



Sunday School Lesson for September 21, 2008
Released on September 17, 2008

"Finding True Happiness"

Printed Text: Matthew 5:1–16.

Background Scripture: Matthew 5:1–7:28.

Devotional Reading: Numbers 6:22–27.

Matthew 5:1–16

1 And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him:

2 And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.\

8 Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

10 Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

12 Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

13 Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

14 Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.

15 Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Lesson Aims

Facts: to analyze Christ's eight beatitudes and His two metaphors of salt and light.

Principle: to see what Christ considered the ideal attitude and character His followers should aspire to develop.

Application: to guide believers in developing Christlike attitudes and character.

Introduction

When someone inherits a lot of money, others may say, "How fortunate!" When someone enjoys good health, many think, "What good genetics!" When someone is honored for an achievement, a typical response is, "How happy you must be!" The one word that sums up these responses is Congratulations!

When the ancient Greeks expressed such ideas, they used the same word attributed to Jesus in the Beatitudes. We translate it "blessed." They used this word to congratulate parents on their children, to congratulate wise men on their knowledge, and to congratulate rich men on their wealth. For them, these were things of great value.

Whenever we congratulate people, we are making a statement about values. If we congratulate people for being healthy or getting wealthy, we do so because we set high value on such things. By contrast, Jesus congratulated people based on a very different set of values. In His shocking appraisal of the human condition, He called people "blessed" who were poor in spirit and meek and persecuted.

The challenge for followers of Christ is to embrace His values. We must stop to consider why we admire people for wealth or achievements that have no value in the sight of God. Instead, we must learn what things have true, eternal value. Then we will be a community of values—God's values.

Lesson Background

The Beatitudes form the introduction to the famous Sermon on the Mount. Jesus spoke these words on a mountain in Galilee during the second year of His ministry.

Both Matthew 4:25 and Luke 6:17 state that large crowds followed Jesus at this time in His ministry. Jesus' fame as a miracle worker had spread throughout the region. People came from as far away as Tyre and Sidon to hear Him teach and to be healed of their diseases. Their astonishment increased when they saw Him command unclean spirits to depart from demon-possessed people.

But Jesus had not come primarily to heal the sick and cast out demons. He had come to preach truth in light of the in-breaking kingdom of God. His Sermon on the Mount was both radical and reasonable; it was both spiritually idealistic and sensibly down-to-earth. His words set ethical standards that no human being could live in his own power. Thus, the life of the believer, described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, is a life of grace and glory, which comes from God alone.

Value of Right Attitudes (Matthew 5:1–6)

1. To whom did Christ address the Sermon on the Mount? (vs. 1,2)

Because of Jesus' growing fame, *multitudes* of people come to Him. In order to make it possible for such a large number of people to see and hear Him, Jesus goes *up into a mountain*. There, on an elevated spot, Jesus sits down to teach. This is the common posture for a rabbi. It indicates that He is ready to begin teaching and His *disciples* come to hear Him. It would seem that His remarks were spoken specifically to His disciples with the multitude overhearing what He said to them.

2. What is probably meant by "poor in spirit" (v. 3)?

The first virtue Jesus commends is to be *poor in spirit*. People who are poor in spirit are aware of their own spiritual bankruptcy. They see their sinfulness; they feel their guilt. People like this are far more likely to turn to God for help than people who are smug in their own goodness. That is why Jesus can look at people like this and announce that they—not the proud and self-righteous—will enter God's community. How much better in the long run to be lowly and saved, than to be proud and lost! Only those who are poor in spirit are eligible to enter *the kingdom of heaven*.

3. What is the promise made to those who mourn? (v. 4)

They that mourn does not constitute a second group of people from verse 3. Indeed, all the Beatitudes should be seen as a total description of the kingdom citizen, not a smorgasbord from which we select the ones we like most (or dislike least).

Like the poor in spirit, those who mourn receive God's favor (Isaiah 61:2, 3). Those who mourn for their own sinfulness will be *comforted* by the grace and forgiveness of God. Those who mourn in sorrow or affliction will be comforted by all those who love them in God's community (see 2 Corinthians 1:4). Those who mourn because they have lost houses, family, or lands for the sake of the gospel will be comforted by receiving much more (see Mark 10:29, 30).

4. How are the weak viewed? (v. 5)

While meekness is often seen as weakness, this is not the meaning of the word translated "meek" in the New Testament. "Meek" means "gentle," "unassuming," "considerate." It arises out of spiritual strength that comes from resting in God and His power.

This is the only beatitude drawn from the Old Testament. Psalm 37:11 says, "But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace."

"To inherit the earth is a most surprising promise extended to the meek who find themselves in constant competition with the greedy, the selfish, the proud, the cruel. But the best things in this world are usually overlooked or missed by the wicked" (Root, Matthew, Standard).

Those who have surrendered to the Lord "look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:13).

5. How will those who "hunger and thirst" be filled? (v. 6)

All human beings can identify with hunger and thirst, for they are common to daily experience. If we would only hunger and thirst after righteousness, we would immediately see the blessing of doing so (cf. Ps. 42:1-4).

When Matthew used the terms "righteous" and "righteousness," he was stressing what might be called righteous living (Matt. 10:41; 23:35; 25:37). It is not only being right with God judicially (Rom. 4:3; 5:1) but also living in a manner that reflects a true change of heart and life.

To hunger and thirst after righteousness is to make spiritual things and godly living lifetime goals. Those who so consecrate themselves to the Lord are promised that they will be filled (Luke 1:53).

