

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 5:7-10
“What Following Jesus Is Like”

February 1, 2015
(4th Sunday After Epiphany)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIIB1: MATTHEW 5:7-10
"WHAT FOLLOWING JESUS IS LIKE"

4:23-25 The Kingdom's Healing Precedes The Demands Of Sermon On The Mount: Jesus First Heals. No Requirement/Confession Before Healing

Kingdom Preview = Power To Make Right (Mt. 8-9), 9:35

²³And he went about all Galilee, TEACHING in their synagogues and PREACHING the gospel of the kingdom and HEALING every disease and every infirmity among the people. ²⁴So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. ²⁵And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. ¹Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. ²And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: (Ex. 19:3, 24:16-17, Dt. 9:9,18:15)

Promise Of Disciples' Reward (Now & Later)

Who Is In The Kingdom? Those Who Empty & Fill; Jesus Speaks/Acts For God!

IIIB1: 5:3-10 THE WAY OF THE KINGDOM: EMPTYING & FOLLOWING GOD'S RULE IN JESUS. 13:16-17, Kingdom Is Near, Is.61:1-11

How To Live After Discipleship/Healing Begins? Indicative = What's It's Like

1) vv.3-6 Focus On God: Passive Way Of Emptying (36 Words), 2) vv.7-10 Focus On Others: Active Way Of Following (36 Words).

Blessing (Makarism)= Congratulations + Audience + Reason

Present Tense (1,8); Future (2-7), 8 Blessings: 3rd Plural

<i>Pi</i>		(vv. 3, 10 Verb to be)			
v.3	(1) "Blessed are /	(Is. 61:1-3, Exiles)	v.10	(8) Blessed are/	Assumes 2 Ages, Kingdom Meets Resistance
<i>ptochoi</i>	the poor <i>in spirit</i> (inner life before God),	(Jam. 2:5, Lk. 4:17-18)		those who are persecuted	for righteousness sake 5:11
	for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	(Beggars, needy before God)		for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	I Pt. 2:20, 3:14

Blessings 5-8 = No Lk. //

		(vv.4, 9 Future Divine Passive)			
v.4	(2) "Blessed are/	(Is. 61:2-3, 11:4)	v.9	(7) Blessed are/	(Prov. 10:10) v. Zealots
<i>penthountes</i>	those who mourn,	(See this world clearly)		the peacemakers,	(Hos.1:10; Mt.5:23-24,17:24)
	for they shall be comforted.	(Grief over sin, evil)		for they shall be called sons of God	(Is. 9:5-7, v. Rome: violence)

Dt. 14:1, Likeness

		(vv. 5, 8 Future Active With Object)			
v.5	(3) "Blessed are/	(Is. 61:1, Ps. 37:11)	v.8	(6) Blessed are/	1:23, 15:1-9. Single-minded Loyalty
<i>praeis</i>	the meek,	(Powerless/ Dependent)		the pure (clean) in heart,	(Ps. 24:3-6, 73:1, James 4:8)
	for they shall inherit the earth (land)	(11:29, Gentle Honesty)		for they shall see God.	(Ps. 51:10, 86:11, Rev. 22:4)

5-7: Horizontal, We Take Initiative

		(vv. 6, 7 Future Divine Passive)			
v.6	(4) "Blessed are/	(Is. 61:1 Ps. 107:5-9)	v.7	(5) Blessed are/	(Ps. 37:21, Prov. 14:21, 17:5)
<i>peinontes</i>	those who hunger and thirst	(God's will, Amos 8:11)		the merciful,	(Hos.6:6, James 2:13, Mic. 6:8)
	for righteousness , for they shall be satisfied.	(Craving for God)		for they shall obtain mercy.	No. 4, 8 Righteousness

5:43-48, Compassion Is An Overflow

The Poor, Plaintive, Powerless, Those Who Pine For Righteousness Beatitudes Are Performative: They Enact Reality, Kingdom Reality Is Now (is) And Future (shall be)

What It's Like To Belong To God's People Awaiting The End, Out Of Step With This World

Vertical, Horizontal Loves //Mt. 22:34-40

vv.3-6 Path Of Emptying Into Deep Desire For God.

