

**Preacher:** Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:1-4

Jesus goes up on the mount and prepares to give arguably the greatest sermon ever delivered, “The Sermon on the Mount.” And he opens with these verses some of us have committed to memory.

“Blessed are the rich.

Blessed are those who never mourn,  
who cause others to mourn.

Blessed are the violent, the oppressors,  
those who run the domination system.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for injustice.

Blessed are those who show no mercy.

Blessed are the impure of heart.

Blessed are the war makers.

Blessed are those who are never persecuted, who never struggle for justice, who never rock the boat on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised, who are never insulted because of their allegiance to Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

The beatitudes, that was them, right? Those are the ones you have committed to memory? I’m seeing a shaking of heads and I’m not sure why. Sometimes I really do think this is what we believe, and not the real beatitudes. “Blessed are the rich, those who never mourn, those who are never persecuted.” I found these “anti-beatitudes” as I was reading a book by a Catholic Father John Dear and, yes, this particular priest really is named Father John Dear, but it’s spelled differently. Father Dear rewrote the famous beatitudes as the infamous anti-beatitudes and calls into question which set we really do believe in. Who really is blessed, the rich or the poor in spirit? Father Dear pits the way of the world against the way of the Kingdom of God and claims that his anti-beatitudes really are a decent depiction of how the world understands blessing. It can appear in the world that the blessed one who works his/her way to the top does so with wealth, without grieving, with oppression, without justice, without mercy, without purity, with war, without being persecuted.

But not so in the Kingdom of God, for in the Kingdom of God, in the Kingdom where Jesus Christ sits on the throne, the blessed one looks awfully weak in our worldly eyes, for they are poor in spirit, they are mourning, they are meek, and persecuted, and yet also pure and righteous. The real beatitudes are not what we expect.

Throughout the season of Lent, we are going to dig into the real beatitudes. And I hope what we discover is that they stand a bit in contrast to the way our world normally works. Yet just because they stand in contrast to the Kingdom of the World, does not mean that we set them aside and abide with the kingdom of the world until the Kingdom of Heaven and of Jesus comes down. No, Jesus gave these words to us fully expecting his faithful ones to live even now like we are in the Kingdom of Heaven and not the Kingdom of the World. They are real and true beatitudes for today, and their contrast should shock us and convict us for admiring their opposite, while comforting us in our brokenness.

Before I get into the first two blessings which are today’s focus, I want to explain some of the basics of what the beatitudes as a whole are.

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<sup>1</sup> Dear, John. *The Beatitudes of Peace*. Twenty-Third Publications, 2016. pp. 19-20.

As Pastor Audrey already explained, we call these “beatitudes” because the old, old church that used the Latin language called them “Beatus” meaning, “blessed.” In English, we expanded that out to our heading “Beatitude.” So, a more direct translation of a heading might be something like “The Blessings.” The word for “blessing” used in these passages from the original Greek, the language Matthew was writing them in, was “makarios.” Say that with me “makarios.” Now this old Greek word for blessing was used in other Greco-Roman phrases like “Hail to those” or “One on whom fortune smiles.” The word carries this divine characteristic, that something/someone holy smiles down upon or touches the blessed person. My Greek dictionary says you could substitute the “blessed are” with “favored are, fortunate are, happy are those.”<sup>2</sup>

And when I do honestly think about who is happy, who is fortunate, who is blessed, I think to myself, “Happy are those who are not mourning the loss of a loved one.” “Fortunate are those who are comfortable.” “Blessed are those whose spirits are high.” But this is not what Jesus says. He says, and these are our beatitudes of the day, “**3** Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **4** Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

The poor in spirit and those who mourn. Why might they be blessed? Let’s dig into these meanings one at a time. First, “the poor in spirit.” This is a tricky phrase. When we hear this phrasing through an American English perspective, we might think it is someone lacking of good spirits. This isn’t the Holy Spirit here. This is the human spirit. And we prefer it when our spirits are jovial, happy, comfortable, confident. But not this blessed person. Richard Gardner in his commentary of Matthew says that the poor in spirit could be someone who cultivates a spirit like that of the poor. Therefore, Gardner says “the phrase refers to those who cultivate a humble spirit, who empty themselves and relate to others in the unpretentious way of the poor.” Blessed are those who have an attitude like the poor because while you might feel weak and vulnerable now, while you might feel powerless now, yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.

