

Blessed – Matthew 5:1-12

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Here in Matthew 5, we've reached the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He's gathered with crowds on the mountaintop, and he expounds on lessons fitting for the crowd who had gathered there.

Who was this crowd? Well, these folks were the victims of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire benefited the ruling elites in multiple ways and imposed pervasive poverty, food insecurity, high stress, and widespread diseases on the majority poor.

These were the majority of people who sat and stood in his presence on this day, eager to hear a word of hope from this teacher who preached the reign of *God's* empire—an empire where the oppressed would not be forgotten but would be lifted up.

Jesus, in these previous chapters, had been commissioned as a divine saving presence. He confirmed his identity as God's Son through his baptism, he confirmed his commission by preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near." And he called his first disciples to leave their boats and follow him.

And now he sits on this mountain to expound on what this Godly empire, rather than Roman rule, would look like.

What's come to be called the Beatitudes make up the first part of the Sermon, a series of blessings Jesus exclaims in rapid succession.

There's nine of them here, and accordingly, the first four beatitudes (5:3-6) name the oppressive situations in which so

many of these people found themselves in at the hands of the Romans and in which God's empire is at work to reverse.

The first beatitude, for example, blesses "the poor in spirit," people who are materially poor and whose spirits are crushed by economic injustice, deprivation of resources, and few options.

These first four beatitudes declare divine favor on those who have been exploited in these ways. They promise divine reversals in both the present and the future.

The next five beatitudes (Matthew 5:7–12) name human actions needed that would express God's transforming work for a just world. They identify distinctive practices—doing mercy, being pure in heart, making peace—that further God's justice. These actions mark the identity of the community of Jesus' followers.

The Beatitudes therefore reflect the sad and tragic reality Jesus acknowledges exists for those in front of him. And it's also his call to those in his circle of influence to rise up in opposition to the oppressive forces suffocating so many.

We could sum up these nine as a description of who's blessed and who is called to be a blessing to others.

Today as we sit here, we are not in the same shoes as those oppressed by the Roman empire. With some exceptions maybe, we haven't been the victims of discrimination, haven't suffered from a lack of basic necessities, and haven't had our freedoms stripped of us. And so it might be difficult then to relate to those Jesus was speaking in front of on that mountaintop.

But we do know hardship; maybe not in the way these people did, but we know what it's like to face a future filled with fear and uncertainty. We know what it's like to be beaten down due to grief and loss. We know what it means to struggle to get

ahead financially perhaps. We know how it is to live amid broken relationships. We know disappointment, anxiety, and loneliness.

And so while these listeners in front of Jesus that day lived in a different era and suffered at the hands of empire in ways we will never know (most of us), we know what it means not to be in a good spot. And these Beatitudes are still for us.

In Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible titled *The Message*, this is how he translates these first four Beatitudes:

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and God's rule.

"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are — no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. God's food and drink is the best meal you'll ever eat.

Those words resonate with us as much today as they would've with that throng of people gazing at Jesus on that mountaintop. It's a message that says you're not forgotten, that there's a place for you, and that that place is one of refuge and meaning.

In other words, yes, you're blessed.

Then, we can be a blessing to others. In fact, Jesus in his last group of Beatitudes seems to imply in his teaching to the masses that the more we care for others amid their suffering, the more blessing we find for ourselves.

Check out how Eugene Peterson translates these last five Beatitudes:

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world — your mind and heart — put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.”

The more we bless others through our work at caring, getting our minds right, showing people how to work together and incurring persecution for our faith, the more we find ourselves being cared for and more in tune with the kingdom of God.

The people of God, even in the deepest pit of despair, are blessed. And then, it allows us to bless others.

Strangely, there’s joy in all this. There’s joy in our suffering and joy in helping somebody through their own suffering.

The Bible scholar William Barclay said this about this text:

“That joy which has its secret within itself, that joy which is serene and untouchable, and self-contained, that joy which is completely independent of all the chances and the changes of life. ... The beatitudes speak of that joy which seeks us through our pain, that joy which sorrow and loss, and pain and grief, are powerless to touch, that joy which shines through tears, and which nothing in life or death can take away ... the serene and untouchable joy which comes from walking forever in the company and in the presence of Jesus Christ.”

There's a joy amid our downtrodden-ness. And there's joy in coming alongside the downtrodden. Blessed and being a blessing.

Rabbi David Wolpe, in the Times of Israel a few years ago, asked the question: Why don't we bless one another?

He wrote, "At the end of Genesis and the end of the Torah, Jacob and Moses offer extended blessings. We take this in stride — after all, they are biblical titans, and obviously they have both the power and the disposition to bless. Why do we feel so shy then about blessing one another?

"It is not because we are inadequate. After all, when you bless someone you are a conduit, not a source. The blessing does not come from me, but through me. You need not be a perfect person (as if there were such a thing) to bless another person. I am passing on to you what is not mine without losing it myself, a candle igniting a second candle, none of them the source of fire.

"On Friday nights Jewish parents bless their children. Yet everyone can offer this boon to others; a blessing is a wish elevated by intangible power. May God bless you with the courage to offer blessings."

It's within us to be blessed, and it's within us to bless another. As Wolpe wrote, we're not the source of these blessings—it's God who extends them. We're simply the conduit—the conduit for God's shining on us and on somebody in our path.

Be blessed and be a blessing.