh) **his hotel became so hostile that he finally told her he was mentally retarded and had been sent to Paris on a rehab program. With heartbreaking cries of, “Oh, pardon, monsieur, pardon, pardon,” she gave him a big hug and an extra croissant at breakfast every morning. The world is not on friendly terms with the Beatitudes.**

Part of the reason: the Beatitudes are rooted in humility. Humility lives as an outcast in our arrogant world. Humility, in our culture, is a child missing so long it should have its picture on a milk carton and be the subject of an unsolved crime drama. Arrogance and self-righteousness own the souls of so many.

Humility is a reticent, shy virtue. She refuses to go where she is not invited. No shrinking violet, and stronger than steel, she still waits to be invited on a date. Humility balks at raised voices, showoffs, swelled heads, or bad manners. Humility packs her bag and leaves the ARB church: The Always Right Baptists. Someone has said, "Being humble is like trying to catch air in your hands." A person becomes humble unconsciously while being faithful to Jesus Christ.

Humility and her children – the Beatitudes – are the path to blessing. Call it mission impossible, but as hard as it is, we are still called to live the Beatitudes. This is not an All-American tale of a lone cowboy taking on the world with six-shooters blazing. The church lives the Beatitudes together. The Beatitudes are, as Stanley Hauerwas puts it, "the constitution of a people. You cannot live by the demands of the [Beatitudes alone], and that is exactly the point."

The Beatitudes are a family photo of a people gathered by and around Jesus. Matthew says Jesus went up on the mountain and his disciples came to him. Here is the real church – the followers of Jesus listening and imitating him. Isn't this the best possible news? Jesus, the Master of Humility, is our teacher. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart." Listen, we can crank out Bach and Beethoven with full orchestra, we can preach like Elijah and Paul, we can even feed hungry people, but until the Beatitudes are our way of life we are not the church Jesus intends. No one of us possesses all the Beatitudes, but wherever Jesus gathers disciples, "we can be sure that some will be poor, some will mourn, and some will be meek".

Jesus offers up the Beatitudes as his response to our world's circle of violence. Have you seen the All State television ads with the character named Mayhem? Our world is populated with guys like him. They break, bruise, and batter everything and everyone in the world.

Violence is a way of relating that inflicts pain on all of life including the environment and all creatures. Treating others as our inferior is a form of violence. Ask any child ever bullied on the playground. Ask any person ever threatened, intimidated, or beaten for just being different. In line at the supermarket I saw a single mom with three children pay for her groceries with food stamps, and heard the low bitter murmuring of affluent customers. Was it envy of the poor or just a deep-seated anger at the thought that someone might get something for nothing? So Jesus, looking at our world, offers us the Beatitudes as a gift, as a way of anti-violence. Write this down: Practice the Beatitudes and you will not participate in the violent ways of our world.

Yet there's no wonder we work so hard to mimic the world and to get ahead. The Beatitudes aren't good references on a resume. You can't say, "I will make a good investment banker because I am merciful, meek, and pure in heart." Our grab-and-go world has neither the patience nor the wisdom to fit the Beatitudes into a busy schedule. From the first time we do or do not make the honor roll in first grade until the day we retire, we know the score. In a world of competition, we have to do something

to stay one step in front. Our world has its own beatitudes. “Happy are the pushers: for they get on in the world. Happy are the hard-boiled: for they never let life hurt them. Happy are they who complain: for they get their own way in the end. Happy are the blasé: for they never worry over their sins. Happy are the slave-drivers: for they get results. Happy are the big mouths: for they get on television and distort reality. Happy are the angry demagogues: they deceive people and rule with iron fists. Happy are the knowledgeable: for they know how to work the system. Happy are the trouble-makers: for people have to take notice of them.”

So, what’s the answer? In a gathering storm of mayhem, the church has to “load up” on the virtues of the Beatitudes, because we church types are called to live the Beatitudes. “The goal of Christian living is to follow Jesus and to share with the other disciples in seeking the [peaceable kingdom] of God.” When we open our hands with gratitude to receive the gift of the Beatitudes from one another, we will find the hard edges of life dissipating, the tendencies to be judgmental and self-righteousness shrinking, and life filled with more blessings. The church looks really good wrapped in the Beatitudes.

And look, as if from nowhere, the manifold, multiple blessings of God appear. To us belongs the kingdom of God, the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and the inheritance of the earth. We shall be filled with righteousness and receive mercy and grace to help in our hour of need. We shall see God and be called children of God. We shall be the most blessed people on the face of this planet. And as we go about our beatitude practicing life, humility will quietly take up residence in our hearts and we won’t have to say anything. Others will see the light shining in our eyes. They will see the spirit of Jesus on our faces and the world will grow strangely dim and the blessings of God will pour forth from the skies.