

Matthew 5:1–12 (NRSV)

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

So, Just When Should We Expect It?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

Let's be honest. A lot of what Jesus has to say is hard to swallow.

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

Can't you just see Jesus' high school counselor writing a recommendation for his college admission. "I'm glad to recommend Jesus. He's a nice guy. A real nice guy. If there is any fault I would find with him, it's that, though. He's maybe too much of a nice guy. I'd have to say he's a bit naïve. Unrealistic. He has a tattoo on his left arm that says, if you can believe it, 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.' On his other arm it says, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.' You see the problem.

"Don't get me wrong. You should definitely admit him. He's one of our brightest lights. Just don't let him major in something soft, like music or literature. I would say the first class Jesus should take is business administration 101. He needs to learn that, in fact, nice guys don't inherit the earth. Aggressive, no holds barred, get in my way and I'll bury you guys; those are the guys who inherit the earth. He needs to learn that mercy is for sissies. I've got great hopes for Jesus, but it's up to you now. Help him become a man, a grownup. Help him leave behind his childish ways. Oh, and get him to remove those ridiculous Sunday school tattoos. Nobody's going to take him seriously with that nonsense plastered all over his body."

The beatitudes are a problem. They're beautiful. They're among the first Bible verses some of us learned as children. The problem is they don't make any sense. I have a framed cartoon on my wall. A minister and a businessman, both in their suits, are standing, maybe at coffee hour, talking to each other. The businessman sarcastically says, "By all means, continue, reverend. We people in business welcome the views of people who aren't in business." In other words, "Go ahead. Keep talking, Reverend, you pious purveyor of platitudes, you have no idea what you are talking about."

And it's not just businessmen or the 1% who think that way. I've had some of the nicest, kindest people you would ever want to meet look at the tattoo on Jesus' arm, shake their heads sadly, and say to me, "It's too bad. You just can't live like that in real life, can you? It just doesn't work."

Over the years churches have tried to compensate for this problem, or do an end run around it. They've tried to figure out how to admit that the Beatitudes don't make any sense in the real world without having to disown them. One of the most imaginative approaches and one that has been one of the most popular and durable in Christian history says, "Well, of course, no one can live like that. No one can practice the beatitudes. That's the whole point. Jesus gave us the beatitudes, and a whole lot of other stuff, not for us to actually do them. Jesus wanted to show us just how impossibly depraved we are. We are so sinful at the core that we cannot possibly live by the beatitudes, and Jesus meant to show us that, and that only God's grace can save us."

Now, I know that Jesus is sometimes a little hard to understand. Some of his parables and sayings can be obscure. But really, all those stories and parables, sayings and commands he told

people to do in the Gospels were really to show the people all the things they wouldn't be able to do and shouldn't bother trying? Come on. Jesus calls us children of God, and what kind of parent ever parents like that? When I told my young son not to get involved in gangs and the drug culture, was I really saying, "You're going to do these things, and I just want you to know that I know that, and I want you to know that the fact you can't help yourself proves just how awful you are at the core." I'm pretty sure I was not the best parent in the world, but I'm pretty sure I was better than that. And I'm pretty sure God is, too.

Another strategy that Christians have used is perhaps more reasonable. It acknowledges that the meek won't inherit the earth, now, or that the merciful won't receive mercy, now. It admits that meekness and mercy fly in the face of the real world, but, but if you will practice mercy and meekness now, and face all the hardships that will come your way, then in the afterlife you will have an eternity of bliss. Often it comes off as a wager, a bet between two possibilities. One, I've got this life right here in front of me. I can see how it works here. The meek and merciful finish last. Two is the afterlife. I can't see into the afterlife, though. So I can only speculate. Here are the horns of the wager. Suffer on the bottom now, in this short life, and bet on reward for an eternity; or, take the bird in the hand; live life selfishly, uninhibited by the constraints of meekness and mercy, and take my chances in the time to come. One might speculate that taking the bird in the hand, this life's rewards, is the option most commonly chosen here.

