

“The Beatitudes,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 2/1/26

Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12

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

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

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

The Beatitudes of Jesus are many things. They are a sermon offered to guide people listening long ago. They are a description of behaviors and attitudes that Jesus declared as blessed. They are also a guide, a guide to happiness in the estimation of Jesus. The word “blessed” can also mean happiness. There are translations of the Bible in which we are told happy are the poor in spirit, happy are those who mourn, happy are the meek.

That might seem counterintuitive, particularly when we hear happy are those who mourn. These are contrarian sentences because they try to underscore that these qualities of human spirit are important, that they are sacred.

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

Hunger and thirst here are not literal. You are hungering for righteousness, for that which is right. Mercy is a gift, a gift given by someone able to offer it. Someone in power offering mercy to someone in need of it would in turn gain the favor of God when that powerful person requires mercy, as we all might require at the end of our days. For powerful people might be in the most need of mercy because power was already a gift given. If you hoard that gift without offering mercy to others, do not expect to receive mercy from others, including from God.

Pure in heart can be understood as simplicity. We are often challenged by the complexities of life and those can change our hearts for the worse. Suffering can make us hard-hearted. Adversity can make us cold and calculating. No one is going to protect me, so I have to protect myself, so watch out.

But as we shield ourselves from suffering, as we build up barriers against the troubles of the world, there is a cost. There are good people out in the world. There are kind souls offering of themselves. Cynicism might protect us in some ways, but it will also isolate us. It will isolate us from the people around us. And it will isolate us from God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Peacemakers are not those who impose or enforce peace. That is not peace but a command into silence. Peacemakers are themselves peaceful, offering themselves both as examples of peace

and as witnesses against violence. The voices raised against injustice and for righteousness. The bodies interposed between the persecuted and the oppressor.

Perhaps the most puzzling part of the Beatitudes is being blessed because you are persecuted. Few of us would seek out persecution. But it requires an assumption that you are being persecuted on account of Jesus. And let me be very clear – that is not being persecuted for being called a Christian. It is being persecuted for *following* Jesus, following the teachings and examples of Jesus, not rallying around a word only.

The word “Christian” can be little more than a name in practice. Does it imply identity or does it describe character? Is it what we declare ourselves to be or is it what someone else might recognize within us in response to our lives? The term “Christian” can be positive, without question. But if it is a word devoid of content, then calling oneself a Christian is meaningless.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The prophets were persecuted because they spoke out upon behalf of God. Prophets were rarely focused outside of the community of believers. I’ll say that again – prophets were rarely focused *outside* the community of believers. When prophets spoke on behalf of God, they were focused inward. They were telling the people what was wrong and, more often, telling the leaders what they were doing was wrong.

In our reading from Micah, “*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?*”

Micah was calling upon the people and their leaders to change, to repent. He was predicting the downfall of the kingdom. But his message was not aimed at the invading armies but at the people, at the kings and his court. To bring about justice, to offer kindness, and to practice humility.

The same could be said of the Beatitudes. They are meant to orient us onto the right pathway to God. In essence, this is how you can see God by clearing away the obstacles within yourself. In Micah’s time, people offered up lavish sacrifices to God as if that was what God was seeking rather than for them to be more like God.

I saw something this week, a short little video essay by a therapist who also happens to be autistic. Autism could make being a therapist rather challenging, as one of the characteristics of some forms of autism is having difficulty with social cues. You do not get sarcasm, you cannot read the room, you struggle interpreting what is meant rather than what was said.

The therapist was talking about ethics and how autistic people sometimes struggle with ethics. Not because they are not ethical people – in fact they are often extremely ethical. But because autistic folks do not take ethics for granted. They do not take specific ethical rules or ideas as given. They need to understand why one thing is ethical rather than some other form of behavior.

I recall years ago studying another psychologist’s work in which he called for radical honesty in everyday life. Absolute, brutal honesty not softened by social niceties. In hindsight, he might also have been on the autism spectrum.

Yes, that dress does make you look fat. No, I do not like the food that you prepared for me. Mark, that sermon of yours last Sunday was overly political or overly moralistic or overly something or other.

Is it unethical (or simply rude) to tell the truth? Maybe we shade the truth or focus on something we can say just short of honesty. That *color* looks great on you. That meal... it was a first for me. Mark, your sermon was quite...interesting.

We do these things, we engage in these little verbal dances, because we do not want to hurt people's feelings. We do not want to strain our relationships.

What is the underlying reason for an ethical rule? Someone outside our local ethical collaboration might come into our midst and not have the slightest idea why we are doing something a certain way.

Is it something like manners, like etiquette? Specific rules to be followed in certain situations? You take your hat off when you go indoors. Unless...unless you are a woman, unless it is a department store, unless you are Orthodox Jewish...

At a certain point, etiquette is the set of rules imposed by one social group to define the boundaries of that group. Can the same be said for ethics? We might distinguish ethics from etiquette as the difference between a good society and a polite society. And a good society might not be polite, and a polite society might well not be terribly good.

For example, blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Why? Why is that a rule to be followed? What is so great about being meek? Does meek mean *weak*? Does meek mean being *quiet* or being *obedient*?

The word used in the Bible is the Greek term *praus*, and it means mildness of disposition, gentleness of spirit. Mildness as opposed to harshness, gentleness of spirit as opposed to brutality. And yet, how would those seemingly positive qualities suggest that the meek would inherit the earth? All evidence seems to be to the contrary, that rather than those of gentle spirit controlling the earth, it will be those prone to violence, those accomplished at brutality.

One of the problems with interpreting the Bible is that we are taking ideas and guidance from one situation from a remote culture and long distant time and trying to use that now with an entirely different mindset and circumstances. When you tell someone to be meek in 21st century America, you might get a different reaction than someone in first century Judea. And yet, it may be the most necessary advice we could receive. And I mean, right now.

