

**CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHRISTIAN**  
**Matthew 5:1-13**

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**September 1, 2019**

Sermons are an odd genre, a funny phenomenon.

As a woman was leaving church, in all seriousness and sincerity – she didn't mean for it to sound this way – she remarked to her pastor who had inquired about her shut-in husband, "Oh, he is doing fine. He watches your sermon every week on television. He seems to enjoy them a lot more now that he has lost his mind."

Surely she didn't mean what that sounded like.

We continue this morning in our sermon series in Matthew. Matthew's gospel is outlined sometimes by five great discourses or teaching sessions of Jesus. The first of those is the Sermon on the Mount, which begins here in Matthew 5.

The crowds were gathering around Jesus already. His popularity was growing. There he sat, as all who delivered a sermon in those days, on a sloping hillside at the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee. The crowd was mixed. Some were only curious. Others were already beginning to consider themselves followers of Messiah Jesus.

There on the hillside, 2000 years ago, Jesus described what a Christian needed to be like. He had come announcing the advent of the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven as Matthew is more likely to have termed it.

And in this message, Jesus preaches a counter-culture – how it is that God's people ought to look different than the world.

He begins describing the characteristics of a Christian, and they don't sound anything like the characteristics of a successful person by the standards of this age. These are the characteristics of the age to come.

To be a follower of Christ is to have a different set of values than the world.

To be a followers of Christ is to have a different set of priorities than the world.

Our allegiance is to God. The world's allegiance is to itself.

Here, in these Beatitudes, we have the qualities of the citizens of the Kingdom.

Now, this is no evangelistic plea. It's a sermon preached for Christian men and women. This sermon is spoken to those who have already received forgiveness, who have found the Pearl of Great Price, who have been invited to the wedding, who belong to a new creation, to a new world of God.

Look at verses 2-3

And opening His mouth He began to teach them, saying,  
"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Blessed is the Greek word *makarios*. It is the idea of divine happiness, a joy that comes with the divine realm. This divine happiness comes to those who are poor in spirit.

In Old Testament language, the poor are those who are the needy who have no refuge but God. Poverty came to be equated with humble dependence on God. Thus the Psalmist can call himself "This poor man" who cried out to God in his need, "and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of his troubles."

To be poor in spirit is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty, our bankruptcy before God. Calvin captured the essence with these words, "He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is poor in spirit." To such and only such is the Kingdom of God given.

Jesus might have said it this way, "A divine happiness goes to those who realize fully their own abilities will never save them, who recognize that they are nothing."

Look at Luke 18:10-14. Notice the poor spirit of the tax gatherer. He recognizes he is spiritually bankrupt. When someone is poor in spirit, they have become aware of their condition. And they make a self-conscience appraisal of themselves and acknowledge it.

**Do you recognize any of these name: Owen D. Young, Pierre Laval, Hugh S. Johnson, James F. Byrnes, Mohammed Mossadegh, Harlow Curtis? You should. According to *Time* magazine, these are all people who have been designated as "Man of the Year" by *Time*, indicating they had the greatest impact in that year of all the persons living on earth. Yet today, they are virtually forgotten to all but a few of us. Fame is fleeting. The celebrity of today is all-but-forgotten tomorrow. (*Preaching*, Vol. 2, No. 3)**

Blessed are the poor in spirit – those who realize they are really nothing.

**God has nothing to say to the self-righteous. Unless you humble yourself before Him in the dust, and confess before Him your iniquities and sins, the gate of heaven, which is open only for sinners saved by grace, must be shut against you forever. (Dwight L. Moody, *Preaching*, Vol. 4, No. 5)**

We come to the point that we realize we, ourselves, are absolutely nothing.

If you ever see a turtle on a fence post, the old saying goes, you can be sure he received some help. If you ever see a man or a woman being part of the Kingdom of God, you can be certain they didn't

get their on their own merits. Turtles can't climb to the top of fence posts, nor can humanity reach the throne of God. We are poor in spirit; we realize we, indeed, have been helped.

**Forgiven souls are humble. They cannot forget that they owe all they have and hope for to free grace, and this keeps them lowly. They are brands plucked from the fire – debtors who could not pay for themselves – captives who must have remained in prison forever, but for undeserved mercy – wandering sheep who were ready to perish when the Shepherd found them; and what right then have they to be proud? I do not deny that there are proud saints. But this I do say – they are of all God's creatures the most inconsistent, and of all God's children the most likely to stumble and pierce themselves with many sorrows. (J. C. Ryle, "Foundations of Faith," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 32, No. 4)**

Not only are those blessed who realize they are nothing without God's help – that they're simply turtles on the top of a fence post, next He says,

Matthew 5:4

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

If we're poor in spirit, we receive a place in the Kingdom of God. If we mourn, we are comforted. This idea comes from Isaiah 61:2, where it says that the Messiah will comfort all who mourn.

