

Bible Study Guide: Week of 10-26-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 5:1-12

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 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. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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

For context, remember that we are still early in Matthew's gospel. Jesus has just finished his time of testing in the wilderness. Emerging from this encounter, he got to work calling the disciples to follow him. He then set out around the region of Galilee preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, and attracting great crowds. These are the crowds Jesus sees coming toward him. At that point, rather than approach the crowds, Matthew tells us Jesus went up the mountain and began to teach his disciples. It is important to note that his audience here is NOT the crowds as a whole, but rather the disciples themselves. Also, note the mountain setting. This calls to mind the revelation of God to Moses on Mt. Sinai and other such encounters from the Old Testament. Likewise, Jesus' posture of sitting to teach is important here. We expect a teacher to stand and lecture, but the opposite was true in the ancient world. The teacher sat and the students stood to listen.

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

Here, Jesus begins the so-called "beatitudes." This term *beatitude* means blessing. It is the Latin translation of the Greek word used here—*makarios*. Some translations use "happy," but "blessed" is better. We might say "fortunate" or "well-off" or "to be envied." It is significant that these blessings form the basis of Jesus' first instruction to his disciples. He is helping them to set their minds not on earthly blessings and ways, but on God's blessings and ways. Jesus knows that in their ministry the disciples will encounter many whom the world would deem to be "cursed" or "unfortunate." Followers of Jesus are not to judge them as the world does, but rather to look at them through God's lens. In God's kingdom, for instance, it is the "poor in spirit" who are fortunate and who are in possession of the kingdom of heaven. What, precisely, does "poor in spirit" mean? It could mean those whose spiritual life is lacking. Alternately, it could mean those who are weary and forlorn. In his bible paraphrase *The Message*, Eugene Peterson interprets it this way: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule." The term "spirit" here (*pneuma* in Greek) can also be translated "wind." Idiomatically, we might say

“Blessed are those who have had the wind taken out of their sails.” The idea is that when one has nowhere left to turn, God is always there and will provide.

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

Comforted is the same root word as the term for the Holy Spirit in John's gospel—the paraclete or advocate. It is not just that those who mourn will receive condolences. Rather, they will have someone to advocate for them. That makes a big difference. It is not just an assurance that the mourners will get sympathy; rather, the mourners will have the root causes of their mourning addressed and fixed!

Who will do this? Notice the passive voice—“they will be comforted; they will be advocated for—by whom?” We will see this passive voice used throughout these beatitudes. It could be the so-called “divine passive”—that is, God is the one who will do these things. But Jesus could also be spurring his listeners—i.e. the disciples—to bring God's ways to bear on the world here and now. We are those sent to comfort the mourning (y'all do a great job of this, dear Good Shepherd family), but we are also those called to help eliminate the sources of affliction and grief. Consider these words of James 2:

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

We are not merely those sent to speak kindly and say “well, feel better soon.” Rather, we are to put our faith and words into action at times.

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

Meek can have a very negative connotation in our day and age—meekness can even be a character flaw. If someone is meek, we might say they have trouble asserting themselves or allow others to walk all over them. But seen in a more positive light, meekness can mean gentleness and humility, which is something we do value in others at times. Jesus' teaching here is concerned primarily with helping the disciples see that the kingdom of heaven turns a lot of the world on its head. In the secular world, it is the strong and bold and decisive who seize the earth for themselves. In the kingdom of heaven, apparently, it is the meek and the gentle and the humble who will *inherit* the earth. Note that inheritance doesn't depend on what we do or don't do. It depends on a relationship and someone else's love for us. If God is the one who is leaving the earth as an inheritance, it is the meek whom God is going to name as heirs.

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

“Righteousness” in Greek can mean rightness, justice, or equity. In short, righteousness is God's way of doing things and ruling the world. Those who yearn for God's ways and will to be done are promised that their yearning will not go unsatiated. Again, note the passive voice—“they will be filled.” By whom? Is this again the “divine passive,” or do Jesus' followers have a role to play, as well?

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

The merciful are those who take pity on others; those who are compassionate. This is a classic virtue, but can also be (by the world's standards) seen as a weakness. Mercy is hard to show to others, but it seems pretty great when it is shown to you. There is a give and a take here, just as in the Lord's prayer when we ask God to “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” It feels nice to receive such forgiveness; it is harder to show it when we have been wronged. Jesus says blessed are they who can find it in them to show mercy.

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

The heart is the center for our thoughts and feelings. Pure here is a word that often means “clean.” Therefore, to be pure in heart is to have clean thoughts and feelings. We all know from experience that when we harbor unclean thoughts or feelings it is difficult to see God’s work among us.

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

“Peacemakers” here means literally “doers or makers of peace.” This word is actually two Greek words stuck together—eirene (peace) and poieo (to do or make). Caesar like to make claims about himself. Two of his favorites were that he was the bringer of peace (the Pax Romana or Roman Peace comes to mind here) and that he was a son of god. Here, Jesus encourages the disciples to look elsewhere for makers/doers of peace and for those who will be called God’s children.

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

What does it mean to be persecuted on account of righteousness/equity/rightness/justice? Jesus knows that his disciples are likely to face opposition, even danger for believing in him and professing him openly. Once again, the promise—the possession or ownership or share in the kingdom of heaven is promised or proclaimed by Jesus to be to an unexpected group. First, it was the poor in spirit. Here, it is the ones persecuted for the sake of justice/righteousness/equity. Just as the prophets found themselves eventually vindicated as true servants of God, so will those who follow Jesus find that their ultimate status doesn’t depend on earthly factors.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. A lot of this section of the Sermon on the Mount forces us to wrestle with the difference between faithfulness and success. What do you think the difference is between being faithful and being successful? Is it possible to be one without being the other?**
- 2. How might we participate in giving comfort or advocating on behalf of those who mourn? How do we already do this as a community? How can we do it more faithfully?**
- 3. What would it look like for you to be a doer/maker of peace right now?**