From the outside, Americans have a different reputation than inside, warranted or not. Americans are brash, they are loud, they are arrogant. Some of that is stereotype, but some of that has recently become a badge of honor. Being gentle of spirit is considered lowly. Being humble is considered weak. Be strong, be forceful, be in charge of everyone and everything.

Which makes me think back to blessedness and happiness. Jesus is saying these behaviors, these characteristics will lead us in that positive direction. But he was not talking about his followers overthrowing the Romans and becoming kings. He was not talking about them ruling over others. In fact, there is an ancient aspect of Christianity that stands in direct opposition to society. Christians as outsiders, Christians as living away at the margins.

You will see this throughout the centuries as some Christians react to other Christians' behavior. When Saint Francis called upon his followers to embrace radical poverty rather than the opulence of the church. When John and Charles Wesley advocated against the Anglican church's lack of care for the needs of the poor, leading in time to the breakaway Methodist tradition. When the Amish currently live away from most others in quiet enclaves of simple piety and low technology.

Each of those reactions is consistent with Christian teachings. And yet, many Christians do not embrace casting off worldly desires, dedicate themselves to the poor, or live simply or meekly. Many billions of Christians have placed themselves under one name and yet they live markedly different lives than suggested by Jesus and the prophets.

And I will note that the attitudes of Saint Francis and the Wesley brothers and the Amish are closer to the message of Jesus than the message most American Christians follow. Jesus wanted to teach people to be good and to live in harmony with others, even if his followers acted differently from others. And this is one of the reasons I struggle with the word "Christian" because it does not seem to mean what Jesus taught.

An Episcopal priest recently described the difference between patriotism and nationalism, and I thought it was helpful in marking this difference. He said, "Patriotism is love. It's gratitude. It's saying, 'I care about my country enough to tell the truth about it, to celebrate what's good and work to fix what's broken.'

"Nationalism, that's idolatry. It says my nation is the nation above critique, above others, God's favorite. And once you slap God's seal of approval on your own flag, congratulations, you have made your country a 'golden calf.'"

I agree with that assessment, and I would further note that this distinction can exist between calling oneself a follower of Jesus and calling oneself a Christian. A follower follows, they do what was taught, what they were asked to do and what they were asked not to do. Another word for follower is disciple and that implies discipline, it implies a sense of personal commitment to the teachings and a measure of rigor in follow through.

At some point the word "Christian" became devoid of moral and ethical content, at least in my estimation. You do not have to do, or not do, anything as long as you have gathered under that banner. As long as you have self-defined as Christian, there is nothing else to do. It is morally and ethically sufficient to be *called* a Christian without having to act in any particular way.

It is the same as idolatry because you are no longer worshipping or listening to God, you are worshipping an *identity*. Critiquing that identity is not acceptable. You are policing the boundaries between us and them, much like etiquette. You can say that about being Christian and you can say that about being American.

If those words only identify people but they have no moral or ethical content, they are worthless labels. Being an American should mean something beyond loyalty to a place. It should be a discipline of ideals, a dedication to democracy, a respect for all those nice sounding ideas that we were supposed to learn about in civics classes. But again, words should bear content. Saying you respect democracy requires doing things to protect democracy, not parroting back middle school platitudes while the world falls apart.

Years ago, I remember conservative critics of a certain Democratic president who were concerned that he was not a morally or ethically upstanding character. And at a certain point, I came to agree with them. I came to agree that someone elected to office should be expected to be a morally and ethically upright person. Not perfect by any means. Not sinless, for who in the world is sinless. But as a leader, *while* being a leader, he or she should be expected to do the right things and refrain from the wrong things.

Did that change? Did we somehow get to the point where we no longer care about the moral and ethical character of our leaders but instead use their power to achieve our personal or political interests? And nothing else matters. Nothing else matters because it is a brutal world out there and every man and woman should be for themselves.

That is exactly what Micah was trying to avert in his preaching. To do justly implies there is some version of justice. To love mercy, to love kindness, means that we know people need our help and our grace. To walk humbly with our God means that we are not always right or righteous. That our opinions are not the only ones that matter and that our desires are not the only important outlook.

And that same could be said for Jesus and the Beatitudes. That we should be gentle of spirit, merciful in our action, and dedicated to peace. That those who mourn should be comforted, those seeking justice should be supported, and those simple and pure of heart should be celebrated rather than cast aside.

The words we use should have meaning. And I have long felt that the word “Christian” has lost its meaning. It no longer suggests someone dedicated to following the life, lessons, and meaning of Jesus Christ. And yet I firmly believe that there should be ethical and moral content to the life of a Christian. Because as we have seen in the Bible, when there is no longer meaning to such words, trouble is coming.

When Micah called upon the people to repent their ways, it was because their way of living was leading them to destruction. When Jesus preached the Beatitudes from the mountainside, he was trying to save the people from the harsh world of Roman imperialism and the morally stagnant world of the Temple authorities. The prophets come to tell us that we are going down the wrong path, not to make us more ardent nationalists, not to make us more loyal citizens. They are here to save us, and they do so by telling us how we have been falling short of the mark. How we have been sinning.

We are called upon to return to inherent principles of ethics and morality taught by Jesus and the prophets. Not to thump our chests with pride, but to lower our heads in humility. To be peacemakers, not peace enforcers. To be pure and gentle spirits, not warrior wannabes. To embrace the lessons of Jesus Christ, not the desires of kings and emperors, dictators and the like.

There is nothing new about the moment we are in. There is nothing surprising about it. And the advice we must follow is as old as the Bible. To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Amen.