

WEEK 1 – RECEIVE GOD’S BLESSINGS

*Much of this week’s devotions’ content was sourced from a booklet by Mary Lou Redding: *The Power of a Focused Heart*. 2006. Upper Room Books. Nashville, Tennessee*

MONDAY – The Blessings of Poverty



Matthew 5: 1-3 (NIV) *Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.*

This week, we look at a passage from the Gospel of Matthew called the Beatitudes. They form part of a longer passage – the Sermon on the Mount – and they focus on qualities Jesus valued and embodied.

Jesus directed the Beatitudes not to the crowds but to the inner circle of disciples who travelled with Him day to day. Like many of us, they were already followers of Jesus who wanted to learn how to live more faithfully. 'Jesus proceeds to do what he often does: he makes statements that turn the usual order of things on its ear' (Mary Lou Redding).

The Gospel of Matthew focuses on the transformed community Jesus came to initiate – often referred to as the 'kingdom of God' or the 'kingdom of heaven'. In the 'blessed' sayings, Jesus identifies the qualities that allow this blessedness to happen.

'These qualities are the essence of what it means to live in the new kingdom where God's will is being done. They represent the outgrowth of the new heart God promises us.' (ML Redding)

We would not normally regard material poverty as a blessing. This is not what Jesus talks about in the first beatitude. Have you ever felt spiritually inadequate, saying 'God, there is no way I can do this'? Then, Jesus says, you're the kind of person who will fit right into this new community God is building! Instead of priding oneself on keeping hundreds of religious rules, like the Pharisees did, Jesus was saying that the spiritual life is not about rules. True spirituality is about living in relationship with God, depending upon God daily. This beatitude offers us a spiritual life based not on performance but on dependence.



Prayer: Gracious God, thank you that I can be so blessed by full and utter dependence on You. AMEN

TUESDAY – Gifts in grieving; power under God’s control



Matthew 5: 4 *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

How could mourning be a blessing? What could Jesus have meant? The second half of this beatitude tells us why we can experience blessing when we mourn: in the terrifying solitude of our pain, we can meet God. This beatitude does not say that all suffering will go away, that those who mourn will have all their problems solved or losses restored – but that our losses and pain can connect us with God. In the end, only God can know what I mourn.

When we accept pain and loss as inevitable parts of life, we find that God shares them with us. And that realisation changes us, the pain, and also the way we see life. We can gain the gift of feeling – allowing ourselves to mourn develops our ability to feel life’s joys – and thereby also the gift of compassion. As we allow God to comfort us, we realise that others mourn too, and remember Teresa of Avila’s words that “Christ has no hands but yours” as we reach out to other mourners.

Matthew 5: 5 (NIV): *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

Being ‘meek’ does not seem to be a value of our times – we want to be ‘movers and shakers’, ‘self-made men/women’ etc. The Greek word translated as ‘meek’ in this verse also means being humble and gentle, values which are apparently not rewarded in our times. Even the Bible does not use these words often.

Being humble or meek indicates subjection to a greater power. Many biblical figures like Moses were not weak figures at all, but they enjoyed a special relationship with God. Seeing their own weakness accurately as well, they chose to subject themselves to God.

One challenge of the spiritual life is learning how to place our powers continually under God’s control and at His disposal. Jesus had ultimate power yet used it selectively to demonstrate the values of God’s kingdom. ‘Committing ourselves to listening for God’s direction means committing ourselves to being selective in responding to the invitations that come to us’ (ML Redding).



Prayer: Lord Jesus, please help me to fully understand how Your blessings differ so much from those of our daily ‘culture’. AMEN

WEDNESDAY – Satisfied with being unsatisfied; Grace that acts



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

'Our culture makes it possible for us to keep our lives so busy that we can ignore spiritual hunger and thirst. Though our calendars may be full to overflowing, we can remain empty and unsatisfied at the deepest levels of our being. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness means being aware that more exists than our eyes see, that our bodies need. It means knowing that we need a relationship with God and recognising that time spent with God feeds us. It means hungering for something better than the status quo.' (ML Redding)

To open ourselves to God and admit our hunger for righteousness means opening ourselves up to be changed, to have our interests and our actions changed. There are no easy 'recipes' by which we can 'arrive' at more righteousness - it requires an ongoing individually unique relationship with God. To continue to heed our longing for God and for transformation of ourselves and the world is to be deeply blessed.