- 1) v.3 Poor in Spirit (No riches, real need)
- 2) v.4 Mourn (Loss, grief, pain at what is against God)
- 3) v.5 Meek (Loss of power, status)
- 4) v.6 Crave righteousness (Physical desire for God)

vv.7-10 Path Of Identity With Christ

- 8) v.10 Persecuted For Goodness (Cross of Christ, confront evil)
- 7) v.9 Peacemakers (Reconciled to God, to one another)
- 6) v.8 Pure in heart (Eyes to see the hidden God everywhere)
- 5) v.7 Merciful (Wise and liberating love, not giving others what they deserve)

The Beatitudes Correlate With The Three Classical Stages Of Mystical Prayer: 1) Purgation/Emptying (1-4), 2) Illumination (Implied) 3) Union/Filling (5-8)

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 5:7-10

Much of the technical material was covered in last week's treatment, but a review is in order. The eight blessings that open the Sermon on the Mount fall into two parallel panels (1. vv.3-6 // 2. vv.7-10), the first having to do with the disciple's vertical relationship to God, the second with the disciple's horizontal relationship to others. To love God and the neighbor as the self is the center of Jesus' teaching (22:34-40). The inclusion is *for theirs is the kingdom of God* (v.3c//v.10c), and the phrase *for righteousness* stands at the end of blessings 4 and 8. The promised rewards are both the present *is* (vv.3, 10) and the future *shall be* (vv. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). Appetizers now, the full banquet later. The healing of so many from so many ailments (4:23-24) is an indicator such powers and outcomes are not just reserved for the age to come but operative in the present through the Spirit-filled Jesus. God the Father is not an distant absentee landlord, and the world is open to God's shaping power; the universe is porous to divine love and wonder.

The first four blessings are a downward path whereby the self is emptied (1-3) into pure desire for God (4). In the terms of mystical prayer this is known as *purgation*. The four disciples (4:18-22) who accompanied Jesus on his first tour through the villages of Galilee (4:23-25) see what no prophet had seen. They have ringside seats on what it means for God through Jesus and in the Spirit to take authority at ground level. Jesus is a mighty healer and exorcist, and the crowds come to receive his Messianic benefactions. No one is disappointed. But, when he assumes the posture of a rabbi- which is to sit for teaching- a challenging word is heard about the new reality. To be his follower is to live within an *upside down kingdom* where what the world rejects is highly valued. To know God through Jesus is to know you are *poor in spirit* with nothing on your ledger, and yet the riches of Jesus are already on display in his person, his kingdom announcement, and the signs that follow it. To feel deeply the pain of our own sin and betrayal, and to see the world through the vision of Jesus, is to *mourn* and *grieve* the current state of affairs. Is this blessing? Yes, because it is God's truth and a prelude. The one who heals disease also cures our illusions. The *meek* are not the *weak* but those who patiently wait for God to lead; they are not pushy because they are unimpressed with merely human initiative. To be hungry and thirsty for what only God can give is to have our appetites rightly directed. With Jesus the disciples are seen to be spiritually broke, complicit in the world's problems, learning about true power, and developing new appetites for right relationships and God's intervention. It is a journey downward against the grain of the culture.

But the path does not stop here; in fact, it reverses course. Between blessings 4 and 5 mystics insert the grace of *illumination* that follows *purgation*. The next move is *union* and *filling*; that this is a dynamic process is indicated by the layering of blessings 5-8. In a world of *tit-for-tat* calculations, disciples reflect God's mercy to others out of the knowledge it is theirs now and waiting for them at the end. What we receive, we give. Mercy is aid and forgiveness; it does not collect every debt and gives beyond what's deserved; it sets others free. To *see God*, even in this morally ambiguous world, is the next gift (v.8), and it comes to the *pure in heart*, i.e. those whose motive is to love God and all that God loves. The cleaner the center of the self (the heart), the clearer is sight. To see God in all, and particularly in Jesus, is its perfection. Richard of Chichester prayed, "O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother, May I know Thee more clearly, Love Thee more dearly, Follow Thee more nearly." To bring peace to conflicted situations is the seventh blessing (v.9). To be a peacemaker is to be fearless and to make sure God's perspective is well represented in new, creative solutions. Because we walk in peace, we bring it to others. But the path of filling and union is not naive; it stands against the world's current administration and draws fire (v.10). These are the kind of people Jesus builds. Help precedes demand; Jesus embodies all he teaches. The eight blessings are not added on, just a description of what happens to those who follow him.

