

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
Embracing Faith: Blessings
Rev. Dr. John Judson
January 29, 2023

[Watch Service](#)

[Watch Sermon](#)

[Genesis 26:1-5; Matthew 5:1-12](#)

Many of you know that I grew up in a home with four boys, of which I am the number two child. As with many homes, my parents were big on chores. There were essentially personal chores such as making our beds and picking up our toys, or later in life, putting away our tools after we had been working on cars. There were also shared chores. These were the ones in which we were less interested. These included mowing the lawn, clearing the dishes, and loading and unloading the dishwasher. None of us were particularly enamored of any of these chores, especially mowing the lawn in Houston's hot and humid summers. There was however, one chore none of us minded doing. That was setting the table. We didn't mind setting the table because we knew it was a precursor to what was to follow, a wonderful, delicious dinner and dessert from our mother. It was only later in life that I realized that setting the table was often used as a metaphor, describing some event, or moment, that was intended to whet the appetite for what was to follow. And it was only this week, after almost forty years of ministry, that I realized why the Beatitudes are where they are, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, and that was to whet the appetite of Jesus' hearers for what was to follow.

To understand this, we need to understand two things. First, we need to understand what the Sermon on the Mount is. The sermon on the Mount is Jesus doing his impression of Moses giving the Law to the Hebrews at Sinai. As a reminder, Moses is given the Law, or Torah, at Sinai and then he teaches it to the people so that the people might be faithful to God; and in being faithful find a full life. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is not making up new laws. Instead, what he is doing is telling the people about faithfulness. Just as Moses did, Jesus is going to tell the people how they ought to live to find a full life. And in so doing he begins where Moses begins by telling the people that the God to whom they are to be faithful is a God who has been faithful to them. The Ten Commandments begins with this table setting wording, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...". God is faithful, so God's people are called to be faithful in return. The Beatitudes serve the same function of setting the table for Jesus' teaching on faithfulness. This leads us to our second understanding, which is what Jesus means by blessed, or blessing. A blessing, or to be blessed consists of two parts: a problem and a promise. This is what we have in Exodus, a problem (slavery) and a promise (freedom).

The same is true of each of the Beatitudes. Each beatitude contains a problem and they each contain a promise. I realize that at first glance this might not appear to be so, but over the next few minutes we will discover how Jesus is setting the table for people to desire to be faithful to God because God has been and is promising to be faithful to them. And though we won't take the time this morning, I would argue that given more time we could link the Beatitudes with the teachings that follow. But for this morning we are going to take a quick tour of the Beatitudes and see how each contains a problem and a promise for dealing with that promise, and are thus blessings, even when they might not appear to be. And I hope that in doing so, you will find a beatitude, a blessing, that offers you hope as well. So, let's begin.

Jesus opens with, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* The problem is that there are moments when life overwhelms us, and we want to give up all hope. We simply sit in despair. This is what it means to be poor in spirit. The promise God offers is the Kingdom of Heaven. This does not mean we will only find new life in heaven, but instead the Kingdom of Heaven, for Jesus, is the community of believers who are supposed to demonstrate what heaven looks like on earth. In other words, when we are ready to give up, we have this community in which to turn to find support, love, and care. We are not alone.

Next, Jesus says, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”* The problem is guilt. Mourning here does not mean mourning the loss of someone we love. Mourning here, is a specific word that describes the guilt we feel when we have said, thought, or done something that we know is wrong; that we know has harmed others. The Promise God offers is comfort, or forgiveness. God does not want us to spend our lives feeling guilty, but desires that we be set free for new life.

Third, Jesus says, *“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”* The problem is that the humble often find themselves left out of all the good the world seems to offer. I say “the humble” because meek here does not mean “mousy” and “afraid,” instead it means living with true humility. The promise God makes is that the goodness of life, of the earth, will come to those who are humble even when it seems that they will be left out of all the good stuff that God has to offer.

In the fourth Beatitude Jesus teaches, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”* The problem is that it is difficult to live righteously, which as I have said before does not mean to be perfect, but to live in right relationship with God and others. As most of us are probably aware, living with the people around us is not always easy. We know how we are to treat them, and we often don’t. We also know how we are to live in relationship with God, and we can find that difficult as well. The Promise is that God will make these right relationships possible. We will find what we need to live rightly with God and others.

Fifth, Jesus says, *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”* The problem is that no good deed goes unpunished. In other words, showing mercy can be taken by the world as weakness and thus no mercy is shown to the weak. The promise is that in return for our showing mercy, God will take mercy on us. God will come into our lives in such a way that full life becomes possible even in the face of an often merciless world.

Sixth, Jesus teaches, *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”* The problem is that focusing on being faithful to God as our priority can cause us to become outsiders. The world wants us to focus on their priorities: wealth, power, fame, and more. God desires us to focus on God, for in God there is true life. The promise is that if we focus on God, which is what being pure in heart means, we will indeed encounter God in such a way that our lives are given full meaning and purpose.

Seventh, Jesus says, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”* The problem is that bridge building, which is what peacemaking is, can be difficult if not seemingly impossible. People want to be confrontational rather than conciliatory. The result is that people seldom seek to be bridgebuilders. The promise though is that those who promote peace will have a special relationship with God because they are imitating the peacemaking that Jesus came to offer; peacemaking that offers a fullness of life for all persons.

Though there are two more beatitudes, I will combine them into one because they both have to do with “blessed are you when people persecute you, revile you, and speak evil against you because you are doing what God would have you to do.” The problem is that living one’s life as a Jesus follower doesn’t make one win many popularity contests. It can often lead to making one an outlier in many social circles. Honesty can get you fired. Forgiving rather than condemning may put you at risk. Placing God before all else can cause one to be considered strange. But the promise is that we do not do this alone. The promise is that we are part of a counter-cultural community that works to be those who offer life to all.

Being faithful to God through the teachings of Jesus is not always an easy road. It can, in fact, be difficult. Yet the Beatitudes tell us that we can be faithful to God because God is always faithful to us. My challenge for you this week is this, to ask yourselves, how am I consciously being faithful to Jesus, even as God is being faithful to me?