***BEATITUDE BLESSINGS***

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Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and Matthew 5:1-12

A few weeks ago, I read this simple message on a sign in front of a local church: “Have a blessed New Year!” It reminded me of the folks who routinely say not “have a *good* day” but “have a *blessed* day!”, and all the folks who say “bless you” when you sneeze, and that Southern aphorism “bless her little heart” which is perhaps not a blessing at all, and then I thought back to the beatitudes we read this morning:

Blessed are the poor in spirit…

Blessed are those who mourn…

Blessed are the meek…

And I wondered, what does it mean to be *blessed* in 2017?

There are a host of preachers of the prosperity gospel who will tell you that blessings come in the form of wealth and widgets. Pray for the new car you want and God will bless you with it. Pray for your stock to rise and God will do it. Pray for all the things that your little heart desires and God will answer your prayer with a shower of sparkles and spangles, because God wants you to be rich! So, the prosperity gospel claims.

The great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick offers a stern rebuke to that theology in the third verse of his well-loved hymn:

*Cure thy children’s warring madness; bend our pride to thy control;*

*Shame our wanton selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul.*

*Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal,*

*Lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal.*

Fosdick seems to believe that the goal of God’s kingdom is not amassing great wealth but doing something else – serving the God whom we adore. Blessing is more about the soul than the things. Jesus makes the same point in his parable about the Rich Fool and in his encounter with the rich young man who wanted to secure his place in God’s kingdom but would not surrender his wealth. Wealth may be a blessing, but it is not the blessing we should seek.

“Blessed are…” Thus begins that series of blessings we know as the Beatitudes. In Matthew’s gospel the first detailed words of Jesus’ preaching after his baptism are found in the Sermon on the Mount, and the first word of the Sermon on the Mount is: “Blessed…” In placing this sermon on the mountain, instead of on the plain as Luke does, Matthew calls to mind for his Jewish listeners the words of God spoken to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The mountain is that high place close to God, that place from which God speaks, that place in which Jesus will later be transfigured and stand in the presence of Moses and Elijah, that holy place where divine words are spoken. The Sermon on the Mount thus carries great weight in Matthew’s gospel as the first specific words spoken in his ministry and words spoken in a setting associated with God’s divine presence. “Blessed are they…” says Jesus.

The Beatitudes derive their name from that first word in Jesus’ sermon, the Latin word for “blessed”. The Greek word in Matthew’s gospel is *makarios*, the same word used to translate the Hebrew word that begins the beatitude found in Psalm 1: “*Happy* are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked…” Happiness for the ancients was not an emotion; it was more akin to contentment in living in accord with nature and in harmony with our deepest human aspirations. *Makarios* was a possession of the soul to which all aspired.[[1]](#endnote-1) One scholar describes *makarios* as “the distinctive religious joy which accrues to [persons] from [their] share in the salvation of the kingdom of God.”[[2]](#endnote-2) To be blessed is thus to be joyfully confident and content in God’s promises, “to know that one is included in the coming realm [of God].”[[3]](#endnote-3) Or as James Howell so wonderfully puts it:

*When Jesus sat on that mountain and told the disciples and the larger crowds, “Blessed are those who…,” he was describing blessedness quite simply as being near God, being in sync with God, snuggling up close to truth, committed to follow in Jesus’ way, the results of which will not seem blessed at all to those who have never heard of Jesus.*

That blessed place in the realm of God might seem obvious to the merciful, the peacemaker, and the pure in heart who find joy in faithful lives, but it may seem less certain to those who mourn, the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and those persecuted for righteousness’ sake. What joy and blessing is there in the midst of suffering or mourning or righteous hunger or persecution? According to Jesus in the beatitudes the blessing is a contented place for all those folks in God’s kingdom despite their present circumstance:

The poor in spirit are blessed with a place in the kingdom of heaven,

not sometime in the future but now.

Those who mourn will not always mourn but will be blessed with comfort which offers hope for the future with which to face the mourning of the present.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be blessed by being filled, for the coming kingdom of God is righteous and just.

Those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake are blessed with a place in the kingdom of God which is a realm that no persecutor can overcome.

Those blessings seem to offer reassurance to people who our culture and experience suggest are not very blessed, people who might seem to be more afflicted than blessed. Yet Jesus begins his sermon by declaring God’s blessing upon them – not as some ethical directive to the disciples to aspire to be poor in spirit or mourning or persecuted – but as comfort for all those who find themselves in those circumstances and wonder if they stand outside the kingdom of God. God has a place for them and a divine ear attuned to their needs. So says Jesus!

In the Bible study this week I shared a prayer based on these beatitudes by the great Scottish New Testament scholar William Barclay. He offers a perspective which perhaps makes these blessings more applicable to our own circumstances than we might readily recognize. His words resonated with those in the study and perhaps they will resonate with you. Barclay writes:

*Let us think of the blessedness of which Jesus taught, and let us ask him to make us able to enter into it.*

*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*

Help us, O God, to realize our own poverty and our own helplessness, and help us to come to you that you may make us rich in the things which really matter.

*Blessed are they that mourn.*

Help us, O God, to be sorry for all the wrong things that we have done, and help us to show that our sorrow is real by not doing them again.

*Blessed are the meek.*

Grant to us, O God, such perfect self-control that we may completely master ourselves, so that we may be fit and able to serve and to lead others.

*Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.*

Help us, O God, to long for goodness as much as someone starving longs for food, and as much as someone dying of thirst longs for water, so that we may be ready to do anything and to give up anything to be what we ought to be.

*Blessed are the merciful.*

O God, our Father, help us at all times to be kind, and help us never either thoughtlessly or deliberately to hurt anyone else; and grant that no one may ever appeal to us for help and not receive it.

*Blessed are the pure in heart.*

O God, our Father, keep all our thoughts and all our desires clean and pure so that even our secret and inmost hearts may be fit for you to see, and so that we may see you.

*Blessed are the peacemakers.*

O God, our Father, grant that we may never at any time be the cause of trouble or of quarrels between other people.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.*

O God, help us to be glad when being a Christian costs us something, because then we have a chance to show that we are not ashamed to let it be seen that we belong to Jesus.

*Hear this our prayer and grant us this blessedness, through Jesus Christ our Lord*.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Might that be your prayer? For, at any given time we may be the ones who are poor in spirit or mourning, meek or hungering and thirsting for righteousness, the merciful or the peacemakers or even the pure in heart. We may find ourselves persecuted for righteousness’ sake – and in those moments, we need to recall these blessed words of Jesus about the blessings we receive, for they are gifts of God that sustain us in living day to day, come what may. They are blessings that might be summed up in those words of Micah with which we opened our worship today: *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*

So, have a blessed new year! And may the blessings of this year be those blessings for which Barclay prayed, those blessings about which Jesus preached, those blessings that offer a year full of hope and joy, confidence and contentment in God’s promises and presence, blessings that offer a place in God’s kingdom for you and for me. May we be so blessed! Amen

1. Robert Wilken quoted by James C. Howell in *The Beatitudes For Today*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2006, p.28 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, vol. IV, p.367 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ronald J. Allen, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol 1*, David Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor eds., Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010, p.309 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. William Barclay, A Barclay Prayer Book, Trinity Press International: Philadelphia, 1990, pp.332-333 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)