JESUS AND HIS TENSIONS WITH OUR WORLD AND WHAT IT VALUES

Jesus' Kingdom Values = The De-Tox And Re-fill Path Of Disciples/Learners	The Values Of Our World Under Current Management = Programming Of Our Culture	Slogan/Song
1. <i>poor in spirit</i> before God	be self-confident, competent, self-reliant	Sinatra, "I Did It My Way"
2. <i>mourn</i> over sin and our world, a broken heart.	be pleasure-seeking, hedonistic, emotion driven, focus on "the beautiful people"	Farrell Williams, "Happy"
3. <i>meek</i> understanding of power, impressed with God	be proud, powerful, important, intimidating	Win at all costs. Nice guys finish last
4. <i>hunger and thirst for righteousness,</i> a keen appetite for God	be satisfied, "well adjusted," stay practical	"Go along to get along," You can't make a difference, so why try?
5. <i>merciful</i> to others because I have received mercy from God	be demanding, what have you done for me lately? "take care of themselves"	Western Karma: "Everyone gets what they deserve in life"
6. <i>pure in heart,</i> love God and neighbors as we love the self. Innocence and wisdom kiss.	"adult," "sophisticated," "broad-minded," "to each his own," "whatever floats your boat"	Read <i>Fifty Shades Of Grey</i> "I have right to my fun." Moral relativism and narcissistic hedonism.
7. <i>peacemakers</i> who carry peace with them as a gift	be competitive, aggressive, "me-first," a winner/loser mindset prevails	It's not my business! Why bother? Avoid conflict!
8. <i>persecuted because of righteousness sake,</i> combines truth and courage	be flexible, "don't rock the boat," "let others do it," don't stand for anything	"We Shall (Not) Overcome!" Retreat into private welfare. Avoid truth/justice issues.

Expanded from Lawrence Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary* (Wheaton, ILL: Victor, 1987), 541.

WHAT FOLLOWING JESUS IS LIKE

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”

Kindness that goes out the front gate returns through the back door.

M A T T H E W 5 : 7

If our grand American experiment has a Creed, it’s surely the loaded sentence that opens the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence:

”We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹

That’s quite a mouthful of common sense philosophy with a bit of creation theology added in service of three endowments from which none should be separated, at least not in these United States of America: *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*. The first two are hotly debated. If the God sets the bounds of human life as natural conception and natural death, then fifty million abortions since 1973 show how flexible we’ve become when the right-to-life of the helpless conflicts with the moral Liberty some adults claim from the second right. And when my Liberty- and even license- conflicts with your right to live, guess who loses? What we seem to agree on, and are constantly adjusting in law and culture, is the third- *the pursuit of happiness*, which is not *a right to be happy*. Pleasant emotions as a national priority! What an unstable and unsound political idea. And when I contrast our national aspirations with the hopes of followers of Jesus, I rewrite the sentence as follows:

”We hold these truths to be biblically-grounded, that all men and women are created in God’s image, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Gifts, that among these are Life, Faith in Jesus Christ, and the pursuit of Holiness, of which happiness is an occasional pleasant byproduct to be enjoyed but not pursued.”

¹ www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.

