



Sermon on the Mount: An Invitation to New Creation

Session 1 “Beatitudes”

Katherine Wolf, the survivor of a massive brain stem stroke said, “We have been blessed to suffer at a young age, because it informs the way we live the rest of our lives.” Hearing her words, my initial reaction was one of shock and disbelief, “How could she consider this experience to be a blessing?” Katherine was twenty-six years old. She and her husband Jay were living on the beach in Malibu, he was in law school and she was experiencing the joy of being a new mom to their six-month old baby, James, when their lives were turned upside down by the stroke. In a day, their “dream life” was crushed and life has never been the same. Today, Katherine faces many physical deficits, including partial paralysis of her face. Yet, she chooses to call this experience a blessing?

When we read the Beatitudes, many of us have a similar reaction. How can Jesus call the people in these circumstances “Blessed”? Or some have interpreted the passage to mean that people should pursue unpleasant situations in order to be blessed, which also is problematic. Are the Beatitudes a list of spiritual “to do’s” in order to be blessed? What is Jesus saying here?

Dallas Willard suggests that the Beatitudes are not a spiritual to-do list, but rather a proclamation of blessing, even in situations where we do not expect to find it. The blessing of God is the availability of his kingdom to all people, regardless of their circumstances. God’s blessing reaches us even in dire circumstances. God’s blessing reaches out to those who feel undeserving, perhaps even hopeless, because blessing is an announcement of God’s favor and grace over people. Blessing is a promise of God’s presence with people. Although mourning is not a desirable circumstance, those who mourn are blessed because they are favored by God and God has not abandoned them. God’s grace reaches out to even those are “poor in spirit” or those who do not feel like they have much to offer God. Those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” who long for God’s justice, even when far removed from their present reality, receive a promise of hope—the blessing and favor of God is coming.

The Beatitudes are both an announcement of God’s favor and a promise of hope. Do you notice how many times Jesus says “...they will be”? God’s blessing is coming to those who are waiting for God to show up. This blessing, however, might look different from the ways we typically describe it—and it might not include health, wealth, and prosperity. Jesus reminds us that God’s favor and grace reaches out to us in spite of our circumstances, and that the greatest blessing we receive is his presence with us. God’s presence with us may even change our perspective on what it means to be blessed: “We have been blessed to suffer at a young age,” Katherine said. To read more about Katherine and Jay’s story and how they are using it to bring hope to others who are suffering visit www.hopeheals.com.

Read Matthew 5:1-12

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, 2 and he began to teach them.

He said:

- 3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
5 Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness,
for they will be filled.
7 Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
8 Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
9 Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of
righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute
you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because
of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your
reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted
the prophets who were before you.

No one is actually being told that they are better off for being poor, for mourning, for being persecuted, and so on, or that the conditions listed are recommended ways to well-being before God or man... They are explanations and illustrations, drawn from the immediate setting, of the present availability of the kingdom through personal relationship to Jesus. They single out cases that provide proof that, in him, the rule of God from the heavens truly is available in life circumstances that are beyond all human hope.

--Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 106.

Questions for Discussion

1. What stood out to you, encouraged you or challenged you from this past week's sermon?
2. Read the quote above by Dallas Willard. How does it help you to understand the Beatitudes? Does this offer a shift in how you have previously engaged the passage?
3. How would you typically describe what it means to be blessed? How do Jesus' announcements of blessing expand your understanding of the word?
4. Can you think of a time in your own life where you've experienced or witnessed one of these announcements of blessing?
5. Do any these announcements bring hope to a current area of struggle in your own life or in the world? Why?
6. Why is it important to not see this passage as a "do-to list" but rather as a proclamation of God's blessing over people who find themselves in a certain set of circumstances?
7. Without seeing the Beatitudes as a list of tasks to accomplish, how might you respond to Jesus' words this week?