

Sermon on the Mount

Message 3

Blessings of Jesus' Kingdom, Part 2

Matt 5:7-10

The Most Blessed

Who is the most blessed person in your generation? You know, people 15 to 25 years old? Paris Hilton, because she is so rich and famous? Are you thinking of a football hero or TV star? Here's my nomination: Cassie Bernall. Remember her, the high school girl who was killed at Columbine High School a few years ago? Are you surprised? You don't think she no longer exists, do you? She has just moved from earth to heaven. And if St. Paul is right, she is better off than all of us. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul said that the best thing in life is to be with Jesus. Do you agree? Is the best thing in life to be with your Lord, your Savior, your Lover? Sure it is, and that is why we long here on earth to be with the one who loves us most. But Jesus loves us more than everyone. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul sort of argues with himself. He loved the Philippians and wanted to visit them. But he knew that it would be better to be with Jesus. Which should he choose? This is a difficult choice only if you really believe – if you are totally confident – that the most blessed thing in this life is to be with Jesus. The problem is, you have to die to get there.

I don't know whether Cassie Bernall was an exemplary Christian. She had started following Jesus in earnest only a short while before she died. I doubt her understanding of God was very deep, and her experience was limited. In short, simply because of her age she was a somewhat immature Christian, but if we take our definition of blessed, she is most blessed of you all. Last week we defined blessedness as having two aspects. First, it means happiness or fulfillment. Second, it means approved by God. Cassie Bernall is most blessed because she is happiest of us all – she is with her Savior. She is also blessed because she is approved by God. Although she was perhaps not very mature in her faith, she did something God specifically indicated has His approval – she suffered persecution for her faith. When the killers demanded to know if she was a Christian she never hesitated, but firmly declared she was. For this she became a martyr.

Tonight we are continuing our studies in the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon opens Matthew's gospel and in it Jesus lays out His vision for the Kingdom He came to establish. The Sermon begins with eight beatitudes – blessings – which form a description of the character of Jesus' followers. As we study these short blessings, we ask ourselves, do I measure up? Does this describe me? Or do I need to ask forgiveness and seek to become more like a true follower of Christ.

Blessed are the Merciful

First the matter of mercy. Which do you want, justice or mercy? When the cop pulls you over for speeding, do you want justice or mercy? How about when your paper is not finished by the deadline? What if you miss the deadline for paying your Lehigh bill? I think most of us are partial to mercy, because we prefer to escape the legitimate consequences of our actions. But what about when someone scrapes your car? Do you simply forgive him, or do you seek a just recompense? What if others in your class cheat on the exam and drive up the curve. Are you in a merciful mood, or would you rather that justice be done? On the whole Americans are fairly forgiving people, but look what happened after the terrorist attack five years ago. Within hours people were calling for us to “bomb them back into the Stone Age”. And ever since our military has been forcing justice on Al Qaida.

Which do you want, justice or mercy? Most of us want mercy for ourselves, but justice for others. We hope people will forgive us our trespasses, but we seek vengeance for injuries to ourselves. Do you want mercy? Do you hope to be forgiven when you sin and make mistakes? You can! All it takes is for you to forgive others. You can't have it both ways. You can't be treated mercifully yourself if you pursue vengeance against those who hurt you. If you want God and others to give you a break, you must be a break-

giving person yourself. But if you insist on getting what's due you, you can expect no slack for your own failures.

This means that when your roommate comes in and throws her wet towel on your bed *again!*, darn it!, you don't blow up at her. You remember, you do irritating things, too. Different things, but irritating just the same. What are they? I don't know, but I bet your brother or sister and your parents do! So you remember that others have been merciful to you, and you show mercy to your annoying roommate. Or when you are in the midst of a great game of basketball and the class klutz shows up, you don't refuse to let him in the game. You remember what it is like to be left out, and you show mercy to the guy – you invite him to join you. Showing mercy does not mean you never address real problems. You might need to help this guy follow the rules, and you might need to ask your roommate (again!) to hang up her towel, on her hook – but you do so *mercifully*. You don't get angry, and you don't jump all over him. You show patience and understanding. You show mercy, because you know you need mercy, too.

