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THE SHOCKING NEWS ABOUT BLESSING
Matthew 5

Laurie and I watched a movie that was about two twin sisters who argued about whose life was more difficult and demanding. They decided to settle the argument by switching places for a few days to prove their point. Both of them found themselves in situations where they were supposed to be the other sister, and didn't know what was going on, didn't know what they were supposed to be doing. So they had to bluff their way through it. When I was watching that I thought, "I know what that's like. I feel like that a lot of the time." We're doing the best we can, but we know we're bluffing our way through. So in quiet moments we go to feeling terribly inadequate, especially before God. How could he ever really accept us, because he's not fooled by the bluff? He knows the truth.

Claremont Graduate School psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has done some fascinating research that has involved thousands of people as subjects. He had these many subjects carry pagers with them as they went through their day. The pagers were programmed to go off at random intervals. When the pager beeped the subjects were to write down whatever they were doing, thinking and feeling at that moment. This experiment revealed the striking fact that when people were alone and undistracted by noise or activity, their minds drifted toward an awareness of discontentment, a sense of inadequacy, anxiety about the future and a general sense of unease. This was pervasive his subjects. In his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, he said this is why watching television is so popular. Though it isn't all that truly enjoyable much of the time it distracts us from those feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and discontentment. A show may not be especially good, but it's better than feeling anxious, inadequate and discontent. In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, Frederick Buechner realized the same thing without doing the formal research. He wrote (p. 19), "Part of the inner world of everyone is this sense of emptiness, unease, incompleteness...something of great importance in our lives is missing."

We sometimes look to religion for help with this background sense of inadequacy and unease and find it only makes things worse. Instead of helping us, it reinforces that we don't measure up. We are more inadequate than we even imagined. This contributes to more anxiety. This is not what Jesus came to do. He said he came to give us rest for our souls. Today we are going to look at part of a speech Jesus made early in his ministry that includes some of the most radical ideas about life

anyone has ever spoken. This is the first part of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 4:23 says that Jesus was preaching “the good news of the kingdom.” This sermon was some of that good news. It’s not good news if its message is “You think you’re inadequate and hopeless? It’s way worse than you even think. So you’d better bear down and try a whole lot harder.” This sermon was good news, which means we need to take another look at it to see in what way this is actually good news. Let’s look at Matthew 5.

THERE’S A NEW BLESSING IN TOWN

The opening words of this chapter are sometimes referred to as the Beatitudes. That term comes from the Latin word, *beatus*. Theologians love to liberally drop Latin words. I wonder if theologians don’t try to keep that going because throwing around Latin terms kind of makes them sound smarter and holier. Whatever the case, that word *beatus* meant “blessed.” Verses 3-10 all begin “blessed are...” This is all about who is really blessed. That’s where the term “beatitudes” came from. Those verses open up the theme for the entire sermon.

There are two radical, counter cultural ideas in this part of this sermon. The two ideas have to do with first, what it means to be blessed, and second, how one gains said blessing. Let’s start with what it means to be blessed. In our society what do people think of when they think of being blessed?

The rich and famous, the beautiful people, are the blessed. The blessed people are the people others envy. They are the ones about whom many think, “I wish I could be like them.” They are the beautiful ones, the ones with lots of money, the ones in positions of power. The ones on magazine covers at the checkout stand. What do you think it means to be blessed? Generally we think of it as having something really good right now. It is great intellect, beauty, money, talent, the ideal life, whatever that is, and so on.

The people of Jesus’ day weren’t much different than us, although they maybe took it a step further. They added a religious component to pretty much the same idea. In Matthew 19:16 a wealthy man asked Jesus, “What good thing must I do to get eternal life?” Jesus could have simply told the rich guy that he just needed to believe in him. He said that on several occasions. In John 6 a crowd of people asked Jesus a similar question. Verse 28 says they asked, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” In verse 29 Jesus answered, “The work of God is to believe in the one he has sent,” meaning himself. But he knew that this rich man had a big issue in his life that stood in the way of him really believing in Jesus. It was that what the guy cared most about was his money. He wanted to have his

money way more than he wanted eternal life. If it came down to a choice between either eternal life or your money, he would take the money. So Jesus put it in exactly those terms to show him the issue. Sell everything you have and give the money to the poor. Verse 22 says the guy went away sad, because he had great wealth. He wasn't giving it up for anything, not even eternal life.

In verse 23 Jesus said, "It is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven." Note the reaction of Jesus' disciples to that statement. Verse 25 says, "When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, 'who then can be saved?'" The obvious implication is if a rich man can't be saved, then nobody can.

