

Sermon File #749

Scripture Text: Matthew 5:1-3

Sermon Title: *The Beginning of Blessedness*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached

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**For additional information regarding this manuscript contact
Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org**

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The Beginning of Blessedness

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Matthew 5:1-3, as we continue our sermons from Matthew. Today, we begin a close look at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, what has been called a sermon so powerful and famous that it's impossible to overstate its influence (Hughes, page 15). One New Testament scholar calls it "the supreme jewel in the crown of Jesus' teaching" (Green, page 88).

Although it's called a sermon, it may in fact be a compilation of several sermons that Jesus preached on different occasions. At least we can assume it's a distillation of a lot more that he taught on these subjects. So, we can assume that what we have in this Sermon on the Mount are outlines and/or summaries of many sermons. As we noted last Sunday, after Jesus began preaching the availability of the kingdom of heaven and the need to repent, he called his first disciples to follow him (4:18-22). They are to learn by following Jesus and by working alongside of him. Jesus showed how the good news of the kingdom invades the world of spiritual darkness and broken-ness as he teaches, preaches his message of forgiveness and deliverance, and heals the sick and casts out demons (4:23-25).

Seeing the crowd that is now following him, mostly because of his power to heal and perform other miracles, Jesus goes up a rise overlooking a valley, what is called a mountainside. Those of us who have been to the Holy Land have seen these hilly areas near the shore of Lake Galilee that provide a natural amphitheater for a large crowd of people. Although the large crowd is allowed to overhear what Jesus is teaching, the message of the sermon is primarily for the disciples, to whom he gives “ringside seats” (Nolland, 191f). The Sermon on the Mount, like biblical sermons every Sunday, is a message for disciples, who alone have the spiritual power and motivation to implement its teaching. But also the Sermon on the Mount, like all preaching, is a call to unbelievers to enter the kingdom through a personal relationship with Christ, by which they too can begin to live by these teachings and principles.

Because of the importance of the Sermon on the Mount, it will be the source of much of my preaching during Year 2009. Follow as I read the text, which includes the first of Jesus’ Beatitudes:

Read **Matthew 5:1-3**.

Peter Senge, a famous scientist, management expert, author and university professor, gave an address to a pastors’ conference in the US. He noted that he had recently visited a large bookstore and asked the manager what books were selling the best. Naturally, the top sellers were books on finances and how to make money in this difficult financial climate. The second best selling books concerned spirituality, but not Christian but rather Buddhist spirituality. Books on Buddhism are popular, noted the lecturer, because Buddhism presents itself as a way of life, and Christianity presents itself as a system of belief. Senge, who himself practices a Buddhist form of meditation, advised the large audience of pastors to think about how to “rediscover their own faith as a way of life, because that’s what people are searching for today” (McLaren, pages 2f). People are not as interested in finding intellectual answers to theological questions as they are in finding a way to change their lives and add meaning and purpose to their mundane existence. Some who have been professing Christians are turning from what they have concluded is a vapid and lifeless biblical faith to seek a new quest through Eastern and other alternative religions.

Obviously, such a quest shows an obvious devaluing of the message of Jesus and a failure to appreciate the new life that Jesus came to give us. The change that Jesus offers, even demands, is far more than a change of garments by donning a Buddhist monk’s robe, or even chanting a set of ritual prayers and incantations. In his Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes, Jesus describes and invites us to a radically new way of living. John RW Stott’s commentary on the Sermon on the Mount is aptly titled “Christian Counter-Culture.” This sermon of Jesus, even though admired by Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), can be understood and implemented only by a follower of Jesus,

who has been redeemed by his grace and empowered by his Spirit to live in a way that is radically different from the surrounding culture.

In my home country of the USA, on this coming Tuesday, a new president will be inaugurated. Barak Obama has come to represent for many people a new hope for a new beginning. As many of us know, the USA faces enormous challenges, both domestically and internationally, and the new president will need much support, and God's people are to pray for him as well as all government leaders (1 Timothy 2:1ff). Whatever our home country, and perhaps yours is Belgium, we are to be faithful and responsible citizens of this present society. But we are also citizens of God's new society, his kingdom, and as kingdom citizens we are called to do the impossible—live Christ-like lives that make a difference, personally and socially. This we do by living as Jesus would live and by joining God in his work of setting this world to rights, of his kingdom coming to earth as it is in heaven. We are to be counter-cultural in what we are as well as what we do.

And Jesus begins his sermon by first describing what we are, as his kingdom people. Simply put, we who follow Jesus are a God-blessed people. So, let's note, first of all...

