

The Upside-Down Kingdom of Christ - part II

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.

Last week I ended our time together with a question that I had hoped would at least frame Jesus'

intentions in these 10 verses. So, I would like to start off with that very same question.

If Jesus is the Messianic King, what would his kingdom look like? More importantly, what should the citizens of his kingdom look like? To be even more direct, what should we look like? Jesus is calling us to love him, to follow him, to immerse ourselves in him. Why? What's the point in all of this? I would submit, based on the context of the Sermon on the Mount, in part it is so that Jesus' kingdom may begin to take shape here and now in the Coulee Region.

Last week I also asked you to join me in praying through the beatitudes on behalf of yourself, your loved ones and your brothers and sisters here at LEFC. I trust that as you did that, the Spirit came alongside you to encourage you and strengthen you, but also to show you how these beatitudes can take root in our lives.

If there is one thing I've learned in 26 years of walking with Jesus, it's that Christianity is not a sound bite religion. Oh we can all have our "coffee cup" verses, like I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me or those who wait on the Lord shall mount up like eagles. But what I'm talking

about is this: if Jesus is really going to be everything for us, then his word and the new reality that it represents needs to be an all encompassing, life consuming endeavor.

There was a time, early in my journey, when I wanted just enough of Jesus to be safe. Safe from hell, obviously, but also safe from divorce, safe from wayward kids, safe from a dead end job and safe from bad theology (ironic, I know)

Well, you may have heard this expression or maybe even have read the poem, but God is the Hound of Heaven. Not only will God never leave us nor forsake us, he will not leave us alone. Sometimes he is softly, gently nudging or tugging, pressing on the edges of our consciences. Other times, he comes with a two by four or a jack hammer and radically reshapes our view of the world.

In 1995, God used the book of Ephesians to open my heart and mind and soul to the reality that Christianity is not just something you add to your toolkit for life. It's not something to take a bad life and make it good. It's not something that takes a good life and makes it great. It really is the giving up on the old life and entering into something totally

new.

I tell you all that for this purpose: once it dawned on me that I was called into this new world, this upside down kingdom, I realized there was a void in my apprehension of God, of Jesus, of his kingdom and of myself. To say it another way, the Holy Spirit placed in me a hunger that I had never known before.

And, that is exactly Jesus' point in the fourth beatitude. **Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.** This hunger and thirst is a righteousness that is the defining characteristic.

of the kingdom of Christ. Look at Matthew 5:20 **For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** In this singular statement, Jesus is both raising the bar above any human attainment but also setting his kingdom apart from every other religious system that had come before or since.

We should also look at Matthew 6:33 **But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.** In the flow of Matthew 6, Jesus is speaking to our anxieties over

necessary earthly things. His point? God knows what you need, even before you ask. So dedicate most of your prayer time seeking his kingdom and his righteousness. God really will take care of the rest.

You may be thinking, what does this look like? If you are anything like me, prayers, bible studies, alone contemplative times can easily drift to things. These are usually good things, mind you, but things none the less. And there is nothing wrong with praying for such things. But Jesus is challenging us to have the right priority and also the right proportion. This has been the difficult part about praying the beatitudes for myself, Sally and our kids plus the elders and you guys. It takes focus. It takes time. It takes effort. And I dare say, it takes an empowerment from the Holy Spirit.

But as with each beatitude, there is a great promise. The promise here is that we will be satisfied. What kind of satisfaction are we talking about? Elsewhere Jesus uses a different metaphor to help answer this question. In John 4:14 he says **but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.**" While in John 6:35 **Jesus said to**

them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

The awesome truth in these verses is that the satisfaction of our hunger and thirst for righteousness will be supplied on an ongoing, totally complete, all encompassing way. We are not simply filled, we are continually filled. And the best part? The righteousness we receive is not some abstract thing, like a digital download of your favorite movie. Instead, Paul describes it like this in 1 Corinthians 1:30 **And because of God you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,** You see, Jesus is our righteousness. Jesus is our satisfaction.

