

**Be Happy: Claiming the Beatitudes**  
**Merciful and Pure in Heart - 2-7-2010**  
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**Matthew 5:1-12 - The Beatitudes**

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.

The Beatitudes we just read come at the beginning of what is known as Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. This sermon, as it is recorded in Matthew, serves as a kind of inaugural address of sorts. Jesus came

to proclaim a way of ordering the world and human relationships that stood in contrast to the way things were and are. He came to set the record straight as to how it is when God rules the world. The beatitudes speak of the attitudes and behaviors and orientation of those who "get it;" those who live by God's rules. The rest of his sermon, and you might say the rest of his life, is spent illustrating what it all means.

Jesus didn't just get up one day and say these things in a vacuum. He was born into a particular socio-religious context, and it was to those in that context that he preached and taught and healed. If we are to really understand what Jesus is saying here, we need to understand a bit about the meaning and context behind his words. Jesus was a Jew. He was steeped in Hebrew scripture. He knew the stories of Abraham and Moses. He had studied the prophets. Another way to put it is he was well versed in both the law and the prophets - both channels of God's relationship to humanity. But whenever there is law, people have a tendency to get legalistic and forget the reason for

the law in the first place, and pretty soon you have law-abiding people who have lost their sense of humility or compassion. Jesus, in his passion for God's ways, saw how the religious leaders had become legalistic attending to the letter of the law and forgetting the spirit. And so when Jesus spoke, he brought those tendencies to light and offered a different vision of God.

These religious leaders, the Pharisees, were not bad. They wanted to serve God, and so they followed all the laws and commandments. And they wanted to be sure that God's truths were understood and obeyed by everyone. But because they wanted to do everything correctly, their desire to serve God turned into absolute perfectionism. They obeyed all Jewish laws of cleanliness, sacrifice and obedience. They were focused on purity and keeping everything in order. But something always goes wrong with this kind of focus on getting things right, on being right. When one strives for perfection...then one also rejects imperfection. And when on the lookout for imperfection, one sees imperfection in people, particularly

people who are not like you. Then imperfection becomes labeled sin. And because they, the righteous ones, have sacrificed so much for God, they naturally became PROUD of themselves and set themselves apart from others...from "sinners", those undeserving. And of course this whole process involves a lot of judging of others and deciding whether they measure up or not. And when you are judging others it is difficult, if not impossible, to be honest and humble and see just how much you have received God's mercy not by your own works, but by the grace of God.

You see how this spiral leads a person down a path away from God... and they become blind and hardened of heart, seeking their own gain and need to be right. French writer, and philosopher, Voltaire once said, "The perfect is the enemy of the good." And that is what happens when people begin to think their standing with God depends upon their own perfection in keeping the law; in offering the appropriate sacrifices; in washing and keeping their distance from that which is judged unclean.

But here comes Jesus, who clearly has a connection to God and clearly knows the rules. The Pharisees can see that. So they would assume, wrongly, that Jesus must be striving for the same perfection they are. But then they see Jesus hanging out with and eating with and touching imperfect people - the unclean, the sinner, those they have taught themselves to AVOID. Naturally they were perplexed. Naturally they felt the need to question and challenge Jesus. But Jesus' turns it around and challenges them with a more complete vision of God's desire for right living when he tells them, "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'"(Matt. 9:13)

When Jesus says "blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy," this is the context. When people get fixated on the law and purity and perfection and being right, the focus is on themselves and judgment becomes the basic orientation. Mercy requires a deeper look at another and the recognition that you, too, have been in need of and received mercy. Mercy can come in the form of a helping hand, or a break, when one is suffering - deserved or not. Several stories of

Jesus come to mind. There is the well-known story of the Good Samaritan. The religious leaders avoided the man beaten and left by the side of the road for dead in order not to be contaminated by him. They were following the rules, after all. But along comes the good-for-nothing Samaritan - the one who clearly does not keep the religious observances - and it is he who shows mercy and proves to be the neighbor expressing God's love. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book The Cost of Discipleship, writes, "[The merciful] will be found consorting with publicans and sinners, careless of the shame they incur thereby. In order that they may be merciful, they cast away the most priceless treasure of human life, their personal dignity and honor."

Jesus tells another story, about an unforgiving servant. This story comes as a response to Peter asking Jesus how many times one must forgive - like 7 times? Jesus says, how about seventy times seven! And he tells the story of a king who decides to square accounts with his servants. One servant was brought to him who owed \$100,000. The servant couldn't pay, so he was to be sold, along with

his wife and family and all his goods. The slave threw himself at the king and begged for mercy. The king was moved, had mercy and cancelled his debt. No sooner had the servant left when he came upon a fellow servant who owed him \$10. The other servant could not pay the debt and begged for mercy. But the one who had been granted mercy did not show mercy. Seeing this, the king had the servant arrested and thrown in jail until he could pay his debt.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us to pray, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". Forgiveness, mercy, compassion; those are essential to the character of God. When we recognize that, we want to respond in kind. Also in that sermon, Jesus says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." Judgment creates distance between people. Judgment hardens hearts. Mercy, on the other hand, creates connection and hope. If there's one thing we all have in common it's that we inevitably find ourselves in need of mercy from time to time. We all screw up. We all fall short. And any of us could,

if we haven't already, end up in dire circumstances and at the mercy of others. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

Purity issues created situations whereby good, law-abiding religious people could not or would not respond out of compassion and mercy - like the priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan. But in this next beatitude, Jesus offers an alternative kind of purity. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." To be pure in heart is to have a singular focus; to will one thing; to truly put first things first. The sixth chapter of Matthew records Jesus' admonitions about religious observance and puts them into perspective. Almsgiving, fasting and prayer were key practices to the devote religious life. Jesus doesn't disagree, but he does suggest that motive is as much a part as the action itself as he warns, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them... when you give alms do not sound the trumpet like the hypocrites do, but rather, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." Likewise, when praying, go into your room and shut the door, and when fasting,

make sure you don't make faces and call attention to yourself. The point of religious observance is not to rack up points. It is not a show or a game to win. Jesus goes on to say not to store up treasure on earth, for "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." No one can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and wealth." Being pure in heart is to serve just one master, to have just one focus, to have your outside and inside be integrated. The reason Jesus called the Pharisees "hypocrites" was because they had two masters - the religious law which they could follow to the letter, but which made them blind to the hardness of their own hearts and their lack of compassion and love for those who didn't measure up. Their inner motive didn't correspond to their outer action. Their focus on purity codes corrupted their hearts and closed their eyes to seeing God in their neighbor.

Clarence Jordan, wrote, "Now when [people] attempt to live a double life spiritually, that is, to appear pure on the outside but are not pure in the heart, they are anything but blessed. Their conflicting

loyalties make them wretched, confused, tense. And having to keep their eyes on two masters at once makes them cross-eyed, and their vision is so blurred that neither image is clear."

"Spiritual purity... is letting go of that which still blinds you. It is allowing the soul to return to its blessed state, the original blessing of knowing that *God is over all, through all, in all, God is all!*" (J. Stuart Taylor III, March 6, 2005, <http://stmarkspresbyterian.org/stmarks/sermons/06mar05.htm>) Jesus says not to worry about things, but rather, to seek first the kingdom of God. Jesus says the whole of the law and prophets can be summed up in this, that we are to love *God with heart, soul, mind and strength* and our neighbor as ourselves. If that is our singular focus, we do not need to worry if we are satisfying religious requirements, we will not have to worry about where we go after we die, and in the process our eyes might just open enough to see *God*. Amen.