**The Sermon on the Mount**

**Sunday May 13, 2018**

**“Blessed Are. . .” (Matthew 5:1-12)**

**1. Introduction: *Good News for Ragamuffins***

Forgive me for starting things off with such a long quote, but I think it says so much. Brennan Manning, dear-departed Christian writer, ex-priest and life-long alcoholic, begins his famous book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* with these words.

“*The Ragamuffin Gospel* was written with a specific reading audience in mind. This book is not for the superspiritual. It is not for muscular Christians who have made John Wayne, and not Jesus, their hero. It is not for academics who would imprison Jesus in the ivory tower of exegesis. It is not for noisy, feel-good folks who manipulate Christianity into a naked appeal to emotion. It is not for hooded mystics who want magic in their religion. It is not for Alleluia Christians who live only on the mountaintop and have never visited the valley of desolation. It is not for the fearless and tearless. It is not for red-hot zealots who boast with the rich young ruler of the Gospels, “All these commandments I have kept from my youth.” It is not for the complacent who hoist over their shoulders a tote bag of honors, diplomas, and good works, actually believing they have it made. It is not for legalists who would rather surrender control of their souls to rules than run the risk of living in union with Jesus.

If anyone is still reading along, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* was written for the bedraggled, beat-up, and burnt-out. It is for the sorely burdened who are still shifting the heavy suitcase from one hand to the other. It is for the wobbly and weak-kneed who know they don’t have it all together and are too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace. It is for inconsistent, unsteady disciples whose cheese is falling off their cracker. It is for poor, weak, sinful men and women with hereditary faults and limited talents. It is for earthen vessels who shuffle along on feet of clay. It is the bent and bruised who feel that their lives are a grave disappointment to God. It is for smart people who know they are stupid and honest disciples who admit they are scalawags. *The Ragamuffin Gospel* is a book I wrote for myself and anyone who has grown weary and discouraged along the Way” (*The Ragamuffin Gospel,* p. xvii-xviii).

Why have I chosen Manning’s preface to introduce my sermon series on the greatest sermon of all time – the Sermon on the Mount? It is because Jesus begins his sermon with an invitation to the *bedraggled, beat-up and burnt-out* to become part of the kingdom of God. Jesus’ sermon goes on to challenge his followers to adopt a particular way of living. But before his challenge, he offers a gracious invitation to all who are weary and heavy-laden to experience the blessings of God’s rule. So you don’t need to have it all together to follow Jesus. Rather, God’s kingdom is for the poor in spirit, for those who mourn, for the humble and the hungry, for the merciful and the pure in heart, for the peacemaker and the persecuted. These are the kinds of people that Jesus gathers into his kingdom. So you, who are beat-up and burdened, wobbly and weak-kneed, bent and bruised, welcome to the kingdom of God.

**2. The Beatitudes: *The Foundation of Discipleship is Blessedness***

Structurally speaking, Matthew’s Gospel is comprised of 5 large discourses (5:1-7:28; 10:5-11:1; 13:1-53; 18:1-19:1; 24:1-26:1) interspersed with narrative episodes. The Sermon on the Mount is the longest and foundational for the rest of the Gospel. Matthew’s introduction to the Sermon presents it as a momentous occasion. Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, goes up on the mountain, takes his seat as the authoritative teacher, calls his disciples and teaches them about the realities of God’s kingdom. Jesus’ sermon presents a clear ethical challenge to his followers to take the path that leads to righteousness, but the grace of God is foundational to his call. In Christianity, we’ve always struggled with the relationship between God’s grace and good works. While we emphasize that it is by God’s grace that we are saved, we wonder about the role of good works in the Christian life. The apostle Paul stressed that we are saved by God’s free gift of grace (Ephesians 2:8) *and not the result of works, so that no one may boast* (Ephesians 2:9). Yet in that same passage he also emphasized, “For we are God’s handiwork, *created in Christ Jesus to do good works*, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). So, good works do have an important place in the Christian life, but they are done in the context of God’s grace. In the same way, the Sermon on the Mount challenges Jesus’ followers to live righteous lives. Yet, Jesus begins his great sermon with the *beatitudes*, which demonstrate that the *grace of God is foundational* for life in the kingdom of God*.*

These nine proclamations are called the *beatitudes,* a designation derived from *beatus,* the Latin word for *blessed.* God is the source of these blessings, for the recipients are clearly in need of God’s generous provision. While most English translations simply read, “Blessed are . . .”, our pew Bible translation emphasizes that God is the author of the blessings by emphatically stating, “God blesses those who . . .” Canadian New Testament scholar, F.W. Beare nicely articulated this idea in his thoughts on the beatitudes, “The blessedness is not something that can be attained by the ‘pursuit of happiness’; not by any kind of social reconstruction that can be made on the basis of political programmes. Jesus is not represented as an advocate of social and economic reform or political revolution. The satisfactions promised to the blessed are not of their achieving; they are *the gift of God*” (Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew,* p. 127).

The biblical notion of being *blessed* is to be in a right relationship with God and in these *beatitudes* a right relationship with God is expressed by the idea of entering into and participating in the kingdom of God. New Testament scholar, Donald Hagner describes this blessedness as “the nearly incomprehensible happiness of those who participate in the kingdom announced by Jesus.” He goes on to explain that this kingdom happiness is not a worldly happiness but “it refers to a *deep inner joy* of those who have long awaited the salvation promised by God and who now begin to experience its fulfilment” (Hagner, *Matthew,* p. 91). In these beatitudes, then, Jesus was proclaiming that God’s kingdom was breaking into the world and as a result the blessings of the kingdom were already being experienced.

