

# God's Promise of Blessing

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 02/02/20

At Crossroads United Methodist Church

Waunakee, WI

Theologians and non-theologians; Christians and non-Christians will often make the comment that “The Sermon on the Mount” and “The Beatitudes” in particular, are the greatest (or most important or most succinct) statement on ethics every made.

What does it mean to be “blessed”? Does “blessing” simply mean receiving some reward, some gift or payment or prize from the one bestowing the blessing? What sort of reward might that be?

And in the case of the Beatitudes, does that mean we are supposed to *strive* after these qualities, so that we might achieve the promised reward? On one hand, that sounds plausible—that we are supposed to try to be meek or strive to be peacemakers—but doesn't that fall apart when we get to “Blessed are those who mourn”? Are we supposed to try to be people who mourn? I mean.

I suppose, my biggest hurdle with the Beatitudes, is in our tendency to sentimentalize of them. This beloved passage walks right into the trap of merely being “Pie-in-the-sky” wishful thinking. Oh, you're mourning right now? Don't worry because in the “sweet by-and-by” you'll be comforted. Don't fret over how you're being treated in this world, because in the next one—wherever and how-ever-long-away that may be—you'll get your reward.

Such a mentality has plagued many versions of popular Christian piety for hundreds of years.

But you see, “Pie in the sky in the sweet by-and-by” doesn't square with what Jesus himself said or did. Just last week, as we heard the story of Jesus calling his first disciples to follow him, we also heard the proclamation with which he began his ministry: “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Jesus' gaze is not fixed on some celestial realm floating on clouds or paved with gold streets. It is something to be seen and recognized and lived-into here, now, today.

So then we reach this moment, when Jesus begins to teach those first disciples—and perhaps the crowds too; it's not entirely clear whether his teaching, his so-called “Sermon on the Mount” of which this is but the first section, is addressed to the whole crowd or only to the disciples seated at his feet.

Either way, though, here we meet Jesus beginning to lay out just *what* those who would follow him need to know. And that foundation in being a disciple would seem to involve being able to *recognize blessedness*.

If you are to follow me, Jesus seems to be saying, you need to know how things really are. You need to know the truth.

Obviously, “the truth” has become a hot-button topic these days. What I do not think... no scratch that... What I *know* we cannot abide, as Christians, is the destruction of any sense of truth itself. Our world has always dealt in alternative facts that counter and contradict true reality.

Famously, we remember from the way the gospel of John tells the story of Jesus' passion and death, we remember that time when Pontius Pilate says in response to Jesus, “What is truth?”

Here at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is setting out for his disciples just what is true, ultimately and definitively. And we know that this is the case, that what Jesus says here is true ultimately, and ultimately true, because of *who* it is that says it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Protestant pastor who led significant resistance to the German Protestant Church's complicity and cooperation with the Nazi regime, testified in his seminal work on Christian Ethics, that: “The Sermon on the Mount is the word of the very one who is lord and law of reality... action in accord with Christ is action in accord with reality.” “Through him were all things created,” the gospel of John reminds us. And so that which we do that is in accord with *him* is in accord

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with reality itself. You can't get more "true" than that which fits with, follows, and embodies Jesus himself.

It would be easy in a week like this one to wonder whether and how such quaint-seeming statements as the Beatitudes are even relevant in the world today. But we are invited today to enter into the truth of the world they proclaim—not *alternative* facts, but *actual* facts; not *virtual* reality, but *actual* reality.

And in this real world, we hear and know that these ones Jesus lifts up—the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, the meek, the ones hungering and thirsting for righteousness (which I hope is *all* of us)—these are *blessed*, now.

The beatitudes are present tense. Blessed *are* the peacemakers. Blessed *are* the pure in heart. Blessed *are* those who are persecuted from righteousness sake.

So, my friends, let us ground ourselves in that truth. And moreover, let us ground ourselves in the One who *is* the truth, the way, and the life. And so grounded, then let us live it. In fact, we have no choice. For as that same Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his famous work on discipleship, "The followers of Jesus are no longer faced with a decision. The only decision possible for them has already been made. Now they have to be what they are, or they are not following Jesus... their discipleship is a visible act which separates them from the world – or it is not discipleship."

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