

The Life God Blesses

SERIES: THE LIFE GOD BLESSES

I'm often interested in why we use the words we use. I was watching the Super Bowl last week and one of the players from the winning team said he was "a blessed man." I wondered what he meant by that. If his team had lost that game, would he still be blessed? Sometimes we say to a person, "God bless you." Or when we pray we often use words like, "Lord, will you bless John." What would we expect to happen if John were blessed? Or we pray, "Lord, please bless this food." Does food that is blessed taste better? We even have a song we sing, "God bless America." What would it be like if America were blessed? We use these words, but rarely do we stop and think what it really means to be blessed.

You're driving along and you see a nice looking man who passes you on the road in a beautiful new Lexus. It's got leather interior. He seems so relaxed and serene sitting there. You can imagine him driving up a long, windy driveway to a lovely home with a perfectly manicured yard. You think, "That's a blessed man."

Or maybe you know better than that. You know that material possessions don't always translate into happiness. But you're at a restaurant and you see a group of twenty-somethings sitting there having a blast. They are young; they are healthy; not a care in the world, and you think, "If they only knew how blessed they are." But then you remember how you felt at 23, and you know being young isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Some people would say, "To be free is to be blessed." A Super Bowl commercial showed country western star Faith Hill riding on a luxurious train, apparently off to her next concert. She has a cell phone pressed to her ear and mouth, and she is singing a lullaby song to her child who lays in bed back home. The caption at the bottom read, "Total freedom." Is that what it means to be blessed? To have the freedom to pursue your career and stay connected to your toddler via a cell phone? That's what some people seem to think.

Most of us know that being blessed has something to do with God. A person says that word and you immediately think, "Oh, they must be religious." When we hear that word we think of someone who walks with their hands clasped and their head in the clouds. They might be blessed but you could never imagine them taking the garbage out.

But there is something about this word; something that hits us at a deep level. However we cut it, all of us have this desire to be blessed. We may not even be particularly religious, but we'd like to be blessed if we could. Today I want us to see what God's blessing means and who it is that we could call blessed.

Jesus uses this word "blessed" a lot. As a matter of fact, he used this word as the keyword in the introduction to one of the greatest sermons ever given - the Sermon on the Mount. Introductions are important. In the introduction to his sermon, Jesus tells us what God's blessing means and who it is we could call blessed. We call these the Beatitudes and in the weeks ahead we will be looking at these one by one. Turn to Matthew 5,

"And when He saw the multitudes, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And opening His mouth He began to teach them, saying, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'"

I. What does it mean to be blessed?

The most obvious thing about this passage is that it is a list of who it is that can be called blessed. Eight times Jesus begins with that same word. What did Jesus mean when he said they are blessed?

Did he mean they are happy? This is what we often are told he meant, but that doesn't seem to fit, at least in the way we use the word. How can those who

mourn be happy? That's like Jesus saying, "Happy are the unhappy, for they shall be made happy." Happiness is determined by my circumstances. Happiness is an emotion that goes up and down like a roller coaster. Jesus is talking about something deeper and more constant than happiness.

It seems to me that Jesus is making a declaration, not about how these people feel, but about what they are in God's eyes. In the OT, when God blessed people he was giving them his approval. It's almost a way of saying "congratulations." In secular Greek, the island of Cyprus was called the "blessed Isle." That's the exact same word that Jesus uses here. The idea behind this word was that those who lived there never had to leave its shores because they had all they needed to be content; the island was self-contained. When we are blessed by God we are in a sense self-contained; our joy does not come from circumstances, it comes from the fact we stand approved before God. To be called "blessed" by God in this way certainly impacts how we feel about our lives. It results in a kind of "sacred delight" that no one or no thing can take away from us. We all want to be called "blessed" in this way. We want to be affirmed. We want our lives to be worthy of God's congratulations.

When Jesus pronounced that certain people are blessed he's saying these are the kind of people who God affirms; these people meet his approval; they are worthy of being congratulated. Part of the reason for that is what they possess. In the second half of each beatitude he speaks of certain benefits which these blessed people enjoy.

Notice that the first and the last blessings promised are exactly the same: "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This is the foundational benefit that Jesus says belongs to the blessed person. We hear that and say, "Big deal. Is that all we get - a promise that some day we're going to float around on clouds and play harps?" But the kingdom of heaven is more than that. Back in 4:17 Matthew summarized Jesus' whole message, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**" It seems the kingdom of heaven was not just some hope for future bliss, but a present reality. And Jesus doesn't say that the kingdom will be theirs, he says it is theirs. The kingdom of heaven is not a place, but a dynamic experience of living under God's rule, and of being in right relationship to him. To enter the kingdom of heaven, to have it said of you that the kingdom of heaven is yours, is to say that you are under heaven's rule, and you are entitled to all the good things that involves.

This is something we enjoy now, but we won't experience the fullness of the kingdom until later. It's a little like owning a home. For most of us, when we say we

own a home, that means we get to live in it while we make payments to a bank. We don't take full possession of the home until the mortgage is paid off. We get to enjoy many of the benefits of the kingdom now, but we haven't taken full possession yet. And when we do, our experience will be so much better. In another sense, it's like being engaged. It's wonderful to be engaged. We enjoy that commitment to one another, we eat meals together, we go on long walks, we plan our future, but there are certain things we don't get to experience yet. That comes later. In the same way, we enjoy our relationship with God now, but there are things to come that are far better.