They weren't puzzled by Jesus' comment. They weren't encouraged or inspired by it. They weren't annoyed by it. They were greatly astonished by it. Greatly astonished is kind of a redundancy. It's like saying something is totally unique. The word unique means it's one of a kind, no other like it. So adding the word "totally" is redundant. It's not possible to be partially unique. If something is partially unique, it's not unique at all. It's just a bit different. To be astonished means to be shocked, utterly surprised, in complete amazement, so adding "greatly" is redundant. But Matthew did that to stress how totally shocked they were. That statement ran contrary to everything they and everyone else in their society believed.

In the Hebrew scriptures God promised if people obeyed him he would bless them with abundance. In other words, he would make them rich. Deuteronomy 28:8 says if you obey God, "The Lord will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to." In verse 13 he said, "You will always be at the top, never at the bottom."

So according to those verses, how can we know if someone is blessed by God? They'll be on top. They'll be rich. They'll be successful. If you're on the bottom, if you have no money, what is to be concluded? You are not blessed by God. That could only be because you're not really obeying him, because if you were, he'd bless you. If you're not blessed by God you should hardly expect him to bless you with eternal life, because obviously you are out of favor with him.

When Jesus said it is nigh onto impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, his disciples were stunned. The rich man is in God's favor. He's the guy who must be obeying God. So if he can't get into the kingdom, then no one can.

Most assuredly no poor blue collar slob who is obviously not blessed by God, who is clearly out of favor with him, has even a whisper of a prayer at getting in.

Now look at what Jesus said in verses 3-10. The blessed people are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness. Uh, that doesn't sound right. Poor, persecuted, mourning. Those are not the people anyone envies. How is being poor or persecuted a blessing? I don't hear anyone saying that they are really blessed because they lost their job, their house was foreclosed on and they've barely got enough food to eat. Where is "blessed are the rich, blessed are the ones on top, blessed are the powerful, the beautiful, the famous"? Those all seem to be MIA.

In those statements Jesus turned the whole system on its head. That becomes glaringly obvious when we note why those poor, persecuted, mourning people are blessed. It is because theirs is the kingdom of God. It is because they will be filled with righteousness. It is because they will be shown mercy. It is because they will see God. It is because they will be called the children of God. Jesus claimed the real blessing is being a child of God and being in his kingdom.

In our theological construct today it is easy to interpret that to mean that the person who is blessed is the person who is going to go to heaven when they die. It includes that, but it is more than that. In Colossians 1:12-13 Paul gives thanks to God the Father, "who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves."

Jesus was saying that the people who are blessed are those who have been rescued from the domain of darkness and brought into the kingdom of Christ. They are in that kingdom right now. They have been shown mercy, they have been declared righteous, approved, accepted by God, they can live in his presence and experience his love.

What do you think the greatest blessing is? The human default is to think to be really blessed is to have the best of what this life offers right now in the way of approval, security, possessions, pleasure and power. We think those who are famous, beautiful, wealthy and thus financially secure, able to control everything in their lives, are the most blessed. And Jesus claimed in this passage that is all an illusion.

Jesus insisted here that the best life has to offer, the blessing we all need, is to be approved by God, to become his child, and to live in his kingdom beginning right this moment and continuing on into eternity. Again I will quote Frederick Buechner in his book, *Secrets In The Dark*. He wrote (p. 149), “The Kingdom of God is what all of us hunger for above all things, even when we don’t know its name or realize that it’s what we’re starving to death for...It is where we belong. It is home...and all of us are homesick for it.”

It really doesn’t require much thought to realize that this must be true. What do we really want? We want peace. We want joy. We are desperate to know that we have value, that our lives matter, that they mean something, that we are approved, ultimately by God, that we are loved and we need to love. We absolutely must have hope. Those are the things we all know are central to a blessed life. Our problem is we get confused about what brings us those things. We think it comes from succeeding, from being smart or talented, from being noticed and approved by people, from having money or fame.

How much money is required for us to be at peace, to know we’re declared righteous by God and to guarantee us eternal life? There is no amount of money that can give those things. What talent can gain those things for you? What power or position or beauty can give them to you? None! Having more money makes life easier, but it cannot give us those things. If we have nearly unlimited wealth, but do not have those things, what will life be like? It will still be filled with that sense of inadequacy, discontent and disquiet. Without those things it will never be a truly blessed life.