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The interesting thing is that we know quite a bit about happiness because it's been a hot topic of research for several decades now. Some of the findings are:

“... that we are not very good at predicting how happy or unhappy something will make us. Given time, survivors of tragedies and traumas report themselves nearly as happy as they were before, and people who win the lottery or achieve lifelong dreams don't see any long-term increase in happiness. Annoyances like noise or chronic pain bring down happiness more than you'd think, and having friends or an extra hour of sleep every night can raise it dramatically.”² A certain amount of money matters for needs to be met, but beyond that happiness increases level off.³ Quality relationship are a high predictor- especially long term, and overall happiness is a *u-shaped curve*; people are generally happiest in youth and retirement and less so in middle age with age 47 or so being some sort of tipping point for happiness in later life.⁴

Fascinating stuff. An hour or so on the internet will update you on decades of careful research- as it did me, and if feeling happy is a priority- as it is for many in our feeling driven culture- you may want to make some adjustments sooner rather than later. But I don't recommend the notion that you have a right to be happy or

² Drake Bennett, “*Perfectly Happy*,” boston.com, May 10, 2009. Other articles include Holly J. Morris, "Happiness Explained," *U.S. News & World Report* (9-03-01); Marilyn Elias, "Psychologists now know what makes people happy," *USA Today* (12-9-02); “The Geography of Happiness: Where Americans Are Happiest And Why” www.fastcoexist.com/3039442/the-geography-of-happiness-where-americans-are-happiest-and-why; Joshua Wolf Shenk, “What Makes Us Happy,” *Atlantic* (June 2009); Arthur C. Brooks, “A Formula for Happiness,” *The New York Times Sunday Review*, Dec. 14, 2013. Treatments by Christians scholars include J.P. Moreland & Claus Issler, *The Lost Virtue Of Happiness: Discovering The Disciplines Of The Good Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006); Ellen Charry, *God And The Art Of Happiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); Brent Strawn, editor, *The Bible And The Pursuit Of Happiness* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³ Katie Simmons, “When it comes to happiness, money matters,” www.PEWRESEARCH.ORG.AUTHOR/KSIMONS .

⁴ “Summary of recent happiness research,” Social Capital Blog, socialcapital.wordpress.com/2010/10/27/summary-of-recent-happiness-research.

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even that it be a major pursuit, and that's because I think there's something deeper and richer Jesus' offers in his company and with his companions.⁵

Because I'm in the God-and-people business, I spend lots of time listening to all sorts of folk talk about their lives and beliefs. Sometimes they share a story with me and then either whine or gush, "But Pastor Phil, I just want to be happy. Is that too much to ask?" The drama is breathtaking. "I just want to be happy." Sounds like the chorus of a Barry Manilow song. Lights off in the arena, lighters blazing, everyone swaying to the music, "I just want to be happy," as if the universe was listening and obligated to deliver to the call of harmonic convergence!

My reply? "As a matter of fact it is too much to ask, because when it comes, it's a byproduct of something else. You're aiming at the wrong thing." They look confused, as if I've just turned their world upside down, which I have if happiness has been life's goal and the implicit contract God is supposed to honor in order to get to be their God. "If you don't make me happy, I will just go and find another God, or else I will be mad with you all my days." In their case, too much time has been spent with the worst of pop-psychology, not enough time with the Bible and the saints, who are God's happy friends. And when I ask, "Tell me, now, would you rather be happy or blessed?" they look bewildered. But that distinction is a key to understanding how our modern obsession with good feelings differs from God's offer of blessing in following Jesus with others. Don't we believe what we sing? "Trust and obey, for there's no other way, *to be happy in Jesus*, but to trust and obey."⁶ To trust and obey Jesus is blessing, and sometimes even happiness as a surprise.

Some say *happiness* and *blessing* are synonyms;⁷ I do not. Blessing, according to Jesus, is more substantial. Happiness is an umbrella, blessing a shelter. Blessing is a full embrace, happiness a glance and a smile. The longing for happiness can only be satisfied by God's blessing. I am blessed; there are many times I am not happy.

⁵ See the prescient last essay of C.S. Lewis, "We Have No 'Right to Happiness,'" *Saturday Evening Post* (December 11, 1963).

⁶ *The U.M. Hymnal*, No. 467.

⁷ Some of the more colloquial translations substitute *Happy are...* for the more correct but less familiar *Blessed are....* A personal psychological or emotional state is thus substituted for the fruits of a divine relationship; this is not progress!

