

Our Blessed Call

February 02, 2020

Matthew 5:1-12

Today's reading is the Beatitudes, the beginning to Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount," whereby Jesus blesses various groups of people. However, the groups he says are blessed (the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the persecuted), often these are not the groups we think of when we think of those who are "blessed." When we hear someone referred to as "blessed," generally the "blessed" person is one of wealth, power, and/or talent. The players in the Super Bowl today are "blessed" because of their incredible strength and skills. The CEOs of the companies that can pay the hefty \$120K per second fee for a commercial during the Super Bowl are blessed with incredible wealth. Movie and music stars are blessed not only with talent and wealth, but fame as well. We often hear the phrase "Children are a blessing" because they make us smile and laugh at their innocence and ignorance. Fame, fortune, incredible skills, happiness, these are the things that the common person thinks of when they hear the word "blessed." However, this is not the picture painted by Jesus in the Beatitudes.

The first group Jesus addresses (vv. 3-5) are those that seem to be in need of God's loving embrace the most. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." "Blessed are those who mourn." "Blessed are the meek." Here, we have Jesus addressing the crowd and saying that those who are blessed are actually the underdogs, the marginalized. Regardless of which of these groups we pick to analyze in-depth, there is an inherent lack of boastfulness to all of them. That is to say, they do not flaunt their poverty, their grief, their meekness. Consider for a moment the words of Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God." (1 Cor. 18:26-29) The rich, the happy, those with power, they risk being boastful. The meek, the grieving, the impoverished, they do not boast of their situation. However, because of their situation, they are more apt to be reliant upon God for providing, of having their needs met, and that is just what we are told. The poor in spirit, *theirs* is the Kingdom of Heaven. The mourning will find comfort, and the meek (i.e. those willing to stand up to opposition), *they* shall inherit the earth. These are groups that, if they boast, they boast not because of what they already have, but because of what the Lord our God has provided for them. They boast not *to* the Lord, but rather, *in* the Lord. Jesus doesn't stop here, though.

The next group Jesus mentions (vv. 6-9) are blessings towards those who best-embodiment the qualities of a Child of God. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." "Blessed are the merciful." "Blessed are the pure in heart." "Blessed are the peacemakers." To better understand what Jesus is driving at here, it's best to look at it with Micah 6:8 in mind. Micah 6:8 reads, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" What is a merciful person or one who is pure in heart except someone who loves kindness? If someone is a peacemaker, they can be assumed to do justice. Those who thirst and hunger for righteousness, they presumably walk humbly with their God. These middle verses reflect for us instructions

given in the Old Testament on what God expects from us, instructions on how to be “fruit of the kingdom” as Matthew later calls them. So, thus far, Jesus has blessed not only those for whom God provides but those who best exhibit what it is to be a Child of God.

The last group Jesus blesses are those who are persecuted either “because of righteousness” or “on [Jesus’] account.” Here, Jesus is talking about the potential for adverse effects for doing what the previous group do. What’s important to note is, at the end of v. 12, he mentions how this too was the case of the prophets. They preached the Word of God to people who didn’t always want to hear it and in some cases went to great lengths to silence that Word. However, this is meant as a reassurance that the reward for suffering such persecution will “be great in Heaven.” This is a reassurance that, though they might not get positive reactions, they nonetheless are doing the right thing and therefore can find peace in that fact alone.

In short then, with these 12 verses, Jesus blesses those that rely upon God, do as God commands, and potentially suffer persecution for doing so. In the end then, what we can come to realize is that these blessings are not just blessings. These blessings also serve as a “call to action” of sorts. As the Church, we are called upon to do more than remind the downtrodden of what the Bible says, but rather are called to do something about it. We are called to be the peacemakers, to be pure in heart and merciful, and to seek after righteousness. We are called not to fear persecution for doing what is right. As one theologian writes, “Nine beatitudes describe the nature and character of true disciples,” and later, “The Beatitudes become a gauge for character that elicits kingdom-like fruit, and well, many of us might just be missing the mark.” In other words, these are meant not just as reassurances for us in our times of need, but as a “call to arms” (for lack of a better phrase) for when we are able to pull others up off the ground. If we are not making peace, this is a call to make peace; to set aside differences and celebrate commonalities. If we are not walking humbly with our God, if we are boastful and not reliant upon God, this is a call to pause for a moment and consider the reasoning behind our need to boast. If we are not lovers of kindness, this is a call to think about what we gain from judging others and bringing others low. In all truth, ours is a call not just to be blessed, but to be a blessing unto others. Therefore, we all must ask ourselves, here and now: Do we have the strength to accept such a blessed call?