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Matthew 5:10-12a

*“Blessed are the Persecuted”*

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Over this past summer we've been looking at the beatitudes from Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. And today, we hear his final one, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Now I think for all of us here, in this country, it may be hard to relate to the word “persecuted” when referring to our Christian faith. No one is mistreated or jailed or physically harmed for practicing our religion. That's not the case though, for many Christians in countries in the Middle East or Africa or Asia. Who can forget the images of those Christians in Egypt back in 2015 who were paraded out before the entire world, and then beheaded. It's not publicized very much, but persecutions of Christians are one of the most serious violations of basic human rights in the world today. So we are indeed fortunate in this country. But that's not to say we don't suffer more subtle forms of persecution from those in our own culture. It's no secret that the unwritten rule is, “don't discuss religion” when we're out socially because someone might become offended. And the anti-Christian sentiment in the media is evident. When you watch a sporting event, the television catches every curse word, temper tantrum and fight that happens on the field, but they'll never show the players kneeling in their group prayer. And reference to, and certainly prayer to God, is effectively banned in schools, at graduations, and in public places. So let's look a little closer at this beatitude and what it might mean.

Now I think Jesus puts this beatitude last, after all the others, because he knew that if we faithfully adhered to all his previous beatitudes, we would be persecuted or maligned in one way or another. For if we follow the beatitudes, we will serve others, we will forgive others, we will turn the other cheek, we will put away our pridefulness. If we truly live out the righteousness expressed in the beatitudes – we will become an enigma to the culture, going against the norm. And we will be misunderstood, ridiculed, criticized. But, in our pursuit of righteousness, Jesus promises that we will be “blessed.” So let's review each of his beatitudes again, and listen with the intent of applying them to our lives.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. This beatitude is really about the virtue of humility. So let me restate it this way: “Blessed are those who are humble, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Now why is this so important to Jesus? Well, consider that every day we face a

world out there where battles of one sort or another, both big and small, are being fought. And our natural defensive mechanism is to protect and look out, first and foremost, for number one. We don't want to appear weak or vulnerable, so we allow our egos, our pridefulness... our natural spirit, so to speak, to take control of how we react. Which can bring out the very worst in us and in our attitude. And how can we ever truly love our neighbors if we allow our pride or arrogance to put up a wall of indifference between us. We can't. That's why Jesus is saying is that it is better to be poor in spirit. Because when we are poor in spirit, we act differently, we view the world differently, and we are better able to relate with what others... our neighbors... are going through and what they feel and what they need. We are better able to do God's work in the world. Being poor in spirit means we are rich in humility, which is a virtue that the Lord holds in the highest regard. We are to be imitators of Christ, who even described himself as being “gentle and humble in heart.”

Blessed are those that mourn, for they will be comforted. When we think of mourning, we often think of death, and certainly most of us have experienced the death of a loved one, and we know the pain it brings. But there are other times we mourn or weep, and suffer as well. Like when something is going wrong in our lives. Maybe it's a health concern, either ours or someone we dearly love. Maybe we have children or grandchildren who are struggling in some way, or going down the wrong path in life. Maybe our relationship with our spouse or partner isn't what it once was. Maybe there is a job situation that's causing us distress. Or maybe we're feeling depressed about something we've done or not done in the past. And many times what happens is that we respond with frustration, anger, even resentment. “Why God, did you let this happen? Why?” And when we have this attitude, there is no possible way to move toward healing, toward reconciliation, toward peace of heart, and especially toward Jesus' promise of comfort.

But, there is a second way to respond. With an attitude that opens us to receive God's comfort. Remember Jesus' invitation: “Come to me, all who are weary and heavily burdened. Take my yoke upon you and I will give you rest.” Can you feel the comfort in that promise. It's a comfort that leads us beyond our sorrow to a new attitude. An attitude in which we trust in God's strength and hope and love. And when we reach that point, then our weeping, our mourning, become a blessing because we say, “I give up trying to do it on my own, my way. I'm giving it all to God.” Because remember another of his promises: “I know the plans I have for you. Plans for good, not harm, plans to give you a future with hope.”

