

“Relationships Shape Us”
Micah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31;
Matthew 5:1-12

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Last week we talked about how Jesus called the disciples, and they left their nets and followed him. When you begin something new, there's always this moment of excitement. What's it going to be like? You have some anticipation and some hopes. You are wondering what will happen next.

They left their nets and their work on the Sea of Galilee. I wonder how they felt when they were following Jesus and all of a sudden, all these crowds of people were starting to gather around him as well. It was a different kind of situation than being out on the Sea of Galilee with just a few other folks, catching fish. Then, they left the sea behind and he invited them to take a hike up the mountain with him.

It's a process of wondering what it's all about. As Jesus sits down on that mountain, he begins to preach and to give us this particular set of Beatitudes. We often have looked at these Beatitudes, and sometimes I think we look at them as something to accomplish. What Jesus is doing—well, let's put it this way. If Jesus were giving a Ted Talk, and he started with these blessings, we would understand that he had a purpose behind doing that. He tried to have some kind of punch right at the beginning to engage us, to shock us, perhaps. I think these are a little shocking. The very first one is the idea that the poor in spirit are the ones who are blessed. What in the world does that mean?

The disciples have realized that their lives are changed by being in relationship and association with Jesus. Their lives are changed. They are hiking up mountains instead of fishing. They are sitting down and listening to him teach, and as he teaches, they are hearing something very different. It's surprising.

As we think about who Jesus is, as we wonder about the nature of how Jesus might change us, change the world, it's so easy for me to think, “Jesus, change all those people so that they are better off, and that they work right, and they do all according to your will and way.” What I realize is how much I also need to be changed, how my own heart needs to change. How easy it is for us as a church, for example, to get into a pattern of doing things, but we might wonder what Jesus would say. It's just a reminder that perhaps Jesus might, in some way, shock us as well.

I think as he sat and talked through these Beatitudes, there's a way they wash over you in a way that makes you wonder what in the world he's saying. He's pairing blessing with all these things that we don't really think of as things that bless us. Being poor in spirit, or blessed are those who mourn—what is that about? It can seem like foolishness, and I think to much of the world it does. If we go on and read through the whole Sermon on the Mount there are lots of things that seem like foolishness in it.

Paul reminds us that God's foolishness has more wisdom in it than any of the world's wisdom. Paul reminds us that as we encounter Jesus, as we encounter the way God has come into our lives, we might see it in stark contrast with the world around us. The world's wisdom isn't quite the same thing, Jesus says. The world's way of success, of its hold on power, its desire for all these things is not quite what Jesus is teaching. I don't know if the disciples, when they began to follow Jesus and saw him as a rabbi, as a teacher, understood how much change he was going to bring into their lives.

It's true, I think, that relationships change us. The people we are with, the context we're in, influences who we are and how we do things. For the disciples, as they walked with Jesus, I think they were being changed. Certainly, they had already changed professions. They already changed their lives in a huge way. But in some ways, walking with Jesus brought an even harder change. It's a change of heart, a change of perspective.

I want to take a look at these Beatitudes and describe them a little bit, but the reality is we could probably spend a whole series of sermons on each one. I just want to identify a little bit about what I think Jesus is doing. He's not saying, "As you follow me, this is what I'm telling you to do." I don't think that's quite what he's saying here. I think what he's saying here is, "As you follow me, you will discover that when you recognize your own poorness of spirit, when you recognize the need to mourn and allow it to happen, when you recognize what meekness is about and begin to honor it, you will be blessed." I want to talk a little bit more about what that place to which Jesus is taking us looks like.

What I think, and what I think Paul is talking about, is that there's a big contrast. Paul is saying that when we follow Jesus, we're going to get something. We're going to get wisdom. We're going to get sanctification. We're going to get righteousness. We're going to get redemption. What does that look like? I think they are saying the same thing. The wisdom that Jesus is giving us is the wisdom of God, not of the world.

