

The Beginning of Blessedness: Radical Christianity

Our New Testament reading is Matt. 5:1-12. Seeing the crowd that is following him, mostly because of his power to heal and perform other miracles, Jesus goes up a rise overlooking a valley, what is called a mountainside, a hilly area near the shore of Lake Galilee that provides a natural amphitheater for a large crowd of people. Although the crowd is allowed to overhear what Jesus is teaching, the message of the Sermon on the Mount, is primarily for his followers. I'll read the Scripture containing Jesus' Beatitudes.

Matthew 5:1-12.

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Just this past week, I was asked to give my opinion about a book written by a popular writer and speaker, who has become a popular writer, speaker and leader of a missions agency. I had read his book *Radical Christian* some years ago, in which he contends that followers of Jesus will seek to meet his demands of discipleship, which call for a radical departure from a normal, comfortable Western lifestyle, and a costly involvement in world missions, through volunteering time and money or making missionary work one's life career. Having not read any of his later writings nor having heard him speak, I realized my critique was not well substantiated; but nevertheless, I opined in my email reply that Platt oversimplifies, and makes the cost of following Jesus, even though his terms are construed as radical, not radical enough.

Even as an old man, I'm only now facing up to the need to have my life radically changed in ways that go deeper than giving more of my income and being involved in active, sacrificial missions service. I remember that as a young boy I heard missionary speakers challenge us to consider a missions career, and I dutifully volunteered to be an overseas missionary. It seemed, from messages given at church and at summer church camp, that the more one loved Jesus the

father from home you would go to serve him. After decades of pastoral service, I'm beginning to realize the radical change that needs to happen in my life, and maybe in ways you kind people would never notice. With the help of a therapist, I'm beginning to understand that a lot of wrong thinking, feeling, relating and speaking need to change. As a citizen of God's kingdom, I'm called to do the impossible—live a Christ-like life that make a difference, personally and socially, beginning with the people closest to me, those God has given me to love the most. I need to live a life God blesses and uses as a blessing to others, as Jesus describes in these beatitudes.

Let's unpack the meaning of Jesus when he said, "Blessed are you." The word "beatitude" is from the Latin "beatitudo," which was a translation of the Greek word, "makarioi," which is best translated "happy," meaning the opposite of misery. "In its proper understanding is the giddy side of joy, when every sorrow is forgotten" (AT Robertson). But when we look at the etymology of "happy," we find the root is "hap, chance, good luck as seen in our words such as haphazard and happenstance.

For our purposes we'll drop "happy" because of the contemporary way it's used to describe a very transient emotion that depends on our feelings and our circumstances. Let's use the word "blessed," but take it out of the realm of priestly and "churchy" benedictions reserved for those who make it to the very end of the worship service. Let's think of blessed as a deep-seated joy that only God can give and that changes our entire outlook on life and the way we experience life. Blessedness is the presence of God with us and within us, placing us with Christ "in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing" (Ps. 16:11; Eph. 1:3). We enter this relationship with a loving God through reconciliation with him. We're indwelt by and are being transformed by the Holy Spirit, who makes us more like Jesus as he produces in us the fruit of the Spirit, meaning his love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22f). Simply, blessedness is eternal life, kingdom life here on earth and in anticipation of the new heaven and earth.

One translation for "blessed" is "to be congratulated." God wishes to congratulate us, not for our efforts or merits, but simply for receiving his unmerited favor. His favor is not something bestowed upon us because of our merits or even our efforts. When Jesus selected his disciples, he didn't seek men who measured up to strict criteria. He simply knew that they would be willing to follow him in simple trust and glad obedience. Now that they sat at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching about this life of following him, they continued to understand that this new life of following was not something they earned or deserved, but was all about Jesus' favor, his mercy and grace, all that we desperately need but can never deserve.

We are thus congratulated by God for simply accepting what he has provided. In Luke's gospel we read Jesus' words of condemnation on those who reject his

blessings, who are too rich to accept God's kingdom, too satisfied with the world to hunger for God's righteousness (Lk. 6:24f). The Beatitudes are not just a nice list of characteristics that make us more pleasant to live with. Rather, they describe the life that God approves, even that he requires. God so loves us and has such determination to bless and enrich our lives with his love that to reject his love is to incur his wrath and judgment. And, through Christ and his cross God has paid a great price to bless us.

The life of blessedness is not a life or religious duty and attainment of which anyone can boast. The context of the Beatitudes and even the Sermon on the Mount itself shows us that this kingdom blessedness, this lasting joy, happiness and favor of God is by the initiative of the Father. God sent his Son into the world to be the Savior of all who believe (Jn. 3:16). The message of the Bible is one of God's desires to bless his creation. All that he created he saw was good, and yet man and woman, the crown of his creation, lost his favor through their fall into self-directing independence from God and crossing over the limits of his relationship with them. And we are all children of Adam and all stand in need of his rescue. The story of Israel is one of God's call to a people to be his unique and holy nation and to receive the blessings of obedience and service within his kingdom. God's call to Abraham was that he become the father of a great nation who also would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:2f). Israel failed miserably and thus it would be through his eternal Son that God would once again be able to have a blessed people, people who would receive his favor.