➤ **Blessedness defined**

Our first task is to unpack the meaning of Jesus when he said, "Blessed are you." Blessedness, at least in our usual understanding of the word is to be understood...

- *Not as happiness*

I think one of the tasks of preaching, particularly to a congregation of folks who like me, "have heard it all before," is to present God's truth in a fresh way, to demythologize Scripture in a way that makes the truth vivid and alive and rescues it from tired clichés. The word "beatitude" is from the Latin "beatitudo," which was a translation of the Greek word, makarioi. The word "blessed" has come to be associated with a religious condition with a vague meaning. Greek scholar AT Robertson says the Greek word is best translated "happy," which means the opposite of misery and in its proper understanding is the giddy side of joy, when every sorrow is forgotten. But, as Robertson explains, when we look at the etymology of "happy," we find the root is "hap, chance, good luck as seen in our words haply, hapless, happily, happiness. English has thus ennobled 'blessed' to a higher rank than 'happy.' Nevertheless, 'happy' is what Jesus said," asserts the Greek scholar (page 39).

But language is a dynamic and powerful thing, so for our purposes we will drop "happy" because of the contemporary way it is used to describe a very transient

emotion that depends on our feelings and our circumstances. Let's use the word "blessed," but take it out of the realm of priestly and "churchy" benedictions reserved for those who make it to the very end of the worship service. Let's think of blessed as a deep-seated joy that only God can give and that changes our entire outlook on life and the way we experience life. Blessedness is the presence of God with us and within us, placing us with Christ "in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing" (Psalm 16:11; Ephesians 1:3). We enter this relationship with a loving God through repentance of our sin and God's gracious forgiveness. We are indwelt by and are being transformed by the Holy Spirit, who makes us more like Jesus as he produces in us the fruit of the Spirit, meaning his love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22f). Simply, blessedness is eternal life, kingdom life here on earth and in anticipation of the new heaven and earth.

This blessedness is something God gives, not the world, and thus the world and our circumstances can never take this blessedness, this undaunted, undeterred happiness, away. We must not think of blessedness as something that we or good fortune provide...

- *But as God's favor*

One translation I have heard for "blessed" is "to be congratulated" (Blomberg, page 98). God wishes to congratulate us, not for our efforts or merits, but simply for receiving his unmerited favor. His favor is not something bestowed upon us because of our merits or even our efforts. As we noted last Sunday, when Jesus selected his disciples, he didn't seek men who measured up to strict criteria. He simply knew that they would be willing to follow him in simple trust and glad obedience. Now that they sat at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching about this life of following him, they continued to understand that this new life of following Jesus was not something they earned or deserved, but was all about Jesus' favor, his mercy and grace, all that we desperately need but can never deserve.

We are thus congratulated by God for simply accepting what he has provided. To not accept his gracious favor is to incur his wrath and judgment, which is the just response of a righteous God. In Luke's gospel we read Jesus' words of condemnation on those who reject his blessings, who are too rich to accept God's kingdom, too satisfied with the world to hunger for God's righteousness (Luke 6:24f). The Beatitudes are not just a nice list of characteristics that make us more pleasant to live with. Rather, they describe the like that God approves, even that he requires. I was reminded of this today as I read Jesus' stern words to the disciples: "And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'" (Matthew 18:3). This God-blessed life is the only life that "passes muster" with God. God so loves us and has such determination to bless and enrich our lives with his love, to reject his love is to incur his wrath and judgment. And, through Christ and his cross God has paid a great price to bless us.

And so we note also...

➤ **Blessedness delivered**

The life of blessedness is not to be understood as a life or religious duty and attainment of which anyone can boast. The context of the Beatitudes and even the Sermon on the Mount itself shows us that this kingdom blessedness, this lasting joy, happiness and favor of God is...

- *By the initiative of the Father*

God sent his Son into the world to be the Savior of all who believe (John 3:16). The message of the Bible is one of God's desire to bless his creation. All that he created he saw was good, and yet man and woman, the crown of his creation, lost his favor through their fall into self-directing independence from God and crossing over the limits of his relationship with them. And we are all children of Adam and all stand in need of his rescue. The story of Israel is one of God's call to a people to be his unique and holy nation and to receive the blessings of obedience and service within his kingdom. God's call to Abram (later named Abraham), was that he become the father of a great nation who also would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:2f). Israel failed miserably and thus it would be through his eternal Son that God would once again be able to have a blessed people, people who would receive his favor.

