

“Blessed Are Those”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 5, 2017

First Scripture Reading: Micah 6:6-8

⁶“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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 receive 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 for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.



Sermon: *“Blessed Are Those”*

I’m going to need most of the kids and young adults to bear with me for a minute or two while I explain something to the rest of the room.

If you’re not on social media or at least hip enough to know what social media is all about, then you probably have no idea what a hashtag is. For users of Twitter and Instagram and the like, a hashtag is what you used to call a number sign or a pound sign. It’s that little tic-tac-toe board symbol on your phone. They are used together with a word or phrase that identifies the topic or theme of a post. Search for a specific hashtag and you can find what other people are saying about your topic.

For example, if you wanted to see what people on Twitter are saying about the super bowl you might search for #SuperBowl. If you’re looking for posts on Instagram about popular restaurants you might search #ColumbusEats.

Okay, now that I’ve caught everyone up to speed, the social media savvy group can come on back into the conversation.

One of the biggest trends in social media is #blessed. People use this particular hashtag to label their social media postings about the good things in their lives. But as one might guess, there is a wide variety of ways that people interpret what it means to be #blessed.

Writing for the website EliteDaily.Com, Emily Arata notes that while according to the Pew Research Center, church affiliation among younger Americans is down, use of the hashtag “Blessed” has exploded in recent years.

“Since the beginning of organized religion,” she writes, “humanity has understood a blessing to be a gift bestowed by a force much larger than ourselves. But, in the millennial age, our egos have grown so inflated that we apply the term “blessing” to the most trivial events of our day: you’re #blessed to buy the last chocolate chip muffin at the coffee shop, or #blessed to be sweating at spin class. That’s not a blessing, per se, it’s life... It’s clear we’ve totally lost our sense of relativism when we believe a supernatural power has nothing better to do than make our phone batteries die before we drunk dial our exes.”¹

Jessica Bennet made a similar observation in the New York Times back in 2014. She noted that On Twitter, the #blessed hashtag may still prompt some genuine sentiment (“blessed to have such a supportive family behind me”) but more often than not it is blatantly self-promotional (“#blessed to be in 3rd place at the Webby’s... please vote now!”), surreptitiously braggy, or just plain absurd (Tim Tebow’s Twitter bio is just the single word).²

I did a quick search myself just to see what’s been posted on Twitter with the #blessed over the last few days and came up with some interesting ones.

One user tweeted out “New car. Love that new car smell. #blessed.”³ While another wrote “Gorgeous tree of life jewelry for my birthday this week. #blessed.”⁴ But perhaps my favorite was this one: “When you get more than 12 nuggets in your 12 Ct. meal at @ChickfilA.⁵ #blessed.”

It’s not necessarily some kind of insidious plot to be openly self-centered, it’s just a misunderstanding of how God’s blessing works.

Jesus was probably faced with similar situation in his time. The Old Testament actually helps us to see people who have wealth and are successful as being in some way blessed by God. The wealth and wisdom and success of David and Solomon was credited to God. The success and growth of the nation of Israel was also attributed to God’s doing. So, it would be quite rational for the people of Jesus’ day to look around and see those who were doing well as having benefited from God’s activity. And for those who were struggling, whether with poverty or hunger or with a legal system stacked against them or burdened beneath the weight of grief and loss or oppression at the hands of imperial Rome, it could easily have felt like they were experiencing the opposite of God’s blessings.

¹ <http://elitedaily.com/women/hashtag-blessed-ego-instagram/1111568/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/blessed-becomes-popular-word-hashtag-social-media.html>

³ Thomas, Eric, (@eric_et_thomas). “New car. Love that new car smell.” Posted: 1/26/17. Viewed 2/3/17. Tweet.

⁴ Karazincir, Ingrid (@psychicgrid). “Gorgeous tree of life jewelry for my birthday this week.” Posted: 1/25/17. Viewed 2/3/17. Tweet.

⁵ Appleman, Sarah (@yourkatygirl). ““When you get more than 12 nuggets in your 12 Ct. meal at @ChickfilA.” Posted: 1/25/17. Viewed 2/3/17. Tweet.

To this day, a gospel of Prosperity is relatively common in our society. This prosperity gospel teaches that wealth and physical well-being are always God's will for us and that faith and right living, usually defined as saying the right things and donating to religious causes, will result in increased wealth, privilege and well-being.⁶ But this reflects a basic misunderstanding of the word "blessed," particularly as Jesus uses it in the Sermon on the Mount.

It's understandable to think that physical well-being is a product of God's blessing. Every night when my family sits down for dinner, we ask a blessing. We regularly say prayers of thanksgiving for the ways God has blessed us. When we present our offerings to God during worship we often make the point that we are returning to God a portion of that with which God has so richly blessed us.

We see "stuff" as the sign of blessing and more and more stuff as the sign of more and more blessings. But what we are doing is confusing God's *blessing* with God's *provision*.

All that we are and all that we have *do* come from God. If you have a roof over your head and food on your plate, give thanks to God. If you have peace in your life and the love of family and friends, give thanks to God. We receive God's good gifts and we see them as a sign of God's blessing. But having a lot does not mean God has blessed us, nor does having little mean that God has cursed us.