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Meekness, as Jesus describes it, means something very, very different from how the world views meekness. Meekness in biblical terms means caring, concern, consideration, gentleness, and a lack of contentiousness. It does not mean lack of moral character or strength, it does not mean weakness, or submission to injustice out of fear. Let's change this beatitude and think of Jesus saying, “Blessed are the caring, the concerned, the considerate, the gentle...” Sounds better already, doesn't it?

And do you know what else? Ironically, it takes strength, and a lot of it, to be meek the way Jesus describes. Webster's Dictionary definition for the word meek says, “enduring injury with patience and without resentment.” Now anyone who has sustained an injury, be it physical or emotional, is well aware that to truly endure it with patience and without resentment, to persevere in the face of pain and trial, is extremely difficult and takes an incredible amount of courage and strength. So the point Jesus is making is that being biblically meek actually means you are strong.

For consider – who really is stronger – the person who rants and raves when angered, or the person who exercises self-control and clear thinking. The person who has to tell you all the wonderful things he has done, or the person who quietly and competently achieves along the way. The person who vows to seek revenge and “get even,” or the person who forgives, holds no grudges, turns the other cheek and goes on with life. And, in the end, living with this attitude, aren't the meek the ones really the most happy, most at peace on this earth? With themselves, with others, and with God? That's why the meek are blessed. They are happy in themselves and in their God, and they need nothing else. The Message version of this beatitude says, “You're blessed when you're content with just who you are – no more, no less. That's the moment, you'll find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.” Imagine being that meek. Owners, inheritors, of everything on this earth that can't be bought!

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.” Think about what is it that most people, even us, hunger and thirst for in this world. If we're honest, I would suspect that many of us might say we hunger for wealth – material pleasures and conveniences, we hunger for acceptance from others, we hunger for honor and even power. We all hunger for something that we think will make our lives more satisfying. But how many of us get up in the morning and say, “I hunger for righteousness today.”

But here's the problem. Ultimately, we know that the things and ways of this world will mislead us and leave us empty. That's why Jesus promises us that those who hunger for and seek righteousness... will be filled. They will be satisfied! And that's why it's so important that we pray. I can't over emphasize the importance of daily prayer because this is the only way we can build a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. And in that closeness with our all-knowing, loving God, we find that our hunger for the things of this world is greatly reduced. For we realize that we have all that we need. We find joy in the simple pleasures around us. We feel accepted because we know we are loved by Almighty God. We are given a peace that passes all understanding, even when things aren't going our way. We are given a right perspective on the people and situations in our lives. Yes, when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we find ourselves filled with the confidence that all is right with our life because we trust in the promise of Jesus who said, "I am the Bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." So blessed are those who hunger and thirst for Jesus and his righteousness.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." Now if this mercy thing is so blessed, why is there so little of it in the world? And why is it that, so often, we too are not prepared to offer mercy? Well, perhaps it's because we've become somewhat hardened by the world. We look at some of the people and situations around us and say, "They've made their own bed, let them lie in it." Or sometimes we don't think a person deserves our mercy. They've hurt us in some way, or done something that upset us, and in our self-pride, we just don't want to forgive them. And, finally, there are many situations that we come upon "by chance", and remember that term, "by chance", where we just don't want to extend ourselves. It involves too much time and effort and takes away from our own lives and priorities.

But here is Jesus telling us we need to have an attitude of mercy. One of Jesus' greatest teachings of all times – the parable of the Good Samaritan vividly illustrates this. "A man was going down the road and fell into the hands of evil men who stripped and beat him so badly they left him for dead. Now, "by chance" some others were coming down the road and saw the beaten man but passed him by on the other side. They obviously didn't want to get involved and take the time and effort to help. But then a Samaritan, a stranger, a foreigner, came by and was moved with such pity and compassion, that he tended to the man, and saved the man's life." When Jesus finished this teaching, he asked "Who was a neighbor to this man?" Who was this man's brother or sister? And the person answered, "The one who showed him mercy." The one who showed him mercy. Then Jesus commanded, "Go and do the same." Go, and be merciful.

