

Sermon for February 1, 2026
St. John's Episcopal Church, Tappahannock
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Matthew 5:1-12

Please note: for online sermon, Share chart below

The Beatitudes are considered by many scholars to be Matthew's masterpiece. **1** Having said that, we often read or hear read this beautiful poetic wisdom, yet wonder what it all means. I think it helps to go back and look at the setting in which they were spoken by Jesus, the related symbolism, and also what we know about how the written record came to be.

Only the gospels of Matthew and Luke contain the Beatitudes, (which means Blessings). They both start off saying that Jesus went to the mountain. Powerful messages come from the mountains. In the Bible there are several times when an important revelation was made from a mountain: for example, when Moses received the 10 commandments on Mount Sinai; the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor when Peter, James and John witnessed Jesus appearing in glory and speaking to the prophets Moses and Elijah. In his famous I have a dream speech, our modern prophet Martin Luther King, jr., spoke of God allowing him to go to the mountain top, and he saw the promised land, and promised us we would all get there too. The common theme between these three mountain top experiences is that of building God's kingdom of justice and peace on earth.

In Matthew we also see that Jesus is addressing both the disciples and the crowds. (7:28)

In the introduction to the Beatitudes, verses 4:23-5:32, just prior to our gospel reading today, there is a vivid description of both the setting and of Jesus' growing popularity.

“And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria. And they brought

him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from the Jordan. Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him, and he opened his mouth 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^[b] 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.

This image of the kingdom of God in the intro, *where all are made whole*, speaks to our duties to God. We are to place our complete trust in him, not in ourselves alone (he healed every illness and weakness). Matthew’s use of “every” suggests the larger theme of striving for fullness of life in Jesus. We all need healing from something. Another feature of the introduction is that a wide field of influence is depicted in all the cities and regions mentioned. It is clear that being outdoors was a feature of Jesus teaching.

The Beatitudes are a piece of deliberate rhetoric, which is intended to make the listener take action in the future, and serves as a thesis for the whole gospel of Matthew. The gospel's main themes are justice and the kingdom of God, and how to love God with one's whole heart, mind and strength.

A brief comparison of the Luke's and Matthew's presentation of the Beatitudes helps us to understand them.

Matthew and Luke share three Beatitudes in common. First, let's take a look at the first two. Note the additional phrases Matthew which provide a deeper meaning to the passages. More will be said on how to interpret in the next section.

By adding “in spirit” to Blessed are the poor:

Matthew sees the poor as the needy ones of Israel, whose poverty is real and economic, but also with a spiritual dimension. The addition of “in spirit” changes the emphasis from socio-economic to personal and moral – humility, detachment from wealth, voluntary poverty.

In the Bible economic destitution is an evil to be corrected (Deut. 15:11); and wealth is not an evil in itself. Indeed it is a necessity for the well-being of the kingdom, but it risks neglect of God and of the poor. God's first priority is the care of the poor. (Isaiah 61)

So how exactly is it that those who are both physically poor and spiritually poor are blessed by receiving the kingdom of heaven? First, when we pray “Thy kingdom come” in the lord's prayer, we do so because we believe that in God's heavenly kingdom there is no suffering, no injustice, and all of our needs are met.

In Jesus time the Roman occupiers divided people and prevented them gathering and kept them subjugated as a way to make sure there could be no opposition or retaliation to their rule.

And we know that on earth we are still in the struggle to create a better world for everyone, and when we open our hearts to God and follow God's precepts, we are moved to help one another meet these needs.

As we said in last week's sermon, God is waiting for *our participation* in the solving of these problems. When the early Christians gathered in secret it was not only to worship. It was to come together, bringing whatever each individual had to share a meal together. Before there was isolation and hunger. Now there was community and enough for everyone to eat as well as worship and spiritual guidance.

So in the first Beatitude, Jesus is saying that we are blessed when we acknowledge our poverty of body, mind and spirit and gather to meet everyone's needs, guided by the Holy Spirit. This is very closely related to the meaning of second Beatitude, where Matthew added Blessed are you *who hunger and thirst for righteousness*. Once we take care of one another and over time transform oppressive structures and create a just society, then we all can grow into sentient beings who are thriving and not just surviving.