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Happiness can never be had directly, at least not for long. Aim at it, and you will miss it. Happiness, especially in its more highly concentrated forms of joy and bliss, even divine ecstasy, is always a byproduct. It comes as a gift of something else, something worthy of your best attentions. When you aim at the right things, happiness will often come and join you as a companion, but if you aim at the wrong things, happiness is concealed in an endless game of hide-and-seek. Think addiction. To seek happiness apart from God is guaranteed frustration. Life is designed, as one man said, according to the following rule: “Heaven takes care that no man secures happiness by crime.”⁸ It is against the grain of the universe.

You cannot make yourself happy. Trying harder is only more effort; trying something different is diversion; trying something better is an improvement. But happiness will not be had by greater effort or more diversions or trading up. When you grab at happiness, it slips through the fingers. Happiness is elusive. It cannot be greeted face to face; it always comes up from behind and taps you on the shoulder. Perhaps a few quotes from wise guides will help us at this point:

St. Augustine wrote in the fifth century as Rome was crumbling, “Happiness consists in the attainment of our desires, and of having only right desires.” Clement of Alexandria agreed that happiness is more about our character than our circumstances, “Happiness,” he wrote, “is the practice of the virtues.” C.S. Lewis said, “God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.” After a career of counseling missionaries, David Augsburger observed, “Happy persons seldom think of happiness. They are too busy losing themselves in the meaningful service of others.” Robert Louis Stephenson agrees, “To forget oneself is to be happy.”⁹

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Jesus had quite a lot to say about blessing. According to Matthew, he composed a catalog of eight blessings to open his greatest single teaching session. It is important not to separate the beatitudes from the One who gave them; they are first of all

⁸ Martin H. Mauser, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2001), 158.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 158-159.

expressions of Jesus' own life with God. He was the one who radically dependent on heaven for all he did; Jesus was the one who grieved and mourned over what sin and evil did to God's world and came to do something about it; he was the one who was strong enough in God to be gentle and meek with people; he was the one who more than anyone craved with his deepest appetites to see God's will come to pass. He said as much in John 4, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work."¹⁰ Jesus lived the first four blessings, but for us they are a difficult downward journey. We are impressed with riches, spiritual and otherwise; we avoid the pain of grief whenever possible; we like power because it makes things happen, and we quickly satisfy our cravings with whatever's at hand.

Jesus is inviting us into his life with the Father and the Spirit, and it is against the grain of this world under current management. Remember, this is the one they hung on a tree; it was easier to do away with him and get back to running the world than deal with his challenge. In Jesus God puts the world on notice that management is changing; a takeover is ahead. Resurrection means that in the end Jesus wins; only what is lined up with him will survive into the new age. All the good desires God created in us will eventually be satisfied: the blessed shall be comforted, shall inherit the land, shall obtain mercy, shall see God, shall be called sons and daughters God. We were made for more; one day it shall all be ours.

The beatitudes are not timeless principles for happy living. They are not self-help and positive thinking. They are a revelation into the person of Jesus and what can be expected to happen to all who follow him as apprentices. To separate them from him is like cut flowers; they look pretty for a time, then wilt because they are separated from the source of life. This teaching grows out of the fertile soil of Jesus' own life. And the first four, which we covered last week, are anything but the yellow brick road to some spiritual land of Oz. They are a painful, downward path where the focus is not on making you and your world happier and better and more manageable but on the encounter between you and the holy love of God. From spiritual poverty down to craving God. The natural self, which is presently full of the wrong stuff, must be emptied and hollowed out.

Jesus' plans to deliver us into the hands of the God from whom we have been so skillfully hiding. We are busted, stripped, humbled, and exposed; we are absolutely undone. To be honest, the things Jesus describes are anything but blessed

¹⁰ John 4:23.

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in themselves. When facing God there is first the shock of spiritual poverty: *poor in spirit*; then comes weeping over the mess of this world and the dark pit of desires that is your own heart: *blessed are those who mourn*; then the experience of standing powerless and unable to make anything happen: *blessed are the meek*; and finally a craving for God that is as sharp as the ache of an empty belly and as demanding as dehydration: *blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...*” What is blessed about the path is that it refocuses life on God. Whatever God uses to introduce you to spiritual poverty and spiritual hunger is a blessing, but we have been trained to run from it since our culture’s dream is self-fulfillment on another path.