In giving a blessing to the poor in spirit, the humble, the vulnerable, the powerless – Jesus tells us that we are to relinquish the control, the power that we claim in this world and give it to God. Live impoverished! All that you have been given from stuff and wealth to power and influence – it’s all mine anyway! It’s like the rich young ruler who is instructed by Christ in Matthew 19 to sell all his possessions and give it to the poor so that he could come and follow. The rich young ruler was terrified of a poverty of spirit that would leave him powerless. In the end, he wanted to rely on himself and not on God. So, if while you are alive on this earth, if you would live with a spirit of poverty and let God have your wealth and influence and power, then you will receive the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now for those who mourn. In a country that prides itself upon the pursuit of happiness, why does Jesus hail the blessed ones as the ones who mourn. Just about all of us knows what it means to mourn. We can point to a moment in our lives when we lost someone dear to us, a spouse, parent, grandparent, good friend, a child. All of us will find ourselves in such a place of grief at some point in our life as we ponder what our life looks like without that person filling their role in it. It’s the kind of grief that leaves no person out, even grown men must cry. And to you, Jesus promises comfort. But in the thick of our mourning and grieving, why are we blessed. I believe because we have dared to feel, dared to care, dared to love. We grieve because our souls have known love and while people die and are born, love builds up and we are blessed having loved.

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<sup>2</sup> Greek-English Lexicon. Walter Bauer. 2000.

Now Gardner opens up this mourning to another level. He says Jesus' language here is a direct parallel to Isaiah 61:2-3 which speaks of the mourning of the people for the plight of Israel as it crumbles and the exile begins. Therefore, this blessing upon the mourning is not only for us as we grieve loved ones, but it is for those of us who would also dare to grieve and mourn over, as Gardner says, "the condition of the world as it now exists." Blessed are those who, despite the conditioning of our brains and hearts to handle violence, are still able to shed a tear when news breaks of another mass shooting, another drone strike, another drug related murder, another heroin overdose, another attack of terror, an unwanted child, another kidnapping, rape, burning, or murder among our Nigerian Brethren. Can you still mourn these things one upon another or has our mourning been saturated?

Let me just say that mourning is not living with cable news on 24/7 to be the first to know about catastrophe upon catastrophe. Mourning is not becoming so consumed in the hopelessness of our world, and mourning is not a nostalgic look down memory lane of who we used to be. No mourning is the release of compassion through tears, laments, and prayers – it is a holy communion with God who receives our compassion, binds our wounds, and sends us back into the world to love some more. Mourning is not a place to solely reside, but it is a blessed practice. Mourn in solidarity with our broken and blessed world. Do not lose your capacity to mourn because, in doing so, we may have lost our capacity to love. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

You see, these beatitudes are not what we expect. They are deep, rich in meaning, practical and spiritual, countercultural to success in our world. All this and we've only just begun. Remember, this is the season of Lent. It is a season in which we should be confronted with the contrast between our true self in Christ and our false self which battles for notice in this world. The beatitudes can guide us deeply inward and upward to discover our true self in Christ if we but see the contrast. This week, I challenge you to consider the condition of your spirit. Is it rich, lavish, influential, puffed up by power, or is it impoverished of such inconsequential things? Take note of what you would struggle most with handing over to God.

Then I want you to risk loving humanity so much that you might mourn with a mother, a child, a grandfather, who has known deep loss. Spend a moment in prayer maybe for someone you have never met – our Nigerian Brethren, refugees, the impoverished of our own city, the – pray for them, mourn with them. You will be comforted. Yours is the Kingdom of God. Amen.