

## **The Jesus Way: Embracing The Upside Down**

### **Matthew 5 :1-11**

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Sitting on my desk in my office down the hall is a framed postcard of the eternal flame which burns at The King Center in Atlanta, Georgia. I visited there way back in 1990 and have carried that postcard with me from place to place wherever I have lived since. On the postcard are printed these words: "Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life. Love illuminates it." They are a profound reminder that King's faith and activism were deeply rooted in scripture and the teachings of Jesus.

This weekend we celebrate the impact of the life and teachings of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. not just on this country but on the world. There will be marches and forums, workshops and service opportunities to carry on the legacy of this great orator and civil rights activist. Yet, I sometimes think that we forget to honor Dr. King as a Christian and pastor, one who shows us the way to live our faith in Jesus, the source of light and love. So, today seems like a perfect day to kick off our new sermon series on living life the Jesus way.

In fact, early Christians called their movement "The Way" based on Jesus saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life". They adhered closely to what Jesus taught. We read in the book of Acts how they lived in community, sharing their resources, praying and worshiping together, supporting each other through the challenges of the Jesus way. Over the centuries, Christianity has morphed from this counter-cultural movement of love and justice into a faith that has changed the world but also become distracted by church bureaucracy, finances, and properties. What does it look like for us individually and as a congregation to reclaim The Way?

There is no better place to look than to the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus teaches his disciples and the crowd gathered with them the basics of what it means to follow him. So, for the next few weeks, we will be examining the Sermon on the Mount as we seek to recommit ourselves to focusing our lives and our life together on being Christ-followers, travelers on The Way.

Let's set the scene first. Jesus delivers the sermon on the mount very early in his ministry. He has just called his first disciples and begun to teach and to heal. Word about him has spread across the countryside, and people have started seeking him out for healing and for hope. As the crowd follows him, Jesus climbs to the top of a mountain just outside of the town of Capernaum and sits down to teach them. The crowd is astounded as he starts to say the most unexpected things. He is literally about to turn their world upside down.

He begins with what we now call "The Beatitudes" - the blessings we heard read from the gospel of Matthew. Commentator David Lose points out, "There is a trap hidden in the Beatitudes that I know I have fallen into countless times, and perhaps you have, too. The trap is as simple as it is subtle: believing that Jesus is setting up the conditions of blessing, rather than actually blessing his hearers." This is an important distinction, I think. We often think about the

Beatitudes as a sort of New Testament ten commandments - a set of laws or instructions. Yet, Lose argues that these are literal words of blessing on the gathered crowd.

After all, Jesus knows who he is talking to. The first four of the Beatitudes address those who are struggling. They are people who are discouraged, grieving, powerless and hungry for justice as Rome occupies their homeland. Luke, the social justice gospel writer, makes their struggles even more blatant saying, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!”

These are the people Jesus begins by blessing. The second four blessings address those who are actively trying to make things better - those who are merciful, compassionate, peacemakers, and justice-seekers. Jesus recognizes that in these seemingly innocuous behaviors, they are challenging the Roman Empire and are likely to be persecuted. Yet, they all are behaviors that exemplify the Jesus Way.

All of these people - those who suffer and those who seek to relieve their suffering - Jesus says will inherit the kingdom. So, he blesses them. But what does that actually mean - “to bless someone”. In his essay published in “A More Profound Alleluia”, Dr. David Stubbs of Western Theological Seminary, writes that a blessing is “a calling for the Holy Spirit to come and transform us” whereas scholar Dallas Willard defines a blessing as “the projection of good into the life of another. It isn’t just words. It’s the actual putting forth of your will for the good of another person. It always involves God, because when you will the good of another person, you realize only God is capable of bringing that.” If we combine these two, we can say that when Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the peacemakers, or the merciful, he is calling on God to bring good to their lives and on the Holy Spirit to transform them.

With the Beatitudes, the blessings, Jesus is setting the stage for the rest of his teaching, the rest of his ministry. He is revealing his priorities as God incarnate living among us. From this point on, we will see Jesus consistently care for, heal, and teach the least of these. He has literally turned upside down the values and expectations of the society in which they live.

In ancient Palestine, those who had financial stability and family to care for them were considered honorable and, therefore, worthy of God. Those who were poor or sick or without family were treated with shame. One’s honor was the most valuable possession a person could have. Shame meant you were marginalized and unworthy of participation in society. Yet, Jesus says these are the people God favors!

So, what do these beatitudes, these blessings, say to us living in the 21st century United States about the Jesus Way? Suggested in his words is that those who suffer already will inherit the kingdom. If we are not presently suffering, particularly suffering from oppression, then we are blessed - we are transformed through the Holy Spirit - when we seek to alleviate the suffering of those who are. It is how we care for each other, how we love one another, that opens the kingdom of God to us.

At a deeper level, Jesus speaks to us of humility. His words bring to mind others of his teachings. “The last shall be first and the first shall be last” or “it is easier for a camel to go

through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom ... “ Jesus is warning us not to become too comfortable or too proud. At some point, each of us will have a moment when we recognize our need for God. When we humble ourselves, acknowledge that we cannot endure suffering without God’s help, the doors of the kingdom open for us, as well.

Jesus’s words also speak to us about vulnerability. The first four beatitudes are addressed to people who are among the most vulnerable in society. To be poor in spirit may mean to be depressed or discouraged or possibly lacking in spiritual nourishment. To mourn is to be in the exceptionally tender state of grief. To be meek can mean to be without power. And to hunger or thirst for righteousness is to be seeking justice. I don’t think it’s accidental that Jesus speaks of vulnerability in language that suggests economic poverty as well as spiritual poverty.

In the upside-down world of Jesus, vulnerability and humility are characteristics to foster yet they are not characteristics we are encouraged to develop in the United States. We are a culture of self-reliance and individualism, of pride in success and achievement. We are taught to aim to be the wealthiest, the smartest, the most powerful or influential. We feel pushed to buy the biggest house and fanciest car, to marry the most beautiful people, to send our kids to the most prestigious schools. Even when we think about church, we admire the biggest buildings, the best music, the largest congregations.

Yet, none of these are characteristics are those whom Jesus blesses. Alongside those who suffer or are oppressed, those who are humble and vulnerable, Jesus blesses those who seek to make things better, who seek to help build God’s kingdom. To offer mercy is to be compassionate and accepting. To be pure in heart is to be aligned with what God values. To be peacemakers is to use our gifts and the power of the Holy Spirit to address conflict nonviolently. To be persecuted because of righteousness is to be willing to risk persecution for the sake of justice.

Living the Jesus Way isn’t easy. What would it look like in your life if the starting point for making your decisions - from the smallest to the most important - was aligning yourself with God? Being merciful, being pure in heart, being a peacemaker, seeking justice? What would it look like for us as a church to put the beatitudes at the heart of our strategic planning?

Think of a choice or decision you have to make right now. What is influencing you as you consider what you will do? Imagine setting aside those influences and starting with prioritizing mercy, love, and light. Would your decision change? What risks would be involved? How would you lean on God?

Whatever your answers...may it be so. Amen.