

Matthew 5:1-11

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

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

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

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

A Call for Commitment

I’ve spent the last three Sundays describing what I call “intentional discipleship,” because for a Methodist, discipleship is such a core part of our calling and our identity. Every Sunday we chant our mission statement, which is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” and in our vision statement we identify the essential quality of a disciple, which is someone how has a passionate and sustained spiritual relationship with Christ.” And of course you understand that the success of our mission and the realization of our vision depend upon where we the church stand in our relationship with Jesus Christ; we’ll have a hard time making true disciples of Jesus Christ if we ourselves are not true disciples; our vision is merely a pipe dream if we ourselves don’t have a sustained and passionate spiritual relationship with Christ.

Now some may be thinking that it’s foolhardy to have such a mission in the first place – making disciples of Jesus Christ. It sounds rather closed-minded. It seems to be a trend in our postmodern world to allow everyone to choose their own direction, to make their own choices, and so a lot of people think that it’s arrogant for Christians to “make disciples” or expect others to “ignite or sustain a passionate spiritual relationship with Christ.” That’s forcing people into your mindset, expecting them to meet your expectations. But we have to understand our Christian mission as having two parts. The first is to evangelize, that is to tell others about Jesus Christ – who he is, what he’s all about, and what Christian faith is all about. Then we let the Holy Spirit do its job, working within a person to bring them to that wonderful realization that

Christ lived and died and resurrected for you and me and everyone. And once that person declares, “I want to be a Christian,” then comes the time to help them in becoming a disciple. That’s why a church must be well-disciplined itself in following Jesus Christ, because we owe it to anyone who is serious about following Jesus to be the best we can be in helping them on that path. So if a church is not drawing in new members you might need to focus on the current members and their discipleship as much as you focus on outreach and evangelism, because you need to have a good foundation before you build.

And as I reflected upon the messages I’ve shared over the past three weeks, I felt a need to go back and revisit the first theme, which was about planting ourselves next to living water, which was a metaphorical way of saying, “Get yourself centered in God” and “to walk with Jesus Christ.” I followed that message with a message of warning that the world is going to tempt you to compromise your walk, to go astray, to lead you into making a partial commitment to Christ but not throwing yourself into the ring. I followed that message by telling you to be bold disciples, to proclaim to others why you are a Christian, why it matters, what makes you so passionate about your faith, what is it that keeps you so energized and excited...and then looked out and noticed some blank expressions and wondered just how energized and excited some folks really are. So I ended by saying if you’re not energized or excited you should go back to square one; you should plant yourself by the living water of God’s Spirit, by praying and reading scripture and worshiping and Churching.

And during the week I came to realize that something was missing. I realized that many of you DO pray and read scripture and worship and fellowship, but those things in themselves do not necessarily excite you or create a passionate spiritual relationship with Christ. And if you’re not passionate then you won’t resist the temptation to compromise when it comes to following Jesus’ commandments. So how in the world can you make disciples if you fall short of *being* a disciple? I realized something was missing at the front end of our Christian walk, and that something is commitment. Committing yourself to pray and study scripture and come to church and fellowship with folks does not necessarily lead you into discipleship. **WHAT IS ESSENTIAL AT THE FRONT END IS A COMMITMENT ON YOUR PART TO FOLLOW JESUS, TO MAKE HIM LORD OF YOUR LIFE,** and to do that, you have to put your entire self into the mix. Only you can do that, and only you can know that you ARE committed. It’s not up to anyone else to judge. It’s all between you and God.