You see "blessing" is one of those words with a dual meaning. We often talk about blessings defined as God's gifts. But here Jesus is teaching about something different. To be blessed in this context, is not "to have," but "to be." To be blessed in this context is to be made holy or to be favored by God.⁷

So, who are the ones Jesus says are Holy and Favored by God? Not the people with the most stuff. Not the people tweeting about flying in private planes or hitting four green lights in a row! Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for justice, those who are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, those who are persecuted for seeking justice and for following Jesus. And that's very different from what you'll usually see under the #blessed on social media.

Let's take those one at a time.

Blessed are the poor in Spirit. New Testament scholar Douglas Hare makes the point that what Jesus is talking about here are not just those who are poor, but those who are poor in spirit. What's the difference? Well, when we have a lot, we tend to forget the God who provides for us. Yet those who are poor will be more acutely aware of their need for God. Living on the margins helps you to rely on God a little more. Poor in spirit refers to those who exhibit "humble dependence on God's grace."

Does that leave out those who are wealthy? Not necessarily. It does not automatically include them, either. But Hare writes that Blessed are the poor in Spirit can also include the wealthy when we read it this way: "Blessed are the affluent who regard themselves as if they were poor, remembering humbly their dependence upon God and their subservience to [God's] will."⁸

⁶ "Prosperity Theology." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 5 Feb. 2017. Web. 06 Feb. 2017. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology>.

⁷ Carter, Warren. "Beatitudes." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. I, A-C. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006. 413-15. Print.

⁸ Hare, Douglas R. A. *Interpretation: Matthew*. Louisville: John Knox, 1993. 36-37. Print.

Blessed are those who mourn. Some scholars believe this is a reference to those who mourn the loss of what Israel was intended to be: a people called by God to embody God's will to the world. To mourn here is to see the injustice being done and to long for things to be made right.⁹

Blessed are the meek. The meek are not merely those who stand silently and never speak out. In the Old Testament book of Numbers, Moses is described as "meek" and he was certainly no shrinking violet. No, meek refers to those who "are nonviolent people, who are humble and gentle in their dealings with others because they have humbled themselves before the greatness of God."¹⁰

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is often read as blessed are those who strive to do God's will. But that puts the emphasis on our own works. More likely what Jesus means here is not *our* righteousness, but *God's* righteousness. Blessed are those who hunger for things to be set right; those who yearn for God's justice to be done.

Blessed are the merciful. Mercy includes compassion and forgiveness. It is not just a sympathetic attitude, but an *activity* that seeks to replicate the way that God has reached out to us, cared for us, loved us, and forgiven us.

The world seems to prefer retribution. The world seems to prefer taking an eye for an eye. But when we're constantly trying to get revenge for what the other guy did, and they are doing likewise, where does it end? God is merciful to us, therefore we should be merciful to one another.

Blessed are the pure in heart. Now we hear this and think that Jesus means those whose hearts are not inclined toward sin. But we also remember that Paul wrote "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." So, pure in heart cannot mean "sinless." But the word "pure" also refers to something that is not mixed with or combined with something else. In this sense, the pure heart is one that is dedicated solely to God and is not aligned with anything else, like money, or power, or prestige. The pure heart is dedicated to God alone.¹¹

Blessed are the peacemakers. Again, this may seem pretty straightforward, but it deserves a moment of consideration. Note this does not say "peace *lovers*, but peace *makers*. We all appreciate peace, but how many of us are willing to actually work for it? We live in a culture where now it seems that getting off a good burn is better than getting along. When there is conflict, whether in congress or in the workplace or on social media, the preferred approach seems to be slash and burn; strike back, save face.

But this doesn't say blessed are those who score the most points or blessed are those who win at all costs or blessed are those who can hurt others more than they can hurt you. Blessed are the peacemakers: those "who devote themselves to the hard work of reconciling hostile individuals, families, groups, and nations."¹²

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. In the word "righteousness," we hear echoes of Micah's words we read earlier. What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God? This is right living. This is aligning our lives to God's will. Sometimes

⁹ Hare, 38

¹⁰ Hare, 39

¹¹ Hare, 41

¹² Hare, 42

that means working for what is right in the world around us. Sometimes doing justice and walking with God puts us at odds with the powerful in our society. Sometimes doing justice and walking humbly with God results in persecution. Blessed are those who are persecuted for standing up for what is right.

Which leads to the final beatitude: Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. This one builds on the one before. Matthew is telling his audience that as they go out into the world to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, they will likely be persecuted for it. Just as Israel has traditionally condemned its own prophets, so these disciples will follow in the footsteps of the great prophets of Israel and face persecution of their own.

But to do God's will and to share God's love and to embody God's mercy and compassion; these are more important than popularity or the acceptance and accolades of our neighbors.

These are the ones Jesus calls blessed. These are the ones Jesus calls Holy and favored by God. Who are these people today? Where do we see the meek and the peacemakers? Where do we see people persecuted for seeking justice? Where do we see people humble before God and living in total reliance on God?

Ideally that would be in the church, but not always. We believe that we are saved and made right with God by God's grace alone and not by anything that we do. So, we do not seek to become poor in spirit or meek or persecuted just to earn what God has already given us by God's grace. But in Jesus words on the mountain, we learn that these are the qualities that are valued by God. So how can we justify striving to live in any other way?

Challenging, right?

Nobody said being a disciple would be easy. And in our society where faith is often reduced to the willingness of people to ascribe to a set of beliefs, we need to be reminded that being a disciple is more than what we profess. Jesus' call to discipleship is a call to action; a call to conform our lives not to the norms of the culture in which we find ourselves, but to God's will. Blessed are they who do, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.