The Father in heaven is a God of perfect love, who has chosen us to receive the full measure of his love (Ephesians 1:3f). God the Father sent his Son to bring his favor to a yet-to-be-redeemed people. The Father was not disconnected from the Son. As Paul says, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Thus, our blessedness was delivered to us...

- *By the ministry of the Son*

Jesus began his public ministry by announcing the "grand opening" of his kingdom, preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17). Jesus came announcing that the rule of God is now available to all who realize their need, and will turn from self and sin and will follow him as Lord. He called disciples to follow him, which includes all of us (4:18-22), and he began his ministry of taking the good news to the needy, including the sick and demon-possessed (4:23ff). Indeed, those living in a land of great darkness saw a great light (4:16, quoting Isaiah 9:1f).

Jesus came to deliver the blessings of eternal life to those who realized their need. In his "inaugural sermon" in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1f as a reference to himself, saying that the Spirit of the Lord was upon

him, anointing him to preach good news to the poor and freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, release for the oppressed and “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18f). The poor often were the materially poor, who are usually those who sense the greatest need for help. The rich are not excluded from the kingdom but often riches exclude the rich, becoming a barrier against the will to follow Jesus (e.g. 19:16-30). Jesus went especially to those who had been overlooked by the religious establishment and who felt themselves to be outcasts and hopeless cases. Jesus thus was known as a friend of sinners, who associated with those of doubtful reputation (11:19). And, even as the Apostle Paul noted, the Triune God seems to “go after” especially the “weaker element of society, the nobodies of this world, which is his way of showing his power (1 Corinthians 1:18ff).

Jesus continues to seek after the poor in spirit and does so...

- *By the work of the Holy Spirit*

As Jesus made very clear, his work of bringing people into his kingdom would be done by the Holy Spirit (John 16:5ff). His gift of eternal life comes through the Spirit, by whom we are made new, born again, as children of God (John 3:1ff). And the Sermon on the Mount is a description of the Spirit-empowered, regenerate life. And we who receive the blessings of life in the kingdom realize that we didn’t seek God first. He first sought us through the drawing and wooing of the Holy Spirit. And it was the Holy Spirit who made us alive, bringing us from spiritual death to new life in Christ (Ephesians 2:1ff).

The Beatitudes describe the genuinely, being-converted life, and not necessarily the life of the typical, so-called nominal Christian. The life that Jesus says is blessed is one that’ been touched and is being transformed by God. We find our assurance, not in a past decision we made or a prayer that we prayed with an evangelist, but in the awareness that the Holy Spirit continues to produce in our lives the fruit of true godliness, the fruit of the Spirit and these characteristics of a life God approves and blesses (Galatians 5:22f; 2 Peter 1:5-10).

Becoming a God-blessed child of God is a result of his power at work within the believer. The great social reformer of India, Ghandi, admired the teachings of Jesus and especially his Sermon on the Mount. Yet Handy rejected the claims of Jesus as the Son of God and thus failed to understand the “impossible” ethic of the kingdom, an ethic made understandable and possible only by the Holy Spirit. And there have always been those who have rejected the claims of the gospel and the call to a personal relationship with Christ but who have claimed to follow the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. But we can see already that the only way to understand the teachings of Jesus, and especially to follow them, requires a personal relationship with the risen Christ. He alone gives us the desire and the dynamic to understand and follow his teachings, not just in a minimalist legalistic way, but to fulfill the full intent of his words.

Economic circumstances make us materially poor. But only the Holy Spirit can make us poor in spirit and prepare our hearts to eagerly reach out to the offer of the kingdom of God.

My preacher father told me about a pastor who was overheard in a church prayer meeting to implore, with some mock humility, “Lord, keep me poor and humble.” A stingy deacon, who overheard the pastor, then prayed, “Lord, you keep him humble and we’ll keep him poor.”

The Holy Spirit convinces us of God’s love shown to us from the cross and our guilt for sin that nailed Jesus to the cross. And the Holy Spirit alone moves our hearts to trust in Jesus and then to transform our lives into reborn children of God (John 16:5ff; 1 Peter 1:3f). We are called to continually humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God as we remind ourselves of our absolute dependence on his grace (1 Peter 5:6).

And then we understand...

➤ **Blessedness dispensed**

There were the religious leaders who thought they had all the answers to the right way to live and to deserve and earn God’s favor. But Jesus turned all of their presumption on its head when he declared in this first Beatitude that the blessedness, the ongoing joy of kingdom life is dispensed...