The key truth here is that all of those things come right out of the kingdom of God. We gain God’s kingdom because we are loved and accepted by him, we have immense worth because the ultimate, most important being in all that exists values us infinitely. In his kingdom we are at peace because we are forgiven and have an unassailable hope. In his kingdom every single aspect of our lives is loaded with eternal significance and meaning.

The kingdom of God, where the God who is the author of life, who is good, just, merciful and perfectly loving rules, is the place where we most experience love, respect, oneness, redemption, reconciliation, and a happy ending to all of life. To the degree that we live right this minute in the kingdom of God we experience those things. The farther we are from the kingdom, the more we experience their absence. Jesus was absolutely right when he said the most blessed person is the one

who lives in God's kingdom. Do you believe that the kingdom of God is by far the blessing you need and want the most? That totally changes what life is all about.

THOSE WHO ARE OUTWARDLY RIGHTEOUS, AREN'T

The second radical idea in this sermon has to do with how we gain the blessing of the kingdom. If that's really the blessing that we want and need most, how do we get it? Unfortunately there has been a lot of teaching on these verses that send us in completely the wrong direction. In fact, they direct us into a dead end. This teaching takes these descriptions like commands. Go be poor in spirit, go mourn, go be a peacemaker, go be gentle, go be persecuted and you can have the blessing that Jesus promised. In other words, they take it as though Jesus was saying, "Go earn this by having these qualities."

That's not at all what Jesus had in mind. We get a clue to what Jesus had in mind in Luke 4:18-19. This was at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He was back in Nazareth. He had been doing some preaching, so he was asked to give their equivalent of the sermon in the synagogue on Saturday. He read a quote from Isaiah 61:1-2. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he said in verse 21, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, he said, "That passage was talking about me. That is what I'm doing."

So Jesus was bringing good news to the poor, to the oppressed, the downtrodden, the nobodies and the no-accounts of his world. Remember how the theological worldview of his people in that day worked. If you obeyed God, then he would accept you and bless you with abundance in this world. Those who were the upper crust of society, the accepted, the wealthy ones, were obviously blessed by God, thus the most righteous and most deserving.

Who came to listen to Jesus? Who followed him? It was not the upper crust. It was not the wealthy people of the society. It was not the religious leaders or the most respectable people. Early on they mostly ignored Jesus, and in the few encounters they had with him they wrote him off as at best inconsequential, and at worst as a know-nothing blue collar heretic.

The people who followed Jesus were fishermen, day laborers, dirt farmers, shepherds, wood workers, potters, common people who were mostly mired in poverty and the daily struggle to survive. Even worse, the criminals, prostitutes and

low life's of that day flocked to him. Many had some faith, but they didn't have the time to spend studying the ancient scriptures and arguing minute points of doctrine and practice. Many probably couldn't read, and even if they could they had no access to the written scriptures. Their lives were occupied with just getting by, and while they didn't flaunt disobedience to the Law, they mostly weren't all that rigorous about it either because their energy went into working and surviving. They didn't pray enough, didn't make as many animal sacrifices as they should, didn't give enough money, didn't always adhere strictly to the purification rituals, maybe even fudged on the Sabbath sometimes. And they suffered from the common moral failings so typical of any group of humans.

All of those people bought into in the system we saw earlier. They were not on the top, they were on the bottom so they were not blessed by God. They had no illusions about that. The elites looked down their noses at them. They were viewed in a way akin to how our cultural elites look down on people from Kentucky, or those rednecks in Mississippi. They knew they never came close to the "righteousness" of the religious elites, and that God undoubtedly had no time for them whatsoever. They were poor in spirit, both because they were physically poor, thus obviously not experiencing God's favor, and because they had no spiritual riches either.

Do you know why those people flocked to Jesus? It was because he brought them a revolutionary message of hope. He came to proclaim good news specifically to the poor, to them, the oppressed. They are the people Jesus was describing in verses 3-10! They were poor in spirit. They mourned because life was harsh for them, and because they wished they were better than they were. They hungered and thirsted for righteousness, but thought that was hopeless for them. They were merciful, because they knew they had no right to look down on anyone, given their deficits. In a poetic way, Jesus was describing humble, looked down on, people. He was saying it was their awareness of their poverty of soul, that they had nothing to take pride in and crow about, their very clear understanding that their only hope was that God would somehow have mercy on them, that qualified them for God's blessing and his kingdom.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy* (p. 121), the late Dallas Willard said what Jesus did here would be as if he said in our culture, "Blessed are the physically repulsive, blessed are those who smell bad, the twisted, misshapen, deformed, the too big, the too little, too loud, the bald, the fat and the old, for they are all riotously celebrated in the party of Jesus."

