

Fisherman's Guide to Good Living

Matthew 5:1-16

INTRODUCTION

HE EMERGED FROM THE [DC] METRO . . . AND POSITIONED HIMSELF AGAINST A WALL BESIDE A TRASH BASKET. By most measures, he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and began to play. . .

It was 7:51 a.m. on Friday, January 12, [2007] the middle of the morning rush hour. In the next 43 minutes, as the violinist performed six classical pieces, 1,097 people passed by. . .The acoustics proved surprisingly kind. Though the arcade is of utilitarian design, a buffer between the Metro escalator and the outdoors, it somehow caught the sound and bounced it back round and resonant. The violin is an instrument that is said to be much like the human voice, and in this musician's masterly hands, it sobbed and laughed and sang - ecstatic, sorrowful, importuning, adoring, flirtatious, castigating, playful, romancing, merry, triumphal, sumptuous. . .

No one knew it, but the fiddler standing against a bare wall outside the Metro in an indoor arcade at the top of the escalators was one of the finest classical musicians in the world [Joshua Bell], playing some of the most elegant music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made [it is estimated to be worth 3.5 million dollars]. His performance was arranged by The Washington Post as an experiment in context, perception and priorities -- as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste.

From *Pearls Before Breakfast* by Gene Weingarten

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Just think of it - the world famous Joshua Bell, playing a three and a half million dollar Stradivarius outside of the DC metro went virtually unnoticed. Just a few days before Joshua Bell had sold out the Boston Symphony Hall where regular seats go for \$100.00. In the subway, Bell received thirty two dollars from the 27 people who stopped long enough to give a donation - you see he was hidden in plain sight.

I think this can happen to us as we look at passages in the Bible that are well known. We often assume that we understand them, but they are so well known to us that we walk right by and don't really hear what they are saying. Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with the Beatitudes, contains some of the most commonly quoted passages in the Bible. So we must be careful to slow down and let Christ's words impact our hearts. This problem can be seen in our passage right away when we use the word blessed.

What does it mean to be blessed? It does not mean 'happy' as some translations would use it, unless you see the ultimate good in life is to be happy. Maybe a better way to translate it would be 'lucky'; "How lucky is the man." Yet, as Christians we don't believe in luck so we can't use that translations. In its most basic sense blessed means 'a life worth envying,' but envy is a sin so we can use that translation. This is why we translate it 'blessed'. We may not be sure what it means, but it is at least accurate. To compound the problem, we then call them the beatitudes which is a transliteration of a Latin word and in so doing prove that we are confused.

What Jesus is talking about is the good life. How to live God's way in the Kingdom of Heaven. So what we are looking at this morning is the fisherman's guide to good living. Let us join the disciples at Jesus' feet and seek to understand why only in Christ can we obtain the good life.

Only in Christ can we obtain the good life because. . .

- **Christ has obtained the Old Testament promises. (vv. 1-10)**

I. Christ Has Obtained The Old Testament Promises

To understand this passage we need to have a little of the context. In Matthew chapter 4, verses 18-22, we have the account of Jesus calling the disciples. The disciples were all fisherman and when Jesus called them they were to be fishers of men. The picture of being a fisher of men could be one of judgment since being caught tends to be the end of most fish. Or it could be a picture of salvation. Either way, they knew that they were not to be concerned about fish any more but about people.

So they left their nets and followed Jesus. Jesus' ministry at this point was amazing, and it really drew the crowds. People came from all over Palestine to see him because he was proclaiming the long awaited Kingdom of Heaven to an oppressed and very religious nation. Not only was he preaching it, but he was also bringing that Kingdom into affect by the miracles he was performing.

Matthew tells us in the end of chapter 4 where the crowds were coming from. Verses 24 & 25 of chapter four state; *"So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan."* Considering the conditions of the roads and that they were most likely traveling on foot, with sick people, they were likely traveling for weeks to see Jesus. I am sure the disciples were amazed. They probably were saying to themselves, "This man can fish for men!"