I’ve chosen these verses from Matthew’s gospel, known as the beatitudes – part of the Sermon on the Mount, to make the point that discipleship is something we are rather than something we do. Jesus begins his sermon, not as I too often do by telling people what they need to do, but rather by telling people who they are. I think that’s an important point. We too often think that living the Christian lifestyle is abiding by a long list of do’s and don’ts. Maybe we have that voice inside our heads that keeps asking, “What would Jesus do?” and that question is what leads us in what we do or say. That can be effective if you indeed ask that question of every decision you make (my own experience and observation has been that we apply that question selectively and only when our consciences are unsettled). But notice Jesus is not giving us a list of do’s and don’ts; Jesus is telling us who people are: “Blessed ARE the poor in spirit; blessed ARE those who mourn; blessed ARE the meek...” They are not aspiring to BE poor in spirit. They’re not STRIVING to mourn. They’re not working at becoming meek. This is just who they are. And

who are the people that Jesus is speaking to? Is everyone in the crowd poor in spirit? Is everyone mourning? Is everyone meek? Of course not. There are probably folks in the crowd who are the exact opposite. JESUS IS SPEAKING TO THOSE WHO ARE poor in spirit, mourning, and meek. Jesus is speaking to those who ARE hungry and thirsting for righteousness, who ARE merciful and pure in heart, who ARE peacemakers and who ARE persecuted for righteousness sake. Jesus is speaking to those who are indeed like him.

A great 20th century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes the point that these folks that Jesus is speaking to are not victims any more than Jesus himself was a victim. These folks are not poor in spirit or mourning or meek because the world has dealt them a lousy hand; THEY HAVE CHOSEN TO BE THE WAY THEY ARE just as Jesus, with his own free will, chose to live the life and die the death that he did. Interpreting Bonhoeffer's theology, writer Dallas Roark writes:

"The poor in spirit are those who have accepted the loss of all things including their own selves for his sake. Those who mourn are those who do "without what the world calls peace and prosperity." Mourning means to refuse to be in harmony with the standards of the world. The meek are those who give up claims to their own rights for the will of Christ. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those renouncing all claims to personal achievement, who wait for God's reign of righteousness. The merciful, having given up claims to their own dignity, become "men for others," helping the needy, the sick, the outcast — all those who need any kind of ministry. The pure in heart become that way by giving their hearts completely to the reign of Jesus. Under his rule, he purifies their hearts with his Word. The peacemakers renounce all violence and "maintain fellowship where others would break it off." The persecuted for righteousness suffer for "any just cause" and will be rejected by the world, but God's kingdom belongs to them. *To this motley crew the world says "Away with them" and God agrees with the world. But he intends them for the kingdom of heaven, where their reward is great.*

And that reward is as much about now as it is about the afterlife; the reward is living in God's presence, or what Dr. Howard Thurman called "living in free and easy access to the source of vitality and aliveness in which *all* life finds its abiding security."¹ That is why discipleship is the only true way to live our lives. Everything else is life without true life, living without really living.

The point that struck me from reading these beatitudes is that *instead of DOING what disciples DO, we need to BE what disciples ARE.* And being a disciple is a decision to go all out, to completely commit ourselves to following Jesus Christ. Jesus speaks of discipleship in this way:

Those who seek to save their life will lose it, while those who lose their life for my sake will gain it" (Matthew 16:25).

This is something that the Church has not emphasized enough lately – the call for complete surrender, for full commitment. Three weeks ago I told you to plant yourself in living water by centering your life in prayer and scripture and worship and fellowship, but I'm afraid you might understand this to mean that you just need to spend more time in prayer and reading the Bible and worshipping and fellowshiping. All those are good things to DO, but they don't make you a

disciple. **GIVING YOUR LIFE TO JESUS CHRIST MAKES YOU A DISCIPLE.
COMMITTING YOURSELF TO CHRIST MAKES YOU A DISCIPLE.**

And committing yourself to Christ depends on nothing but your own decision; the only prerequisite is that you want to be a disciple. The only question you need to answer is: **do I want to surrender my life to Jesus Christ?** And only you know in your heart whether you are a disciple, whether you have made that decision, and whether you intend to follow through on that decision.

Once you have made that commitment, you know it, because you are no longer the same person that you were. You know that that decision was the most important decision you have ever made, and it will take all your strength and commitment to follow through with it. It gives you butterflies as it should. But it also gives you everlasting peace.

And once you've made that commitment to Christ, once you have made him truly the Lord of your life, you do recognize that stark distinction between the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. And you realize that despite living IN the world you are no longer PART OF the world. You belong to the kingdom of God, and nothing can remove you from that place.

ⁱ Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (Harper & Row, 1963), page 15.