What does it mean to be blessed? It means to experience the approval of God and to enjoy the benefits of being a part of his kingdom. That's nice to know, but who are the ones that can be called blessed? Who are the ones he affirms and who are the ones to whom he promises the kingdom?

II. Who is it that God blesses?

To answer that question, we have to see who it is Jesus is speaking to here. If you look up a few verses you can see that there were great crowds following Jesus. We know Jesus was speaking at least in part to these crowds because when the sermon is finished it says, "the crowds were amazed at his teaching." Many of these people came to him for healing. Matthew says they were "**suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics...**" (4:24). It's doubtful if many of these people would be voted "most likely to succeed" in their high school class. Yet these were the people following Jesus. Many of them had become disciples, and these disciples followed him up the mountain (5:1-2). These were the men and women who had left nets, fishing boats, thriving businesses and even families to follow Jesus. It's these folks Jesus has in mind when he says, "Blessed are those..." They were simply women and men who had come to trust and follow Jesus out of a deep sense of need.

The ones God blesses are not the one's we would expect. They are not spiritual giants. They are not blessed because they possess some higher degree of righteousness than other people. Quite the contrary, they are blessed because they understand their own deep-seated spiritual poverty. That's why the first group on the list are the ones he calls "poor in spirit." They're not necessarily materially poor, but they are spiritually poor. Who are the poor in spirit but those who know their need for Jesus? They are the ones who know they don't measure up; who tried to keep God's law but time after time have come up short. About 7 years ago I ran a marathon. Since then, I've tried to run another three different times, but each time I find myself falling short. Either I get injured or I get sick or I just fail to make the time to train. I'd like to run another, but I'm not sure I have it in me. In the same way, the blessed of

God are those who keep trying to please God and be righteous people, but they keep falling short and they know it.

As we look at the eight different ways Jesus describes these people, it's clear that the ones God blesses are not the ones we might expect. It seems the things that are praised in the kingdom of heaven are totally reversed from the world of man. It almost seems that in God's kingdom, you win by losing. It's like someone changed all the price tags. The things that our culture deems important are suitable for a five and dime store in the kingdom. But the things we would rather avoid are prized and placed on a pedestal.

That shouldn't surprise us. We know that Jesus' earthly life ended in shame on a Roman cross. The cross was a symbol of everything you didn't want to be. It was like the electric chair in our culture. The OT even said, "Cursed is every man who hangs on a tree." And yet, we know that cross as a source of pride. We wear crosses around our necks and we put them up in our churches. We sing songs, "I will cherish that old rugged cross..." It seems Jesus is saying that those are blessed who follow him in this strange, reversed way of living; in the way of the cross. They embrace kingdom values where everything is flip-flopped from the world.

For instance, if you look at this list, you can see that they focus on internals rather than externals ("poor in spirit...hunger and thirst for righteousness...pure in heart"). We live in a world that is consumed with externals. We define people by what they wear, what their house looks like, what their title is, and how much their kids achieve. The Pharisees were also into externals. They were concerned with externals of religion rather than the heart. Later in the sermon, Jesus said, **"Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven"** (5:20). Those who embrace this great reversal; those who embrace the values of the cross, have stopped looking at personal righteousness as a do-it-yourself project. They've seen the desperate condition of their own heart and they invited Jesus to start a renovation project from the inside out.

As we look at this list, we can also see that they focus on the advancement of others rather than themselves. We live in a world that tells us to get ahead, even if we have to do it on the backs of people in our way. But Jesus exalts those who are meek and merciful; he exalts the peacemakers. Imagine your company is looking to hire a new Vice President. You put together a list of qualities: visionary, hard-working, organized, decisive. Do you think "meekness" would make the list? In our dictionary, meekness means weakness. Do you think "merciful" would be on there? You can't be merciful

and swim with the sharks. How about "peacemakers?" Peacemakers never win. Most every time I've tried to make peace between two rival parties I've ended being on the wrong side of both. Yet if you look at Jesus Christ, if you look at the cross, what do you see? You see meekness - he submits to those who mistreat him. You see mercy - He doesn't give people what they deserve. You see a peacemaker - He spills his blood to bring divinity and humanity together.

Finally, as we look at this list we can see that these people gladly bear the shame of Christ. The list culminates with, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness...blessed are you when people insult you...on account of me." I'm glad he didn't start with this. I'm glad he started with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." I'm better at that. But sooner or later it will come down to this. If we live by the first seven Beatitudes, we will certainly experience the eighth. Sooner or later we will have to decide if we will continue to identify ourselves with Jesus Christ when it means we could lose the job, or the friendship, or become the object of gossip and slander. Jesus says that those who bear the shame of Christ will win the lottery in heaven. Though it appears they lose on earth, they will win big in the kingdom of heaven.

CONCLUSION

In the 1996 Masters golf tournament, Greg Norman, known as The Shark, had a six stroke lead after three rounds. One more round of just average golf and he would have his first Master's victory. But on the last round the bottom fell out and Nick Faldo came from six shots back to win by five strokes. But that loss did something for Greg Norman. People from all over the world contacted him with words of encouragement. He got four times the amount of mail he got when he won the British Open. He said later that the whole experience changed his outlook on life. He said, "I never thought I could reach out and touch people like that. And the extraordinary thing is that I did it by losing."

God's blessing; God's congratulations; God's smile is on those who know their need for Christ and follow him in this strange, reversed, flip-flopped way of living, where often times we win by losing.