Yet, in chapter 5 verse one Matthew says; *"Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him."* Jesus saw the crowd and so withdrew to the mountain side to teach his disciples - the great fisherman teaching them how to be fishers of men. This was not a secret teaching, because the crowds were there but it was not teaching for the crowds. The sermon was addressed to the disciples, to the insiders - to fishermen about fishing. It is also Jesus teaching them about the crowds. The theme of the sermon (which covers chapters 5, 6, & 7) can be seen in chapter 6 verse 8 where Jesus uses the phrase, *"Do not be like them."* To be a fisher of men you have got to be different.

So he begins by giving them the fisherman's guide to the good life. In verses 3 to 10 Jesus points out eight blessing. Each one of these blessings are drawn straight out of the Old Testament. They are the long awaited blessings of God. This part of the sermon is not original to Jesus. They can each be found in the Old Testament, some in almost the same wording like Psalm 37:11; *"But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace."* Others are allusions to Old Testament themes that both the disciples and the crowds would have recognized.

The originality of Jesus is in bringing them all together into this one form. He is purposely using these themes that they would recognize and in so doing He is declaring that all the things that the prophets were looking for have now arrived. They are now yours because of Him.

These blessings are still very radical. They are a reversal of the many lists of worldly beatitudes that we hear. Poor in spirit sounds nothing like self esteem, or assertiveness training. Being meek isn't what most parents try to teach their young boys. Then there is this hungering and thirsting for righteousness - sounds a little like a fanatic. We would say blessed is the one who is happy, not those who mourn. Yet Jesus, and the Old Testament, tells us that it is those who mourn who will be blessed.

So how do we read these blessings? What does it mean to be poor, to mourn? As John Stott puts it, "The 'poor man' in the Old testament is one who is both afflicted and unable to save himself, and who therefore looks to God for salvation, while recognizing that he has no claim upon him." In Isaiah this 'spiritual poverty' is specially commended. It is *"the poor and needy,"* who *"seek water and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst."* for whom God promises to *"open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of valleys"* (Isaiah 41:17,18). As Calvin wrote; "He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is poor in spirit." The blessing that Jesus declares for

them is that they have the kingdom. It is the poor, those who have no righteousness on their own who obtain the kingdom.

The idea of mourning is similar. One of the scripture readings from this morning was from Isaiah 61:1-3. *"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion - to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified."*

Who are those who mourn in the Old Testament? They are the people of God who mourn the judgment of God that has fallen on the City of God. They can't sing the songs of Zion because they are in captivity, so all they can sing are songs of sadness. They mourn for the day when the Kingdom of Heaven will be built - and what is the promise? They will be comforted - it will be built.

This verse doesn't have anything to do with the grief of a funeral; it comes out of the Babylonian captivity. It has to do with a longing for a time of righteousness. It does deal with death in the sense that death is the judgment of God, but it has nothing to do with making you feel better because a loved one has passed away. It is mourning because of the rebelliousness that is in our hearts, and the hearts of others. Yet the promise is that a day will come when we will no longer mourn.

All eight of these blessings are the blessings of the life in the kingdom of heaven. Old Testament promises which Christ has obtained. He has made it possible for us to live a life where we seek God, and his righteousness, and express Christ's love to our neighbor. He has blessed you with the riches of a place in the Father's household.

Only in Christ can we obtain the good life because. . .

- **Christ has obtained the Old Testament promises. (vv. 1-10)**
- **It is a life aimed at the blessings of heaven. (vv. 11&12)**

II. It Is A Life Aimed At The Blessings Of Heaven

I wish we had time to delve into each of these blessings in depth, but that is something that we don't have time for here this morning. Yet I want to point out a few structural things in this passage. You will notice that the blessing in verse 3 and verse 10 are the same; *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* and *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* These two verses form an inclusion, or brackets, around the other verses. It means that they are all one unit. They are not a list of alternate blessings (you be the poor in spirit, I will be merciful, and someone in the back will be meek). Instead they are the blessings and characteristics of everyone in the kingdom. They are to describe its citizens.