Matthew 5: 7 (NIV): *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

One definition of *merciful* is 'showing kindness in excess of what is deserved'. A familiar picture of mercy in scripture is the well-known story of Jesus interacting with the woman caught in adultery. According to Jesus' example, mercy does not explain away troubling behaviour (sin), excusing it as if it had not happened or denying its seriousness. On the contrary, mercy acknowledges that wrong has been done and that punishment is justified, but it deals more gently than could be justified by the letter of the law.

In our daily interaction with others, we have the power to criticise, condemn and censure others in our words and by our actions. Mercy is choosing to use our power to extend grace when we could just as well use it to exact punishment. Jesus promised that those who do so will find God's mercy extended to them.



Prayer: Lord Jesus, please make me always hunger for righteousness with You and to not only receive Your mercy, but also extend it to others. AMEN

THURSDAY – To will one thing, while seeing the world as needy and whole



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

For people of faith, to see God would be a blessing beyond anything we have known, but for most of us, this beatitude may also seem to be the least attainable. We know that we are less than pure, or perfect in our thoughts, or blameless in our actions, even if we try to resist sinful desires. We're already doing the best we can, but we're not pure in all our actions. However, the word translated as 'pure' in this beatitude does not mean morally blameless and perfect.

Scripture is full of the dedication to God that is meant by this beatitude, eg. '*an undivided heart to revere your name*' (Psalm 86: 11), and '*singleness of heart*' (Ephesians 6: 5). This willingness to allow our hearts to be changed is at the centre of seeking purity of heart. It involves willingness to let go of the multiple things that divide our heart and attention so that we may do the '*one thing [that] is needful*' (Luke 10:4).

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

What peace? Throughout history there seems to be some form of violent confrontation somewhere

in the world – as currently in Ukraine. However, in the Hebrew scripture that Jesus knew and quoted, the word usually translated as 'peace' is *shalom*, which means much more than not being at war. 'It can also be translated as 'salvation' or 'wholeness'. This kind of peace is bringing salvation to – mending and making whole – the entire created order, in the sense that God brings healing from all that limits us.' (ML Redding)

Shalom does not mean escape from the world but engagement with the world in all its brokenness. Peacemakers are those who see that the world and its people are broken but also hold a vision that God can and does reach out to heal our world. God does it through the acts of those who live by the values of this new kingdom where God's will is done.

None of us is meant to assume responsibility for all of the world. God calls each of us to act for justice and wholeness *within our sphere of influence*. That may seem like a small response, but each response has the power to change a part of the world.



Prayer: Lord Jesus, please help me to always focus on You with an undivided heart, while using opportunities to help You to make your kingdom whole again. AMEN.

FRIDAY – Action and reaction



Matthew 5: 10-12 *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

If contributing to peace seems hard, suffering persecution – especially for our religious beliefs – seems even harder to many of us, who may not have experienced official persecution. Yet, for Christians, it comes from the time of Christ Himself until today in some parts of the world. Indeed, especially in the 'prosperity gospel', some may see their blessings as proof of God's favour.

'However, Jesus says in this passage that not only can we find blessing in persecution, but also that we should rejoice when it comes! When we try to turn ourselves and the world away from sin and self-centredness and toward God, persecution will follow. All the thoughts and institutions that exalt themselves in opposition to Christ's ways will resist giving up their hold on us and on the power they have in the world.' (ML Redding)

It is human nature to not want to hear such things, but this

beatitude reminds us to refocus our hope away from our physical bodies and their ease - or lack thereof - when persecution comes and on what is eternal: our union with God. It is not a call for suffering for the sake of suffering, but emphasises that when we suffer for the sake of righteousness, it prepares us for our eternal, lasting identity in the new kingdom. Whatever our individual actions for Christ that arouse the wrath of the kingdoms of this world, this beatitude promises an eternal result.

To conclude on the beatitudes: 'When we realise how much we need God, when we enter into life fully, when we use our powers under God's direction, when we hunger for God's way, when we love mercy, when we focus our hearts on God, when we work for peace and give ourselves fully to what we believe in – every moment we are able to do these things, we walk the way of blessedness" (ML Redding)



Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for Your words and way towards Your true blessings. Help me to do Your will. AMEN