

The Jesus Attitudes

1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12

Crossroads Christian Church
Feb. 2, 2014 Epiphany 4 A

As our Epiphany experience continues, we're beginning today to look more in-depth at Jesus' most famous collection of teachings, the Sermon on the Mount. Sometimes you'll hear somebody say, "I'm not much of a churchgoer, but I try to live by the Sermon on the Mount." When they say this, I suspect that they haven't read the Sermon on the Mount for many years, because it is really challenging to live by. In addition to the Sermon on the Mount, we're going to be looking at Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. They're a good match, because both of them challenge us to rethink what it means to live as a Christian.

For today, let me begin with a question. Where have you found happiness lately? In meals with close friends, At a musical concert? In playing or watching a ball game? Working in your garden? Puttering in the garage? Playing with the grandkids? For some, it may be seeing your children or grandchildren succeed in schoolwork, or do well in athletics. For others it may be enjoying something creative, like painting or woodwork. Or maybe it's a nice, peaceful drive in the country. What makes you happy?

Jesus provides some answers in that wonderful, beloved passage called the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are the opening, the introduction, to the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount as a whole is all about Christian living, and it challenges us to do all sorts of difficult things—things like being true to the law; not judging or putting down other people; seeking and giving forgiveness; being true to your marriage vows; loving your enemies; praying to turn your life over to God.

But back to the Beatitudes. Beatitude means the state of being blessed, of being in God's good favor. We grew up knowing the Beatitudes as "Blessed are..." The Common English Bible that we use now in worship, uses the word "Happy," and that's a pretty good translation, too. "Happy are the poor in spirit, or meek, or peacemakers." J. B. Phillips translated that word as "O, the bliss of..." To be blissful is even better than being happy.

I've preached sermons on each of the Beatitudes before, but for today, let's just take a quick look at each one. Let me read you each Beatitude as you heard it read earlier, followed by the version most of us heard growing up, and a few brief comments. The first Beatitude: "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs." or "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Most of Jesus' ministry was spent calling people to the Kingdom of Heaven. It meant eternal life with God, but it also meant living a God-oriented, God-directed life here on earth. The poor in spirit recognized that they weren't in charge, but that God was. They knew that they weren't left to their own resources, but truly trust in God.

The second Beatitude: "Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad." Or, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

This one almost sounds like an oxymoron. How can you be happy when you're grieving? But as Christians, we know that death isn't the end of it, that we are received by a loving and gracious God. Death and grief are real, but God's love conquers death and we can find strength and comfort in that.

The third Beatitude: "Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth." "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." This is also counterintuitive in a "nice guys finish last" world. But meek in the way Jesus used the term doesn't mean namby-pamby or spineless. It means enduring injury with patience and without resentment. It means having self-control and managing your anger by putting God first in your life.

The fourth Beatitude: "Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full." Or, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

Righteousness means justice, fairness, and integrity—what Pete Seeger, who passed away last week, sang about. And hungering and thirsting involves passionately seeking something,

a need that only God can satisfy. "Taste and see, for the Lord is good."

The fifth Beatitude: "Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy." or "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Mercy is having the imagination and sympathy to deeply feel another's misery, and the will to act on it, the will to make a difference. God shows mercy to us every day, every hour, and we are blessed when we show mercy to others. And that's what our Week of Compassion offering is all about.

Beatitude number 6: "Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God." "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." It's our own shame, our own sin, our own fear that makes us turn away from God's loving face. Purity of heart is to have integrity, and to have our whole being ruled by God's love. Then we see God smile upon us.

The seventh Beatitude: "Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children." "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." Shalom, the Hebrew word that puts together the idea of peace, fairness, and well-being, and health, both of individuals and the community. The peace that God offers is something that we are invited to make real through acts of reconciliation, witness, and forgiveness, and for working for peace in our world.

The eighth Beatitude is longer. "Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. "Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you." Or, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when men 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 men persecuted the prophets who were before you." Jesus knew that to live the kind of life which he offered in the Beatitudes would meet resistance, even violent resistance,

from the world; from the powers that be. At the easiest, people would laugh and mock; at the worst, would threaten and kill. Jesus doesn't want us to have a martyr complex, but he does want us to be realistic that our faith can put us in danger. Yet, we can trust that God has our back; that God's reward will be greater than whatever price we pay for staying true to our faith.

So back to looking at the Beatitudes as a whole.

Blessedness—true happiness—is living true to our nature as God's children, feeling joy in loving God and our neighbor. This happiness doesn't depend on outward circumstances, where we can be happy one moment and sad or angry or anxious the next. It's not an emotion, it's an attitude—that's why I called this sermon the Jesus attitudes. For as we explore the Beatitudes, you will discover the portrait of Jesus. He not only preached the Beatitudes, but he lived them out. What does it mean to be poor in spirit? It was Jesus, who emptied himself to become one of us. What does it mean to mourn? It was Jesus, who shed tears for Jerusalem, who shed tears for the death of a good friend, but who knew God's comfort. What does it mean to be meek? It was Jesus, who prayed, "not my will but thine be done." Who hungered and thirsted for the righteousness that satisfies our souls more than did Jesus? And who showed us the depth and power of God's mercy more than Jesus? And who came that we might know perfect peace? Jesus. And who paid the ultimate price to bring us that peace, facing the persecution of the cross? Jesus.

So, the Beatitudes aren't platitudes, or clichés, but rather they challenge us to a new kind of life; a Jesus-centered life; a God's-reign centered life. They teach us that no matter how tough things get in life, God is right there with us. The Beatitudes aren't laws or commands, they're invitations. They're words of hope and encouragement that rally us to true discipleship, to live out the Jesus Attitudes. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon