

Blessed Are the Upside Down
Matthew 5:1-12
First Presbyterian Church
January 7, 2018
Beatitudes Series # 1

Introduction to the Reading

Many years ago, Clarence Jordan wrote a wonderful book on the Sermon on the Mount... and in that book, he noted that though the Beatitudes provide the kickoff to Jesus "Sermon on the Mount," what Matthew says is that Jesus TAUGHT them... and that it might be more accurate to call this Jesus' "LESSON on the Mount" or his "INSTRUCTION on the Mount" rather than his SERMON on the Mount.¹ And there's a difference, Clarence Jordan said, there's a difference between a sermon and a lesson... and I quote:

"A sermon is something you sleep through and tell the preacher you really enjoyed. But a lesson is something which is assigned and for which you are held responsible. You don't sleep through lessons, only sermons." Well, just in case you are already getting drowsy, this a lesson Jesus is teaching.

Matthew 5:3-12 (UNISON)

⁵When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them...

³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹ Clarence Jordan in *The Substance of Faith and Other Cotton Patch Sermons*, Association Press – 1972, p. 62.

¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Prayer for Illumination

God, source of all light,
by your Word you give light to the soul.
Pour out upon us
the spirit of wisdom and understanding
that, being taught by you in Holy Scripture,
our hearts and minds may be opened to know the things
that pertain to life and holiness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Sermon

In one of her sermons, Barbara Brown Taylor tells how when she was little, she liked to stand on her head. She was short then, and everything in the world seemed so tall and boring to her... but she found that by standing on her head she could liven things up. Grass hung in front of her eyes like a green fringe... trees grew down not up... the sky was a blue lawn that went on forever. Her swing set was no longer an “A” but a “V” - and at any moment her house seemed in danger of falling off the yard. She liked standing on her head because she could see things in a new way. She liked standing on her head because in a world where trees grew down and houses might fall up, anything seemed possible.

Perhaps Jesus should have asked his students to stand on their heads while he taught them these Beatitudes... because that’s exactly what he did – he turned the world as they knew it upside down.² Up was now down and down was now up. Out was now in and in was now out. Front was now back and back was now front. Blessed are the upside down.

Taken together the Beatitudes are among my all-time favorite words of Scripture. Over the years I have studied them... pondered them. I’ve taught them and preached on them. In fact, we just finished studying them in our Friday morning Bible study... but I can’t say I have truly understood them. And I can’t say I truly understand them now; only that I may be getting a little closer. Perhaps this is true for you as well – my sense is most of us don’t quite know what to do with the Beatitudes. We’ve heard them so many times we don’t really hear them anymore. And when we DO hear them, we think they’re just new commandments to be obeyed... new list of “shoulds” and “oughts” that we good Christians need to get to work on. “I should be poorer in spirit... I ought to be purer in heart... I worry that I’m not meek enough... Mournful enough... righteous enough...merciful enough. That (I’m embarrassed to say) has been my default when I’ve heard these words. And so, part of my deepening understanding of the Beatitudes is realizing there are NO “should’s” or “oughts” here... there are NO “thou shalt’s” or “thou shalt not’s” anywhere in Jesus’ words.

² Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon “Blessed are the Upside Down,” *Gospel Medicine* (Cowley Publications – 1995), p. 145-146.

Jesus isn't saying "Whit, do this and you will receive this... do that and you will receive that." So, what I am coming to understand is that what Jesus is doing here in the Beatitudes is answering a very simple, yet profound question: Who is well off? Who is living the good life? Who is truly blessed? It is the question of fundamental well-being... the question of where... and in what... and in whom... our well-being lies. And what Jesus is saying here... in fact, what his core message will be throughout his earthly ministry... is that well-being lies with him... with living our lives in his kingdom. Who is well off? Those who are in the kingdom of God.

Well, as we know (and as Jesus certainly knew) there are many other answers to that question... many other criteria for defining who is well off. There's wealth and power and status... there's IQ and what school you graduated from and how thin and beautiful you are... all kinds of other ways to determine who is blessed... who is living the good life. Yet, in these Beatitudes Jesus asks us to stand on our heads and risk seeing things from another perspective... to risk seeing things through his eyes... as he sees them.

Dallas Willard in his book *The Divine Conspiracy* recalls the Old Testament story of Jacob – who was this crooked guy that was always scamming somebody... who got into trouble as people do when they live that kind of life... and who wound up on the run and sleeping in a ditch with a stone for a pillow. As he slept he had a dream... and the dream was of what we've come to know as "Jacob's Ladder." You remember Jacob's Ladder? It was a kind of staircase into heaven with angels coming and going on it. It was a very vivid and wonderful dream and you may remember that Jesus said people were going to see the same in his case... they were going to see the heavens open and the angels of God descending on the Son of Man.

Well, let me just pause for a moment and ask you to think about that for YOU – think about heaven opening and angels of God descending to you. When Jacob awoke from the dream, he said: "Surely the Lord was in this place and I did not know it." Surely the Lord was in this place and I did not know it... Surely God was right here... right now... and I did not know it.

Friends, I want to remind you - here at the beginning of a new year - that God is wherever you are... that wherever you are, God is there. And that you do not need to ask who will go up into heaven and bring God down... who will sail across the sea to bring God to you... who will descend into the depths to bring God up... you do not need to ask because wherever you are is a doorway to HEAVEN. Remember now that heaven isn't only what happens after we die. That's such a limited view! Heaven is the presence of God... heaven is the kingdom of God here and now. And it does not matter WHAT you are... WHO you are... what you have GOING FOR you... what you've got GOING AGAINST you... none of that matters... because God is in this place.

This is the message of the Beatitudes... this is what the Beatitudes are all about... because friends, you can't understand the kingdom of God until you understand that there is no limit to whom you can go and say: "Blessed." No limit.³ There is no limit to whom you can go and say: "Blessed."

Well, I said earlier that Jesus wasn't just offering us a new set of "shoulds and oughts" ... of rules and laws to be followed... Yet IF (in response to this sermon) there is anything for us to DO this morning, I suppose is to PRAY... to pray with all our heart for discernment... to pray for Jesus' eyes... for eyes that can see Jesus' kingdom... for eyes that see the world as he does. Because that's what we really need to deeply understand the Beatitudes. We need eyes to see the blessing of knowing our spiritual poverty... to see the blessing in meekness and mourning and showing mercy and making peace... eyes to see the blessing in doing the right thing... even if it costs us dearly. Let's do that now... would you pray with me?

Lord Jesus, as you taught your disciples long ago on a hillside by the sea, teach us today of the things of God. May your Spirit be at work within us granting us eyes to see as you see. Thank you, Christ, that you are with us... whoever we are... wherever we are... whatever we face... thank you that you are with us and that no one – absolutely no one – is beyond your blessing. It is in love for you... and with desire to be your disciples - that we offer this prayer. Amen.

³ Dallas Willard: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxkaVGVhkuA>