

Have you ever read or heard this list of blessings and thought something to yourself like: “I wonder if I am pure enough in heart?” Or maybe you’ve thought: “I really should get more involved in some kind of peace-movement.” Maybe you’ve pondered: “Does God really want me to be persecuted before I can get into heaven?” Here’s the one that stuck with me for years: “Why would anyone chose to be meek? Seems like the meek mostly get walked all over.”

For years, I heard this passage, Matthew’s “Beatitudes,” as Jesus laying out the *conditions* for God’s blessing. And there’s good reason to be inspired by this passage to be merciful, to be pure in heart, to be peacemakers, and to endure persecution for the sake of righteousness. But there is something else here.

You see, Jesus is announcing something truly astonishing that we will miss if we take this passage to be a list of proper behaviors. Jesus is not saying: “If you try to live like this, God will bless you.” Jesus is saying: “God is blessing you, and this is what God’s heaven is like.” In other words, people living under these conditions are already blessed. Blessed *before* we act in these ways, not because we do.

That’s why some of these statements seem a little off. Jesus is not describing how the world works. He is not describing typical human behavior. The meek don’t seem to be inheriting much of anything and the merciful don’t seem to receive much mercy. Instead, the arrogant and powerful appear to control most of the planet’s resources, and they may only appreciate the meek and merciful because they are easier to take advantage of.

People who hunger and thirst for justice *are* sometimes filled, but entire generations of other people crave justice all the way to the grave. People who mourn *are* sometimes comforted, but far more often people try to talk them out of their feelings, to fix them or to say things that lower their own anxiety. With a little probing, these blessings start to seem a bit like Mark Twain’s definition of a “classic book,” which, Twain said, was any book that people praise but don’t read. Are these just qualities that we admire but don’t practice? What is Jesus up to?

The answer defies our ability to accept it. Jesus is declaring something marvelous in these blessings; something that is *happening*, not something that is *coming*. This passage has more to say about the presence of God’s heaven than it does about how to live life. Retired Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright said that the beatitudes are “good news, not good advice.”

You see, rather than setting up conditions for blessing, Jesus is simply but truly *blessing* his listeners. Jesus refers to God's heaven at the beginning of the passage and again at the end. That's always a cue in early Hebrew writing that there is something essential between them. Some 21<sup>st</sup> c. Christians assume that God intends to grant these blessings in some otherworldly heaven where good people go after death. You can see why people make that assumption. After all, Jesus does say there is great reward "in heaven" for those who are falsely accused and reviled for being loyal to Christ.

But Jesus was a first century Palestinian Jew. And Matthew's Gospel portrays the most Jewish version of Jesus in all scripture, so his understanding of heaven makes a difference. The "heaven" that Matthew's Jesus is proclaiming is God's space, where the fullest expression of God's creation exists even now. Our limited human experience is of an earthly reality that interacts with God's perfect transcendent reality. Our hope and the reason for our practice is that, in God's time, we will be made fully aware of the unity of heaven and earth that God has joined together for ever.

What Matthew's Jesus is announcing is stunning: "*This is the kingdom of heaven.*" Our current reality is *already included* in God's transcendent reality and God's perfect heaven is not waiting somewhere else. We catch glimmers of that shining city from time to time, but someday the true unity that eludes us will be fully revealed.

The beatitudes are not entrance requirements for the kingdom of heaven. They describe the nature of God's transcendent heaven, now here at hand. God is actively pouring out love through the Holy Spirit – actively spilling heaven into us and around us and over us right now. Peace, purity of heart, gentleness, loving-kindness and mercy define God's heaven.

We imagine these to be the acts and attitudes that gain entrance to heaven, but in truth, they are evidence of the heaven already planted deep within us and among us. God esteems us – *blesses* us – even as the world does not, and the more we realize that, the more we act accordingly.

This is the radical good news that Jesus is preaching: that because God has *already* blessed, God's presence is available to our awareness. To be "poor in spirit" means to recognize that our lives depend on God and to trust that God yearns for what is life-affirming and unifying in all people. Blessed, then, the poor in spirit. Because God has showered heaven upon creation, heaven belongs to those who trust God for their lives and who hope, even when life seems hopeless.

Because God already and always loves and adores us, God's presence strengthens by being beside us when we mourn. Now, while I maintain that God

is perhaps most intimately and personally present in our grief over a loved one, Matthew's Jesus is referring *here* to a more prophetic form of mourning. Jesus is reminding his Jewish audience that because God loves them, God is with them in their lament over the destruction of the Temple.

In other words, God is with everyone who cries out against human actions that destroy or damage paths for God's in-flowing heaven. God's loving presence is the *reason* they protest – the *motivation* for speaking out, not the result.

The same can be said for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; they are blessed with right relationship to God and to God's creation. Being awake to that relationship stimulates people to yearn for and act on behalf of right relationship for others – for righteousness – to enable God's justice.

Because we are blessed – *valued* in the eyes of God – we are kind and forgiving. "Meek," in the Biblical sense has nothing to do with being timid. The meek are those who act with kindness and forgiveness. They manifest the values of God's heaven that God has blessed them with.

The good news in the Beatitudes is that God loves and adores everything in creation. God pours life and love and joy out for all people, and everything that God has made. And the more aware we become of God's yearning, the more our actions shine heaven through us and around us.

The radical nature of this passage is hard for some to drink in. Some have a hard time trusting that God wants to bless any of us in the first place. Others can only imagine God as a stern and demanding judge, and so it seems out of character for God to bless us without requiring some list of virtuous behavior. A few are confident that their version of virtue has earned them a spot in heaven and that anyone who doesn't fit the constraints of *their* perspective are destined for a spot in a slightly warmer after-life.

None of that is how scripture portrays God, especially in the life and ministry of Jesus, but these are images that parts of the church have taught and people have a hard time letting go. What scripture *does* portray resonate in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is the outpouring of God's love for others.

You see, none of us can keep God's heaven for ourselves. We can only hold God's heaven long enough to give it away, even if people despise us for it. The more we give heaven away, the more of heaven there is to give. And one day, when all creation is awake to the love of God filling them, there will be only the radiance of pure joy for all God's creatures.

You have already been made holy. So be kind. If you want to see God's mercy, be merciful to someone else and watch God's mercy pass through you to another. If you want to see God's peace, make peace with people around you.

Are you seeking purity of heart? Get in touch with who God created you to be – that deepest blessing that God has already granted – and be in integrity with that.

And if you still find it hard to accept God’s unconditional blessing – if you are struggling to trust God’s grace to influence your actions – let Micah’s words be your guide: “All that God requires of you, O mortal, is to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.”

Do all three in harmony with each other and you will find yourself tasting heaven along the way. And whether you are aware of pouring it out or drinking it in, you will be letting drops of Paradise fall behind you as you walk with God through God’s blessed creation.

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Works consulted:

Wright, N. T. *Matthew for Everyone: Chapters 1-15*. London: SPCK, 2004.