

Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 15

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

Blessed are those who climb the corporate ladder; they will be blessed with a comfortable retirement. Blessed are those who invest shrewdly, especially in a volatile market; they will be provided many opportunities. Blessed are those with a superb education. Blessed are the good-looking, for they will find plenty of friends.

Of course, Jesus never said any of those. In fact, Jesus seemed to go out of his way to not speak in those words that offer some kind of formula for successful living. Isn't a blessing an indication of successful living? As Rev Mark Ramsey, Presbyterian pastor, points out, we need to reintroduce ourselves to the word *blessing*, as in, "Blessed are the..." as we find in our gospel lesson this morning. These blessings are known as the Beatitudes, which mean supreme blessedness. So, what is blessedness? I want to give credit to Rev. Ramsey for his thoughts on the Beatitudes, which I am sharing with you this morning.

We need to reintroduce ourselves to the word *blessing* for there seems to be a common misunderstanding of the theological understanding of a blessing. In our society, blessings are seen as wealth, prosperity, material goods. How often has it not been said that the wealthy have been blessed by God. People may reflect on how God has blessed them with material prosperity. Many believe that the wealth of our own nation is due to the fact that God has blessed us as a nation. Blessings are seen as some kind of reward for good behavior, right action. Prosperity preachers proclaim, "Get right with God, and God will bless you with wealth, a rewarding career, a great family."

Blessings are not some kind of transactions with God. We live in a world of striving or aspiring. Keep your nose to the grindstone, and you will climb the corporate

ladder. If you want to be successful in life, work hard. Focus on your athletic abilities and you can become a great athlete. Hard work is the key to career success, life success. From a theological perspective, it translates as, “Do for God, and God will reward you.” Blessings are seen as transactions with God. Give God something. God gives back. The Beatitudes do not fit neatly or conveniently into our world of striving or aspiring.

Blessedness is often times contrasted with deprivation or suffering. So, if you are blessed, you will not lose your dog or your wife or your pickup as they lament in country western songs! But take note of the last Beatitude, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” That questions any belief that blessings are the opposite of deprivation or suffering. For Matthew the cost of blessedness is very much like the cost of discipleship.

Some believe that a blessing is happiness, that a blessing brings happiness. Blessing does not equate to happiness. You may remember Bobby McFerrin’s song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” In Psalm 1:1 the same word translated Blessed in the Beatitudes is translated *happy* and the Good News Bible, in trying to make the gospel more accessible for twentieth century young people, also begin the Beatitudes with, “Happy are, rather than “blessed are.” But *happy* seems to be too thin a word for what Jesus claims.

The Beatitudes are descriptive, and not prescriptive. Jesus here used the indicative voice, not the imperative. In other words, they are not an exhortation to shape up nor are they some dire warning of what will happen if we don’t shape up. The Beatitudes are not entrance requirements for the kingdom. The Beatitudes are not direct

calls to action, to become poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be pure in heart. It runs the risk of becoming legalism and works righteousness. Let me remind you again, the Christian faith is not works righteousness. It is not legalist. Jesus is offering consolations for those who find themselves in these situations. You are blessed when you find yourself in these situations.

Perhaps a clue to understanding what it means to be blessed is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes are the beginning verses of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This sermon starts with the Beatitudes, and goes through chapter six, to the end of chapter seven. In the last paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declared that to hear the words and act on them is to be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew, but the house did not fall, because it was founded on rock. Those who hear the words but do not act on them are like the foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew, and the house fell. Blessedness does not stop the storms from coming. Blessedness does not stop the rain from falling, the floods from coming, or the winds from blowing. But, the house stands. Blessedness comes from being in a relationship with God. Blessings are indicative that our lives are built on rock, not sand.

Beatitude people are the people of God. They're poor in spirit, they are wounded and hurting, they're gentle and meek, they're hungry for what is just and fair, they're pure in heart, they seek peace, and they have a tolerance for being misunderstood by an unknowing and unbelieving culture.

The culture, the sociopolitical context, of Jesus's day is not so different, in some ways, to our day. The sociopolitical context of Jesus day was that of the Roman Empire,

an empire of oppression and injustice. The religious context was that of the elite Jewish establishment, the religious leaders who were part of the elite. What Jesus teaches us in the Beatitudes critiques both contexts because of the groups upon whom the blessings are pronounced. Those who would receive God's favor are not the privileged classes of the Roman Empire or of the Jewish establishment. Those who receive God's favor are not the rich and the powerful. The Beatitudes are spoken to those groups whom God deems worthy, not by virtue of their own achievements or status in society, but because God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, the justice seekers, the peace makers, and those persecuted because of their beliefs.

Rev. Ramsey says that Jesus' Beatitudes are "geography—they tell you where to stand." He quotes Fred Buechner, who once wrote, "If you want to know who you really are as opposed to who you think you are, look where your feet are taking you. The Beatitudes tell us where our feet should take us, where we should stand:

You're in the right place if
...you are in a place where you can be poor in spirit;
...you are a mourner seeking comfort,
...you walk with the meek, if you look around, and you are surrounded by folks who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
...you are merciful, if you are pure in heart.
You are a peacemaker, even if you get persecuted for it.