

“The People of God’s World” (Part 1)

Matthew 5: 1-12

NLT 1 One day as He saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around Him, 2 and He began to teach them.

3 God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for Him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. 4 God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth. 6 God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied. 7 God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy. 8 God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God. 9 God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God. 10 God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. 11 God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. 12 Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.

The Message: 1 When Jesus saw His ministry drawing huge crowds, He climbed a hillside (mountain). Those who were apprenticed to Him, the committed, climbed with Him. Arriving at a quiet place, He sat down and taught His climbing companions. This is what He said: 3 You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and His rule.

4 You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. 5 You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought. 6 You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

7 You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full’, you find yourselves cared for. 8 You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. 9 You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

10 You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom. 11 Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

Our text for today from Matthew chapter 5 is the first part of what is commonly called Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7). More specifically, the first 12 verses are called the "Beattitudes". The Sermon on the Mount is mainly about Jesus giving us a glimpse of what He called the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. Unless you are referring to England as the "United Kingdom" or playing a medieval knight video game, you rarely if ever hear the word "kingdom". That's why the title of the sermon is people of "God's world" rather than "People of God's Kingdom." Jesus said that God's world was both future and present. That is, in the future, God will install a new structure, a new "government," and this, he says, is what it will look like. But Jesus also says that God's world has already, in another sense, entered into the present age, the "Now" if you will.

It's no secret that American culture is one of the most diverse tapestries of humanity in any country in the world. We value diversity and multiculturalism because our country consists of people who literally come from every tribe and nation. In many areas you're as likely to hear someone speaking Spanish in the grocery store as you would the local American English dialect, for example (be it "Y'all" or "Hey You Guys" or "Yous guys"). Our cities are populated by a patchwork of ethnic neighborhoods, and walking down the street can often seem like a tour of the world and its peoples.

But not every country is as diverse. In fact, here's a question: What do you suppose is the most ethnically *homogenous* country in the world? Many people would immediately dial to Japan or the Koreas, for example, or some African nations. Maybe you'd think of one of the Arab nations or somewhere in Eastern Europe. Japan would be a good answer because of its tight immigration rules and significant learning curve for the language. Other nations are homogenous because they are isolated either politically (like North Korea) or geographically (like some island nations).

Even those nations that would seem to be traditionally homogenous would seem to be changing as the world becomes "flatter" and we become more technologically and physically linked by computers and travel. Many people in South Korea, for example, would still see themselves as ethnically homogenous (which is still the official line of the country's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology). Many Koreans hope that expressing their cultural homogeneity will appeal to North Koreans and lead to eventual reunification. At the same time, however, the country hosts immigrants from 126 different countries and races. As one South Korean professor points out, "We are the Han race and Han means sky, sky embraces everything, so the term 'Han race' is inclusive."

There's a truth to that statement. No matter where we live or what ethnic tribe we're from, we all live under the same blue sky in God's good creation. While we pay attention to differences in culture, language and race, God tends to evaluate us based on characteristics that are more than skin deep. Indeed, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus reveals that God defines the world much differently than we do and, in fact, is remaking the world in such a way that *defines God's people by their character and conduct* more than their heritage. [NOTE 1]

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus redefines what it means to be a citizen of God's new world -- a world Jesus called "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven" (those terms are used interchangeably). Who are the people of God's world? While we all may look different on the surface and speak a different language, Jesus reveals at the very beginning of his discourse *that there are certain traits that will be common to all of those who are becoming part of God's new world.*

Look closely at the Beatitudes (verses 1-12) and you might notice that they build on one another. The 20th-century missionary, E. Stanley Jones, observed *that you could really divide these nine Beatitudes into three sets of three, with each set of three Beatitudes following the same pattern: thesis, antithesis and synthesis.* [NOTE 2]

When you look at them in this way, you begin to see that Jesus is laying the foundation for citizenship in God's new world which he will flesh out in the rest of the "sermon"

The first three verses begins with the thesis: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3). Writer Tim Merrill writes, "My wife and I were traveling in Ireland last summer, and we went to a vesper service on a Saturday evening at a Dominican priory in Waterford. The abbot spoke about the meaning of the first beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." He suggested that one way to understand this verse is to play around with the word order and read it like this: "Blessed are those who have the spirit of the poor." In other words, the people of God's world are those who identify themselves with those who have less, with those who struggle to survive, with those whose options are limited by systems and structures beyond their control. We are blessed when we can enter into their suffering and can see as they see. The poor, then, become more than an abstract concept, or a demographic entity removed from our own experience. We have become them for we have their spirit." --Timothy Merrill, Executive

Editor, *Homiletics*.

