

The Upside-Down Kingdom of Christ

Matthew 5:3-12

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The last time I stood up here, I wanted to let you know that it's ok to not be ok. So, how are we doing? Are we soaking in the love of Christ to the point that we really know that He will never leave us, even when (or maybe especially when) we are not ok? Are we deeply trusting in the *heseka*, the steadfast promises of God that He is always for us and never against us, whether we are ok or not? Are we fully relying on the incredible power of the Holy Spirit to awaken this new reality in us and to move us forward in our daily pursuit of Jesus and to empower us to love and serve His people in sacrificial ways?

No? Me either.

That's part of the reason I've landed on the Beatitudes as our text for the next two Sundays. God has been both encouraging me and challenging me with these 10 verses. The challenging part is that he is graciously showing me that I am not ok. The encouraging part is that he is lovingly assuring me that that is ok.

Before we dive in, I want to tell you a personal story to let you all know that the folks who stand up here (or at least this one) are not ok. It started near the beginning of the year. A sermon by Sam Storms challenged me to pick a prayer focus for 2017. The idea is that whatever else I may pray for, the predominant focus of any prayer should be in this singular area. The focus I landed on was the Beatitudes, specifically Mt 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.

So, I began praying with this as my lens. Praying for myself, for Sally, for our kids, for the elders, for you guys that God would instill a hunger and a thirst for the righteousness of Christ and as that hunger drives us we would begin to see our spiritual poverty, mourn for our sin, that our pride would be checked, that mercy would flow out of us, that our desires would turn to what is pure and true, that we would be marked by the true Shalom of God, and that we would gladly embrace whatever reaction we might receive from the watching world.

Well, I learned a few lessons praying this way. The main one is this: serious praying is serious business. I don't know

about you, but here is one way that I am not ok. I'm often not serious about prayer. The reason? Real prayer, serious prayer, is serious business. God is not messing around. So, when I took this prayer focus seriously, He responded.

As some of you may know, Sally and I were in New Zealand about a month ago. One week before our departure date, out of the blue, I decided to grab our passports to make sure they were with our itinerary and other trip stuff. As I glanced at mine, I noticed it had expired six months earlier. I'm sure you can imagine the panic that ensued. I will spare you the gory details for the sake of time, but I want to highlight two reactions of my schizophrenic heart.

The first reaction was a moment of weeping praise going into Walgreens for my passport photo. How gracious was God to prompt me to look at my passport a week before I needed it rather than the night before? Did I deserve that? Did I ask for that? Pure, overwhelming, overflowing grace.

The second reaction was four very sleepless nights full of a litany of what if, worst case scenarios. Praying didn't seem to help. Reading didn't help. Pacing and tossing and turning didn't help. Nothing really helped until I read a short article by John Piper which basically stated our prayers are anemic, our nights are restless, and our holiness is tepid because our faith is in something other than Christ.

Those words, said a thousand different ways, a thousand different times by dozens of different people hit me hard. It became so clear. God had given me a wonderful gift. An truly undeserved, unsought after gift. He was shouting at

me: "John, I've got this". And my reaction over those four days was, "I'm not so sure".

But the testimony of Scripture, the testimony of our lives, the testimony of my life, is that God has our backs. And, because He has our backs, it really is ok to not be ok. We can be honest with God in our prayers. We can be honest in our small groups. Serious praying, while still serious, is a good thing. And pursuing Christ is worth the effort.

So, with that as my somewhat long introduction, let's take a look at the Beatitudes. There are a few things we need to keep in mind as we start this journey. The first thing is this: The entire gospel according to Matthew was written for a purpose. The recording of the Sermon on the Mount and specifically the Beatitudes fits into this purpose. We will understand, appreciate and be able to apply the Beatitudes so much more as we keep Matthew's Spirit inspired goals in view. And his goals were to present Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT promises, to show that Jesus is the true Israel and to declare that Jesus is the messianic king.

We also need to remember that the Sermon on the Mount fits within the flow of the book of Matthew and within the ministry life of Jesus. Even a cursory review of the preceding verses show Jesus' ministry is on a stratospheric climb. It's at that point he pulls his disciples aside to teach and show them what an upside down kingdom really looks like. Right after the sermon, Jesus' ministry takes him to the outcasts of his day. How are the disciples prepared to go from rock star status to ministering to lepers and prostitutes? Jesus reoriented their entire world view. He flipped it upside

down.