Last week I made the assertion that this beatitude is the hallmark of the Christian life. Consider this: what is the progression of the Christian? There is a point in time (maybe when you were real young) when every believer was not a believer. And, whether you knew it or not, when you were seeking God, it was a hunger, born of God, And, this hunger was satisfied as the Holy Spirit wonderfully opened our eyes and enabled us to put our faith and trust in Christ.

Following this, as we embark on our walk with Christ, we ebb and flow, we grow and we plateau. In and through these times, the Holy Spirit prompts within us a hunger and a thirst. Sometimes it's like someone parched in the desert. Sometimes it's like someone who has found a cool mountain stream. Sometimes it's like a walking into a bakery. Whatever the stage, whatever the state of journey, God is leading us by hunger. A hunger for Jesus. And this is a hunger only he can satisfy.

As our poverty and grief feed into meekness and hunger, they produce in us a realization of the overwhelming mercy that we have received in Christ. **Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**

Think about mercy this way. If I handed you the keys to a new car, would you be grateful? My guess is that you would. However, if you had just totaled your car, lost your job, had your spouse in the hospital, without insurance and were up to your credit limit on 3 credit cards and I came along and said not only do I have a new car for you, I've have paid all of your debts for the rest of your life. Then you would realize you have received mercy.

There is a short hand that I and many others use that goes like this: Justice is getting what we deserve, grace is getting what we don't deserve and mercy is not getting what we do deserve. And while this is helpful, it seems the Bible is not always so precise in splitting mercy and grace. The authors in both the Old and New Testaments use mercy and grace almost interchangeably. And if you think about it, our salvation is both mercy (no more condemnation) and grace (we are forgiven and made new).

But this beatitude flips things a little. While we are the recipients of incredible mercy, Jesus says blessed are the merciful. It's as if he assumes that as receivers of mercy we will also be dispensers of it. One of the best illustrations of this is Mt 18:21-35. Since this is a rather long passage, I won't take time to read it, but I want to highlight a couple of verses. First Matthew 18:27 **And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.** This man owed 200,000 years wages and his master forgave it all. The next is Matthew 18:33 **And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' The servant had no mercy for his fellow**

servant that owed him the equivalent of \$1,000.

Jesus point in this beatitude and in Mt 18 and throughout the Bible is that our actions and attitudes reflect what we've really received. There is a stinging question to this beatitude. Is the mercy that flows out of my life in anyway reflective of the mercy I've received? If so, there's more to come. If not, it should lead me to grief and a hunger to see such mercy flow through me and a meekness in knowing that I am not all that I pretend to be.

Have you noticed when we combine these beatitudes together, they begin to have this self correcting element to them? And they start to expose more and more of the edges of our lives. This is especially true as it comes to purity. **Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.**

Jesus' point here is not simply go be pure and I will love you and let you in to see God. Nor is it hey, I've made you pure. No worries. I don't care what you do. Come on in and see God. These are two "isms" on the end of the purity spectrum. Legalism: get yourself together and then God will love you contrasted with antinomianism: God loves you so you don't need to get yourself together. Both are

incorrect approaches to purity.

If neither of these extremes are right, where's the sweet spot? How can we strive for purity without becoming legalists? And how can we embrace the reality that it's ok not to be ok without falling into the trap of antinomianism? Quite frankly, that takes a lifetime of following, and leaning and stumbling and falling and being lifted up by Jesus and relying on the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

As we read through scripture there is this continual ebb and flow: You have been saved from the foundation of the world, followed by work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven followed by whoever does not give up everything is not worthy of me.

The point? Purity of heart is both something we've received, Jesus has really cleansed us of all of our sins, and something we strive for, we are commanded to live in a manner worthy of the gospel we have received. And, isn't that the tension of the entire Sermon on the Mount?

And the promise? We will see God. There is an obvious future component to this promise. Paul

reflects this so well in a verse I cherish 1 Corinthians 13:12 **For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.** But the promise is not exclusively future oriented. When we see the gospel working itself out in our lives or the lives of others, we are beginning, dim as it may be, to see the face of God, experience the beauty of his presence, and to enjoy the wonders of his love.