Plenty of people have debated what "poor in spirit" means, but here's where the context can help us. Remember that Matthew's gospel is written to a Jewish audience and is aimed at telling us that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David and son of Abraham, and that He's the one who fulfills the law by embodying it. So, when Jesus talks about the poor in spirit, our clue to what that means is found within the context of his own life and character. If we want to know what being poor in spirit looks like, we turn to Jesus as the first example.

In chapter 3, we read about Jesus' baptism, where the voice of God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well-pleased" (v. 12). That's an echo back to Isaiah 42:1, when God is speaking to the figure called the Suffering Servant. Right at the outset, Jesus, the king of God's new world, is marked as a servant who came to give his life for the world (20:28). Jesus then immediately "*obeys*" the Spirit in chapter 4 and goes out into the wilderness where he engages in radical *self-denial*. To be "poor in spirit" combines these three traits of Jesus: servanthood, obedience and self-denial. The one who is poor in spirit recognizes that he or she has nothing to offer God on his or her own, that his or her life has no purpose apart from God. They obey God not out of

obligation, but out of a desire to gain something better -- the life of God's new world. The poor in spirit are those who voluntarily empty themselves so that they can be filled by God. [NOTE 3]

This leads to the *second beatitude*, which focuses the attention from the inward to the outward: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Disciples who are poor in spirit, who have turned their attention away from themselves, now turn their attention to the world and begin to see it as it currently is -- a world in pain, a world where the selfish desire of sin dehumanizes people, a world full of violence, a world that has given up hope of redemption. Those who mourn are blessed because they are able to enter into the world's pain and grief and are not afraid of it.

Synthesize those two beatitudes together and you get the third: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." We tend to think of meekness as wimpiness, as though our lives could be written as a "Diary of a Wimpy Christian." But here meekness is a combination of the previous two elements: the power and decisiveness of self-denial in the poor in spirit, and the passion for the pain of the world in those who mourn. Those who both want nothing from the world and, at the same time, are willing to share everything with it are the meek. The spirit of self-denial and the spirit of service come together to make a new being -- the most formidable person on earth -- the terrible meek. They are terrible because they want nothing, hence they can't be tempted or bought, and they are terrible because they are willing to go to any lengths, even unto death, on behalf of others.

The second set of three. With the image of the "terrible meek" still fresh in our minds, Jesus then turns to another set of three beatitudes that follow the same pattern: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" (thesis, v. 6); "Blessed are the merciful" (antithesis, v. 7); and "Blessed are the pure in heart" (synthesis, v.8). Whereas the first three beatitudes *gave us a pattern for emptying ourselves, these next three teach us with what we are to be filled.* [NOTE 4]

Another way of translating the Greek word for righteousness is "justice." Justice takes the meaning of righteousness out of the realm of the individual and into the realm of the whole world. The people of God's world aren't just those who do good; they do good *for a purpose* -- to bring God's justice into the world. In other words, they are those who see their lives within the context of God's larger mission of redeeming the whole world. They do the will of God, but they see God's will as being bigger than themselves. They're not as concerned about their own eternal destiny as they are about the destiny of the whole creation. They're less focused on justifying themselves than participating in God's justice for those who need it most.

But righteousness by itself can easily turn into Pharisaic self-righteousness. That's why we need the balancing of the second beatitude in this triad: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (v. 7). Those who have hungered and thirsted for God's justice must begin to show mercy to those who need that justice the most. When you put the passion for justice and the compassion of mercy together, you become the "pure in heart," or the "undivided in heart" (v. 8). Blessed are those whose life is geared

toward a single purpose that is both righteously merciful and mercifully righteous. These are the ones who are blessed to "see God" because they see the movement of God and the purpose of God in every person. They see God everywhere because they are always looking for ways in which to live out God's purpose through obedience, mercy, service and love. They see God the way Jesus said they would -- in the face of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the least, the last and the lost (Matthew 25). [NOTE 5] *The third set of three.* "Blessed are the peacemakers" (v. 9); "Blessed are those who are persecuted" (v. 10); and "Blessed are you when people insult you" (v. 11 NIV). Take the meek who want nothing from the world, and the pure in heart who want nothing but God. Put them together and you get peacemakers!

