

Matthew 5:1-12
Blessed Are...
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This morning we're beginning a new series of sermons that will lead us through this fall and then continue on into 2020, in the Gospel of Matthew. But specifically this fall we are going to be focusing on Jesus' greatest teaching, his magnum opus, the beating heart of the Christian life, the Sermon on the Mount.

I don't know about you, but I am a sucker for a good launch or unveiling experience. Whether it's a highly anticipated movie, like each new installment of the Star Wars saga; or a product launch like the latest Apple phone or watch; or a car like the Tesla, personally the one that got me more excited than about any other was when Elon Musk the founder of Tesla unveiled...wait for it, solar roof tiles. But really there's no better unveiling or launch experience than the 9 months it takes for each little baby to grow in gestation. With each day the anticipation literally grows and grows.

Matthew tells of the roll out of Jesus' ministry. He begins as Jesus has returned from his wilderness training, his sojourn in the desert where three times Jesus is tempted to use his divine identity for self-serving purposes, three hungers we too face: the hunger for food, the hunger for security, the hunger for power all are presented to Jesus by the devil and three times Jesus responds by stating that his would be a posture of dependence on the Father, instead of independence and self-reliance.

Then, after hearing of John's arrest Jesus steps out into his Messianic role, preaching, Jesus' first sermon was simply: **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**

Under your own direction life was going one way, how's that working for you? Jesus says, turn because the Kingdom is in your midst. Have you ever had one of those watershed moments in your life when you knew that because of what you were seeing or hearing all of life, as you know it would be different? Like the moment you saw your first born, or maybe the moment you first saw the person who would be your spouse.

Upon seeing Jesus the first words people hear from him are: Repent. Seems like an interesting first sermon topic. But think about how often we hear speakers tell us how full of potential, and importance, and greatness is inside us if we will just let it out, just try a little harder. Sometimes it doesn't feel like there's a lot of untapped greatness in there, just the real struggles and insecurities that everyone of us deals with. Jesus' first move is to invite us first to a posture of honesty.

In our worship, you will notice that each week we spend time in worship confessing our sin, acknowledging—as Paul will go on in Romans 3 to write—that we all fall short of God's glory and holy purposes for our lives. We do this not just because we have some self-critical need to be scolded, we do it because it reminds us of our deep need for a God who literally comes to us in our rescue. Now we're ready to hear the good news.

After gathering the crowds around him Jesus opens his mouth and taught them saying: **Blessed...**

And some among the crowd I bet were beginning to rub their hands together, thinking: now we're getting somewhere, here comes the good stuff. They thought: Jesus is now going to tell us all of the things we can expect from all of the things we've done for God. These are the religious ones, these are the faithful observant Jews, those who on the outside appeared very worthy of being blessed. But I bet there were also people within earshot who were thinking: "I don't feel close to God; I'm probably not going to be among the blessed ones, because my life doesn't look like theirs, I wonder if there is going to be a place for me in what he's about to say..."

I think we have a sense of this, because we hear it a lot from churches from pastors, and leaders and people who write things about faith, about what it looks like to be blessed. We hear words like victory, abundance, overcome, growth, and success attached to the understanding of blessed, and this is so often what it looks like to have a spiritual life that is blessed. And I will be dollars to donuts that at least one time or another every one of us has said to ourselves, this sounds all well and good, but my life feels very far from what this person is talking about.

Being gathered into Jesus' presence we are invited to acknowledge that our lives sometimes feel far from victorious, successful, conquering. Is there a place for those of us who struggle to be a Christian because it just doesn't come easy? Is there a place for those of us who are discouraged because all the promises we make to ourselves to get our physical, relational, and spiritual life back on track, so often fall short, and we know it? Is there a place for those of us who still struggle with what the pietists call that "besetting sin," the sin in our life that always seems to trip us up and we feel like we are powerless against it? I wonder if there is a place for us among the crowd gathered to listen to Jesus?

And Jesus continues: Blessed are the poor in Spirit. That's interesting, not blessed are the poor in wealth, or blessed are the poor in health, or status, but blessed are the poor in spirit. Jesus is saying you are blessed when you realize how spiritually deficient you are. He uses the word *Tokos*, for poor in spirit, which is more emphatic than someone who is just scratching by. Rather *tokos* indicates that the blessed ones are those who are spiritually destitute—who have tried it all and still feel like they're coming up short. Jesus calls this person blessed because after all their trying, they're finally ready to simply to receive life from Jesus, and not earn it on their own.

