

The Beatitudes

Jesus has caused quite a stir in the region, visiting the various villages in Galilee from lake side to hill side. People were being healed; demons cast out.

It's like positive waves have flowed out with good news from one community to the next, way beyond the areas Jesus was physically walking, with large crowds coming from across the regions; for they did not just come from Galilee but Syria and Decapolis too.

Seeing these large crowds, Jesus picked a hillside seat, and his disciples came to him.

Was he removing himself from those crowds? Matthew certainly tells us that Jesus' teaching here is aimed at his followers rather than to all.

But it was also an open event which could invite the curious and maybe the openness acted as a subtle invite – do you want to follow me?

The followers sit down and are excitedly expectant. What will Jesus talk to them about? What teaching will he bring?

Jesus begins to speak:

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 be shown 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 because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ 'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Blessings! We like blessings.

...but there is puzzlement in the minds of the disciples – how can those poor in spirit or in mourning be blessed?

How can the meek inherit the earth? Their very character 'is to not claim rights for themselves but for the rights of others.'ⁱ (well put by Tony Cross)

Maybe those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will get some temporary encouragement when they succeed in a particular campaign, but Jesus says they will be filled.

And as for that last one on the list, 'blessed are the persecuted', what are we supposed to do with that? Do we make others persecute us just so we can claim that blessing?

Only the blessings on the merciful, pure in heart and peacemakers seem to work better.

... mmm, those actively working for peace ... maybe we'll invent our own prize for that in the future, a noble endeavour for sure!

But overall, Jesus seems to be super optimistic in his blessings, as he also says that those who are unjustly persecuted will receive the kingdom of heaven. That's going a bit far, isn't it?

So, what are they?

- Although blessings, they are given as proverbs,
- Some may hear these proverbs as ethical instruction,
 - But to be all of those blessings is an impossible task,
 - And even if when we manage to act in the way of one or two, there is no answer on how to bring the blessing for it is only in God's hands.
- these blessing proverbs a sign of God's Kingdom that are given rather than earned.
- And they are promises on how God brings his kingdom to us as we give our lives in service of him.

Proverbs are wise sayings that point to an attitude of heart & mind that we should seek, based in a relational experience with the Lord and they contain future promise of what will be.

We see this in verse 12, 'Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven'.

And, because they are about speaking God's Word into a current situation, they are also Prophecy.

Their encouragement is threefold:

- We are to do the works of the Lord on Earth, in the heart-attitude of each 'proverb blessing'.
- It is not other people we have to please, but those works are done out of love for the Lord.
- The Lord is faithful to his promises, and these promises are based on his grace which is not earned but offered as a gift. They show both a care for us now and for full restoration with the Lord in the future.

Now what?

It is good to get an understanding of the blessing proverbs that Jesus begins teaching of the disciples, but we need some ideas and tools on how to live in those blessings.

Let's start with the idea,

Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint;
but blessed is the one who heeds wisdom's instruction. (Pro.29:18)

Revelation here means to be enlightened or informed.

Another word used and a bit closer to the original is 'prophecy'. This term is about speaking God's word into a current situation.

The idea then, is to remember that the beatitude blessings are about speaking God's presence into the present.

Sally Nelson puts it like this,

"followers of Jesus are called to a feat of prophetic imagination: to envisage and then to work for a different world, prefigured in the life, ethics and words of Jesus himself."ⁱⁱ

This is the big idea – or Revelation and motivation for us.

To enable us to begin to be prophetic in our community – whether in the home, workplace, school, family, friends and locality we need some encouragement:

Who are the people of these blessings?

'Blessed are the poor in spirit'; these are not the doubtful, the lacking in faith people. These are people who recognise that they do not have the spiritual resources to be God's Blessing. They realise they are utterly reliant on God. It is those who consistently ask the Lord to give them what they need to represent God on earth that day /that moment. (see also Isa.66:2)

Blessed are those who mourn; seems easier this one – those who mourn are those who have lost someone or something precious to them. But a blessing on mourners? who we normally regard as an unfortunate people in those moments is surprising.ⁱⁱⁱ Are we to envy them instead, 'oh, although you are really sad, God blesses those who mourn'?

No, that is right or sensitive to the person. The people of this blessing are those who mourn over the loss of God's Kingdom values in the world. It is those who mourn over the plight of the poor, over injustice, over God's grace and purpose for the world being neglected.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. This one I want to explain a bit more.