- *To the needy*

Dallas Willard translates this first Beatitude as “Blessed are the spiritual zeros,” the spiritually bankrupt who would be voted by their school classes as “the least likely to succeed.” Willard notes that Jesus is saying in these Beatitudes that the kingdom of God comes upon those “without a wisp of religion,” those who would be the last to say they had any claim on God. Thus, Willard warns against seeing the Beatitudes as the result of the spiritual disciples and meritorious goodness of those bent on advancement in the kingdom. If we’re not careful, he warns, we can make the Beatitudes a “to do” list for the self-righteous who by living up to these characteristics will think they have a claim on God (Willard, pp. 100ff).

But instead, says Willard, in these Beatitudes, Jesus is announcing the good news that he has come to those the world has written off, much as he did in his inaugural address (Luke 4:14-21). The grace of God and the gift of his kingdom rule has fallen freely on those of a “deplorable condition” (page 102), the least religious, the least likely to find the kingdom, much less to succeed in it.

We need to demythologize these Beatitudes from our usual churchly setting to get a feel for what an incredible message they were to “spiritual zeros.” I think of the recent Golden Globe Awards, for example, when awards were given to successful, famous and rich actors in the US. Those who receive these awards make quite a display of their “total surprise and humility” when their names are announced. Yet, each winner probably has a good idea that he or she is a likely candidate for the prize, and is quite prepared to strut across the stage to “humbly” receive the award. But imagine a wallflower, who had difficulty getting inside the theater, and who has never won anything in her life, all of a sudden being announced as the best actor in the business. Or imagine the most heretofore unnoticed athlete being awarded the sportsman of the year prize, to the surprise (and dismay) of those who were real candidates for the prize.

We are not to think of the Beatitudes as a list of things to achieve, but rather as God’s commendations to people who are quite unselfconsciously godly. Thus I’m reminded of the Lord’s commendation in the Sheep and Goats judgment passage: “Lord, when did we do these things for you?” (25:31-46)

Let me quote you a paraphrase of this Beatitude from Willard:

*Blessed are the physically repulsive;
Blessed are those who smell bad;
Blessed are the twisted, misshapen, deformed,
The too big, too little, too loud,
The bald, the fat the old—
For they are all riotously celebrated in the party of Jesus (page 123).*

God’s favor is by his gracious choice and often comes to those the world has written off. His call is simply...

- *To those called to follow Christ*

The Beatitudes are given by grace alone, yet, as one commentator has said, “we must cultivate what has been received by grace” (Turner, page 147). The Triune God takes the initiative and brings the blessings of the kingdom to us, but we, in response must take hold of it by force (Matthew 11:12). Once grace has entered our lives, we must continue to live in a way that honors God and receives his favor, all the while aware that we deserve nothing.

The call to follow Jesus is to a glorious, soul-satisfying and fulfilling life. But it’s also a call to follow Jesus in the way of the cross, which means suffering in this life. It means also that we take up a cross daily, and execute our self-centered desires and objectives for the sake of Jesus and the objectives of the kingdom. Blessedness is by grace, but there is no cheap grace.

Now one makes this clearer than Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), in his classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*, which is a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. Bonhoeffer, who was hanged by the Nazis at the end of his prison camp interment at the age of 39, continues to impact the Christian world with his writings. He notes in his comments on this Beatitude, that Jesus promises his blessings on those who have become poor for Jesus' sake, and have lost everything, "even their own selves," to answer Jesus' call. He notes that the true blessedness that Jesus offers comes only "on the cross." Bonhoeffer says that the spirit of the Antichrist rejects the cross. He then refers to "preachers of the national religion, who enjoy greatness and renown, whose feet are firmly planted on the earth, and who are deeply rooted in the culture and piety of the people and molded by the spirit of the age" (Bonhoeffer, page 106ff). These know nothing of the blessing of following Christ in the way of the cross, which is one of death to self and to all that this fallen world loves (1 John 2:15ff).

During a conference when he was speaking primarily to university students, American Pastor John Piper was approached by a young man from his audience who asked, "Isn't Christianity a crutch for people who can't make it in life on their own?" Piper answered, "Yes." Period. After an awkward silence, Piper explained that people don't normally think of a crutch, a cane, a walker or a prosthesis as a bad thing, so why should we think less of Christianity because it is something we desperately need?