You can see how important this principle is in human relationships, can't you? Well, it's even more important in human-divine relationships. Above all you need God's mercy. If God were to deal justly with you, you would perish for your sins. The ways we annoy each other are a tiny taste of how offensive we are to God when we disobey Him. We *desperately* need Him to be merciful to us – and He will. God *longs* to be merciful to us – but His mercy is conditional upon our showing mercy to others. Do you want to know God. Do you want to be a true follower of Jesus? Do you want to be blessed? Then be merciful to those around you.

Blessed are the Pure in Heart

Jesus moves on from a very practical topic like mercy to the invisible quality of your heart. Why is He concerned about the purity of your heart, and why is that your ticket to see God? We tend to be more concerned about what people do than what they think. So you may hate your neighbor, but as long as you don't harm him, we don't particularly care. But God is very much interested in what you think, because actions proceed from thoughts. In Mark's gospel Jesus said that evil actions proceed from an evil heart (Mk. 7:15). So to build a truly good community, you must see to it that people's hearts are in the right place. This is the practical Achilles heel to Islam. That religion focuses on the behavior of people without addressing their hearts, and consequently becomes oppressive. As Jesus lays out His vision for a new community, the Kingdom of heaven, a necessary component is people who not only *do* the right things, but think and feel the right ways.

The opposite of a pure heart is a defiled heart, and it is sin that defiles your heart. Hatred, lust, greed, deceitfulness – these are the sins which defile your heart. You can come to RUF, you can go to church, you can be the nicest person around – but if your heart is not pure, you will not see God. Psalm 24 gives us some perspective on this. Verses 3 to 5 read,

Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?
Or who may stand in His holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, Nor sworn deceitfully.
He shall receive blessing from the LORD,
And righteousness from the God of his salvation.

God is holy. That means He is morally perfect and untainted by any wrongdoing. All He does and thinks is pure perfection, and He will not tolerate any impurity. If you wish to be with God, you must be pure, too – all the way down into the deepest recesses of your heart. This will profoundly affect how you live. Think about the movies you watch. Do they encourage pure thoughts? Or do they incite greedy or

lustful thoughts? What about the people you hang out with, the music you hear, or the things you see on the internet or on TV? It is not my place to regulate what you do, but let's be honest – some things around us do not encourage purity. In fact, they blatantly encourage impurity. These are things you must remove from your life. You decide. What will help you become pure in heart?

Do you wish to be part of the Kingdom of heaven? Do you expect to see God? Do you hope to live a blessed life? Then you had better be pure in heart. It's an absolute requirement.

Blessed are the Peacemakers

And now Jesus hikes the stakes. Not only is it necessary to be merciful to others, even the obnoxious and troublesome – Jesus expects us also to bring peace into troubled situations. Peacemaking is not natural. We are more inclined to be contentious, especially when things don't go our way. Think of the recent problems with road rage, flaming, and domestic violence. All these problems arise in people who would rather fight than seek peace – and the reason they fight is to get their own way. They are unmerciful and impure in heart, so they pursue their own interests at all costs.

But God's people will not only be at peace, they will also intervene to make peace in conflict situations. Why is this? Scripture says it's because God is the author of peace. This is why Jesus came to earth – to make peace between us and God. And now He expects us to imitate Him in making peace with others. 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 says,

Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

You see, God sent Jesus to overcome the separation between us and God, and now He calls us to bring others to God as well. Furthermore, in Ephesians 2:13-18 Paul tells us that God specifically overcame the hostility between Jews and Gentiles.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, *that is*, the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man *from* the two, *thus* making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

So you see, making peace between God and man, and between man and man is central to Jesus' mission and to God's character. This is why those who make peace are called sons of God. They are so much like God, they appear to bear a family resemblance.