Value of Right Actions (Matthew 5:7-12)

6. In what ways can mercy be expressed? (v. 7)

Mercy can be expressed in at least two different ways. First, the *merciful* person is forgiving to people who have wronged him or her. Second, the merciful person is compassionate to people who are suffering or needy. In either situation, the merciful person displays a generous spirit.

In return, the merciful person will *obtain mercy* from God. This does not mean that our mercy toward others forces God to be merciful toward us. The idea, rather, is that our merciful attitude toward others becomes an occasion of God's mercy to us. Whether as a sinner in need of forgiveness or as an afflicted person in need of help, God's merciful children will be shown God's mercy.

7. What does God want from our hearts? (v. 8)

Those who are *pure in heart* are not polluted with either moral impurity or insincere motives. In both respects they meet the requirements of Psalm 24:3, 4: "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully."

God wants hearts that respond to Him in total devotion. The person who is pure in heart will seek holiness, "without which no man shall see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). The final reward for such a person is to live with God in Heaven, where he or she will look upon God's face (see Revelation 22:4).

8. In what ways can Christians be peacemakers (v. 9)?

Being a peacemaker is often a thankless task. Like policemen trying to settle a domestic dispute, *peacemakers* may find themselves under attack from both sides. Stepping in to help settle disputes for others is not always appreciated. Furthermore, it is sometimes our own disputes that need the balm of peace. Even though we may have a right to be angry with someone, Jesus calls us to become instruments of peace (Proverbs 15:1; Matthew 5:39). For those in Jesus' audience who expect Messiah to launch a war with Rome, these words must be both shocking and disappointing.

Members of God's community, however, place great value on peace. Like Jesus himself, we try to live at peace with all (see Hebrews 12:14), to break down the walls of hostility (see Ephesians 2:15–17), and to be agents of reconciliation (see 2 Corinthians 5:18–20). People who value making peace will *be called the children of God*.

9. Why is being a peacemaker so difficult? How can you do better in this area?

Christianity and the world may not see eye to eye on the issues of spiritual poverty, mourning, etc. But on the value of being a peacemaker there is substantial agreement. The world recognizes great achievements in peacemaking by awarding Nobel Peace Prizes, etc. Great peacemakers must break through the me-first agendas of warring parties. Jesus' position on the value of peacemaking is clear.

Peacemakers are what God calls us to be. The reason is that we are His children, and He wants us to be like Him. The Prince of Peace knew the difficulty of peacemaking, for He even gave His life so that peace might once again exist between God and us. This is by far the most important kind of peace there is.

10. How should Christians approach persecution? (vs. 11,12)

The last of the eight Beatitudes is the only one with a note of peril. And unlike the others, this Beatitude is expanded into two more verses of explanation (vs. 11, 12, below). Living as a citizen of God's kingdom will draw opposition (compare 2 Timothy 3:12).

Persecution may come in many forms: physical, psychological, social, financial, etc. But the issue here is the reason behind whatever form the persecution takes. Persecution *for righteousness' sake* is the world's response to us for doing the right thing. Those persecuted are still called *blessed*. It is far better to suffer such persecution and enter *the kingdom of heaven* than to avoid persecution by doing the wrong thing and then be punished throughout eternity.

Jesus knows that people of the world will *revile, persecute, and say all manner of evil against* His followers (Matthew 5:11). If they persecuted the master, they will also persecute His disciples (see John 15:20).

Value of Right Witness (Matthew 5:13–16)

11. How is an effective Christian like salt and light? (vs. 13-16)

The Beatitudes are followed by a summary statement of the basic character of the Christian's life as salt and light. "Ye are the salt of the earth;" again the phrase ye are indicates that only genuinely born-again person is salt and can help meet the needs of the world. The salt adds flavoring, acts as a preservative, melts coldness and heals wounds. Thus it is a very appropriate description of the believer in his relationship to the world in which he lives. The term "lose its savor" refers to its essential saltiness. Jesus was actually saying that if the salt loses saltiness, it is worthless. The implication of this statement is that if a Christian loses his effectiveness, his testimony will be trampled under the feet of men.

"Ye are the light of the world" describes the essential mission of the Christian to the world. His light is to clearly shine forth into the darkness of human depravity. He is to set it up on a candlestick, not to hide it "under a bushel," e.g., basket.

Inconsistent living and unconfessed sin. In the life of the believer will become a basket-like covering which hides the light of God. God provides the light and it continues to shine, but as believers we must keep our lives clean before the Lord in order not to cover up the light which He has placed within us. Darkness is the absence of light and darkness alone cannot dispel the light, but the smallest light can dispel the greatest darkness. Therefore" let your light shine through a clean life before the Lord and before the world in which you live.

Conclusion

We live in a very materialistic society today, and sometimes Christians seem to get seduced into that lifestyle rather easily. We need to emphasize the fact that spiritual development is far more important than material desires and needs to be continuously cultivated if we want to become Christlike.

Challenge your students to carefully reexamine their lives to see where spiritual development is needed. How do they spend their free time? What kinds of relationships do they have? How often do they witness to others?

Prayer

Our Father, teach us what to value most. Lead us to be the kind of people who display kingdom values. Help us to be salt and light in our world, so that others will give glory to Your name. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

Be salt! Be light!

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

While studying Matthew 20:17-28 "Serving Others", think about the contrast between Jesus' willingness to go to the cross for people and His disciples' ambition to be elevated to honor in His kingdom. Think about how Jesus defined His own ministry.

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