There is no *ought* here, no obligation; Jesus is not making demands but describing what happens to those who do business with God. When you are hungry for God, you’re on the verge of something life changing. You have been disconnected from the world’s priorities, you’ve been de-toxed. The God who offers blessedness can only do so by restructuring our desires. Before we can become agents of the kingdom, which is the subject of the second column of four blessings, we must be dealt with. We are never done with the downward path to emptiness and the upward way of new desires and capacities. Emptying and filling is the way, and we may spiral over these eight markers many times. To turn them into eight distinct steps like grades in school is to forget they describe an unfolding, dynamic relationship which God controls and which we are always beginners.

This is the starting place for being a follower, not the good works of mercy or peacemaking, not the vision of God or heroic suffering *for righteousness sake*, but coming to terms with where I stand with Jesus at my side. Layer by layer, deeper and deeper, the whole process not under our control but under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit whose job it is to use Scripture and sacrament and the circumstances of life to write this material within. You may be in mourning today; that is a good thing. Right beside you sits someone the windows of whose heart have been scrubbed so clean they see God with fascination and childlike delight; that is also a good thing. It appears you live in different worlds, but you are both within the force field of the same kingdom and its individual operations. Our unity is not that we all have the same experience or that we are all at the same place; our unity is in Jesus who has the right to do with us as he will. We are not in charge; he is, and we belong to him.

We must also not separate the beatitudes from the story in which Matthew places them. A few disciples, four thus far, have said Yes to the challenge to tag along and observe Jesus announce and display the kingdom of God. Simon, Andrew,

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James and John. Jesus healed multitudes without asking for religious credentials or requiring up-front confession of sins. He saw what the Father wanted because he was utterly pure in heart; he was merciful without regard to people's moral status with the result that he is the peacemaker without peer; he brings God's *shalom*, God's peace, God's comprehensive restoration and suffered for it. What he passed out no one could earn or purchase. Could they respond? Yes. Could they buy it or package it or control it or brand it? No. Jesus is free from human manipulation.

This is not myth; this is remembered history which would have been easy enough to dismiss or contradict had it not been true. Even Jesus enemies admitted it, though they sometimes attributed his powers to the Evil One. We call him Savior; others branded him a sorcerer. Divine power was his, and in that presence blindness melted away, leprosy vanished, twisted limbs straightened, seizures stopped, various pains were removed, spiritual squatters thrown out and life set right. The kingdom of God is what life looks like when God takes back rule, and in Jesus we get a sneak preview which is really good news. The point being that the two columns of four beatitudes have a setting in the unfolding of Jesus' larger agenda of training disciples. We do not separate them from his person as wisdom-in-general, nor do we separate them from the larger kingdom agenda. To isolate them is to misread them. It's not about trying hard to be poor in spirit or go out and make people hate me so I can claim persecuted status. How foolish is that? But to follow him I must be changed, and this is simply what the change looks like; it's a dynamic process of emptying and filling with God in control. I have a seat, but not the driver's. Jesus drives, and when I ask, "Where are we headed?" he smiles, "Why not enjoy the ride?"

Verse 7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Here the new filling begins, and it is interesting where it starts. The drawing you sometimes feel to others is an effect of God's grace. It's compassion. Your eyes are being opened, and it is so easy to shut them. But if you say an inward Yes, there comes the possibility of mercy, and the marvelous thing is that once mercy is shown, love increases and observation sharpens. Mercy is compassion turned to action, heart joined to hands and help. It is to see the other as not so different from myself and to extend to them what I have received from God.

Mercy is not giving people what they deserve. Mercy goes beyond justice. It looks beyond the fault to the need. Mercy does not wait for the other to come groveling but reaches out, making it easy for the other to receive the gift. Mercy is as close as we can get to the heart of God. As John Chrysostom preached, "Mercy

imitates God and disappoints Satan.”¹¹ Mercy is a fresh breath of heaven’s air.