Do you want God for your Father? Well, do you act like His child? Are you a peacemaker? Or are you a troublemaker? Probably many of us are more likely to be conflict avoiders. When trouble breaks out, we look for peace elsewhere. But God calls you to make peace in the midst of trouble. In so doing, you will be blessed.

Blessed are the Persecuted

And now, the blessing nobody wants. What do we seek in this life? Comfort, security, happiness – certainly not persecution. So why should Jesus demand that His followers seek persecution? Isn't his "blessing" masochistic? No, for Jesus does *not* demand, or even suggest that we *seek* persecution. Rather,

He is speaking to the reality, the certainty of persecution.

The point here is that Jesus most emphatically did *not* come to rescue you from the problems of this life, or simply to save your soul. Jesus came to establish a Kingdom, the Kingdom of heaven. The problem is, there were already kingdoms in place, and they had no intention of giving way to a rival. Remember what happened when Jesus was a baby? King Herod heard that a king had been born, so he killed all the babies in Jesus' town. Remember the first thing that happened after Jesus was baptized into the ministry? Satan immediately attacked Him. Folks, there is a war on, a spiritual war, and you must decide which side you will take. This is not a pleasant thought, and I wish I could tell you it's not so, but I would be lying to you, and I would be leading you into terrible danger if I did so. Now the followers of Jesus are not hostile toward unbelievers. Far from it! No, we are meek, merciful, and we seek peace with all people. But we know that there are those who will not accept peace with those who love Jesus. Persecution is not a vague possibility – it is a certainty.

We are unlikely to be arrested and tortured for our faith here in America, but believers in China and Sudan face these, and worse, treatments every day. For us, persecution is likely to take the form of social pressure and embarrassment. Take the case of Scott, a Lehigh graduate student in the history department. Scott is a Christian, and his faith influenced how he approached his studies. Many in his department resented this, and Scott was a lone voice in class discussions. He felt isolated and mistreated, but he hung on. He was willing to endure this hardship in order to be true to His Savior. Seamas faces similar situations in his English classes. Ronnie faced a very difficult situation a couple of years ago. He felt that being in a fraternity was detrimental to his spiritual life, so he deplored. That was a hard thing to do. He lost friends over it. But the persecution was worth it because he is after a better community – the Kingdom of heaven.

Ronnie and Scott and others here tonight are real heroes for standing firm for Christ. Cassie Bernal is a real hero because she stood firm to the end. She endured persecution all the way to death. You, too, can be a hero of the faith if you will stand with Jesus in the face of unfriendliness, ridicule, and opposition.

Badge of Authenticity

The beatitudes opened with the entrance requirement for the Kingdom of heaven – poverty of spirit. If you would join Jesus in His Kingdom, you must admit that you, on your own, have nothing to offer. You are by nature sinful, but Christ forgives you when you admit it – and He admits you into His Kingdom. Now He closes the beatitudes with the badge of authenticity. How can you know for sure you are in Jesus' Kingdom? What is the key to separating Jesus' true followers from imposters? It's whether they are persecuted by Jesus' enemies. Think about it, if you are friends with those who hate Jesus, whose side are you on? And don't think you can try to straddle the fence. Those who try to be on both sides of a conflict please no one. They get hit from both sides.

Here is the bottom line. The Kingdom of heaven is dangerous now, but it is eternally secure. The world is temporarily secure, but eternally doomed. Which side will you take? Are you willing to endure some persecution now for eternal blessing? Or are you not sure? Are you thinking that you want to follow Jesus, but are not sure you have what it takes? You cannot follow both Jesus and the world, but if you are afraid you do not have the will power to resist temptation, there is good news! Jesus takes you as you are and *makes* you able to follow Him. You must take Him as He is. Don't try to follow an imaginary Jesus, one of your own imagination. Jesus is building a Kingdom, a blessed, eternal Kingdom, and He calls you now to join Him. If you do, He will make you into someone like the beatitudes describe. He will make you into a hero of the faith.

Jesus is the great heart surgeon. He will give you the ability to follow Him if you ask Him. All you have to do is ask, and He never turns away those who ask. This is the gospel!

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September 10, 2002