One of my favorite quotes from Eugene Peterson is: the place where we find God is always at the end of our ropes. In his Message Translation Peterson interprets 5:3 to say "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule."

In the next three Beatitudes Jesus offers blessings to people who find themselves in deplorable situations.

Blessed are those who mourn, the brokenhearted, who once experienced grief, and continue to face the prospect of living each day in their grief.

Blessed are meek, or as New Testament Scholar Dale Bruner writes, "blessings on the little people." Blessings on those who make no claims for themselves before God who know they are powerless and without standing.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are blessed not because they are righteous, but because they long for and feel starved for and empty of a needed righteousness. Blessed are those who crave righteousness, but for whom it as yet eludes them.

This Summer I had the opportunity to check an item off of my bucket list, I saw the stage production of Victor Hugo's masterpiece *Les Miserables*. It is a monument, not only of literature, but of theater and music. In the story Jean Valjean takes the lead in representing the whole of French society who were the oppressed, accused, rejected, the miserable ones. And the antagonist in the story is Inspector Javert. Javert is not just the bad guy who tirelessly pursues Valjean to carry out what he understands to be justice. But Javert represents something deeper, something inherent, something theological. You see Javert is bound captive to the law, the only way righteousness or justice can be known is in a strict keeping of its statutes. But the very thing that he has devoted his life to is also the thing that keeps him from knowing true life, for he believes that the only way to God is by climbing our way up. But what we see is that his relentless pursuit of righteousness is what keeps him from ever knowing grace or mercy. It drives him to take his own life because mercy is so foreign and unknowable to him.

Jesus says, blessed are the ones who realize just how far they miss the mark. Blessed are the ones who understand that their only path to blessedness comes when someone takes them by the hand and leads them there, and gives it to them.

And then he tells them what they will receive when they are at the end of their ropes. In short, they receive Jesus. For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven; for they shall be comforted; for they shall inherit the earth; for they shall be satisfied. What we receive is not the strength to pull ourselves up and muster the will to do it on our own, but the savior who comes down to offer us himself, and who lifts us up out of the holes we dig for ourselves. In short what Jesus gives us is himself.

The 20th Century German Theologian and Pastor Helmut Theilicke says: "the reason why you who are miserable and afraid are to be called blessed is simply because I (Jesus) am in the midst of you. When you are going through all of the things that tempt you to feel as though you are far away, forsaken, and destitute from God, Jesus says, realize that I too had to feel that distance and forsakenness. Because you are feeling this way is precisely what ought to drive you closer to me because we are sharing this together."

But as a friend and mentor once said, Jesus doesn't just come down into our pits to be with us, but to lift us out to new life. Again Theilicke writes "Jesus comes to us not just as the teacher, but as the savior. These aren't just words, words, words; something happens to us. From now on we have a signature, sealed with blood and sanctified by his sufferings, declaring that heaven has been opened to us, even when everything around us has been locked tight. We have a signature that certifies that in *everything* God works for good for those who love him. It is precisely the empty hands that shall be blessed."

Blessed are those who are able to see clearly how little in this life is actually needful in order to be overwhelmingly joyful. At no other time in my life has this been more clear to me than on our visit to the churches in Cuba. Churches who gather in broken down, dilapidated buildings, with little more than a handful of bibles; no music program, no grand pipe organ, no fancy preaching, monthly salaries for their pastor that wouldn't even fill our gas tank. And yet, these communities had such

joy and love for Jesus that they would serve literally hundreds and sometimes thousands throughout the week with what we would see as the leftovers.

This is when it became real to me that true blessedness had nothing to do with what you have or what you've earned, or what you've been able to achieve. True blessedness comes in your proximity to the savior, and a willingness to receive this life you've been given and receive your identity from the one who calls us miserables blessed.

C.S. Lewis wrote, the people around us think that money and sex and booze and the high life are as good as it gets. To folks like this the Beatitudes sound roaringly stupid. But such people are like an ignorant little child who says that he'd rather just go on making mud pies in some slaggy alley in the slums simply because he can't imagine what it means that you just invited him to go to the beach for the weekend. People in this world are far too easily pleased. They think mud pies is as good as it gets when really they and we all have been made for joy! Blessed are you if you know the joy that is our God in Christ for it changes everything!