The final thing to see is that the Beatitudes perfectly kick off this upside down view of life, ministry, faith and obedience. Consider their very structure:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit - nobody seeks poverty
- Blessed are those who mourn - mourning is to be avoided
- Blessed are the meek - self reliance and go getters are rewarded
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness - righteousness is given lip service at best
- Blessed are the merciful - cheap mercy, sure. Real mercy, not so much
- Blessed are the pure in heart - purity is winked at, given some air time on Twitter but is essentially ignored
- Blessed are the peacemakers - we all want peace but who is actually going to go out and pursue it, make it happen
- Blessed are those who are persecuted because of Jesus - persecution is avoided and rarely regarded as something to be embraced.

What I love about these 8 facets of the upside down life of the Christian is that they all tie together. I will pull some of these threads a little later, but think about this:

- The realization of our spiritual poverty leads to mourning
- Poverty and mourning produce meekness and provoke our hunger

- Hungering for righteousness drives a deeper view of our poverty but also feeds our need of mercy, peace and holiness
- Mercy and peace fuel each other and also lead to meekness
- Pursuit of holiness reveals more poverty and also leads to mercy
- Persecution can fuel meekness, mercy and peace or it can reveal our lack of these qualities which drives us back to poverty, mourning and hungering for righteousness

I have one last comment to make before we dive in. The Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes are easily misapplied. Many, including some evangelical churches, would see these 10 verses and these 3 chapters as New Testament replacement for the 10 commandments. They would say this is how you should live (or at least strive to live) to please God. And while Jesus does challenge his disciples to live within this framework, there is only one thing that pleases God. It is perfectly obedient life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

The really good news today is this: If you have trusted in Jesus' perfect obedience as a substitute for your own disobedience and in his sacrificial death as the payment for every sin of yours, big, little and in between, then all of the promises and blessings (and challenges) of the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes are yours.

And, if anyone here or listening to this has not trusted in

Christ, whether you just never considered it or you've actively avoided or rejected him or this simply is a new concept, you can trust him even in this moment. It's not magic. It is simply faith in the unshakable, unchanging, completely perfect promises of God and the finished work of Jesus.

Now, to the Beatitudes:

Blessed are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Right out of the gate, Jesus makes this jarring statement to his disciples who up to this point had to be enjoying their gig. People were coming to Jesus from all over the nation and even from beyond Israel's borders. Great crowds followed him. Who wouldn't get swept up in that?

But Jesus is after our hearts. So he begins the reorientation process by stating that the ones whom God blesses are those who are spiritually poor. And, lest we think Jesus is thinking that poor means you're working paycheck to paycheck, you only have a two bedroom house and you can't afford the iPhone 9xp, we would be mistaken. For Jesus spiritual poverty equals spiritual bankruptcy.

Some of you may be asking, what does this mean? As believers, don't we have the fruit of the Spirit and haven't we been given spiritual gifts? Isn't the very presence of the Spirit in us a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance? Yes, these things are true and they are truths that should fuel our souls, but Jesus is not referring any lack in the Holy

Spirit nor any lack in our connection with Him.

Instead, what Jesus is saying is that we need to grasp the reality that our own spirit is bankrupt. Jesus is challenging his disciples and us to know that we have nothing to offer to God. If everything comes by grace, then nothing can come from within us. Consider Paul's testimony in Phil 3:7-8 **But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.** We could add Isaiah 64:6 **All of our righteous deeds are like filthy rags.** Paul and Isaiah get what Jesus is talking about.

This reality affects us in several areas, but I will focus on just one. When is it that we pray most fervently? Is it when things are going well, or when the bottom drops away? Is it when we get the promotion or the pink slip? Is when our checkup says our weight and cholesterol are fine or that we have inoperable cancer? Simply put, it's when God graciously reveals to us that in and of ourselves we are without any resource that we come to him as desperate children, totally dependent on His loving provision.

And, that's the point of most of Matthew 6. Our Heavenly Father knows what we need. But His desire is for us to come to him in faith. And we will only do that as we realize we can't do it ourselves.

It should be noted that every beatitude comes with a

promise. They are like a hand in a glove. The promise here is that the poor in spirit will possess the kingdom of Heaven. You may wonder what that means. Since Christ's kingdom is not a physical kingdom, it's pretty clear Jesus is not talking about land or property. But if the kingdom of heaven is what's described in the Sermon of the Mount, what Jesus the king is saying is that entrance into that kingdom starts with the realization that on our own we don't belong there and by ourselves we can never get there.

One last thing about spiritual bankruptcy: it must inevitably lead us to the cross or it will lead us to despair. We may readily admit we have no spiritual resources, but may still want to overcome this in our own strength. However since we have no resources we can never do this. Only Jesus can do this in our stead. And he did what we could never do on the cross.

There is a natural consequence to a true apprehension of our spiritual bankruptcy. It's is a mourning over our sin.

