

“Blessed are the sat upon, spat upon, ratted on”

Matthew 5:1-12

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Read Matthew 4:23-5:12

Many, maybe you, live with an unsettling awareness of God.

We get very busy and push him aside for periods of time but like a distinct memory of some past significant event, he incessantly creeps back into our thoughts.

We can't seem to shake him.

Most of us in this room can't live unaware of God.

We might live in defiance of him, in fear of him, in truce with him but not unaware of him.

Something keeps bringing him back to mind.

Most of us were reared in religion – we were taught there is a God and we accepted that.

We were encouraged to comply with what is “right” and threatened to avoid the “wrong”.

We got the distinct impression that if we understood the right things (believed them) **and** stayed within certain limits of behavior we could reasonably expect God to reward that with a measure of prosperity and safety in this life and the next.

And if we made any serious mistakes along the way, we could just hope that God was as forgiving as we had heard.

Most of us decided not to take any chances with this and so after sowing some wild oats in youth, we settled down into a modicum of morality and religious decorum.

But there's a nagging suspicion that there is more to God than what we know.

There's a vague, unarticulated, thought that **maybe** we are supposed to be connected to God in ways **we** don't experience.

So we have an uneasy truce with God – a bargain of sorts:
 We'll do our best to keep our end of the bargain and we'll expect him to keep his.

But the bargain doesn't seem to hold.

Over 20 years, your parents divorced, you didn't get into the college you had set your heart on, your fiancée backed out of the relationship, your job disappeared in a recession, your wife got chronically ill, your teen-aged daughter got pregnant, and your father died after a terrible sickness.

Have I overstated it?

I don't think so, maybe the **specifics** are different but over 10, 20 or 40 years your story reads much the same.

And in the midst of all that seems to happen **TO** you, you know the people **you've** hurt and the wrong **you've** done and you vacillate between **fearing** you have caused all this to **blaming** God for being so unfair.

This description may not only be true of many 21st century American churchgoers but if you were a **first** century Jew, this may well describe your life and religious experience as well.

Then one day you hear about a man holding meetings outside of town.

Matthew 3:1-2

"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

He's claiming that something is available.

He's saying that we will be able to experience God very differently than we do now.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Somehow, the "world" of God, (that we think of as "out there", "removed", "remote", "disconnected from our daily reality") is going to invade our personal 1st century "world" of the here and now.

In light of what life is really like, we are intrigued by the idea but largely dismiss it as the ranting of a naïve fundamentalist.

Not long after, however, we hear of another man preaching the same theme.

Matthew 4:17

“From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

But this time there was a difference.

This time the teaching was accompanied by some incredible actions.

It would have been easy to dismiss it as exaggerated propaganda if you and others hadn’t been there.

Matthew 4:23-25

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom...”

He said the “good news” was that God’s presence and power had invaded our world and was available to us, individually and corporately – life could be different.

Not only was he preaching “good news” but he went everywhere – “healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds ...followed him.

Among them were people we knew.

A neighbor’s mother paralyzed for years;

A friend’s child with seizures;

The lunatic that lived on the edge of town;

Your own brother healed when no one else could help.

And all the time, the clear implication was that this was just the tip of the iceberg – that this is, in part, what it means when the “world” of God – “the kingdom of heaven”, “the kingdom of God” - invades our “world.”

You can't help but remember what you had learned in Sabbath school from the writings of the Prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 61:1-3

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD...has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives... to comfort all who mourn...

The old prophet had said that a man would come doing this very thing.

Could this be him?

Is it possible?

Can God truly affect my world in these real ways?

Can the "kingdom of heaven", the "kingdom of God" – the presence, the rule and the power of God actually touch my life?

Jesus once prayed, "Father, Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus' desire was that we would experience, here and now, **some** of God's kingdom world, God's will.

He desires that just as God lovingly rules in heaven so we would trust his loving rule in our lives here and now.

This Jesus was very convincing.

The Scribes and the Pharisees **talked** about God, **but this man acted!**

However, not long after, something happened that stretched credibility to the breaking point.

This man Jesus read the very same text from the Prophet Isaiah that I've already referred to but listen to what he added:

Luke 4:16ff "(Jesus) went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷ The

scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

LK 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the
Lord's favor."

LK 4:20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, "**Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**"

Jesus claimed that the "kingdom of heaven", the presence and power of God to truly affect and change our lives, **is available through him.**

A true connection with God, (not a God who is removed and disconnected, not a God who is largely irrelevant to my life) but a present relationship with God is made possible through him.

This stretched credibility, as I said, because we knew where this man lived – in Nazareth.

We knew his mother and brothers.

He's just like any one of us. – well not quite!

Later when John the Baptist, that ranting desert preacher who first said the "kingdom of heaven is near", was in prison, he sent a message to Jesus asking:

Matthew 11:3-5

"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."

By his very actions, this Jesus proved **HE WAS AND IS** the link between God's world ("The kingdom of heaven") and our world.

It is true that the **full** power of God's kingdom was yet to be experienced but it had, in part, invaded the present.

We were experiencing already a taste of what was yet to come.

