

Lenten Sermon Series 2009

*Beatitudes 1: Upside-Down Blessings*

Matthew 5:3-12

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

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The Beatitudes. The language, the poetry is so beautiful even in translation. The truths they speak of are so simply stated yet profound. It's no wonder that the Beatitudes are so well-loved. Next to the Lord's Prayer, this is probably the most quoted part of the New Testament, reproduced even in art form, especially the homey kind, from bookmarks to cross-stitch samplers. Yet I wonder if the very beauty of the Beatitudes works against it? If perhaps we don't take them seriously enough because it's so, well, pretty. Not unlike the Lord's Prayer, which we say so often and with so little thought that we easily lose sight of its radical message. Compare it with another well-loved passage from the Old Testament, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. That psalm is transcendently beautiful, expressing powerful emotions that we can all relate to. But it is not a teaching. The Beatitudes, though, despite the poetry, are a teaching. There's a lesson here for us, and a very important one. We must be careful as we admire the poetry of the words not to lose sight of their meaning.

The Beatitudes are the prelude to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. It may be John 3:16 that gets the most air time at football games, but the Sermon on the Mount is the true heart of Jesus' teaching. A collection of little sayings, brief lessons, and parables that while simple, nevertheless turn all our understanding – of God, of the world, and of ourselves – on its head.

One of the books I read in my research for this sermon series pointed out how autobiographical the Sermon on the Mount is. This isn't just what Jesus taught; it's what he truly lived. Turn the other cheek, why worry about tomorrow, love your enemies, etc. This is Jesus' life. And that's all the more true with the Beatitudes. Poor in spirit, merciful, peacemaker, blessed when persecuted; it's Jesus to the letter. This is all the more interesting when you consider how many theologians over the years have speculated whether the Beatitudes, and indeed anything in the whole Sermon on the Mount, can be practical. Can anyone really live this way? Not in this world, some have said. Yet Jesus did. And sure, he was the Son of God with all sorts of superpowers, but he was also the Son of Man, the Human One, and Jesus never asked us to do anything he wasn't willing to do himself.

But the critics are at least partly right. You can't live this way...in *this* world. Not with this world's values, not if we play by this world's rules, not if we want to win in this world's game. But that's the point. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is giving us a new set of rules, new values, a new game to play – God's way. But it is very much a game we are meant to play in this world. The kingdom of heaven that Jesus talks so much about, after all, is not some kind of pie in the sky by and by. The kingdom of heaven is something we are supposed to live out in this world, and in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is showing us what it looks like.

Another of my reference books by James C. Howell starts by pointing out what the Beatitudes do not say. At first I thought this exercise was kind of cheesy, but as he kept at it, I realized how important it was. Howell starts with the obvious, almost a caricature of modern values, and while we recognize the truth here, it's also easy for us to say, "Well, of course Jesus didn't say that!"

Blessed are those who climb the corporate ladder; they will have a comfortable retirement.

Blessed are those who invest shrewdly; they will own a second home on the coast.

Blessed are those born into fine families; they will enjoy countless advantages.

Blessed are those who shop, for they will own neat things.

Obvious, right? We know that's not what Jesus was about. But then Howell goes on to some values that we all hold more deeply, things that I daresay we all would agree are good.

Blessed are those with a superb education.

Blessed are the free.

Blessed are the happy.

Howell then moves back to more superficial issues, but perhaps now we won't be so flip in saying that we are above these things, lest we catch ourselves in a lie.

Blessed are the cool.

Blessed are the good-looking, for they will find plenty of friends.

Blessed are the sexually active, for they will have endless good times.

Blessed are those who satisfy their desires.

And finally Howell rounds it off by revising our old friends the seven deadly sins:

Blessed are the greedy; blessed are the gluttonous, the envious, the angry, the proud. This exercise shows us how much we really do accept the world's standards of blessedness, how even some of our most cherished values can in fact still reflect the shallow self-absorption of the seven deadly sins. We human beings, after all, are masters at fooling ourselves.