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. I don't know about you, but I can't recall the last time I looked into to the mirror of God's word so closely that I wept over the indwelling sin that remains in me. Oh, I see my sin. There's no question there. But rarely do I weep over it.

You might be wondering, what's the value of mourning? How could grief over our sins make any difference? That's a great question and I would simply point you to Luke 18:13 **But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast,**

saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' What was Jesus' assessment of this man? He was the one who went home justified.

Mourning is a sign, an indicator that we are beginning to realize that our sins really are an offense to God. And that on our own merits, we would still be lost, dead in the very sins that seem so wonderful and necessary. Why would God save a wretch like me?

And then there is the mourning over the sin we see around us. If I rarely weep over my own sin, how often am I heartbroken over the sins of my neighbors, our community or our culture? I have many reactions to things I read, see or hear. But grief is usually not one of them. Contrast this with two passages from the Old Testament. The first one is from Psalm 119:136 **My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.** The other is from Ezekiel 22:30 **And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none.**

You see real grief whether over our own sins or the sins we see around us, doesn't stay in its own little swamp of a pity party. True grief seeks comfort. And just like our spiritual bankruptcy, we are not equipped or empowered to comfort ourselves. But we can learn from the broken-hearted tax collector. Only God can give us the comfort we so desperately need. And our comfort is this: that in Christ our debt has been paid, our brokenness has been healed, our sight has been restored and we have been released from

everything that held us captive.

The great news is that the promise of this beatitude is that God will comfort us. We can add to this the additional blessing that the comfort we receive from God, he will multiply as we turn around to become a source of comfort to others. Paul spells this out in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.**

The third beatitude flows right out of the second: **Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.** Consider the natural byproduct of a true realization of our spiritual poverty and a deep mourning over our sin. Isn't it a full apprehension of who are? Our spiritual pride should be crumbling. Our praise and admiration to Jesus should be growing. And, our need for status both within and beyond the church should be diminishing as well.

I say these things because meekness is essentially replacing self confidence with other confidence. The other, of course, is Christ. True meekness, true confidence in Christ, allows us really rejoice when others succeed and I don't. It also allows us to see along with Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:7 **What do you have that you did not receive?**

Quite frankly, this is where God brought me through my whole passport ordeal. On January 25, my birthday of all

days, holding my shiny new passport, the Spirit made it clear that I was the recipient of super abundant grace. What did I have that I did not receive? There was no ground for boasting in John, but a mountain of evidence for boasting in Christ.

Likewise, when I look out here, I have to ask: who am I compared to each of you? Doesn't God love each one of you as much as loves me? Haven't we each received the same Spirit? Are we not all going to receive resurrection bodies? Won't we all join with the saints in worshiping around the throne of God? These questions remind me of Ephesians 4:4-6 **There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.** Since we have all these things in common, one-upmanship can be put aside.

What about the promise attached to this beatitude? If the meek are to inherit the earth, how are we to understand and anticipate this? As with many of God's promises, this one has dimensions to it. One dimension is right here within the church. God's new earth is breaking in as his children begin to live out, by the power of the Spirit, the Sermon on the Mount, Ephesians 4 and Romans 12. Isn't this what Jesus told us to pray for: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This should both excite us and compel us forward in our faith.

But the ultimate fruition of this promise is that we will inherit the new earth pictured in Revelation 21 and later

half of Isaiah 65. All things will be new, there will be no more sin and we will finally see God. We should rest in this, but we should also pursue it. As Jesus says later in Luke 13, we should strive to enter through the narrow door and Paul says in Philippians 3:12-14 **Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**

I need to cut it off here because of time, but I do want to give you a teaser and a homework assignment. The teaser is this: from my perspective hungering and thirsting after righteousness is the crux of the beatitudes, the key to understanding and applying the Sermon on the Mount (see Mt 6:33) and perhaps the hallmark of the Christian life. How's that for a set up for next week?

Now the homework assignment. I'm seriously asking each of you to pray through the beatitudes this week. Pray them for yourselves and the people closest to you. Pray them for the elders and your brothers and sisters here at LEFC. Pray them for our missionaries and other believers you know. Allow these verses to be the filter which every one of your prayers passes through this week.

I want to wrap this up by asking a question. If Jesus is the Messianic King, what would his kingdom look like? More importantly, what should the citizens of his kingdom look

like? Jesus is calling us to love him, to follow him, to immerse ourselves in him. Why? So that his kingdom may begin to take shape here and now in the Coulee Region. Would you join me in that journey?

Father, according to the riches of your glory grant us to be strengthened with power through your Spirit in the core of our being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith—and because you have rooted us and grounded us in love, may we have the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of your love and grace, and to really know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

SDG