

Matthew 5:1-12

5 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.

CAN YOU RECOGNIZE A BLESSING WHEN YOU SEE ONE?

Blessed are the rich, the famous, the powerful, the beautiful and the healthy. Blessed are those who live in safe neighborhoods, in luxury houses, who drive luxury cars, who can afford to eat out at least twice a week, and whose children go to the best prep schools. Blessed are the enviable, the admired, the ones who live the good life.

That's what would expect Jesus to tell us, because that's precisely what we want in life, and we want God to give us a nod of approval. And so it should irritate us a little that Jesus doesn't include any of these things when he defines those who are blessed. Instead he says blessed are the poor, the sad, the meek, the ones who hunger for justice and righteousness, who long for peace, who show mercy. There's nothing in there about a Lexus or a yacht or a vacation home.

Many people, including some well-known pastors, have misunderstood what Jesus is saying here; they think that Jesus is having pity on the unfortunate in this world, that he's telling them that despite their suffering God still cares for them while he gives us a wink and a nod as if to say, "And *of course* you're blessed." But when we give the Beatitudes this kind of interpretation we are corrupting his message to make it something that accommodates our desires, our material and ego-driven longings. Jesus is not having a pity-party for the poor here; he is describing the sort of people who are truly blessed.

I was intrigued by that word 'bless' as I worked on this sermon. It's a very primitive word that deserves a little research, and I found that the Hebrew word for bless, *barach* (בָּרַךְ) is the verb form of the noun *knee* (בְּרֵךְ). When you look closely at both words, you notice the only differences are among the vowel markers, which would have been absent from the original texts, so both words would appear identical, and the only way a person could distinguish would have been by oral tradition. The point is that blessing has always had something to do with falling on our knees, and we hardly imagine the rich and the powerful and the successful as *kneeling* before God. We usually think of the oppressed as those who kneel, who are in fact "brought to their knees."

This idea that blessing has to do with oppression or humility seems almost foreign to us, but it is a key point in the Bible. The psalmist writes:

The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (Psalm 146:9)

The author of Deuteronomy writes:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. (Deuteronomy 10:17-18)

It is precisely those who are poor and who yearn for justice (because they are so often denied justice) who God loves and cares for. They are truly "blessed." And his judgment comes on those who neglect the poor and the stranger and fail to treat them justly. Hear what the prophet Isaiah says:

²¹ How the faithful city
has become a whore!
She that was full of justice,
righteousness lodged in her—
but now murderers!

²² Your silver has become dross,
your wine is mixed with water.

²³ Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.

Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.

**They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them.**

²⁴ Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:
Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies,
and avenge myself on my foes!

²⁵ I will turn my hand against you;
I will smelt away your dross as with lye
and remove all your alloy.

²⁶ And I will restore your judges as at the first,
and your counsellors as at the beginning.
Afterwards you shall be called the city of righteousness,
the faithful city. (Isaiah 1:21-26)

God aint foolin around! He's angry at the way those who seem so "blessed" materially have neglected and taken advantage of the poor and the meek, the very ones that Jesus declares to be the *blessed*. And God declares that he loves them.

From the beginning Jesus understood something that we too often don't understand until we are poor in spirit, or mourning, or hungering for justice and peace. What Jesus is telling us is that our struggles that bring us to our knees are the very things that help us recognize that we are blessed. Because when we are brought to our knees we draw closer to heaven. One of my favorite quotes is this one by Angela Yuriko Smith...

"Only when my eyes have adjusted to the dark can I witness the splendor of the moon and the stars. Only when I have sat in hopeless loss can I appreciate every blessing."

Once again we see that allusion to being brought down; Angela sits in hopeless loss while others kneel in the same.

So does this mean that the rich and powerful and even those who exploit the weak and the poor are not blessed by God? Not at all! God does not like some of us more than others, and this is not a prescription for you to go out and get poor and suffer some oppression so that you'll be blessed. Jesus is just declaring that the people we often consider unblessed are in fact blessed.

But to those who are not poor in spirit, those who do not mourn, those who are not meek, those who do not hunger or thirst for righteousness, those who are not merciful or pure in heart, who are not peacemakers, those who are unwilling to suffer for righteousness' sake, you will have a hard time recognizing true blessing. Once again I draw that connection between a blessing and something that brings us to our knees, and the one who is not prone to kneel should pray that one day he might be so that he can appreciate what a blessing really is.

I recall when I was in chaplaincy training, walking into a hospital room where a middle aged man was with family and making quite a bit of noise and clearly agitated. I introduced myself and asked if I could assist in any way and the man looked at me angrily and said, "Can you cure me of cancer? No, you can't help me! Please leave." Later I learned that this very wealthy man had been given a diagnosis of six months to a year of life. The next time I was on duty he had calmed down and invited me to speak with him. I learned that he was not so much concerned about "where he would spend eternity: heaven or hell," but more a frustration in that he seemed to have missed something in life. He was a handsome, intelligent, wealthy, and until recently healthy man who had traveled many places and done many things, but he never acknowledged God's blessing in all of this. He had allowed his pleasures to drive his life and when he realized that he was nearing the end of that road he was seeing nothing but emptiness beyond.

The best thing about a blessing is coming to recognize that God is eternal, and that suffering is not. That's why Jesus ends every one of his blessings with a benediction:

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.**

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

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God does have a perfect plan, a perfect recreation of this corrupted world. Those who know themselves to be blessed always have this truth in the back of their minds and know that suffering is only temporary. Yet they work to alleviate suffering not only their own but the suffering of others as well. Maybe that's because they are better able to empathize with those who are poor and meek and hunger for righteousness. But it's also because they have a faith that places hope in God and his promises.

So you may want to come up to altar and kneel for awhile, not so much to gain a blessing but to recognize how blessed you already are. You may ask the Lord to place in your heart a greater hunger for righteousness, a greater capacity to show mercy, a greater desire for peace, a greater ability to love both you neighbors and your enemies. But whatever your prayer, may you see how blessed you are, and thus may you be a blessing to others.