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## *The Revolutionary Disciple: Blessed* Matthew 5: 1-12

We are in a season as a church when we are focusing like a laser beam on one question, "What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus who makes disciples for Jesus?" It is not enough to view discipleship as something just between Jesus and me. Our walk as an apprentice of Jesus begins when we obey his command to "Repent" (which means: "stop and turn around") and "Follow." Those two steps—turning from your way and following the way of Jesus—are the essential starting point of discipleship. But the second part of Jesus' call to us- "Go and Make more disciples" is not an option. It is essential to true discipleship. Real disciples reproduce. They make more disciples.

One of our mission partners has devoted his entire ministry life to disciple-making. Doug Burleigh and his wife, Deb, head a ministry in DC that quietly shares the love of Jesus with the most powerful people in the world. But Doug has another passion, and I want him to share that with you. The ministry of disciple-making has a special place in your heart, doesn't it? Tell us about it.

Last week, Pastor Megan received a note of blessing from one of our young disciples here at Chapel Hill named Peyton. I thought I'd share it with you: "Dear Pastor Megan, You are such a good pastor. I'm not saying that Pastor Mark is bad... but I'm saying that you're good." It is always such an encouragement to receive a blessing from someone, isn't it? This morning we turn to the most famous blessings every pronounced. We call them the Beatitudes, and with these sublime words, Jesus launches a preaching ministry that will change eternity.

<sup>23</sup>Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

<sup>24</sup>News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. <sup>25</sup>Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

<sup>1</sup>Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup>and he began to teach them saying: <sup>3</sup>"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek, for they will

inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. <sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup>Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. <sup>10</sup>Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

I still remember my first sermon 27 years ago. It was titled *Not One Step More*, and it was based on a passage from Exodus 33 where Moses says to the Lord, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." I wanted my first sermon to cast the vision for the future that was entirely Holy Spirit driven.

Today we come to Jesus' first sermon. After 30 years working in dad's carpenter shop, Jesus bursts on the scene with an audacious pronouncement: "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near! Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men." And immediately, we do see the Kingdom of Heaven breaking through. Jesus preached, taught, healed and performed miracles and his crowd of followers grew. Finally, He gathers them on a hill near the Sea of Galilee, and the first words out of his mouth are revolutionary. They flip reality on its head: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the mourners, blessed are the meek, blessed are the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, blessed are the merciful and the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted and insulted and lied about... blessed are all these people!"

We know and love these words, don't we? Some of us have memorized them. But what do they mean, and why did Jesus start here, of all places? First, what does "blessed" mean? To be blessed is to experience the favor of God which results in a deep sense of well-being. It is sometimes translated as "happy". Any of you seen *Duck Dynasty* on TV? We love that show. Phil Robertson, the head of the clan, has a favorite expression, "Happy, happy, happy." It's nice to be happy; it's good to be happy. But "happy" is a lame word to describe the blessedness that Jesus speaks of.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Blessing means laying one's hand on something and saying: Despite everything, you belong to God!" Biblical blessedness looks like this. [*Walk out, put hand on heads*] To be the "blessed" of God means that God is for you; He is with you. He is your champion; His hand is upon you.

Jesus' listeners would have understood it very well. Blessing was a regular part of their daily prayers. For Jesus to speak blessing in the opening words of his sermon wasn't unusual. But the list of those being blessed... now, that was revolutionary. Why?

At the time, it was assumed that the blessing of God was evidenced by wealth and health and power. If you were a wealthy person... that was proof of God's blessing, of God's favor upon you. That is why, when Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven," the disciples replied, "Then who can be saved?" "If it is that hard for a rich man—who is obviously blessed by God—to get into heaven, what hope is there for the less-blessed poor men like us?"

This same attitude is seen in John 9 when Jesus encounters a blind man. His disciples want to know whose fault it is that he is blind. Who sinned, the man himself or his parents? After all, his blindness had to be a sign of God's displeasure, right? Someone had done something wrong, right?

This belief—that your circumstances, your health, your prosperity were indicators of God's blessing upon your life—was so prevalent, it was almost like a Jewish form of karma. If God is happy with you, he will make you healthy, wealthy and wise. If not, you will be poor, ill, powerless and looked down upon by the rest of the world. By the way, that's not very different from the way we think today; just listen to some of the American preachers. I wonder how that health and wealth gospel plays in Sudan and Iraq. I guess those disciples aren't as pleasing to God as we American Christians are.

Now, with this in mind, let's re-read the description of those gathered around Jesus:

<sup>24</sup>News about Jesus spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. <sup>25</sup>Large crowds... followed him.

If "blessing" meant God's hand of favor upon someone, you could not find a less-blessed crowd of people than those gathered on that hillside in Galilee: diseased, pained, possessed, epileptic, paralyzed. According to the thinking of the time, these were the God-abandoned... not the God-blessed! These were the spiritual losers who were riding on the coattails of the really holy people who carried the rest of the Jewish nation along with them spiritually. Yet, as Jesus looks out across this motley crew, his first words are a burst of Kingdom Light! "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the mourners, blessed are the meek, blessed are the spiritually famished, blessed are the persecuted..."

Aren't those precious words? But as beloved as they are, the Beatitudes have been mostly misunderstood and often abused. They have become a how-to list for earning God's favor. If you want to receive the blessing of God, you need to be poor in spirit, need to be mourning, need to be meek and spiritually famished and persecuted.

