

The Be-Attitudes: 9. Insulted and Falsely Accused

Matthew 5.1-12 [New International Reader's Version]

Mason United Methodist Church

13 June 2010

Blessed are you when [people] revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
[Matthew 5.11-12 NKJV]

Is this supposed to be *good* news? It sounds terrible!

If that is your initial reaction, you are not alone. The beatitudes (as they have become known) serve as the prelude to the rest of Jesus' words that have been recorded as *The Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew 5-7. At the end of this sermon, the writer of this gospel writes the words, "And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were *astonished* at His teaching." [Matthew 7.28 NKJV]

These statements of Jesus in the first 12 verses of Matthew 5 tell us about faith: faith's beginning, growth and maturity in a person's faith, and the testing of faith. The Beatitudes also prepare the reader for the rest of the sermon. Those who first heard the words were stunned, just as we are today when we read them or hear them read.

Later on in Matthew there would be more stunning words recorded as those of Jesus:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.' And 'a man's foes will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it." [Matthew 10.34-39 NKJV]

These are difficult words. They are hard to hear, understand and process. It would seem that life will most certainly be a trial, and that a person's enemies would have the upper hand most of the time. And on top of all that we are called upon by Jesus to *love* our enemies, *bless* those who curse us, *do good* to those who hate us, and *pray* for those who spitefully use us and persecute us. [Matthew 5.44]

In fact, the scriptures have much to say about forgiving those who we perceive as our enemies. In Romans 12.20, Paul is recorded as saying that if we give food and drink to our enemies we shall be *heaping coals of fire on their heads*. At first pass, that sounds like a good way to get some vengeance and not having anything at all to do with forgiveness! But a deeper understanding of the customs of the biblical era in which those words were written tells an entirely different story.

At that time, and even in modern days in some eastern countries, almost anything can be carried on the head: water pots, loaded baskets, and many other items. Carrying loads that way does not require that the hands even be used except to place the load on top of the head. With the load carried high and the hands free passage through crowds of people was made easier.

People kept fires going twenty-four hours a day in their homes for cooking and warmth. There were no matches available in those days. If someone's fire would unintentionally go out, a person would walk to a neighboring home to borrow some burning coals to restart their own fire. Using a cloth-covered insulation ring, the coals could be placed on the borrower's head and carried back to the location of the burned-out fireplace. When giving hot coals to a person perceived as an enemy, it was to give a *gift*. To "heap coals of fire" into the container on their heads was to give even more of a blessing, and to demonstrate a symbol of selfless generosity. [From Strange Scriptures that Perplex the Western Mind by Barbara M. Bowen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1944.]

Jesus used dichotomies to teach deep truths. Knowing that there would be conflict and antagonism toward those who chose to follow him, he started the sermon recorded in Matthew 5-7 with a series of promises to those who would choose to believe and follow.

One of those dichotomies is the cornerstone of this summary of the beatitudes – these last two verses wrapping all of the other eight, suggesting a reward for those who persevere.

Who is blessed and happy?

- Those who are *poor in spirit*,
- Those who *mourn*,
- Those who are *humble and meek*,
- Those who *hunger and thirst for righteousness*,
- Those who are *merciful*,
- Those who are *pure in heart*,
- Those who are *peacemakers*, and
- Those who are *persecuted for righteousness' sake*.

In fact, Jesus said that these people should rejoice and be exceedingly glad! The Greek word for being exceedingly glad is *agallasthai* [ah-golly-ahs'-thye], derived from two Greek words that mean to *leap* a lot with *joy*! It's sort of like Peanuts Snoopy pictured as being so happy that his ears are flapping and his toes are tapping, being on tiptoe with joy with his nose high in the air and rejoicing! It is the joy that makes one jump (or on the football field to bump chests or helmets, and on the soccer field to run around and hug in celebration after a big score).

When you stand for what you feel is right, you will be at least *challenged* if not *reviled* and *persecuted*.

The word in Greek for reviled is *oneidizo* [oh-nay-ditz'-oh] which means to defame, rail at, chide or taunt. There are two reasons for defamation implied in Jesus' closing statement: the evil spoken is *false*, and the *cause* must be for the Lord.

Non-Christians are not necessary for mocking and reviling – some who *call* themselves Christian do a good enough job. And in response, a quote from a website that I read (referring to the current situation in Gaza) is apropos: “Those who stand for *justice* are always on the right side of history.” [Italics mine.] Another quote from a neighborhood reader board a few weeks ago: “If you stand for nothing, you will fall for anything.” If one capitulates to the desires and opinions of every person, they will generally be universally spoken well of (which, the Bible says, was true of the *false* prophets). It would seem that Jesus saved the best phrase for the last in this beatitude: “When you are reviled and persecuted you are blessed. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

So, in this last in a series of nine sermons on the *Be-Attitudes*, highlighting lifestyles that help us to *become* what God would have us to *be*, what's the bottom line for the believer?

- The kingdom of heaven is yours. (Verse 3)
- You will be comforted. (v4)
- You will receive an inheritance. (v5)
- You will have spiritual fulfillment. (v6)
- You will receive God's mercy. (v7)
- You will spend eternity with God. (v8)
- You will be called *children of God*. (v9)
- You will be in the kingdom of heaven. (v10, as repeated from verse 3)
- You will have a great reward in heaven. (v12, reiterating verses 3 and 10)

Once in a while now, I stop at the New Tacoma Cemetery and stand at the spot where my cremated remains will someday be buried. It is a humbling thing to realize again that I will live only so long, and then death will finally bring me face-to-face with my Savior. At times I think and plan as though I will live forever; but I won't. Earthly things are temporary, but heaven is forever. One day all of the things I think are important now will be finished. My life's work will have been completed. The difficult times? Past. Supposed enemies? They won't matter. Here I am reminded of a line from a sermon my wife, Kathleen, preached not too long ago. A preacher asked a congregation, “Does anyone here have enemies they need to forgive? If so, raise your hand.” Everyone raised their hand except one woman in her 90s who sat with her hands folded in her lap. Thinking she might not have heard the question, the minister asked her specifically, “Don't you have any enemies to forgive?” She responded, “Nope. I outlived them.”

What about life as it is happening now? Aren't there some important things yet to be accomplished or possessed? Jesus said as it is recorded in Matthew 6.33, “Seek first the kingdom of God and [God's] righteousness, and all these things [the right *stuff* necessary] will be added to you.” Amen.