In our pursuit of purity, fueled by the mercy we've received, as we hunger after Christ in the meekness produce by our poverty and grief, the Spirit produces in us a peace that really does surpass our understanding. **Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.** However, there is something about this concept of peace that I think is important to consider. It has a few different dimensions to it. There is the dimension related to hostility, the white flag, the peace treaty. And then there is the peace of mind, everything's going to be ok. No worries. If you think about it, in our relationship with God, both of these dimensions are present.

And then there is Shalom.

Shalom, which encompasses these first two dimensions, is much more than we realize. Listen to this definition from the Explicit Gospel:

In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

The way things ought to be. Who here is hungry for that?

But who here is willing to really work for that?

At the end of the day, Jesus is saying that the breaking in of his kingdom will be marked by men and women who strive for shalom in their marriages, their families, their churches, their neighborhoods, even in their jobs and on social media.

Now, I will be the first to admit this is an impossible task for us to do on our own. Especially, as we see

later in Mt 5, we are to pursue shalom not just with our friends but with our enemies. But if, in the power Holy Spirit, we are beginning to live out the standards of this upside down kingdom, are we willing to make shalom one of our goals?

To put my cards on the table, this is an area where I continue to struggle. I have no problem with a cessation of hostilities with someone with whom I've been in conflict. I have no problem with a restored, civil, "peaceful" relationship. But pursuing shalom on their behalf? Seeking what's in the best interest of someone who has actively opposed me? That seems to be a bridge too far.

But even as I say that, we need to consider the promise to us as we pursue shalom in the strength of the Spirit. Jesus promises that those who pursue this type of peace will be called sons of God.

When you hear that, you may say: wait, aren't we already sons and daughters of God? The answer is yes, but there are layers to that expression. One layer is that in Christ, we are sons and daughters of God in a familial sense. We are adopted into God's family. Jesus is our brother.

However, the expression "son of" had an additional layer to it back in Jesus' era. It also meant one to follow after. Think of it this way. In Jesus' day, if dad's a carpenter, what is Jr going to do when he grows up? If dad's a shepherd? If dad's a bricklayer? The pattern was usually that the son would be just like his father. We even have that trend in our area in businesses like Dahl Ford and Wettsteins. The beauty of this promise is that as we pursue peace, we will not only emulate our Heavenly Father, we will become a little more like him.

And now we come to persecution. **Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** I will be right up front with you, I have some trepidation speaking about persecution. I have experienced very little, if any persecution in my own life. And while some of us may experience persecution, whether from our extended families, neighbors or co-workers, most of us know very little about it. The challenge then, is how to speak to it with integrity and biblical authority.

For us, here in the La Crescent, La Crosse, Onalaska area, the path forward might be two fold. First is to realize that while persecution may be slight, almost

like background noise, today, that may not be so tomorrow. Our American culture is on a downward trajectory and while no one can predict the slope and God can certainly bring a revival, the overall trend continues to be downward. In fact the fairly plain reading of Mt 24 and similar passages prepare us for the reality that the world around us will continue to decay until Christ returns. Matthew 24:12-13 **And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.**

The second path is for us to realize is that in Jesus' eyes persecution is the world's response to us living out the beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. This may hard for us to hear. It is hard for me to say. I really am preaching to myself at this point. If persecution is a reaction of the world to us, to me, living out the beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, what does it mean when I face little to no persecution? Could it be that I am more talk than walk? Could it be that I am a chameleon when it comes to my faith, especially at work? Could it be that I am super comfortable with being super comfortable?

Well, in true Jesus fashion, he rocks the boat of our

perception of persecution. In verse 10 he makes the bold statement: blessed are those who are persecuted. Since being blessed has the connotation of being favored, receiving honor and being cared for, persecution seems to be contrary to all of those. And, since most people instinctively avoid persecution, this, of all the beatitudes, seems to be the most difficult to embrace.

Perhaps that's why Jesus adds two more verses to help unfold what he's challenging his disciples and us to accept. **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.**

Jesus helps clarify a few things in these additional verses. First, he is speaking about a persecution that is a result of our connection with him. If I get pulled over for a speeding ticket because I was speeding, that's not persecution, that's justice. However if a neighbor calls in a dog barking complaint because we're having a backyard Bible study, that's a form of persecution.