Luke contains a Beatitude that is not in Matthew (thus the adjacent blank spaces on the table). In Luke we read, Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh (or 'have joy'). Again this is related to how we will be joyful when we have access to the fullness of life possible when we take care of each other and all of creation.

Let's jump to the last Beatitude which Matthew and Luke have in common: (blessed are you when people revile you, persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account). They are basically the same. The blessings promised are that if we are persecuted, we will ultimately be glad because we can look forward to heavenly rewards. The message here was for those facing persecution in the Bible times, and going forward into history. When one's life is on the line for our Christian beliefs, the important message is that the fight against evil is not in vain, and there will be rejoicing in heaven if

one has made the ultimate sacrifice for the cause. There are a modern martyrs as well as we have said. However let us remember that Jesus was crucified for standing up for justice and against Roman oppression, and for insisting that unconditional Love is the Way. Jesus’ suffering was real. His resurrection is also real, and if in our lifetime we are called martyrdom, we have hope in the resurrection and eternal life because of Jesus’ sacrifice for us. We are reminded of that every Sunday before the Eucharist when we say “Walk in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.” Having said that, no one should *strive* for sainthood. The best situation is standing against unjust systems and transforming them into thriving communities *for all*, i.e. practicing reconciliation and forgiveness, renouncing evil and building God’s kingdom on earth.

Luke

Matthew

Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.	Blessed are the poor in spirit , for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.	Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness , for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh (or ‘have joy’)	

The next Beatitudes 6 Beatitudes are not in Luke. (see below).

Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revalue and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.	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.
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	The following scripture follows the Beatitudes only in Matthew.
	You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others. So that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

As indicated earlier, Matthew has 6 Beatitudes that are not mentioned in Luke. These are his own expansion of the Psalms, Isaiah and other sources as follows.

Matthew 5:4-5

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Matthew 5:7-10

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.

We are just going to look at the second Beatitude, Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted, for the remainder of this sermon, because we do not have time to cover them all. However during the Adult Bible study time during each Sunday in Epiphany, we will address the others.

Matthew echoes Isaiah 61 when he speaks of those who mourn in Matt. 5:4.

First let's look the words Jesus said when he was in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:14-18) He had just come from the 40 days in the Wilderness. He was announcing the beginning of his ministry.

“And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and the report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country, and he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read, and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written. ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.’ And he closed the book and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them:”

”Today, the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing:” (quoting from Isaiah 61:1-5),

“I came to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion, to give them a Garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord to display His glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations, they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.”

In summary, when Matthew says in Beatitude in v. 4, **Blessed are those who mourn**, for they will be comforted, although it has come to mean all those who mourn for any loss, originally he is focused on Isaiah 61, where the people of Israel in exile mourn to see evil reign as it so often does on earth. We

see how this response in Isaiah 61 is woven into that brief and simple yet powerful Beatitude.

And how will those who mourn be comforted? As we just read, *they will be given a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord to display His glory.* These are beautiful words of encouragement when we are mourning any loss, and empowerment when we mourn evil that reigns at times during our earthly existence. This helps us to do what Jesus did, and what he calls us to do - we are called, each in our own way, to participate, to stand up and speak out, and to work for social justice.

In closing, as said in the Jerome Commentary,

“Matthew [therefore] transforms a short messianic manifesto into a program for life, a list of desirable qualities and virtues.” **2**

These blessings will find their realization in the kingdom of God on earth if we, with God’s help, work together to make a difference wherever evil reigns.

Our reading from Micah today calls us to action.

Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly. That is the trinity of the moral life in one verse, said Cornel West. **3**

We are called to be part of God’s plan – a plan for righteousness. For loving kindness. For humility. [For] the vision of the Beatitudes.

Amen

Resources

1. Brown, Raymond et. al., editors; The New Jerome Biblical Commentary; Prentice Hall International; 1969. 1990; p. 640
2. Ibid.
3. Bass, Diana Butler; "Justice, Love, Walk"; The Cottage; Feb. 1, 2026; https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-1ba?utm_campaign=email-half-post&r=17md9u&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