The peacemakers are the ones who are resolute and active in their pursuit of reconciliation and justice between humans in conflict with each other, whether the conflict is between families, races, cultures or countries. The peacemakers, in other words, are those who stand in the gap and are willing to engage conflict with peace, to work for justice, and stay in that gap for as long as is necessary despite the sabotage that will inevitably come from those who are unmotivated or unwilling to change.

If peacemakers are the *thesis*, the *antithesis*, or that which acts against it, is persecution (v. 10). Jesus says that a) if you're a peacemaker, you are blessed! But Jesus also says, b), if you are a *persecuted* peacemaker, you're blessed again! The final beatitude, verse 11, is a variation of the previous one. You're blessed yet again if, after persecuting you because of your peacemaking, they insult you and slander you -- lie and talk trash.

History tells us that anyone who acts as a peacemaker will usually become one of the persecuted (vv. 10-11). Jesus is the ultimate example of that truth. As E. Stanley Jones once put it, "Peacemakers must get used to the sight of their own blood."

If there's a synthesis for this final triad of beatitudes, it is in Jesus' concluding remarks. If you're a peacemaker, if you're a persecuted peacemaker, and if you're a lied-about, trash-talked, persecuted peacemaker, well then, basically, you can start rejoicing. [NOTE 6] The synthesis is joy. The fruit of living a peacemaking, persecuted life, even a life that embodies all of the qualities Jesus itemizes in this list we call the Beatitudes, is JOY. Persecuted peacemakers in particular can rejoice because they're persecuted for doing something worth persecuting! They rejoice because they are walking directly in the footsteps of Jesus and the prophets. They rejoice because their peacemaking, even if it costs them their own blood, is making change possible.

The poor in spirit. The mourning. The meek. Those who hunger for righteousness. The pure in heart. The merciful. The peacemakers. The persecuted peacemakers. The slandered, insulted and persecuted peacemakers. These are the people of God's world.

[NOTE 7] The church is where we begin to develop this kind of character as we work and minister with each other. Living like this is a sign that God's new world is breaking all around us. The more we focus on living like the people of God's new world, the more likely this present world will start to look beyond races and borders and toward a brand new way of life! If we expect to have any impact on our community, to make a

difference for Jesus, we need to be building these character traits into our lives. So what are you going to do about it? Please write down on your bulletin or in your phone or somewhere that is accessible ... What is one thing you can do today to start building these character traits into your life? We need to start somewhere today. I am going to write down that I need to hunger and thirst for righteousness more, I need to read my Bible each day and work at finding a way to apply it every day, not just when I should because I'm a Pastor. Next week, we will continue to look at the "People of God's World" in the passage following the Beatitudes where Jesus talks about how we're salt and light.

Sermon Notes for "The People of God's World (part 1)"

based on Matthew 5: 1-12

Given in Doster Community Church on October 29, 2023

- I. In the Sermon on the mount, Jesus redefines what it means to be a citizen of God's new world—a world Jesus called "the kingdom of heaven." There are certain traits that will be common to all those who are part of "God's new world."
- II. E. Stanley Jones proposes that we can divide the 9 Beatitudes into three sets of 3, following a pattern of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.
- III. The first set of three are 1) Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Verse 3). 2) Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted, 3) and the synthesis blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." They teach us a pattern of emptying ourselves.
- IV. 2nd set of 3: 1) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (ver. 6), 2) Blessed are the merciful (verse 7), and the synthesis 3) Blessed are the pure in heart. They teach us with what we are to be filled.
- V. 3rd set of 3: 1) Blessed are the peacemakers (v.9), 2) Blessed are the persecuted" (v.10); and 3) "Blessed are you when people insult you" (v.11). Take the meek who want nothing from the world and the pure in heart and you get peacemakers. The synthesis is joy.
- VI. The fruit of living a peacemaking, persecuted life, pure in heart, and meek is joy. The poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, those hungering for righteousness, the pure in heart, the merciful, the peacemakers and the persecuted are the people of God's World.
- VII. So, what are you going to do about it? Please write down on your bulletin or in your phone ... What is one thing you will do today to start becoming a person of God's new world? We absolutely have to start building these kinds of things into our character if we want to make a difference in the lives of our community.