So our attitude shouldn't be, "Will I give mercy?" but rather, "Who needs my mercy – my forgiveness, my compassion, my understanding?" "And how much can I give?" To the person who has hurt you. To the person who has made his own bed. And, of course, to the persons you come upon 'by chance' on the road of life.

And when we stop to think about it, is showing mercy really all that hard? Especially when we consider that we have received mercy upon mercy from God? For all our mistakes, all our misdeeds, all those times we mess up and don't get it right. And there is our merciful God – forgiving, patient, compassionate, understanding. Giving us another chance again and again and again. And who knows – if a little more mercy was shown in the world, might there be less anger, less violence, less indifference? Yes, "blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." What does it mean to have a pure heart? Well, let me assure you that being "pure in heart," does not mean that we are blameless or perfect or good in every sense of the word. Someone once even called Jesus "good", and he responded, "No one is good except God alone." And that's exactly why Jesus came to earth in the first place – to teach us that goodness and perfection is something we are constantly to strive toward. But then he went to the cross to die for us because he knew that goal is effectively unattainable for us mortals. So how then, might we define a pure heart?

Well, Jesus uses the example of a child to illustrate his point as to who will see God. For who has a heart more pure than that of a child? So, to enter the kingdom of God, to see God, we must become like a child. In a sense, you and I... we, are to grow down. For consider the characteristics of little children. Probably first and foremost, children are desperately needy. And they know it. And in many ways, they are happy to be needy – they feel loved and cared for. Yet, how many of us grownups have that same attitude toward our heavenly parent – God. Aren't we more apt to want to be independent? Do things our way. And with this attitude, our heart is focused more on self than on God. Second, children trust. We typically don't. And yet Jesus told his disciples to take note of how God cares for the lilies of the field and the birds in the air. And he assured them how much more God cares for them, for us. And with that promise, we are to trust completely in our heavenly Father. Third, children are great examples of humility. And we need them as an example because we all struggle mightily with that vice called pride, don't we? In fact, if you think about it, pride really is the underlying force behind all the sins in our world. That's why Jesus tells us, "Blessed are the pure in heart... for they will see God."

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons and daughters of God.” I'm sure with what is going on in Afghanistan, God must be weeping over what his children are doing. And yet, it's interesting that if you look throughout creation, it seems that of all creatures, God created humankind for peace and with a peaceable nature. I mean the shark has its teeth, the wasp has its sting, the snake has its bite, the bear and the lion their claws. Yet man comes into the world naked, unarmed, innocent, defenseless. So I think the original nature of man as God really wants us to be, is gentle, dependent on one another, loving, and peaceable. But something seems to have gone terribly awry. Instead of peace and calmness and love in our lives, we often find the exact opposite. It seems like everyone – the person in the next car, at the restaurant, on the airplane, in the check-out line, our spouses, our children, our co-workers, our friends, and yes, even ourselves at times drive or walk around with a chip on our shoulders, so easily becoming irritated and angry with other people.

So given all this anger, what's the answer? Well, the great philosopher Plato once said that our souls are like a charioteer who strives to control two horses, each pulling in a different direction. One horse is reason. The other horse is emotion. For Plato, the righteous soul learns to hold the reins in such a way that the horse of reason becomes dominant. You see, the peacemaker learns to keep the emotions - passion, anger, resentment, in check by tempering it with reason. And that's good advice. Because if we allow anger to have free reign, it will eventually result in death. That's right, death. Because it will eventually kill you and the ones you love. For anger kills understanding, it kills joy, it kills peace. And so, give your anger over to God, so that you can do that which makes for peace. So that you can be a peacemaker.

The beatitudes. Tenets for living the kind of life Almighty God wants us to. But these beatitudes are so counter-cultural, they are not the norm. And whenever we go against the culture, we run the risk of persecution. We run the risk of being misunderstood, questioned, ridiculed, mocked and more. But remember, Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you on account of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven will be great.” And as Christians, this is what we live for, isn't it – life beyond this earth, life everlasting, life eternal in heaven. Yes, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” I don't know about you, but as for me, I wouldn't have it any other way. Amen.