The Beatitudes describe the genuinely, being-converted life, and not necessarily the life of the typical, so-called nominal Christian. The life that Jesus says is blessed is one that's been touched and is being transformed by God. We find our assurance, not in our baptismal certificate or a past decision we made or a prayer that we prayed, but in the awareness that the Holy Spirit continues to produce in our lives the fruit of true godliness, the fruit of the Spirit and these characteristics of a life God approves and blesses (Gal. 5:22f; 2 Pet. 1:5-10).

Becoming a God-blessed child of God is a result of his power at work within the believer. The great social reformer of India, Ghandi, admired the teachings of Jesus and especially his Sermon on the Mount. Yet Ghandi rejected the claims of Jesus as the Son of God and thus failed to understand the "impossible" ethic of the kingdom, an ethic made understandable and possible only by the Holy Spirit. And there have always been those who have rejected the claims of the gospel and the call to a personal relationship with Christ but who have claimed to follow the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. But we can see already that the only way to understand the teachings of Jesus, and especially to follow them, requires a personal relationship with the risen Christ. He alone gives us the desire and the dynamic to understand and follow his teachings, not just in a minimalist legalistic way, but to fulfill the full intent of his words. Economic circumstances make us materially poor. But only the Holy Spirit can make us

poor in spirit and prepare our hearts to eagerly reach out to the offer of the kingdom of God.

There were the religious leaders who thought they had all the answers to the right way to live and to deserve and earn God's favor. But Jesus turned all of their presumption on its head when he declared in this first Beatitude that the blessedness, the ongoing joy of kingdom life is dispensed to the needy.

Dallas Willard translates this first Beatitude as "Blessed are the spiritual zeros," the spiritually bankrupt who would be voted by their school classes as "the least likely to succeed." Willard notes that Jesus is saying in these Beatitudes that the kingdom of God comes upon those "without a wisp of religion," those who would be the last to say they had any claim on God. Thus, Willard warns against seeing the Beatitudes as the result of the spiritual disciples and meritorious goodness of those bent on advancement in the kingdom. If we're not careful, he warns, we can make the Beatitudes a "to do" list for the self-righteous who by living up to these characteristics will think they have a claim on God.

But instead, says Willard, in these Beatitudes, Jesus is announcing the good news that he has come to those the world has written off. The grace of God and the gift of his kingdom rule has fallen freely on those of a "deplorable condition," the least religious, the least likely to find the kingdom, much less to succeed in it. We're not to think of the Beatitudes as a list of things to achieve, but rather as God's commendations to people who are quite unselfconsciously godly. As Willard paraphrases:

*Blessed are the physically repulsive;
Blessed are those who smell bad;
Blessed are the twisted, misshapen, deformed,
The too big, too little, too loud,
The bald, the fat the old—
For they are all riotously celebrated in the party of Jesus.*

God's favor is by his gracious choice and often comes to those the world has written off. His call is simply to follow him. The call to follow Jesus is to a glorious, soul-satisfying and fulfilling life. But it's also a call to follow Jesus in the way of the cross, which means suffering in this life. It means also that we take up a cross daily, and execute our self-centered desires and objectives for the sake of Jesus and the objectives of the kingdom. Blessedness is by grace, but there's no cheap grace.

Now one makes this clearer than Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*, a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. Bonhoeffer, who was hanged by the Nazis at the end of his prison camp interment at the age of 39, continues to impact the Christian world with his writings. He notes in his comments on this Beatitude, that Jesus promises his blessings on those who

have become poor for Jesus' sake, and have lost everything, "even their own selves," to answer Jesus' call. Although he died young and tragically, Bonhoeffer's life was blessed, and he was and us an amazing blessing to others.

I find that this is a choice I must make daily, and is not one that was made once and for all at the time I first trusted Christ and began to follow him. Every day I must decide to live for kingdom of God goals and by kingdom principles of faith and faithfulness. My prayer must be for his kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (6:10). This means I die daily to my persistently re-emerging self-will and submit to the will and ways of my heavenly Father. This means also that I learn to give thanks in and for all my circumstances, trusting that even amidst life's disappointments, a loving Father is at the helm of my life.

I need to let go of every part of my thinking, speaking, relating and acting that keep away God's blessings in my life. My sin is rejecting the ways God wants to love and bless me, to make me truly happy. He created and rescued me to be his happy child. This is the radical Christian life I'm to live. And I don't need to go to the mission field, though the blessed life is truly missional, wherever I may live. I realize that as a child and young man I tried hard to cause my daddy to love me, even becoming an over-achiever in sports, music and student leadership. And later, even as a young pastor and after "Daddy" was deceased, I tried to please him. But I've never had to make my heavenly Father love me. Impossible! I can't earn his love. He gives it unconditionally.

Jesus is calling us to follow him in a radical life of blessedness, of incredible joy that the world apart from Christ can never know. A sense of radical need is all we need!