

Blessed are God's People
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Matthew 5:1-12
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Often times, we are tempted to receive today's text, Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, as a set of instructions to individual believers. But Jesus, through the writer of Matthew, was speaking to a group of believers: Jesus' first disciples, the Matthean community of believers, and even our own little congregation of believers. As we reflect on today's text, I invite you to consider that its words are addressing how Sardis Baptist Church, as a collective body, should embrace the good news of God's inbreaking realm.

There's a second thing I want to ask you to keep in mind. Nearly every Sunday, we say the Lord's Prayer in unison, and that prayer includes the line, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Another way we can rephrase that request or longing is: "Let God's movement, God's presence, God's world be made manifest right now." It's hard to emphasize just how radical a statement it is to claim God's system over Caesar's. I think today's passage offers us depth as to why God's movement is so radical.

Let's set the scene. Jesus, in the prophetic tradition of Moses, makes his way up the mountain to teach the disciples and other bystanders. The image reminds us of Moses' receiving and giving of Torah to the Israelites, and for the ancient reader, asserts the authority of Jesus' teachings. This is a source we can trust. This is one who speaks with God's authority.

Jesus makes nine declarative statements about how the God movement is going to operate. These are not conditional statements. I think that's important, especially in a campaign year. We hear candidates on TV right now who say, "If or when I'm elected, I'll work to make this happen." Jesus isn't talking about what can be, Jesus is talking about what is, and what will be. Jesus doesn't talk about what he, as an individual is gonna do, he's talking about what God's gonna do.

We begin with four statements that address a person or community's setting or standing in the world. Jesus reminds his audience, and you and me as well, of who, and how, and what God's gonna be now, and in the future.

Blessed are communities who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Yes, Jesus' claim includes those in poverty, but this isn't a statement about poverty. This is a statement about dependence. Blessed, vital, happy, thriving in God's world, are those who don't assume their resources are what give them value. Blessed are those who understand their dependence on God. Because in the end, it's not gonna be machinations of material wealth or artificial power that derive wholeness and value, it's going to be the love and grace of our Creator.

Blessed are communities who mourn, for they will be comforted. Yes, Jesus' claim includes those who grieve tragic things, but this isn't a statement about tangible grief. This is a statement about longing. God resides with, God blesses, God empowers those who mourn the fact that the current world is failing to represent, to mimic, to be a manifestation of what God intends.

Blessed are communities who are meek, for they will inherit the earth. Yes, Jesus loves mousey people and shy people, too, but this isn't a statement about timidity. This is a statement about humility. Ours is not a community which exists to empower the God movement, ours is a community which exists because of the grace, compassion, and power of God. It's not that we've got God, it's that God's got us. And when God's got us, we've got more than enough.

Blessed are communities who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Yes, this statement includes those who need bread, and those who long for a world where people give bread freely, but this isn't just a statement about hunger and righteousness. God's world is one where we lord our righteousness over others, but rather, it's one where our rightful actions invite, embrace, and embolden the love and inclusion of all people. God's is a world where neighbor includes both friend and foe. And that's the kind of community that soothes our hunger and quenches our thirst.

Jesus shifts his lecture to five concluding statements about how God's communities should act in pursuing lives of discipleship. These aren't a checklist

for success, nor are they a litmus test for righteousness. They speak to how those who live in the setting of God's presence, respond in faith.

Blessed are the communities who are merciful, for they will receive mercy. Have not each of us, in some way, felt less than, felt excluded, felt vulnerable? Caesar's world tells us that we aren't good enough; shames and demotes us for our inadequacies. God's world says we are enough, welcomes us, just as we are. Communities who mimic God's mercy also receive and thrive in the abundance of God's mercy.

Blessed are communities who are pure in heart, for they will see God. How often we can get distracted from our purpose, from our calling, from our true selves. Caesar's world forces communities into the urgency of single moments rather than the integrity of lasting truths and realities. What is our core? What is our heart? What is our purpose? We are God's, even in seasons when the world is messy, and busy, and traumatic. Communities who follow their heart, even in seasons of distress, will recognize the presence of God, and see God working in the present.

Blessed are peacemaking communities for they will be called children of God. Caesar's world wants us to confuse order and domination with peace. And if we're honest with ourselves, most of our peacemaking ventures, both individually and collectively, are designed to maintain a status quo, or offer the least amount of resistance and disruption, or appease the ones who are most prone to violence or combativeness. The world God is bringing about has no regard for tired and predictable measures of faulty peace. God is our source of peace, and God's peace is realized when all are allowed to live into their potential and value as God's children.

Blessed are communities who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Peace isn't peace if it's an exercise in force or dominance. Likewise, righteousness isn't righteousness if it's exercised for an agenda. Caesar's world keeps trying to tell us that what we do should be based on what it can get us in Caesar's world. What does the Lord require of us? To do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. And why? Because we are God's people. And when we act as God requires, we will always have enough.

Blessed are communities who are reviled and persecuted and slandered on account of me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. God's movement is countercultural, y'all! The powers and principalities will never be happy with a threat to their status. They'll try hard to tell you what they can provide is enough-er than what God has to offer. But how a great a reward, for those folks whose dependence on God offers an independence from the fleeting, sordid, decaying, emptiness of Caesar's lure. Rejoice and be glad, for a kingdom exists, and will exist forever, that transcends our wildest imagination of traditional kingdoms.

Okay, so I know that's a lot. As a matter of fact, we could spend a whole semester dissecting this text. So... what I want to do is leave you with a few compact thoughts.

Clarence Jordan once prayed, "Lord, help us to not get so tangled up."

I think what Jesus is saying to us today, is that the Caesars of this world seem to tangle things up pretty good. They take a world that was meant to be equitable and abundant for all and turn it into a world that's only equitable and abundant for the very few. In pursuit of this hoarded abundance, those who are marginalized are made poor, are made to mourn, are made meek, are made hungry. And yet still, they offer mercy, they remain pure at heart, they work for peace, they endure persecution, all because they understand the longevity and presence of God.

Sardis Baptist Church, if we're gonna be the kind of community God desires us to be, we've got to stop getting so tangled up in Caesar's world.

Caesar's world wants us to read this passage and label ourselves. Caesar wants us to twist and contort ourselves in false social constructions. Caesar wants our identity to be something artificial instead of authentic. What's our identity? Who are we? Well, I don't think we're poor, and I don't think we're in mourning, and I don't think we're meek, and I don't think we're hungry and thirsty.

And I don't think we're white, or black, or male, or female, or transgender, or straight, or gay, rich or poor, or Republican or Democrat, or citizen, or immigrant, or refugee, or whatever other social construction the powers that be can invent.

That's not an identity. That's not a fitting description of the divine substance in each of us.

I think we're simply God's. I know we're God's.

Sardis Baptist Church, if we're gonna be the people Christ calls us to be; if we're gonna we're live into the blessedness and happiness God freely offers us; we have stop choosing to live in kingdoms contorted and maligned by Caesar's falsehood, and start choosing to live in a kingdom wholly constructed in God's truth.

God loves us. God is our source. God gives us our value. God longs for God's world to once more be God' world. And God longs for each of us to be part of such a world.

Blessed are God's people, those who work for God's world, for there is always enough.

Friends may it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.