Yet we need to be careful not to draw the wrong conclusion from this exercise. As Howell points out, it's not that Jesus is against wealth or education, or even having lots of friends. But so often our pursuit of these, described in our own US Constitution as "the pursuit of happiness" is in fact a pursuit after vanity, for food that does not satisfy and drink that does not slake our thirst. As David Brooks says in discussing our modern consumerist culture:

Why do we torture ourselves with things we don't have and aren't likely to get? Why do we eagerly seek out images of lives we are unlikely to lead? It is precisely because fantasy, imagination, and dreaming play a far more significant role in our psychological makeup than we are accustomed to acknowledging. We are influenced, far more than most of us admit, by some longing for completion, some impulse toward heaven. The magazines are not really about hedonism.... They're not even mainly about consumption. These magazines are about aspiration.

But Jesus is not against aspiration either, nor imagination, nor even desire. Rather, he is offering something so much better for us to aspire to. As C.S. Lewis put it:

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

That's an interesting way to look at it, isn't it? That we are far too easily pleased. That we settle for so little. By contrast, think of what Jesus is offering us in the Beatitudes, what hopes and dreams and desires he seeks to arouse in us. Imagine that, the Beatitudes as arousing! Something Technicolor compared to our drab world, a symphony compared to the

buzzing kazoos of everyday life. Can there be something better out there? Isn't life about so much more than this? Yes, Jesus says. Oh, yes! And it begins with poverty. That's the first lesson of our upside down blessing.

You may know that the Gospel of Luke has its own version of the Beatitudes which is very different from Matthew's. Luke has only four blessings, accompanied by four woes, and he is very physical and concrete. Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, who hunger, who are persecuted. Woe to those who are rich, who laugh, who are full, who are admired! It's such a great difference that we are tempted to make more out of it than is warranted. I don't want to make a big deal out of this because I think they are really saying the same things even though they say it very differently. But the first Beatitude really raises the question, what does Matthew mean by "poor in spirit" anyway? We run the risk either of downplaying the spiritual significance of poverty, or alternatively of focusing so much on the spiritual aspect that we neglect the significance of real poverty.

The Greek word that is translated as "poor" here really means to be destitute, powerless, in need. That is the word used in both Matthew's and Luke's version of this Beatitude, which tells me that they really are speaking about the same thing. If we understand that this is the kind of poverty being spoken of here, then it clarifies the issue of riches, because the big problem with money is not wealth per se, but the illusion it gives us of independence, of self-sufficiency. A problem that the rich, the poor and the in-between all share is the mistaken belief that money will take care of our needs, to the point where we start defining our own value in terms of our wealth. Am I paid what I'm worth? Do I have the things I deserve to have? Is there something more I need to own in order to make my life complete? In fact, the issue here is not how much money you have. The issue is, is money how you measure your worth?

Compare this to poverty of spirit: to be destitute in spirit, powerless in spirit, spiritually in need. That doesn't really sound good either, but if we remember that the Beatitudes also describe Jesus, then let's look at him as an example. At first that might seem crazy. Surely Jesus is spiritually rich! He's the Messiah and all that! Yet remember his agony in the garden, on the eve of his crucifixion. How he prayed that God would take this cup from him, how he sweated drops of blood, how he longed for his friends to keep vigil with him. That sounds like spiritual destitution to me! It doesn't mean that he was weak. Rather, it means that even Jesus could not rely solely on his own reserves. He needed God, too. He even needed his friends. I've mentioned this in sermons before, how Jesus never felt the need to be independent. And if he did not, then why do we think we should?

This is how Jesus turns worldly wisdom on its head. Those who are in desperate need of God and of one another, they are the ones who are blessed, because they will have something that money cannot buy, something the world can never take away. They will have the kingdom of heaven itself.

And what is this kingdom of heaven? It is not a place. It's not a reward in the afterlife, nor is it the abundance of material prosperity in this world. The kingdom of heaven is real, but it is intangible. The kingdom of heaven is the world as God sees it, the world as God intended it to be: a place of beauty and abundance, a place of companionship and harmony. All this belongs to those who need God, who find that they cannot get by without God. All these priceless treasures belong to those who know that world standards do not provide the true measure of a person, that our true worth is determined by the simple fact that we are God's beloved children, created in the image of God.