And we experienced it through this man Jesus.

This is a most important issue.

The real presence of God in our lives is not made possible by holding some beliefs in our heads but **by embracing a person** in our hearts.

Later on many of the people would want the "goodies" of healing and food that Jesus brought but they wouldn't want him.

But we were beginning to see that the "kingdom of heaven", the presence and power and rule of God in life was available not just by the teachings of this man but **through this man** – only as we embraced him.

We became his disciples, we followed him, we engaged him, we trusted him, we obeyed him – we embraced him.

But most amazing of all was that this "kingdom" presence and power of God, this "God in the flesh" Jesus was available to all of us.

Our old ASSUMPTIONS were disintegrating fast.

We had thought that the religious leaders were the most likely to have access to God.

We assumed that affluence and good health were indications of God's approval AND that the financially struggling were obviously under God's disapproval.

We thought God was reached best by those who were the most religious – those who knew the most about God.

But here God seemed to be touching the least, the lowest, the slowest.

He didn't come first to the "most-likely-to-succeed" of Jerusalem; he started first among the blue-collar or no-collar residents of the back-water towns of Galilee – the unlikely.

In fact prior to the Sermon on the Mount I see Matthew telling a lot about the unlikely.

- There's an unlikely genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, in the first chapter where Matthew includes only five women – everyone "unlikely" – the hopelessly immoral, foreign or young.
- Mary, the mother of Jesus, a most unlikely choice.
- Matthew points out that Jesus would be from an unlikely town - Nazareth of which it would be said, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46)
- He would select unlikely disciples – fisherman rather than learned leaders of Israel.
- And he would minister mostly to the most unlikely people – the sick, the lame, the desperate living in the boondocks.

"A curious law of reversal seems to apply in matters of faith. The modern world honors intelligence, good looks, confidence, and sophistication. God apparently does not. To accomplish his work God often relies on simple, uneducated people who don't know any better than to trust him..." Yancey p39 [Reaching for the Invisible God](#)

Matthew then records that Jesus went up on the side of a hill.

A huge crowd gathered around him as he sat down and began to speak.

He points to the very people he has just healed and says in essence, the kingdom belongs to people like you – spiritual and social zeros.

Crowding around Jesus were the least likely to succeed.

No one would look to this crowd for spiritual leadership in religion.

And Jesus looked at that crowd and congratulated them!

I think we would have had to see his face to know how excited he was.

A herald from the king couldn't have announced anything with more authority, sincerity and finality than he did.

"You are blessed!" he said. You are blessed, you are blessed, you are blessed!

There are at least two fundamentally different ways of understanding the word "blessed" that Jesus uses.

A very common way is to understand "blessed" to indicate that you will be blessed, you will find favor with God, you will benefit, **if you do these things.**

But Jesus did not say "blessed are the poor in spirit" **because** they are poor in spirit.

The parallel passage in Luke 6 demonstrates this.

LK 6:20 "Looking at his disciples, he said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

LK 6:21 Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh."

When we read that we don't say we should attempt to become poor, or hungry, or weep, as conditions for being Christian.

Likewise Jesus in Matthew is not describing an attitude we should acquire but is simply describing what is – they **are** poor, poor in spirit, etc – the least likely.

And on them the kingdom of heaven has come – Jesus is here!
Jesus isn't here asking anyone to become poor, meek or merciful or to mourn or hunger and thirst – he is simply describing what they already know themselves to be.

The other way of understanding the word “blessed” is as a synonym of “Congratulations!” – You are “blessed”!

“Congratulations” you who are poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is yours.

The Beatitudes paint a picture of what people **already are without God** **AND** by joyous contrast **what they are and enjoy by God’s grace.**

These words are not lessons to be learned.

They are not actions to be taken.

They are not even attitudes to which we must aspire.

We can’t take what Jesus announces as the good news of the kingdom and turn it into bad news about us.

I have heard people say, and I think I have said, when we read the Beatitudes we should be depressed at how far short we fall in what God expects of us.

I now think that is the exact opposite of what Jesus was declaring – he says “congratulations”.

The Kingdom of heaven, the presence and rule of God has invaded your personal world – Jesus is here and He makes all the difference.

We are tempted today to take the Beatitudes apart and handle each one separately as if it stood alone, independent of the others.

But Jesus’ congratulations are most powerful when all the Beatitudes are heard together just as they were preached by him.

That is why I have chosen to preach **one** sermon on the Beatitudes rather than a sermon on each.

5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Perhaps the most appropriate synonym for the “poor in spirit” is “desperate”... those standing before God, stripped of all self-sufficiency, self-security, and self-righteousness.” (Guelich 98)

“Theirs is the kingdom of heaven” – God’s promise of life-transforming and death-transforming intervention in our lives is announced.

Who are the poor in spirit, the desperate?

“The flunk-outs, the drop-outs, and burned-outs. The broke and broken. The drug-heads and the divorced. The HIV-positive and herpes-ridden. The brain-damaged, the incurably ill. The barren and the pregnant too-many-times or at the wrong time.