Next he continues to flip our view of things by saying we should rejoice and be glad because of persecution. This is so counter intuitive. Why would we embrace persecution? And rejoice? Seriously Jesus?

Thankfully, Jesus gives at least two reasons for this rejoicing. One is that it shows we're on the right track. Persecution comes because the righteousness we are hungering for is being manifested in our lives. Persecution comes because we are speaking and living in way that not only honors God, it tangibly connects us with Jesus.

The other reason for rejoicing is because we are not in this alone. Jesus says when we are persecuted, we are in the company of the prophets. The book of Hebrews was written to a persecuted church on the verge of abandoning their faith. Their pastor wrote them a letter to encourage and exhort them in their walk with Christ. In Chapter 11, the author uses the same logic as Jesus: look at all of those who have gone before us in faith. All struggled, in one way or another. But all persevered in the faith. In essence, the writer of Hebrews and Jesus are saying, we are all in this together so stay strong and keep the faith.

And the promise? It's not what you would think. It's not relief from persecution. It's not even that others will pray for you and support you. Instead it's the same promise given to those who grasp the depth and magnitude of their spiritual bankruptcy. Namely they have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ.

So just like last week when we saw that our spiritual bankruptcy can't keep us out of Christ's kingdom, now we see that persecution can't keep us out either. In fact, in a striking similarity, if spiritual bankruptcy is in a sense, a prerequisite for seeing our desperate need for Christ and thus gaining unfettered access to his kingdom, isn't persecution the perfect way to show us how empty we are by ourselves and yet how full we are in Christ?

One quick comment on rewards. Rewards in Scripture are never a bad thing. Jesus, Paul, the Psalmist all implicitly and explicitly refer to rewards in a positive and faith enhancing way. In fact Jesus mentions rewards 10 times in the Sermon on the Mount alone. What is important to remember is that the rewards promised are not new jobs, cars, houses, long lives or any such thing. The reward is new life, the reward is no more sin, no more tears, no more death. The ultimate reward is God himself.

That brothers and sisters is why we need to rethink persecution. The rewards of Christ are our aim and goal and prize. That's why we're here and that should be the engine driving everything we say and do.

So, here we are. In a real sense we've just walked through a blueprint for what it looks like to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ. But, in another sense we've just taken our first steps into a much larger world. We're on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, but only up to our ankles.

Last week someone commented that they appreciated all the information, but asked what they were supposed to do with it. That's an excellent question. Sometimes the application of a text of Scripture is fairly clear. Sometimes it's more nebulous. But always, it's dependent on the Holy Spirit bringing that application to our minds and hearts.

And that's where I would like to leave the Beatitudes. By their very nature they are not easily summarized. We could walk through eight, maybe even twelve applications from those 10 verses. However, if we use this passage, as Matt Chandler

would say, as an MRI, the Spirit will bring the application to us.

Because of all of this I would like to wrap up with a loving exhortation. I realize the busyness of our lives. I realize the distractions of our lives. I realize the continuing allure of sin in our lives. And yet I want to lay these ten verses in front of you as your 2017 prayer challenge. Read through them often, perhaps daily, not just as a quick, blah-blah, sort of time filler. But instead consider that they can serve as an MRI for the state of our walk with Jesus. And then they can propel us into the rest of God's Word to find the truth to address the diagnosis the Beatitudes expose in us.

And finally would you consider seriously pursuing Mt 5:6? Serious prayer is serious business. But the testimony of scripture is that God is worth it.

Father, these verses expose us to the reality that we are not everything you want us to be. Help us, fill us, satisfy us in Christ. Give us the wisdom and strength we need to walk in a manner worthy of Jesus and in way that testifies to his grace and mercy in our lives. By this, may we bear fruit for your kingdom and glory. We also need an endurance and a power only

you can provide because, as you know, the road we are on is long and often hard. We so much want to exhibit love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self control, but we know we can only do this in the power of your Holy Spirit. Thank you for rescuing us out our sin and death and despair and bringing us into your holiness and life and joy. And thank you for delivering us out of the domain of darkness and giving us citizenship in the kingdom of your beloved son, Jesus who is our wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

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