

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Blessings - January 29, 2023
Matthew 5:1-12

As we begin today, I'd like to call your attention to the "Theme for the Day" which is the first slide showing as we start our service. I choose a quotation for each week's service. Sometimes it's from a celebrity, sometimes it's from a theologian, sometimes it's from someone nobody's heard of — it's something that is supposed to tie the worship service together.

This morning, I have selected a quotation from Henri Nouwen. Nouwen is a Catholic Priest most noted for his writing on spiritual subjects and connecting spiritual growth with visible action in the world. I thought what he had to say about the scripture in Matthew we call the Beatitudes was particularly relevant and interesting. Nouwen wrote: *The Beatitudes offer me the simplest route for the journey home, back into the house of my Father. And along this route I will discover the joys of the second childhood: comfort, mercy, and an ever clearer vision of God. It's a place where I can live in freedom without obsessions and compulsions.*"

The Beatitudes are, in many ways, Jesus' response to another biblical list: the Ten Commandments. These are the two most important "lists" in the Bible. His observation is exactly right: I have seen quite a few public buildings and, of course, churches, proudly display a copy of the Ten Commandments on their front lawns. The Supreme Court ruled in 2005 that this was legal because the Ten Commandments are as much an historical document as a religious one and they do constitute the foundation for much of our legal system.

The Ten Commandments are a guide to right action. Following them gives us a choice to obey them to the best of our ability or we can of course ignore them. But really, who can actively disagree with statements that ask us to honor our parents, not cheat on our partners, not steal, lie, or be jealous of the possessions of others? God also demands that God comes first, and that the Sabbath was created to lift us out the material world and into the mysteries of our creator. If we have any kind of faith, these commandments are absolutely necessary to our practice.

As in the case of any human-created law, we are required to be active participants in the process. By process, I mean that totally or even mostly obeying the ten commandments is not something any person can do immediately. Most of us do attempt to obey at least some of them most of the time yet we also fail to obey others nearly always. However, the point of the Ten Commandments is not that we perfectly obey them — because we as human beings simply can't.

Nonetheless, we can over time bend our wills to obey them more and more. Over time, we have the ability to reflect upon our choices both good and bad and we have the ability to increasingly choose the good more and more often. The more we understand about ourselves and how the world works, the more following the Ten Commandments makes sense, and the better we will

become at doing so. Indeed, if everybody were able to follow the Ten Commandments as written, there would be no need for courts of law. I hope you in the room and most of the people outside this room would agree that they are the standard toward which we should actively, if imperfectly strive.

Now, the Beatitudes or “Blessings” as set forth by Jesus are in some ways a complement to the Ten Commandments yet in some ways highly dissimilar from the Ten Commandments. The Beatitudes complement the Ten Commandments because they are both focussed on God. The Commandments are a list of how God wants us to conduct ourselves in the world. The Beatitudes, on the other hand, are a list of how God promises to stand with us because things are inevitably going to go wrong in our lives especially as we attempt to follow the Ten Commandments more and more closely.

However, the Ten Commandments are dissimilar from the Beatitudes in the sense that choosing to follow the Commandments is a conscious decision on our part. We make the choices. We follow them or we don’t follow them. We have control. God commands but it is we who choose whether or not to act.

The Beatitudes, however, are centered not on our actions. Rather, they help us deal with the circumstances of life — circumstances which we often cannot control. Circumstances which, more often than not, are puzzlingly the result of our choosing to obey God.

This Jesus stuff is not easy. Being a Christian means far more than showing up at church on occasion, putting some money in the plate, saying the Lord’s Prayer for the 1000th time, eating a piece of bread and drinking a little bit of grape juice. If that, and “being nice” is all you are doing to practice your faith, then you have a good ways to go when it comes to really following Jesus. I’ll repeat: this Jesus stuff is not easy.

However, before we can follow God’s Law as revealed in the Ten Commandments, or dealing the consequences of following the Law as revealed in the Beatitudes, we need to reframe our attitudes toward both: not in terms of simply trying to follow the rules as best we can, but building and lasting relationship with the Rule Maker.

Simply put, when Jesus Christ is not in your life, Christianity in particular and the Bible in general looks like the Employee Manual we get from HR when we start a new job: follow the rules and you won’t get in trouble. Of course, few of us read the HR manual so we’re not sure exactly what the rules are, but we when we fail, we may get caught.