But that is not at all what Jesus was saying. Jesus, was describing the second-class citizens; the ones looked down upon by the rest of the world. The “poor in spirit”... those were the spiritual nobodies, the ones who had nothing to offer spiritually. Mourners... they were the heartbroken who had been abandoned by their spouse or buried their child. The meek were the mousy ones who scurried out of the way so others wouldn't walk on them. The spiritually starving craved righteousness because they didn't have any. Peacemakers have the most thankless job in the world. Just ask the cop who answers a domestic violence call; both sides hate him! And have you ever seen what happens to the merciful in a business setting? They get chewed up. The pure in heart... you mean the naïve, goody two-shoes who gets made fun of behind her back. And the persecuted—like Christians in Iraq or Nigeria who are being raped, tortured and beheaded—these are the blessed of God? This is what you must aspire to if you want God's blessing upon you?

That's not what Jesus was saying. He was describing what he was seeing. Jesus was looking at a crowd of broken, hopeless, rejected, spiritual nobodies. I imagine him peering right into their eyes, deep into their souls, and speaking to them almost personally... “You, you who think you are a spiritual nobody, you whose eyes are puffy from crying all night, you who can hardly raise your eyes because you are so timid, you who are being abused by the two sides of the family you are trying to reconcile, all of you who feel like spiritual losers, abandoned by God and disdained by the spiritual people in the world...”

“Guess what! Blessed are you ...and you, and you, and you, and you! I know the world says you are anything but blessed. I know your religion says you are anything but blessed. But I say, God is for you! God has laid his hand on you! God is your champion. God is with you. And not just someday—when everything will be made right (which it will—but, right now, God is with you. Right now God is laying His hand on you. Right now you can experience well-being and contentment and joy and peace because you are the blessed of Almighty God.”

That is what Jesus did in the opening words of his inaugural sermon. He laid his hands on that motley, frightened, beaten crowd and said, “Guess what, against all odds, against the diagnosis of this world, you belong to God!” In other words, the Beatitudes are a description, not a prescription. They were a description of the broken, hopeless people gathered around Jesus who heard, for the first time, that they, too, were beloved of God; that His hand was upon them, too, despite their appearances.

And really, we don't want this to be the prescription for blessedness, do we? Otherwise, we would have to be spiritually devastated by grief, have to be the person who allows the world to tromp on them, stuck in the middle of a toxic family feud, or humiliated for our faith in order to receive God's blessing. God may allow us into those situations, but is Jesus really saying we should aspire to them in order to receive God's blessing? Where does that leave those of us who happen

at this time to be spiritually full; where does that leave the laughers in this room? Or the Type-A personalities or those whose families happen to be peaceful and good? Does it mean that we cannot experience the blessing of God unless and until we lose all of those things?

No, the radical nature of Jesus' message comes through better when we add the word "even". Even for those who feel like the world has cast you aside and God has forgotten you, I've got great news. It isn't true. God's hand can be upon you right now, even in your emptiness, even in your grief; even in your fear and your loneliness. You still belong to God. And by the way, it's only a matter of time before every one of you will be on that list—only a matter of time before every one of you will be spiritually empty or grieving or humiliated or persecuted—and when that time comes, God will still be your champion!

This was revolutionary stuff. And it still is. As I think over this past week, so many come to mind who need to hear and believe this word of blessing. The mom who gets up five times a night to turn her child over because his body doesn't work right; the man who was served divorce papers by a wife he adores; the man whose jawbone was cut out and will never eat a piece of solid food again; the woman going through endless medical procedures; the man who lost his ministry because of moral failing; the woman who has lived a lie for years and just got found out.

This is just a partial list of people in this church in this week... people reeling from the circumstances of their lives... our empty and sad and frightened and humiliated people. And to them, Jesus says, "Bless you! Blessed are you. Right here, right now, right in the midst of this, God is for you, God's hand is upon you, God is your champion."

Three chapters from now—as Jesus concludes the greatest sermon ever preached—he is going to say, "Listen, this stuff I've just taught you... this is real life; Kingdom-of-Heaven life. If you are really my apprentice, my imitator, this is the way we live, you and I. My disciples obey me, and if they don't their lives crash down around them like a house built on sand." The punchline to the Sermon on the Mount is obedience! If Jesus is your Lord, do what he says. That's how he ends it.

But notice, that's not how He starts. He starts with grace; He starts with blessing. He says, "Wherever you are in life—whatever you are going through, however broken, sad, empty, despairing you might be—God is for you. God's hand is upon you. If you believe and receive the blessing of God, I will help you to be the person I created you to be. Discipleship ends in your obedience, but it starts with my grace. So let this word ring in your hearts forever: God is for you! Blessed are you!

## Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
  1. How does our culture define "blessedness" or "happiness?" How does that definition contrast with Jesus' definition in the Beatitudes?
  2. Studies on happiness indicate that the poorest countries in the world have the happiest people. What in the world do we do with that kind of information? How should it inform the way we live where God has placed us? Or put it this way, can we be both wealthy and happy? How?
  3. As you read through the list in the Beatitudes, which one most describes your present state? Talk about it. How might you claim God's promise of blessing in the midst of that situation?