As we go down the list of those who are blessed by God, we become a bit puzzled because they don’t fit the world’s definition of blessed or happy people. This collection of the people includes the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the humbled, the hungry and the thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. Hardly people that our society would define as successful. Why then does Jesus call these people blessed or happy? It is because they acknowledge their inadequacies and recognizing their great need, they stand ready to receive what God generously offers them. The beatitudes are good news for the wobbly and weak-kneed who know they don’t have it all together and who desperately need God’s amazing grace. Jesus’ invitation to enter the kingdom of God is open to people such as these.

So, Jesus goes down the list of invitees to the kingdom of God. F.W. Beare beautifully summarizes the guest list of the kingdom with these words, “Those who are blessed are not various types; they are the same people, described in a variety of ways and the rewards of life in the kingdom are shared by all. To be admitted to the kingdom of heaven means to be comforted, to have the deepest longings amply satisfied, to be acknowledged as sons of God and to see him” (Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew,* pp. 127-28).

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. What does it mean to be “poor in spirit”? Does it entail real poverty? Or is it the frame of mind or psychological condition of the downtrodden? Or does this expression describe a person’s spiritual condition before God? Or does it refer to those with a humble spirit who are dependent upon God’s grace. All these have been suggested as possibilities for understanding this beatitude. But I find Eugene Peterson’s translation of this beatitude most helpful, “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule” (5:3, *The Message*). Do you feel like you’re end of your rope? Do you wonder if you have the strength to carry on? Do you feel depleted and empty? Welcome to the kingdom of God. “With less of you there is more of God and his rule.”

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* We are surrounded with pain, sorrow, grief and sadness. We weep tears for our losses and for the losses of others. The deep groaning of a world longing for God’s rule weighs heavy on our souls as we see and experience its sorrow, violence and turmoil. Yet amidst our pain, “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Corinthians 1:4). Even though God comforts us now, we will continue to weep tears until that day, when his kingdom comes in all its fullness and “he will wipe every tear from our eyes and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4). Are you deeply saddened because of life’s losses? Welcome to the kingdom of God. “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you” (5:4, *The Message*).

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* In a world that exalts the powerful and the ideology of looking out for number one, it’s easy to feel unimportant and insignificant and it’s hard to be humble. We long to be noticed, acknowledged, congratulated and applauded. Some of us have even experienced the pain of being humbled, marginalized, or ignored by others. To those who are lowly in the eyes of the world, God promises a place at his banquet table. Jesus said, “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matthew 23:11-12).

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.* Those who are hungry and thirsty for God share the words of the Psalmist when he declared, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:1-2). When people hunger and thirst for righteousness, they long for God’s will to be fulfilled in their lives and in all the earth. This deep longing coupled with a profound need for God’s righteousness results in a intense desire is for all that God has for them. Again, Peterson’s translation is striking, “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat” (5:6, *The Message*). Are you hungry and thirsty for God? Welcome to the kingdom of God and enjoy the best meal you’ll ever eat.

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*. In a world dominated by payback and revenge, forgiveness seems to be in short supply. Even if we don’t actively seek revenge for those who have injured us, we often hold on to feelings of resentment or bitterness toward others. Take it from me, it’s easy to hold onto a grudge and so difficult to let it go and to forgive. Yet those who are welcomed into the kingdom of God have experienced the greatness of God’s grace and the immensity of his forgiveness. We are urged to forgive as we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4:32). God’s forgiveness transforms us into people who are able to forgive others.

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*. In Jesus’ religious world, a lot of stress was put on ritual purity; on eating the right kind of food and not touching the wrong things; on following the rules. This focus on ritual purity led some to minimize personal ethics. Jesus called his followers to a more profound kind of purity that extended into the soul. When Jesus interpreted the Law, he got to the heart of the matter beyond superficial adherence to the rules. Are we willing to devote our inner lives whole-heartedly to Jesus? Or would we rather surrender control of our souls to rules than run the risk of living in union with Jesus?

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.* At the very heart of the kingdom is radical peacemaking. Christ is our peace and he has reconciled us to God and as a result we are reconciled to one another (Ephesians 2:14). In a world that is focused on building walls that separate, we are called to build bridges that connect. In a society that values completion, we are challenged to model cooperation. Yet it begins here, in our congregation where we learn to walk side-by-side and hand-in-hand. Are we willing to make the peace with our brothers and sisters? Are we willing to take God’s peacemaking love out into the world?

When we heed Christ’s invitation to enter God’s kingdom and then live out its counter-cultural values in the world, we will experience resistance and opposition. But take heart, *you’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom* (5:10, *The Message*). May God give us the strength to live faithfully for him in the world.

**3. Conclusion: I need God!**

Jesus’ beatitudes are counter-cultural declarations of blessedness that teach us that when we’re empty, God graciously fills us up. In a world where admitting our vulnerability is frowned upon, this is a message of great comfort. Our confession echoes that of Canadian writer, Douglas Coupland, who concluded his book, *Life After God,* with these words, “Now--here is my secret: I tell it to you with the openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God--that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love”

Do you need God? Welcome to his kingdom!