

Unexpected Blessings from G-d - Sermon Based on Matthew 5:1-12
by David Hindman on Sunday, January 30, 2011

“I love drunks in recovery.” That was not something I expected to be told in a church. The woman speaking was making coffee for an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. She’d been in recovery 15 years, and when I asked her to explain herself, she said, “The first steps of healing and recovery in AA are 1. We admit we are powerless over alcohol—that our lives have become unmanageable; and 2. We believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.” And when a drunk gets it and admits they have a problem they don’t know how to fix, that’s when they start the road to health and the blessing of being sober.” Listening to her I heard, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.” Or as another translation puts it, “Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor, the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!” We might not think of a drunk being blessed, but she knew she was. Every meeting of AA was an opportunity for someone to learn the truth and the blessing she’d received, and she loved the opportunity to be present when such a miracle happened.

For the next 5 weeks we’ll dig into Matthew 5 and 6, Jesus’ so-called Sermon on the Mount. At first you might think Matthew presents Jesus as a new Moses. This first speech of Jesus takes place on a mountain, like Moses

on Mt. Sinai. And the writer has collected Jesus' teachings into five major sections, a reminder of Moses' five books of law. But in Jesus we're seeing someone greater than Moses. In a few weeks we'll hear Jesus say, "You have heard it said, 'You shall not do such and such. But *I* say to you..." Jesus claims for himself authority greater than Moses. So when we hear Jesus' teachings, Matthew is telling us to pay attention. This isn't just a run of the mill teacher or consultant for hire. When we hear this voice, it is the voice of God speaking in human form, so it behooves us to pay attention. When this speaker gives life lessons, he is giving LIFE LESSONS about what true blessing is. In fact, since this is Jesus' first major speech in Matthew, we might think about these words like Jesus' inaugural address, telling us what we can become under his leadership. Or the Sermon on Mount could be Jesus' state of the union speech, giving us an honest picture of our true condition and how blessing could come to us.

Now the temptation might be to spiritualize these teachings and assume no one can live this way. They're just a tantalizing snapshot of heaven. That's understandable and it's partly Matthew's fault. He talks about the kingdom of heaven. Sounds pretty otherworldly, but actually, it sounds 1st century Jewish. Matthew is finding another way to speak about God, without saying the word. He's revering the commandment not to misuse God's name. First

century Jews put a metaphorical fence around the word God. Today we might say “for heaven’s sake’s to avoid using God’s name and taking it too lightly. Today’s Jews do the same thing by writing the name for God with a dash replacing the letter “o” as it is printed in today’s sermon title. Matthew’s Jesus isn’t teasing us with an out of reach taste of a spiritual realm far away. Jesus is telling us who’s blessed and whose lives are in synch with the ways of God. He’s saying people who live like this will be at home in God’s presence. In fact, people living like this are already living in a new reality. They’re already living like God rules and already know the blessings that come to those living with God at the center of life.

And what do their lives look like? Well, they look like Jesus’ life. Jesus is the one who knows his life utterly depends on his connection to God; he’s humble and doesn’t always have to have his way; he mourns over a world that’s lost its way and is filled with injustice and suffering; Jesus hungers and thirsts to do God’s will and to set things right in this crazy world; he’s the face of mercy toward those who know how far they are from the life they want; Jesus is utterly pure because there’s not a millimeter separating his will from God’s; he’s the peace –maker between God and humanity; and on the cross he’s the one persecuted for doing what God requires. But there’s no one more blessed or alive or full of the fire of God.

His is the blessed life we want for ourselves, too. Jesus promises that that life can be ours. These are not another set of impossible rules weighing us down and sucking the life out of us. Blessing is a gift coming to us as we live this way and take on these perspectives about how life truly is lived.

A friend of mine was a pastor of two small British Methodist congregations. One Sunday she was preaching at a service which included a baptism. In her sermon she was really laying into a gospel truth completely contrary to society's ways. A woman present for the baptism audibly responded with a raspberry. My friend was almost undone by that unexpected attitude, but I thought it was just perfect. You see, Jesus' ways are quite different from the world's ways. The world is inclined to ridicule or even punish someone who tries to follow him. He tells us that in the Beatitudes, so we shouldn't be surprised. Truth be told, my relatively easy life worries me a bit. I must not following Jesus closely enough because my discipleship is apparently not worth noticing or too big a threat to the world.

But Jesus' way is the way of true blessing. We have Christ's example as proof. His word as promise to us. And it's a way lived in this world. Really. I would not lie to you. This week as I prepared for Sunday, I thought about people I've met or known who've embodied these beatitudes and have found blessing themselves. Bill, the founder of AA knew the

blessing of spiritual poverty. Members of Christian Peacemaking Teams going to Iraq or Palestine with an inner strength and peace I want. The mother of a murdered daughter going to Greensville Correctional Center to speak a message of mercy and forgiveness to the murderer. Corrie ten Boom in a Nazi concentration camp for hiding Jews but not bitter. The Beatitudes are an invitation and a promise. They are the path to blessing in this life and the in the world to come, and Jesus invites us to claim them for ourselves now.

They're too hard. It's too daunting to take them on. Of course it's hard. Anything worth doing is challenging. Most won't try or will be afraid to fail. But God's Spirit will work with us to help us live this blessed way. What blessing and joy are there to be received! Jesus speaks both to his disciples and to the crowd and opens a door to a new way of life to all. So I invite us – take Jesus seriously. Work on just one thing, ask for God's help to become the person you know God wants you to become. Discern the one thing most urgently keeping you from being the person you want to become for Christ's sake. Claim your spiritual brokenness for the gift it is. Be alive enough not to give up or become cynical about the world's pain. Give others the mercy you'd want. Let go enough not to have your way all the time – that is real power! Instead of feeding into the violence and anger

filling our neighborhoods and airwaves, become the change you want to see. Work for peace by actively seeking the good of all. Read through the Beatitudes again. Think and pray about which one you want to really dig into in the coming months. Let it re-shape you and become a blessing to you. And if you need a basic start-up to blessing, in the words of the prophet Micah, do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. God will direct you in good paths and bring blessing beyond words. Years ago, Nelson Mandela wrote to his wife, "A saint is a sinner who keeps trying." The Beatitudes are Jesus' gift to us. They are the shape of blessing. They are worth trying again and again, again and again, until we know them by heart and our hearts are blessed indeed. You heard the man. What are we waiting for?