Another thing that stands out about are bracket verses can be seen in the change of tense. All of the blessings in verses 4 to 9 are in the future tense - *"for they shall"* - yet verses 3 and 10 are in the present tense - *"for theirs is."* The kingdom is theirs now, and so they can have confidence in the promises to come. As verse 10 says, those that are persecuted are actually the blessed ones. They are the dwellers of the kingdom.

Those who are poor in spirit – those who know that there is nothing that they can do to be right before God – they are the very ones who the Kingdom comes to. Doesn't that give you hope. When you look at yourself and say, "Have mercy on me a sinner," you are the very one that the message of the kingdom is for. Jesus came so that by his life and death you would be able to stand before the Father, as a member of his kingdom. Though you are poor in yourself, you are also rich in Christ.

Yet we need to live for that kingdom. We are to live a life aimed at the blessings of heaven, for we have not yet received all of the blessings in this life. I may hunger and thirst for righteousness but I also continue to struggle with sin. Yet I

continue to struggle because I know that when Christ returns my hunger will be satisfied. I will be righteous and blameless before God. Not because of my perfection, but because Christ has purchased it with his life and death.

There is another shift in grammar between verses 10 and 11. The eight blessings listed in verses 3 through ten are all in the third person, when we hit verse 11 it shifts to the second person. *"Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* (Matthew 5:11& 12).

Jesus is no longer being general, but now he is introducing the fishers of men to their particular blessing. He is saying that your particular blessing is persecution. Just think about the fisherman here. They have left all to follow this man. They look at him and they see that he is awesome at gathering crowds - he can really fish for men! They are excited; they see themselves as part of a national movement. They look at the crowds and think that they must be on the brink of overthrowing the Romans. Jesus takes them up into the mountains for a training course. Lesson one; the values of the Old Testament are the values that matter, but the one that stands out for you is you will be persecuted just like the prophets of old. This was probably one of the most disappointing starts to a sermon that they could have heard. But Jesus was showing them that they needed a life that was aimed at the blessings of heaven.

Part of living a life aimed at the blessings of heaven is to live counter to the world. This is not that strange if you think about it. If we live in a world of evil and are blessed by the world, then it must be because we are part of the evil, the corruption. If we are hated and despised then it is most likely because you are not a part of the corruption.

Our lives are shaped by what we value and pursue. If you value the reward and recognition of being a marathon runner then you have to live your life differently than someone who does not. You will eat different foods, spend time training, even the books and magazines you read will reflect your focus. When people talk with you, in a short span of time they will know what you value in your life.

What Jesus is telling the disciples is that if you live a life aimed at the blessings of heaven one of the ways you will know you are on the right track is when the crowds don't approve. When your life doesn't fit with the cultural ideas of society around you then you are on the right track. How do you know that you don't fit - By how they react to you?

Only in Christ can we obtain the good life because. . .

- **Christ has obtained the Old Testament promises. (vv. 1-10)**
- **It is a life aimed at the blessings of heaven. (vv. 3, 10, 11&12)**
- **It is different than the world. (vv. 13-16)**

III. It Is Different Than The World

In most of your Bibles you will see a heading after verse 12. It seems some editor somewhere felt Jesus was switching to a new topic. One thing to remember is that those headings are not inspired. Sometimes they are helpful, and sometimes - like here - they are not. Jesus is not moving on to a new topic, he isn't even changing subjects. This can be seen because everything is still in the second person.

"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house" (Matthew 5:13-15).

These are verses that many of us are very familiar with, and when I run across verses that everyone 'knows' it is important to actually slow down and make sure the text actually says what I think it does. How are the disciples like salt? The most common answer I have heard is that salt is used as flavor and a preservative. So the disciples are to make the world more palatable for God, and preserve it from destruction. The problem is that just because the only uses that we have for salt is preservation and flavor does not mean that is the only use that Jesus would have thought

of. So how do we figure this out - we answer three questions. How was it used in their day? How Jesus uses the metaphor of salt in other places? What the context tells us about the metaphor.

