

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“Message from the Mountainside”

Matthew 5: 1-11

January 30, 2005

It's significant of course, that what we read together earlier in the service, this Beatitude Teaching, was the first sermon Matthew records for us. Matthew is a gospel, pretty big on teaching and preaching and we just heard Jesus' first sermon.

Or at least the first part of it... kind of like he started with a poem... which they taught us at seminary, wasn't a bad way to begin. He starts with a poem... but there are no mere three points to follow.

What follows is dazzling and brilliant... a teaching that lives and that you don't grab hold of... it grabs hold of you.

That's what we were feeling at Lectionary Breakfast Friday morning... the best commentary I get all week, by the way. Friday, the Beatitudes were in charge of us.

Someone said... **“It's beautiful and musical...”** And it is... **Blessed are... Blessed are... Blessed are.”** It's comforting in its rhythm... and sort of lulls you at first.

Another pointed out... **“Yeah, sort of like a children's song, it invites me in but then it really unloads...”**

“Like a knife in me, that's being turned,” another said.

That got a lot of heads nodding “amen”... and someone confessing... **“I'm not any of this yet... can't check off any of these.”**

That's the way it began... and the conversation just kept bouncing, bouncing wildly... off the text and our lives... back and forth.

It's not hard to imagine this text bouncing around in an ancient church... They're gathered in some simple living room. It's 70 AD... and not a fun time for Christians. In many ways, their commitment to Christ hadn't paid off.

Plenty of persecution... isolation.

Rejection... they didn't go home for the holidays anymore.

Lives full of everything lives are full of.

Being followers of The Way was no insulation. They still got sick... lost loved-ones... had to deal with difficult people. There was no insulation and though Jesus never promised there would be... they were wondering.

Their lives weren't so blessed. And it's just a humans instinct to figure that if you're doing the right thing... following the right savior... you're going to get some blessing... a little payoff.

But the Christians died from this and that plague... just like everyone else... In addition, they were a despised sect... ridiculed on a good day.

So they wondered... if they were doing it right... getting it right... believing it right. **Were their circumstances saying no?** That was at least one of the big questions

lying squarely in the heart of those first century believers who had snuck off for another worship service.

They were wondering about God's blessing and about what it means to get it when their leader pulled out the scroll they'd gotten recently and read this part of Matthew's new gospel. The conversation that followed, the way they heard the Beatitudes was certainly shaped by the fact that they had the curtains drawn, hiding as they heard it.

Who you are makes a difference in what you hear. Like it did that day Jesus first preached this sermon and started it with this blessed poem.

We heard earlier about the crowd that had gathered. They were, Matthew makes a point of telling us, ill in all sorts of ways... **"Suffering from severe pain, demon possession, seizures, and were paralyzed."**

The congregation was pretty much the walking wounded if they were walking at all... and remember, it's not just a human instinct to feel the gods must not be pleased with you if you're paralyzed... In that religious culture, it was assumed Yahweh wasn't pleased because surely there was a skeleton in your closet.

"Who caused this man's blindness?" they asked in John's gospel, **"His sin or his parents."** Someone's paying for something. Someone broke a commandment or came up too short on the Levitical list that determined who was naughty or nice. And someone's suffering because of it.

So the congregation there in Galilee wasn't suffering simply from the severe pain of every disease but from the deep suspicion that God didn't like them and was making that apparent. Whoever had God's blessing... it wasn't them.

Matthew writes, **"When he saw them..."** Not just an incidental transition out of chapter four as we read it... not at all. But an insight into God with us. He saw them... suffering... outside and in. And when he did, he went up on the mountainside.

Luke says he sat down on a plain. Matthew says "mountainside." That's not just, "potato," "potatoe," "Herman," "Herman." Matthew, the one who writes with an eye towards the Jews, has this new teacher go up the mountain, because the old one did. Moses went up the mountain to bring down the law.

Jesus is about to give them his law so he goes up on a mountainside to sit down and to say, **"Let me tell you about who has the blessing of God."**

And that's the big word, right? Blessing? The Living Bible substituted "happy." Don't even go there. This isn't about getting you happy. It's about who is blessed of God and blessing in the bible is miles beyond happy in Hallmark.