There's one other approach worth mentioning. It goes something like this. The world offers little reward for living meekly and mercifully. But the world's values are actually illusory and unsatisfying. The 1% may get everything they desire, except, except the things that really count. The Beatles sang, "I don't care too much for money; money can't buy me love." Gatsby had immeasurable wealth, but he put a gun to his head. Many of us look at the likes of Mother Theresa or Gandhi, and we say to ourselves, I don't have the guts to live like that, but I have this sneaking suspicion that I would actually be happier if I did. This approach has some legs, I believe. It's how we talk about generosity. We say that in giving we receive more than we give. That is, many of us believe that, despite the world's messages to the contrary, were we to live meekly and mercifully and generously to the point of giving up everything, we would inherit fulfillment beyond all life's riches. Most of us don't think that the world's treasure leads to the highest happiness, but we just aren't willing to chance it, though.

As I say, this view has legs, at least to some degree. But even this view is a little more complicated than it looks. For example, Gandhi and Mother Theresa depended enormously on people who gave support from their wealth. It took a lot of people who didn't give up everything to make their work possible. One Indian official and friend of Gandhi's once quipped, "You have no idea, Mr. Gandhi, how expensive your poverty is."

It seems that we are not yet at the bottom of the matter. We can't convincingly say that the Beatitudes are meant just to show us how sinful we are, or how to guarantee our ultimate eternal bliss, or even how to find fulfillment in our life here on earth. Something's missing in our understanding.

I wonder if it has to do with the whole way we've been thinking about it. We've been asking the question, how's this all going to work out for me? Am I going to be saved by God's grace? Am I going to have eternal bliss? Am I going to find fulfillment? These are important questions, of course, but for Jesus they are important only if they are part of a larger canvas.

Down in the Dead Sea wilderness in communities like Qumran, up in the Judean hill country and out in the rolling grasslands of the Galilee in the time of Jesus there arose a growing

sense among at least some of the population that the society was not what it should be, or what God wanted it to be. Jesus and John the Baptist and others like them saw that power and wealth were in the hands of a very few. And they realized that the powerful and the wealthy of their day, Herod and others, had little commitment to a just society. Jesus and John, on the other hand, imagined a society in which justice rolled down like flowing streams, in which mercy for those in need was the order of the day, in which the wolf and the lamb would feed together, in which spears would be beaten into pruning hooks, and in which integrity and fairness would rule. This society they imagined they called the kingdom of God. This kingdom of God was no theoretical, pie in the sky idea for them, nor was it heaven to be entered only after death. This kingdom of God was this world the way God intended it to be, maybe even what this world was at some primeval time. And most important, this kingdom of God was in sight, in front of them. They could almost feel and taste it. They hungered and thirsted after it. In Judaism there is an idea called tikkun olam, meaning repairing or healing the world. Tikkun olam is very close to the original idea behind the Beatitudes. Blessed are the meek, those who mourn, the peacemakers and so on, not so much because they will be rewarded in heaven, or rewarded at all in some selfish sense, but because they will be a part of ushering in the kingdom of God, part healing the world, tikkun olam. They will be blessed because the world will change its unjust and vicious ways and become a new creation.

The Beatitudes were words of encouragement. They pointed to a new day that they saw dawning on the horizon. It's not exactly clear just how they thought this new day would come, or exactly when. But they insisted it was close, not light years away. And they insisted that God had a part in its coming, and so did they.

Kierkegaard once said that to be a Christian is to make a leap of faith. It is, in one way of saying that this yearning, hungering and thirsting for the kingdom of God is evidence enough that it is coming. It is to leap to the conclusion that if we try to live by the ideals of the kingdom of God, we will play our part in bringing it about, tikkun olam. And when will all this be? When will creation be the kingdom of God? Jesus' answer is a little enigmatic, something like soon a long time. He prepares his followers for the persecutions and reviling of this world not yet there, but he insists that to them belongs the kingdom of God; it is on the horizon.

Put another way, Jesus doesn't offer a view of the Christian life full of quick fixes, easy answers, or dancing sugar plums. What he does offer is a call to follow after that which, if we are paying attention, we can already taste, that after which we hunger and thirst, and that which Jesus called the kingdom of God. It lies before us. Do you see it? It's right there, isn't it? Amen.