My own awareness of the power of mercy has been expanded by a prayer I sometimes pray twenty a day, often aloud when no one is around but more often in my heart in the midst of other duties. It’s from the Orthodox tradition and is known as *The Jesus Prayer*: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Some want to label it an empty repetition, a mindless mantra; it is anything but. It’s the way things are and a need that never goes away. Jesus is always who he is- Lord, Messiah, Son of God- and I am always who I am, a sinner in need of mercy. The grace of the thing is that after years of soaking in this sentence prayer it has moved down past the narrow sliver of waking consciousness and taken root in my heart where it functions as a sort of spiritual drag line, pulling the crud of sin and self-deception to the surface to be evacuated through confession and repentance. When I wake at night I hear this prayer bubbling out of my heart. My heart’s desire is to be full of mercy. I want to give away what I need. And when I stand high on principle or am tempted to read someone the riot act, a question arises, “What would it mean to show mercy, to open a door for the kingdom to shine through?” The first evidence of the kingdom in terms of our relationships is mercy. Only the humbled can show mercy, and only the needy can receive it. Mercy changes us all.

The story of told of a politician who, after receiving the proofs of a portrait, barked at the photographer, “This picture doesn’t do me justice.”

The photographer looked up, “Sir, with a face like yours, you don’t need justice; you need mercy!”¹² They stared at each other in silence. Photographers, you see, have an extraordinarily clear eye, and so does our God.

Here’s how to spot the real thing. Mercy is not strained, not forced; it’s not given with a grudge or I.O.U., not delivered with a barb or air of superiority, because if it is, then mercy is mixed with something less pure. Mercy creates a rich memory but no unpleasant aftertaste; it is sweet through and through. Mercy is the first sight of the outskirts of the heavenly city. And, if properly received, it becomes the virtue of gratitude. Not to let mercy do its work in me is one way to define sin. Mercy is not a policy or a procedure; it’s an invitation to do business with God in giving and

¹¹ Manser, *Quotations*, 247.

¹² Michael Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 240.

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receiving. A world with no mercy is a world with no future and everyone locked up in the chains of the past. If you pride yourself on being exacting and demanding, one who is always upholding standards and monitoring others for conformity as if you were God’s little police force, beware. You are in for a fresh engagement with the first four beatitudes. You need to be emptied again, and that too is mercy.

Verse 8, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” When the Bible speaks about the heart, it is not an anatomy lesson but an image for the deep self. Below the surface waves of emotion, deeper than the will can reach, underneath the subtleties of intellect, subterranean to ingrained habits, down in the control center where decisions are made: that is the heart where the image of God is stamped. A pure heart is a simple heart that wills one thing.¹³ A pure heart is undivided.¹⁴ A pure heart is a smudged mirror rubbed clear by God’s inward cleansing. And the fact that Jesus places it on the path of disciples right after mercy is a promise he can bring it about. Real change starts at the deepest part of who we are.

At any time where we have caught a glimpse of God and knew it was so: a reflection of his glory in nature, divine mystery in the face of another, beauty that took our breath away, a sermon that lifted the veil, an act of mercy, a touch of healing, in that moment you experienced purity of heart in some degree. It’s not as foreign as we imagine. That we are believers is a guarantee that we have *seen* at least something that drew us towards Jesus. The promise here is of more of the same. Each layer of inward cleansing opens new sight. We see more of God and all things increasingly in the light of God. Your inward eye and capacity for discernment is becoming more perceptive. Where others notice nothing, you see God. C.S. Lewis wrote:

“We are afraid,” he wrote, “that heaven is a bribe, and that if we make it our goal we shall no longer be disinterested. It is not so. Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to.”¹⁵

Verse 9, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” In Romans Paul gives us his version of the seventh and clarifies that

¹³ Remember Kierkegaard’s dictum, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.”

¹⁴ James 4:8.

