

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Fourth Sunday After Epiphany,
January 29, 2017

Have a Blessed Day!
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
January 29, 2017

Matthew 5:1-12

The best known of all sermons ever preached is Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" which appears in scripture in Matthew 5, 6 and 7. The first part of the sermon, known as the beatitudes, is my topic this morning.

As was customary for rabbis, Jesus sat as he began the sermon which he addresses to his disciples, not to a crowd of people. When teaching, rabbis sat and the listeners sat around the rabbi, as was the case here.

The Sermon on the Mount is long, far longer than any I have ever given. If I tried to talk as long as Jesus did on that occasion, you would probably be squirming in the pews, asking yourself, "When is he going to finish?" If however you were listening to Jesus, I am sure that your rapt attention to what he was saying would not fade.

Now, what is a beatitude? It is a blessing on someone or something.

We tend here in the South to say "Have a Blessed Day." That is a beatitude of sorts, at least a start to one. More needs to be said for it to fully be a beatitude and in our scripture reading Jesus utters nine beatitudes, eight of a general nature and the final one specifically directed to his disciples.

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

This beatitude is addressed not only to those who are economically poor but more precisely is addressed to anyone who is in need of God's help such as those who are emotionally disillusioned or who are oppressed. At times that might include any of us.

"Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted."

We all have undoubtedly mourned the passing of a family member or a good friend at one time or another. We should mourn but should not let our mourning go on indefinitely. I have a friend who lost her husband quite a few years ago but who has never gotten over her mourning. Are you like that or do you know anyone who is like that?

It is not healthy and it overlooks the fact that the loved one is with Christ. That is something to be joyful about, not something to mourn. As the beatitude says we should be comforted, not mournful.

Of course there are other things which cause people to mourn --- loss of a job, loss of financial support, even loss of prestige. Those types of mourning are understandable but are transitional. Prayer is the appropriate response.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

A better word than “meek” is “gentle”. This beatitude refers to people who do not assert themselves over others in order to gain prestige or to advance a cause or something they strongly support. Politicians unfortunately tend not to be meek or gentle. Often they are self-serving. That is the type of attitude that Jesus is addressing. Those who are meek and gentle are the ones who will prevail in the long run. They are the ones who truly will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

This beatitude refers, in part, to those who have been downtrodden, those who have encountered injustice in their lives. In this grouping are the poor, the disabled, minorities such as African Americans and Hispanics, immigrants --- anyone who at times seems to be pushed to the margins of society. Their quest for righteousness can and will be fulfilled only through God’s intervention --- through the righteousness of God and through Jesus’ second great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. These people are our neighbors and need our love in fullest measure.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

Are you merciful to others at all times? Few of us are but God is always merciful. The Zondervan Historical Commentary ⁽¹⁾ points out that God’s great mercy does not give us what we deserve. Rather he gives us what we do not deserve --- grace and salvation.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

None of us can look and see God’s face, at least not in this life but, if we truly believe in God’s grace, we will see God when the time comes.

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.”

This beatitude is rather self-explanatory. Those who strive for peace are indeed God’s children. *“True peacemakers are those who wait and work for God, who makes*

whole the divisions created by humans.”⁽¹⁾

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The beatitude is directed at anyone who is maligned for whatever reason. It may be a child who is bullied in school. It may be someone who is maligned because of his or her religious beliefs, as are many in the Muslim community. It may be an immigrant who works hard to support his family but who is looked down upon. It may be the unemployed father who resorts to begging on the street.

All of these and more are blessed and welcomed into the kingdom of heaven.

The final beatitude which is directed to the disciples, and to us, is, *“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me”*, because of your faith in Jesus.

Have any of you encountered that? I have. It comes from the unchurched that see no point in going to worship on Sunday when you could be mowing the lawn, playing golf, or just relaxing.

It comes from atheists who criticize the beliefs of Christians.

It comes from people of other faith traditions who think that theirs is the only valid way to worship.

What response should you have to this? Verse twelve of our scripture reading says it well. *“Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

Have a blessed day!

Amen

(1) Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, vol. 1, Clinton E.

Arnold, ed., Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011