Actually, instead of a crutch I think of my faith in Jesus as a transplanted heart I desperately needed, without which I could not survive. In fact, Paul says Christ is our very life itself (Philippians 1:21; Colossians 3:4). Jesus noted that only those who realize their spiritual sickness and blindness can receive desperately needed healing from the Great Physician (Mark 2:17; John 9:35-41). As Piper notes, the idea of a desperately needed Savior, without whom we cannot live as God intends and without whom we cannot face eternity, is offensive to the proud "can-do" mindset of this fallen world (Piper, below).

- *To those seeking the kingdom of heaven*

Yet the choice is clear. We must all decide which will be the course of our lives—to live in a way that God will honor and that pleases him, and with which he will delight to pour out on us the joy and delight of heavenly blessings, or to live for self and this fallen world, which is fading away.

I find that this is a choice I must make daily, and is not one that was made once and for all at the time I first trusted Christ and began to follow him. Every day I must decide to live for kingdom of God goals and by kingdom principles of faith and faithfulness. My prayer must be for his kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (6:10). This means I die daily to my persistently re-emerging self will and submit to the will and ways of my heavenly Father. This means also that I learn to give thanks in and for all my circumstances, trusting

that even amidst life's disappointments, a loving Father is at the helm of my life (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

This means also that, as one of God's poor ones, I cannot be satisfied until other poor, unsuspecting people hear the good news of Jesus' invitation to come to him and receive his kingdom (11:28ff). As I follow Jesus I necessarily join him in his work of recruiting other recipients of the kingdom, of hearing the astounding invitation, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). I cannot think of a better place than Belgium to find people who would be totally unsuspecting and surprised by kingdom blessings. In my home country there are so many who think they have reserved a special place for themselves in the kingdom because they once made a decision for Christ, prayed a prayer after "walking the aisle," and have been fairly consistent in church attendance, and have enjoyed the "blessings" of material prosperity. But here in secular Europe you're more likely to find "spiritual zeros" whom Jesus is seeking to save. We are not to be satisfied until his kingdom comes to earth in its fullness, until this fallen world is put to rights and the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

Conclusion:

I hope that today you realize that Jesus is calling you to follow him in a life of blessedness, of incredible joy that the world apart from Christ can never know. The only criterion is that you be surprised, just like a wallflower at a Miss Universe Pageant, or someone who's never achieved anything athletic in his life as Sportsman of the Year. A sense that you have no claim on God is the only criterion. A sense of need is all that you need!

Jesus is looking for some poor folks today, some who admit to our undeserving and lack of credentials and who need more than just a crutch. We need a new heart. We need to, as in the words of my former youth pastor, "get a life." Jesus brings this life to us, which is free for the taking. We take hold of it as a beggar finding bread. And we yearn to tell other beggars where they too can find this bread.

The great German pastor and preacher, Helmut Thielicke, says that Jesus attracted around him "miserable sufferers," and said to them, "blessed." The Beatitudes, he continued, are "a hand stretched out to us in the midst of suffering and care that God still has a design for us and that he wants to lead us to goals so lovely that we shall weep for joy." All God requires, continues the preacher, are "empty hands," hands which are "blessed because they have long since lost all human hopes and consolations" (Thielicke, pages 7-9).

Before we can become rich in the kingdom and in the everlasting blessings of God, we first need to get poor. In this financial climate, it's not difficult to get poor. But in a climate of pride and self-reliance it's a challenge to admit our desperate need for God and that we always will depend absolutely in him to keep us in his love, lead us into his purposes and to take us into his everlasting kingdom. I invite you to join me in Jesus' soup kitchen, his bread line. It's the way to present and everlasting abundance and joy. It's joy that will surprise us often and always, and will make us delirious with the permanent happiness we now call joy.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Recalling the quote from Professor Senge at the ministers' conference, what evidence have you seen that people today are more interested in finding a new way of life than a set of beliefs?
2. Define the word “blessed,” and compare it with the world's definition of “happy.”
3. What is your reaction to those who say have no desire to have a personal faith relationship with Christ but simply want to live according to the Sermon on the Mount?
4. In what ways are we dependent on the Holy Spirit to experience a blessed life?
5. What do you think is the meaning of being “poor in spirit”? Why or why not is Willard's term “spiritual zeros” a fitting label for the poor in spirit?
6. How would you answer the student who objected to the Christian faith because it seemed to him to be “a crutch for people who can't make it on their own”?
7. Reflect on your heart and whether or not you are poor in spirit and thus eager to receive God's kingdom.
8. Think of others in your sphere of influence who are “spiritual zeros,” and might be amazed to hear the message of God's blessings through Christ. Ask God to use you to relate this good news to them.

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