¹⁵ In his *The Problem of Pain* (PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 5:8).

peacemaking is communal; it reduces friction and builds up social capital, "So then," he wrote, "let us pursue the things which make for peace *and the building up of one another.*"¹⁶

There are some things peacemaking is not. It's not the avoidance of issues. The name for avoidance is *peace-faking*, and if carried to extremes means a person would rather do themselves in than face conflict. Peace-fakers run from conflict to the point they run from life itself. The logical end is suicide. At the other extreme is what Ken Sande calls *peace-breaking*; it is pushy and demanding, even violent, which is why the logical end of *peace-breaking* is murder.¹⁷ Peace-breakers run towards conflict and create more. They are spiritual arsonists instead of fire fighters.

In the middle range, between avoidance on the one end and aggression on the other is the fragile middle. Not faking peace or breaking peace but *making peace*. When a person knows God through Jesus Christ, when they are eager to receive and give mercy, and because they see more clearly than others because of a heart in process of purification, they become a gift to the world around them. With an objectivity that is wise, they listen to both sides, break logjams, distribute guilt and blame with accuracy, and open up new creative paths. They are not afraid to enter conflicts because they have been sent there. They are God's mediators.

Only those at peace with God and with themselves have anything worth exporting to a world in conflict. Their presence calms agitation. People intuitively trust them because they are trust-worthy. After listening, the really good ones can state your case and emotional investment even better than you can. There is a name for people who do the demanding work of peace-making; we call them diplomats and ambassadors, pastors and evangelists. Peace-fakers we call cowards; peace-breakers we call thugs, but peace-makers are God's kids because they bear the family likeness. They heal broken marriages and close old, infected wounds. They turn old grudges into new opportunities. They thaw cold hearts and give wiggle room. So close are they to God's desires that he calls them what he calls the angels, *sons of God*.

Verse 10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for

¹⁶ 14:19.

¹⁷ For the treatment of the three categories, see Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004).

theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus was no naive dreamer, no starry-eyed fool. He begins the Sermon on the Mount with a warning that discipleship is costly, at the beginning poverty of spirit, but particularly near the end of the path where the shadow of the cross looms large. Beyond the pressing issue of making peace between individuals are larger conflicts. Real issues of social justice and communal evil. And if you address them in the power of the gospel, you will be misunderstood. You will be hated and made fun of. The powers will rise against you. If you always chose the right, which is Jesus and his kingdom, and if in his company you face the obstacles, first within yourself and then in the world around you, it will get hard, not because you desire martyrdom but because that is the nature of the thing you are up against. This world is resistant to God’s priorities and has an arsenal of defenses.

There is a letter that from time to time draws my attention. It was written from one preacher to others. Like many of Paul’s epistles, it was written from inside jail, a Birmingham jail. And if only black churches had a vote, it might be added as a footnote to the New Testament canon. It was not written just any old time of year but Easter weekend 1963, a turbulent time when peace-makers were few, peace-breakers many, and when most of our Methodist churches sat in the guilty silence of peace-fakery, hoping it would all go away and stop disturbing our privileged peace.

His flaws we will leave to the historians, but his pen that day was pure prophecy; the candle of his intellect and rhetoric was lit by the Holy Spirit. I read the last two paragraphs as a son of the South, in the hope that one day we will see his words fulfilled, not just in legal matters but in merciful, pure, and peacemaking hearts who will join the biblical prophets in their quest for personal and social righteousness. Listen to the content and the poetry:

“One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering, and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: "My feets is tired, but my soul is at rest." They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting

in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience' sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence....

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty. Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.”¹⁸

Five years later King lived into the eighth beatitude, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Where are you called to speak up? Where are you called to stand out? Where are you called to carry mercy and purity of heart and peacemaking against the forces that conspire every day to make human life less than human? Will you follow Jesus that far? Our second baptismal vows sums up our common call, “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” **I do.**¹⁹

CONCLUSION

This is what following Jesus looks like. I cannot make it easy or different. I cannot make it popular. I dare not turn it to good suggestions or simple steps to happiness. I only ask you to listen to his words and pray, “Lord Jesus, take me deeper into your companionship and keep my feet on the narrow way that leads to life. This is blessing enough for me.” Then watch what happens.

¹⁸ Found in William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 262.

¹⁹ *The U.M. Hymnal*, page 34.