But what if we could step behind the rulebook and really understand what the rules were for, why they were written, and most importantly who wrote them in the first place. What if we could get into the mind of God, the Ultimate Rule Maker and learn how the Rule Maker thinks. Wouldn’t that

make following the rules a lot easier? Wouldn't that make dealing with the sometimes negative consequences of doing a good job of following the rules much easier?

Well, God is the Ultimate Rule Maker and Jesus is God in human form. It follows that the more we can get into understanding the mind of Jesus, the more life and living by the rules will make sense. We call getting into the mind of Jesus Christian Spirituality and Christian Spirituality is at the heart of the Beatitudes.

Now we don't have time today to dive into all eight, giving each the attention it deserves. Let me just talk about a few. Let's start with the first one: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." What is mourning?

Of course, when we hear the word mourn, we immediately think of the death of a loved one. We lose someone who has been close to us, someone who has made a difference in our lives, someone whom we will not see again on this earth. Of course we are sad. Of course we are upset. Of course we are confused and aggrieved at our loss.

But the idea of mourning applies not just to the loss of a human being. When you consider it, mourning is very much part of everything that goes on in life. At the heart of all mourning is the simple fact of change. That which was normal for us has become different somehow. People, by and large, don't like a lot of change so when it happens, we mourn. We are sad about what was, even if what is to come is much better.

Jesus said those who mourn are blessed. This can mean that as we follow Jesus more closely and strive to obey God's laws in the Ten Commandments, our lives are going to change. Yes, they will change for the better, but that change may not be immediately obvious. Have no doubt, giving up old ideas and behaviors is hard and for a while, we may even regret our choices. If you don't believe me, just ask a former smoker whether they mourned after that final cigarette!

But the good news is that in Jesus, we do not mourn alone. As we move closer to him, as we struggle with change, as we start saying no to things we once said yes to, we are not alone. Having a relationship with Jesus means that He is there alongside us. He is there to guide us. He is there when we cry or are angry or want to give up. Jesus, in short, is our comforter in all the times of our lives when we mourn. Mourning is normal, but take heart, we are blessed in Jesus.

Jesus also said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Like everything when it comes to following Jesus, purity or purifying ourselves is a gradual process. How do we purify ourselves? We become purer the more closely we follow God's Law as revealed in the Ten Commandments and we strive to imitate the life of Jesus in how he acted in the world. Again, this is hard. Following Jesus is hard. More importantly, we have to admit from the start that we cannot hope to follow Jesus all by ourselves. It is impossible. On our own, we cannot just wake up and

say, "Today, I'll live like Jesus did," because we will fail. Did you know that for quite some time, Benjamin Franklin kept a diary divided 13 goals for moral perfection. By sheer force of will, Franklin thought he could make himself perfect. Needless to say, he failed. He found he could not keep them all at once.

From a Christian perspective, Franklin should be commended for trying to purify himself. He learned a lot about himself and his failings. But poor Ben could never have succeeded in his project because he adamantly rejected the need to have Jesus in his life to help him both purify him and forgive him when he failed.

The point is, do you see why Jesus linked purity to seeing God? As we, with the help of Jesus, come closer to purifying ourselves, with everything that means: seeing, experiencing, knowing the presence of God will become easier and easier. Jesus will be in our lives more and more. We will have a better understanding, we will know His mind, we will know His heart. Following Jesus will become as natural as breathing and every word we speak will become like a prayer.

Just briefly, the act of being a peacemaker is both good and terrible. Many of the most celebrated peacemakers in our world, including Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela, suffered terribly and sometimes died cruelly. Yet they could not have done their work without having the guiding, loving presence of Jesus in their lives. They, with no doubt, were truly children of God.

This friends, is why the Beatitudes do not appear on public buildings, or just about anywhere else. At their core, embracing the Beatitudes means embracing a lifelong relationship with Jesus. It means surrendering to His will instead of your own. It means giving up your desires and replacing them with His. It means feeling and yearning for His presence in your soul so He can guide your thoughts and give you unconditional love.

That's what it means to follow Jesus and it can be a thankless, difficult task. So much of what this world values is diametrically opposed to what Jesus teaches. But when we follow, when we accept, when we surrender, we will be comforted, we will see God, we will receive mercy, we will truly be God's own children.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.