The overemployed, the underemployed, the unemployed. The unemployable. The swindled, the shoved aside, the replaced...

The lonely, the incompetent, the stupid. The emotionally starved or emotionally dead.”

Even the moral disasters will be received by God as they come to rely on Jesus, count on him. Murderers and child-molesters. The brutal and bigoted. Drug lords and pornographers. War criminals and sadists. Terrorists. The perverted and the filthy and the filthy rich... Sometimes I feel I don’t really want the kingdom to be open to such people. But it is. That is the heart of God. “God’s grubby people”.

Willard 123-5

“Congratulations, you who are so desperate you will accept my favor, God’s presence and gracious rule have come to your life.”

5:4 Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

“Mourn” is like Luke’s “weeping ones” - those whose mates have deserted them, the paralyzed by rejection, the grief-stricken over the death of a spouse or child, or those who seem to have had life stripped from them by financial disaster – To them Jesus comes.

It includes those who live with remorse for the things they’ve done – they grieve over parts of their past.

“For they shall be comforted” - knowing how totally unable we are to change the situation, we stand helpless and thus hopeless – then Jesus comes and offers himself and it opens up whole new possibilities.

She and her husband came in to see me very recently – She wept as she told about her life, the despicable things she has done – “beyond what you would believe” she told me.

She spoke of slowly believing that God accepts her, slowly accepting his forgiveness of her.

She is living today in the full awareness of her own sin (desperate and mourning) but increasingly aware of the Kingdom of heaven – God’s presence and love in her world.

Jesus says, “Congratulations you who grieve over how helpless and hopeless you are on your own, you who mourn the things you’ve done, God has invaded your life with real comfort which means strength for the present and hope for the future.

5:5 Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

“Meek” – This is a parallel to the first beatitude meaning virtually the same thing: Helpless, desperate, knowing they have nothing to offer or help. They expect nothing in life – knowing they don’t deserve anything.

“for they will inherit the earth” – Here the emphasis is on the future aspect of God’s kingdom rule – a day is coming when it will all be different – you will rule with Christ.

Jesus says, “Congratulations you who know you have nothing to offer, who know you have no rights, who are intimidated by life, who expect nothing from life, by God’s grace you will one day have it all.

5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

“Hungering and thirsting for righteousness” does not mean a strong desire for holy living but **a desperate desire for change** that God alone can bring.

Perhaps they have failed so badly that night and day they cringe before their own sin and inwardly scream to be made

pure. Maybe they have been severely wronged and long to see things made right – like parents who learn that the murderer of their child has been released from prison and is laughing at them. (Willard)

In this fourth beatitude Matthew has summarized the first three:

Those who are desperate for God to act since they know they have no ability to do so on their own.

They know they need God.

Jesus says, “Congratulations you who have an insatiable desire for things to be different, knowing it can’t go on the way it has, you will be satisfied, life will change – now in part and by God’s promise, fully in the future.

5:7 Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

“Merciful” One who has been taken to the end of his own rope, one who has seen how desperate he is, one who knows his own failings **and has seen that God will accept him**, cannot help but have a merciful attitude.

Jesus says, “Congratulations, you who know what it means to be forgiven, not because you deserve it but just because God loves you, and you find yourself thinking of others the same way – not judging them but forgiving them, you will be shown mercy in the coming day of judgment.

5:8 Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

“Pure in heart” has to do with honesty, transparency, no pretense, no mixed motives, no holding out to make a deal with God, total integrity.

Jesus says, “Congratulations, you who have no pretense about your condition, who stand openly, nakedly, honestly, transparently before God, seeking no deals, just grace, looking to him alone for any hope, you will see God – you will be fully accepted into his presence.

5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Jesus says, “Congratulations, you who have found peace with God in me, and just as with mercy so here, having found peace you act that way toward others – you will be called sons of God, you will have the closest possible relationship with God —his children.

5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus says, “Congratulations you who are belong to God and live in conflict with the world’s values and actions – you have a whole new perspective on life and as a result you live in tension with the world. This only proves what is true – the kingdom of heaven – God’s presence, rule and power are yours now and more fully in the future.

I really don’t believe the Beatitudes were written to challenge Christians to a greater or deeper religious commitment.

I don’t think they were written to show a non-Christian what he or she needed to do to become Christian.

They were written to those who already know they can’t do it on their own, those who already know they need God!

Jesus says, “CONGRATULATIONS” – GOD HAS COME TO YOU!

He has come to you in the person of Jesus.

He offers not a code of conduct, not a religion, but himself.

Where are you in life?

Still self-sufficient?

Or has life sufficiently beaten you up that you know how desperate you really are?

If you had been there when Jesus was physically here in this world how would you responded to him?

Would you have tried to justify your past actions?

Would you have tried to impress him with your status compared to others?

Or would you follow him, sit and listen to him,
accepting him, receiving him, trusting him – hearing
his “congratulations”?

**If he offered to hug you, what would be your body posture
– stiff, protective, not too close, gotta keep my balance?
OR would you lean into him and let him support you?**

The kingdom of heaven is near – God’s gracious invasion of your
world is as near as Jesus.

Lean into him today!