This was utterly radical. It was an all out, violent attack on the prevailing religious system of that day. And Jesus proceeds from that point to completely dismantle that system. Look at verse 20. “I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” Exceed the Pharisees? That’s simply not possible. No one could do that. They were far and away the best! Yet Jesus said if you have to earn God’s favor by scrupulously keeping all of rules, then you’re going to have to do way better than the Pharisees. Jesus went on to explain what he meant.

In verses 21-22 he said, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.” That’s crazy! The law keepers prided themselves on having a perfect score on that law. “Don’t commit murder.” Hey, I’ve totally nailed that one. I’ve never murdered anyone in my life. I’ve never even wanted to murder anyone. There have been a few moments when maybe a little pain for someone else might have been in order, and I’ve known a person or two that I’ve felt the world would have been better without, but I’ve never wanted to kill anyone.

But Jesus said that God’s righteousness, the real intent of the Law, has to do with not just our outward actions, but with what’s inside us. So if you’ve ever been angry with someone, you’ve violated that Law. You don’t even have to act on that anger. You just have to think it. Years ago in our former ministry there was a woman who criticized Laurie in ways that were unfair and just plain untrue. I love Laurie and realize that I am not objective when it comes to her, but in this case the shots the woman were taking were totally a result of her own issues. I didn’t go off the deep end, raging at the woman. In fact, I never did anything about her. But I will confess freely that there was more than a little anger in my heart at her. Even now I have had the experience of having heard this woman’s name mentioned and I get this twinge of negative feeling. I’m not bearing a big grudge against her, but there’s been anger in there. Jesus says I violated God’s Law.

Jesus goes on to attack other superficial approaches to the Law. Instead of the Law saying adultery is wrong, Jesus says even the thing that gives rise to adultery, lust, is a violation of the Law. At the end of the chapter he really slams the door on us. In verse 43 he says, “You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” That’s what the Pharisees taught. We are to love our neighbors, but those dirty Romans aren’t our neighbors. They’re our enemy, so we should despise them. Jesus said the real meaning of the command to love our neighbors is to even love our enemies.

The point of all this is the most religious people, the respectable ones, are no better than the people on the bottom rung of society. They violate God's Law just as much as anyone. So if they are relying on their own supposed "righteousness," which is all outward, all for show, to gain God's blessing, then they're in big trouble. They do not get it.

So how does one get this most crucial of all blessings? One admits his or her poverty of soul. We can only say, "I'm in the group on the bottom. I'm in the group whose only hope is that God will have mercy on me." Jesus was saying to the down and outers who flocked to him, "You are the ones upon whom God will have mercy and give his blessing. You are the ones who are going to enjoy the kingdom of God. You are God's children. That's because you admit your need, you humble yourselves before him, saddened by your failings, and appeal to him for mercy and grace."

APPLICATION

RESET YOUR BLESSING PARADIGM

For probably 10 years Laurie and I knew our kitchen needed to be redone. We had the classic 1990's 4-inch tile counters. Some of the tiles were chipped and the grout was awful. The sink was chipped and cracked. Last year we were finally able to afford to replace our counters and sink. We spent a lot of time looking at various granite and quartzite slabs, looking for one that would fit well with our décor. We finally decided on one that we thought would work well. The day came when the new counters were finally installed. The guy who fabricated and installed the counters did a great job. But when I went into the kitchen my stomach kind of sank. We didn't get even close to matching our décor. The kitchen did not look good. I had a "what are we going to do" moment. It took a while, but we finally came up with an idea for a new approach. We needed a new paradigm for our kitchen, one very different from what we had before.

Jesus said in this sermon we need a new paradigm for blessing. It is standard equipment on human beings to think of blessing as the life of abundance, pleasure and power right now. But Jesus tells us we need to see blessing as being in the kingdom of God. It is a completely different way of seeing life, a way that has profound impacts for what we pursue, what we prioritize and the kind of people we will become.