Take the very first one. You are blessed if you are poor in spirit. I don't think that's inviting us to try to be poor in spirit. I think what that's inviting us to do is to see that to be human means that we're often not as on top of things as we think we should be. I think it's inviting me to recognize that my self-confidence is something I can't build all on my own, that I'm dependent on others, that I'm vulnerable, that I'm not a superhero, that I need the people around me. That's what poor in spirit often means in our society. If you're not self-made, if you're not self-actualized, if you're not self-confident, then you are poor in spirit. What I think it means is that we now recognize that we're dependent. We are dependent on each other and we are dependent on God. We're dependent on the grace God has given us, the life God has shared with us, the creation God has put us in. I could list a number of ways we are dependent on things. It's in contrast to the world.

This next one is a contrast as well. Oftentimes, it feels like the world says that when something bad happens in our lives, we should just get over it. Jesus seems to say,

“No! Mourn! Feel the wrong. Recognize it. Lament it.” We don’t have to ignore it, or sweep it under the rug, or say it didn’t happen. He’s inviting us to be human.

Meek. The Greek word used here is really different than the way we think of the word “meek.” It really means “to balance one’s power in a way that we use it appropriately, not harshly or violently.” Humbly. It’s a way of using what we have to care for others without needing to elevate it to be the best.

Hunger and thirst for righteousness: that desire for right relationship that might lead to a place of shalom.

The merciful. The word merciful really comes out of the idea of a covenant relationship. You learn in a relationship of mutuality, of caring back and forth, how to care for one another. How to care for the other. That’s the root of that idea of mercy. How do we care for the other and give them grace? Particularly when we have a covenant of grace with God, we learn that idea of grace, that sense of mercy.

A clean heart. Part of that is the suggestion that the world is going to give us a particular kind of direction, and God is, too. A clean heart is being able to focus in on the very core of who we are, on the direction that God gives us, the grace that God gives us, the love that God gives us, the opportunities God gives us and see those in contrast to the world around us.

Then, there’s being a peacemaker. It’s interesting, as I was looking up that word, that there’s a sense of being whole in it. It’s those who make wholeness. Who make relationships whole, who make communities whole. Wholeness is a way of saying shalom or the goodness that God wants us to live in and amongst in the community. It’s what we’re about as a peacemaker.

But, Jesus says, the world may not appreciate these contrasts. We live in a world that tells us we’re supposed to be aggressive, tells us we’re supposed to win, tells us we’re supposed to smash our opponents, tells us that violence is the way we can gain power and that power is important. We live in a world that wants us to make ourselves somebody, to make our lives special and different, perhaps famous. It’s about the distinctions between us rather than the commonalities. So, Jesus says the world may not appreciate that. That could bring persecution. We see the attitude of the world.

The last of the Beatitudes, I think, after giving the attitude of the world, gives the attitude of God. A reward in heaven. An entry into God’s kingdom, to be part of that relationship or that place. To have our citizenship under God. To be following Christ, not some earthly leader. There are plenty who want you to follow, but Jesus is inviting us to follow him and to be changed.

I think at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is suggesting that if you follow him, you may live in ways the world doesn’t expect, but you will find that you are blessed in ways the world can never bless you. I think it is our true freedom that he

is pointing to. In many ways, I think it's the freedom to be the very human beings that God has made us to be. Oftentimes, I think the world holds up for us things that are impossible to be. It asks us to be inhuman, superhuman. Those things bind us up. The expectations that we begin to have of ourselves can restrict us and lead us to divisions. Jesus frees us to follow him and find in him that grace that allows us to live with grace for each other. Or as it says in Micah, to do justice, to be the ones who care about the right relationships of people. Justice is not retributive, but restorative. Justice, for God, is bringing about new life, bringing about or restoring relationships so that we can live together and love mercifully and walk humbly with our God.

It is that invitation to walk humbly with our God that is embodied in the table, as well. It's remembering that very first thing that Jesus said, the poor in spirit. We are limited. We are dependent. We need others. We need food. We need that which nourishes us physically and spiritually. We are invited to come to the table Jesus sets and into the life he gives us. We are invited to find that we are not alone. We are part of a community. We gather around the table together. We are given a life that the world just can't give us. God is the one who calls us, gathers us, feeds us, and out of that, takes us into the world so that we might walk humbly with God throughout our lives and in all we do. Amen.