Remember in that Old Testament story of Jacob and Essua, where Jacob tricks his dying father into giving him the blessing rather than his older brother. Essau is beside himself later... with his dad... unblessed... **Don't you have one for me?** And there wasn't and his weeping could be heard all over.

To be unblessed is worth weeping about. Blessing gives you something you can't get for yourself. It comes from another and you need it. And you know it if you have it and you know it if you don't... and the painful weeping is impossible to miss.

You know, don't you?

The blessing is about you... Not, **"I sure like the way you color, son."** No... **"I like you. There's a gleam in my eye when I look at you."** The blessing is core deep and deeper. It penetrates...

And that's what this poem is about first... And those sitting beneath this mountain, suffering. And those sitting in that first century, den... wondering. And those sitting around coffee at the Atrium... bouncing... Hear this teacher come from God say, **"You're blessed..."** That's the first thing out of his mouth...

"You're blessed if your spiritually poor... if you don't have it together spiritually... you're blessed of God." It's amazing that one is first.

"You are blessed... if you mourn... if you've lost what seemed like everything... you have God's blessing."

And on he goes, proclaiming God's blessing to them. Don't you know Jesus was still seeing them... looking persons in the eye.

"Blessed are you... you are blessed... and you... you're blessed, if you're meek. If you have no power..."

What was it like for them to hear this? This word... this reality... this good news. You have God's blessing... you, who thought it was a million miles away.

"You, who are starving for righteousness... you want it so badly... need it so much... and feel like you haven't eaten in years."

"You're blessed," he kept saying it. **"You're blessed."**

And they heard it on that hillside and in that den... around that breakfast table. Are you hearing it? **You have God's blessing... what you need most. What is essential to live."**

It isn't because of anything. It's simply yours.

"You are blessed today," merciful one... you'll know mercy.

Are you persecuted? Is someone or some thing just "after you?" Jesus sees you... can you hear him say, **"You're blessed."**

That's where it all begins... it has to begin there. God's grace coming down from this mountain. If you can't get this... you can't get Jesus.

This teaching is amazing and it is exasperating. You'll spend a lifetime hearing it, I hope... but only if you hear this first. God's blessing is yours period.

Now... beyond that... this sermon starter will bounce around in your life as it did around our table Friday morning.

You'll see this great vision, as one of us said, **"sort of dangled out in front of the community... challenging us to something beyond us. Be this way."**

Or you'll see and hear a path that changes who you are inside out. It's a contemplative path,
 where you see your spiritual poverty and emptiness...
 where you embrace suffering...
 where your hungers and passions are transformed...
 where you practice forgiveness, over and over and over.

At other times, you'll look out a window, as one of us did, who saw someone going through the trash by the window and you'll ask, **"Can I even get this, without getting to the bottom of life?" Is the gospel so bottom up, so inverted, that I have to go there.**

It bounces and bounces around... you'll be challenge to an advanced ethic in your world and in your relationships... and community. You'll always be saying,
**"Jesus calls me to be a peacemaker...
 He calls me to mercy...
 Jesus calls me to hunger for righteousness, justice."**

And having heard... core deep and deeper... that you are blessed of God... you'll care about that and everything else Jesus said that day on the mountainside and what's more, you'll seek it. Meekness... peace... humility... mercy.

You have God's blessing... period. Knowing it... and living powerful lives of blessing ??????
 that's why Jesus is sitting on that hillside in the fullness of time.
 And why we keep gathering here.
 And why we must come to this table.
 The Beatitudes Jesus shared that day are a self portrait...
 One blessed of God who lives a life of blessing in the world.
 One who sees a vision of another way of being
 and invites us to see it with him.
 On that hillside by the Sea of Galilee he told us what it looked like...
 on the hillside outside of Jerusalem... he showed us what it is.

You come to this table saying yes to that again... believing you are blessed and declaring your desire to take that blessing into the deepest part of who you are. To internalize Christ and his gospel in ways that change you forever.

In mystery and words beyond our comprehension... Jesus said, **"Truly, truly, I say to you... unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood; they abide in me and I in them."** (John 53, 54, 56)

Jesus took a loaf of bread... blessed it... broke it and said. **Take this... it is my body.** And then he took the cup... and after he gave thanks he gave it to them and said, **"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."**

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