When I went looking up the use of salt in the ancient world here are just a few;

- Paying Taxes
- Rubbing into newborn babies
- Way of destroying things
- Symbol of cursing
- Used as an antiseptic in animal fodder (still done today) to make into a better fertilizer
- Used to increase animal health - salt licks (still used today)
- Used as fertilizer, a lot of salt is bad but a little salt is helpful
- Sign of friendship (I ate salt with him)
- Sign of dependence (He lives off of the salt of the king)
- A covenant symbol (eating and sacrifice)
- And several others

I don't expect you to remember these different uses, but just broaden your perspective beyond just preservative and taste. So how does Jesus use the imagery of salt? The only other place that I found Jesus using this imagery is in Luke 14:34&35. *"Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."* In Luke he is definitely has the use as a fertilizer in mind. If salt is only taste and preservative I would hate to think what he would want you to do with that manure pile. Still this isn't conclusive because people can use that same imagery in different ways. All we have accomplished is to broaden the possible meanings of the salt.

So we will need to go back to our passage for the answer. Jesus uses three parallel images; salt, light, a city on a hill. So what is common in these images that Jesus uses? He is pointing out the uselessness of a light that doesn't shine the inability of hiding a city on a hill and the uselessness of salt that isn't salty.

What would make salt useless - If it no longer retained the qualities that make it different and useful. The point doesn't center on what the salt was used for, but that it is useful. There is no point in having saltless salt, or a lightless light. And a city on the hill always stands out. The point Jesus is going for is the need to be distinctive. He is pointing out the uselessness of being like everyone else if you are going to fish for men. He is saying it is impossible to be one of his disciples and not be different. With the last image he takes it a little farther, pointing out the inevitability and necessity to stand out against the culture around you.

You don't need to figure out the use of salt to get Jesus' point - they all work. If salt is not different then it would be pointless to try to put it to any of the possible uses. That is why they will be persecuted and hated like the prophets of old - they will stand out against their society. They will display the kingdom to a world in rebellion.

So how are they to stand out? In their good works, yet these are a different kind of good works. *"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 5:16). What do we do when we see someone do good works? Whether it is helping an old lady across the road, volunteering with the boys and girls club or any other thing we typically think of as good works. We say that they are such a great person, we give them praise. Yet these good works are supposed to bring praise to *"your Father who is in heaven."* The rest of Jesus' sermon - chapters 5, 6 & 7 - are an exposition of these good works. They are good works that show that their spirituality is real and authentic. It is about doing the will of the father, not making people feel better or being popular.

For the disciples, the crowds provide the opportunity for self deception. Popularity and approval are strong lures that can quickly lead us away as well. They can get us to set aside both the values and the blessings of heaven for lesser things. We can be tempted to remain silent when we know that our opinions and values will not be popular. Fear of the reaction of the crowd around us may even get us to approve of things that go counter to the teaching of scripture. The

crowd around us wants us to conform to their values; to see riches which are false and fleeting and to seek approval so that we can avoid persecution. For popularity isn't a blessing of the kingdom, persecution is - because our life is to be different than the world.

CONCLUSION

To wrap things up lets think back to our violinist in the DC metro . . .

As it happens, exactly one person recognized Bell, and she didn't arrive until near the very end. For Stacy Furukawa . . . there was no doubt. She doesn't know much about classical music, but she had been in the audience three weeks earlier, at Bell's free concert at the Library of Congress. And here he was, the international virtuoso, sawing away, begging for money. She had no idea what . . . was going on, but whatever it was, she wasn't about to miss it. . . . [she] positioned herself 10 feet away from Bell, front row, center. She had a huge grin on her face . . . [Her and the grin] remained planted in that spot until the end. . . . When it was over, Furukawa introduced herself to Bell, and tossed in a twenty. (April 8, 2007 Washington Post)

What will be your reaction to the master fisherman and his guide to good living? When you look at your life, is it different than the world? If we see the value of Jesus' words we will stop following the wisdom of the world and pursue the good life of the kingdom of God. Knowing that our lifestyle will not bring us praise from the people around us, but it will from our father in heaven. Then our lives - in word and deed - will point people to God and so make us fishers of men.

Let us live a life where we seek God, and his righteousness, and Christ's love to our neighbor. For in Christ we have access to the very promises of God. This is the good life of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Only in Christ can we obtain the good life because. . .

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