Being a Christian is not about meekly being a moral person in society, but about bringing God's Kingdom nearer to society. But we have to be meek right? Yes, it is biblical – which is to be lawful citizens, as far as the law does not directly contradict God's commands, but meekness is not simply about compliance to society.

This proverb blessing says the meek will inherit the earth.

Taken only at face value from a human viewpoint this is impossible, and we are considering it first because it otherwise acts as an obstacle to living in the Beatitudes Blessings.

As said earlier, How can the meek inherit the earth?

Jesus is saying in this proverb, that his disciples are to be meek before God – e.g., compliant, humble, gentle and 'fearful' in that sense of awe of God. In other words what God wants is put first in our lives.

We have that decision and ability to say 'yes' to Jesus. It is Jesus himself who said his disciples will do works like those he did.

Wow - a bit scary for sure and a bit awe-inspiring, I hope!

A meek disciple, or follower of Jesus has God's interests before their own.

What does that look like?

It looks like the person who is the good Samaritan – showing God's love and care to people who others look down on.

It looks like the person who stands up for God's justice: that may be to help someone we know who is suffering an injustice, maybe standing up for a group of people, as LPBC are trying to do via CKF & the asylum/refugee ministry.

Continuing with the other blessing proverbs:

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Who are these people? A reminder from earlier:

"followers of Jesus are called to a feat of prophetic imagination: to envisage and then to work for a different world, prefigured in the life, ethics and words of Jesus himself."

To help us on how to be like this:

"Yet seeking and striving are not enough. The blessed are not those who arrive but those who continue, at whatever cost, in their pilgrimage toward a more perfect righteousness."^{iv}

e.g., already started... we're not trying to earn our place in the Kingdom of heaven – that is given as gift when we are spiritually born-again.

Our challenge is not to live trying to earn God's favour, but to live as those who are already assured of that gift and now seek to live as examples of his favour.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful; an easier one to understand but putting it into practice? – but don't think these people are those who occasionally show mercy. The godly merciful are those whose heart-attitude is always to be merciful. 'They have responded to God's love and are living by his grace.'^v (Morris) Pastor Mick who we saw a video about some months ago is one such example.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart; a little explanation about the heart in scripture. It is neither the physical organ nor our emotions. It is the whole of our inner state and outlook on life, which then includes the way our emotions are affected. Again, it is not easy because, as Jesus also taught, "out of the heart proceed evil thoughts" and he lists some acts of evil thought just for good measure! So, who are these people? They are the people who know they fall short of God's standards are wise enough to realise they cannot become pure on their own – only

through God's grace and by consistently allowing God into their heart to clean and correct. Another way of putting it, is they have to let God see them – and then they will see God. It does remain an eschatological promise, e.g., they will not see him fully until death, but before then they will at least see some signs of him.

⁹ **Blessed are the peacemakers**; Jesus is not referring to people of peace; to people who avoid difficult situations, but he is referring to people who actively engage in bringing God's peace.

¹⁰ **Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness**; if we do wrong and are punished, that kind of suffering is just that- punishment. It is not suffering because of righteousness. There people are the same as those described as 'poor of spirit' and who are suffering because of it. Their ultimate reward is the same, and this blessing forms an encouragement to keep relying on god, even if the physical situation has got worse. It is an encouragement that God sees.

¹¹ **Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me**; Likewise, this blessing is an encouragement not to begin acting like those who persecute or to stop living-out God's blessing. In this blessing Jesus get more personal - moving from blessed are those, to blessed are you. The blessing proverb says to expect insult and injury, because the world is blind and often antagonistic against God.

And so, for this and all these blessing proverbs Jesus says,

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

Brothers and sisters, take heart for God knows, God sees, and he is with those who are living out the blessing of his Kingdom.

Our challenge is not to live trying to earn God's favour, but to live as those who are already assured of that gift and now seek to live as examples of his favour.

ⁱ Cross, T, (2024), in The Baptist Ministers Journal, volume 361, p.13.

ⁱⁱ Nelson, S, (2024), in The Baptist Ministers Journal, volume 361, p.4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Morris, L, (1992), *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Eerdmans, p.97.

^{iv} Bailey, K. E., (2008) *Jesus through Middle Eastern eyes*, SPCK, p.77.

^v Morris, L, (1992), p.100.