Laurie and I saw the movie *The Greatest Showman* this week. The story is loosely based on the life of P. T. Barnum of circus fame. It has two main themes. One is

that we should value and respect the dignity of every human being, no matter how different they may be. But the other message is that fame, money and position are not what life is all about. It is about relationships, about love. At one point Barnum set up an American tour for Jenny Lind, the world famous singer. She drew huge crowds and sung to thunderous applause, But at one point in the movie they have her sing, “All the shine of a thousand spotlights, all the stars we steal from the sky, will never be enough, never be enough. Towers of gold are still too little, these hands could hold the world, but it’ll never be enough, never be enough for me.” She sang about the fact that our greatest desire, our greatest need, is to be loved. The movie writers don’t get it completely, but they sense the acclaim, the money, the applause leaves us empty. The climax of the movie comes when Barnum realizes this, and sings of how for years he chased the cheers, but it left him empty, and longing for the love of his family. He sings “From now on” saying it is going to be different. The stuff of this world can never give us what we need, it will never be enough. So from now on we should live in the kingdom of God, rejoicing in the blessing of his infinite love and grace.

All of us want to be filled. We want to be filled with life and peace and joy. While the standard idea of blessing makes for more pleasant circumstances, it can never fill us. It can never give the life, the peace and the joy that we want. What will do that is living in the kingdom of God. We should know that, because throughout our lives we’ve kept pursuing the blessings of this world that we think we want, but they’ve never been enough. What we need is to shift our paradigm, renew our focus on living in the kingdom of God, for that is the blessing that brings satisfaction.

REST IN THE GOOD NEWS

We all know the sense of inadequacy, the unease and disquiet, that I talked about at the beginning. Is there any answer for that? Yes, there is. It is in the message of good news that Jesus gives in this passage. There is hope for the inadequate, the flawed and failing people like us. It begins with admitting our inadequacy and throwing ourselves on the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

In his introduction to the book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (p. 12), Brennan Manning wrote the gospel is for “the bedraggled, beat up and burnt out. It is for...the wobbly and weak-kneed who know they don’t have it all together...It is for the inconsistent, unsteady disciples whose cheese is falling off their cracker...It is for the bent and bruised who feel their lives are a grave disappointment to God. It is for smart people who know they are stupid and honest disciples who know they are scalawags.”

This is good news for us. The pressure is off. God loves ragamuffins like us. In fact, the only people who will ever experience true blessing are those who know they are ragamuffins and are grieved by that, but who desperately throw themselves on the grace and mercy of God.

Before Laurie and I got engaged she came to a couple of football games that I played in. I kind of hate to even admit it now, but those games I felt extra pressure to play well. In my young idiot brain I had the silly idea that she would see my athletic prowess and be impressed, and that would help win her heart. At the time Laurie didn't even think she was looking for someone to win her heart. But I now know for a fact that athletic prowess wasn't even on her list of things that were necessary for someone to win her heart. If it had been she never would have consented to become Mrs. Laurie Myatt. I put extra pressure on myself because I thought it mattered in our relationship, and I couldn't have been more wrong.

We do the same thing. We create a list of things we must do to impress God, to get him to like us, to make ourselves feel adequate, worthy, to finally have a blessed life. To our surprise, the things that we think are necessary, the things that put so much pressure on us, that cause us to feel discouraged, depressed, even hopeless, aren't even on the list. What God cares about is that seeing our desperate plight we throw ourselves on his grace. He wants us to quit pretending, quit putting on a show, quit trying to prove something and simply admit our desperate need for his grace as our only hope. And when we do that we get his kingdom, the most blessed thing we can ever have in life. He wants us to rest in what he has done for us, to rely on his kindness alone. Do you feel inadequate? Do you think you really are poor in spirit? If so, congratulations. You qualify for God's kingdom! So rest, be at peace, you who are poor in spirit. For yours is the kingdom of heaven.

REJOICE IN WHAT JESUS HAS DONE

The pressure is off. What a relief! In Christ you have become a child of God, guaranteed his inheritance. You are in possession of the greatest blessing you could ever have. What do you do when someone gives you an undeserved but precious gift? You rejoice!

On March 14, 1979 Laurie gave me an utterly undeserved, absolutely unexpected, shockingly wonderful gift. She agreed to become my wife. She didn't do it grudgingly, she did it enthusiastically and joyfully at a moment when I thought such a thing was impossible. She later explained it was because of my athletic prowess. Just kidding. That was, up to that point of my life, the happiest day I had

ever experienced. I was overwhelmed with joy. This happened around 9 in the morning on a day when we were supposed to go to school. We were so full of joy we had no thought of going to class. We couldn't contain ourselves, so we cut school the rest of the day.

In Christ God has given you an utterly undeserved, shockingly wonderful gift. He hasn't done it grudgingly, but willingly, eagerly, even though it seemed impossible. The right response is to be overwhelmed with joy. So rejoice, you poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of God.