Mourners are those who are bewailing their own sinfulness. The more you and I are exposed to the purity of God, to the likeness of God, the more we recognize the blackness of our sin. Remember Isaiah, when he found himself in the presence of a holy God? He cried out, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!" It is the cry of the Apostle Paul who proclaims, "Wretched man am I! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" John, in Revelation, sees the Son of Man and falls at his feet like a dead man. It is those who truly mourn their own sinfulness who will exchange the sackcloth of mourning for the garment of praise.

We see our great offense before God. We learn to trust Jesus as the One who paid sin's ransom.

Look at the next verse, Matthew 5:5

Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

Your translation might say, "Blessed are those who are meek."

There are two people in scripture who are described as meek. Do you know who they are? Appropriately, the first is Moses – the first great deliverer of God's people. The second is Christ – the second great deliverer of God's people. Moses leads the multitude on a journey from bondage to freedom. A Moses who stands before Pharaoh and demands, in thundering terms, "Let my people go." The same Moses is described in the scriptures as meek. And Jesus, who stands before Pilate and refuses to reply. Jesus, who goes to the cross, having said to the disciples, "No one takes my life away; I lay it down, and I will take it up again." He is the one who is described as meek, as humble, as gentle. He is humble and rides on a donkey (Matthew 21:5). (Carl Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount*)

To be described as meek or gentle – that’s a wonderful thing. It’s a real mature place in the spiritual walk. Being arrogant, being haughtily self-assured, being demanding, needing attention – that’s all the stuff of baby Christians.

I hope I can one day reach that stage of spiritual gentleness, spiritual meekness, where I am a giver and not a taker. Where I’m a contributor and not a demander from God’s people.

You see, gentleness doesn’t come from weakness, but it comes from being strong. And out of strength, and only out of their strength, can they reach out with a meek, humble, and gentle spirit.

Meekness doesn’t mean we’re powerless. It means our power is under control. It’s the description of a stallion, ever so powerful with big muscles bulging, but ever so meek as he’s tamed by the bit. Meek is not to be confused with wishy-washy or weak. Meekness is a controlled desire to see the other’s interest advanced ahead of one’s own interest.

Oh, if the world were writing today, they might say, “Blessed are the strong, the shrewd, those who stand up for their own rights, those who refuse to be taken advantage of, those who will always look out for slights, those who push for great success.” We have a tendency to put a higher value on self-assertion in the world’s culture, but not so in God’s economy.

The biblical concept of meekness is different. Meekness is teachable. Meekness is quiet. Meekness is power under control – power under the control of God. That’s true power.

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

Matthew 5:6

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (Blessed is he whose greatest desire is to do what God desires.)

Spiritual hunger is to be the characteristic of all of God’s people, whose supreme ambition is not material but spiritual.

Do you really realize how fleeting riches are? I do funerals all the time. Being constantly surrounded by death and funerals has made me realize one thing. None of us will carry the riches of this world with us. This world is brief. The world to come is forever. You will take nothing with you when you leave this world. You come into this world naked, and you leave naked. You come with nothing, you leave with nothing.

It is so easy, especially in Western culture, to make your goal that of accumulating the wealth of this world, to spend your whole life trying to grab for a bigger piece of pie. Don’t hunger and thirst for material things, but hunger and thirst for righteousness.

The Greek text is best translated this way: “Blessed are those who keep on hungering and keep on thirsting for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.” It’s a present-tense participle. It’s continuous action.

But what kind of righteousness? It's not righteousness in general. Not righteousness as an abstract concept. But it the only kind of righteousness worth having, which is the righteousness of God. (Carl Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 24)

Next is Matthew 5:7

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

To be merciful is to show compassion for those in need. To be in the Kingdom of God is to be one who has enjoyed the mercy that flows from the throne of God and to seek to treat others with mercy.

God shows mercy to those who are merciful. Even in the Lord's Prayer, a few verses ahead, we hear "forgive us as we forgive" (Matthew 6:12-15). And in James 2:13, we read, "God will not show mercy when He judges a person who has not been merciful."

It is always tempting to give people what they deserve. It is much harder to give people grace. But often, when we give people what they deserve, we are saying more about ourselves than we are about the people to whom we give their due.

**There is a sign posted on the fence of a convent in Marion County, California: "Absolutely no trespassing. Violators will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. – Sisters of Mercy."**

**On the other hand, Mother Teresa, was at a gathering with kings and presidents and statesmen from all over the world. They were there in their crowns and jewels and silks [and suits]. And Mother Teresa wore her sari, held together by a safety pin. One of the noblemen spoke to her of her work with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. He asked her if she didn't become discouraged because she saw so few successes in her ministry. Mother Teresa answered, "No, I do not become discouraged. You see, God has not called me to a ministry of success. He's called me to a ministry of mercy. (Alice Grey, ed., *Stories for the Heart*, p. 105)**

God has called you, and God has called me, to be ministers, to be givers, to be conduits of His mercy.

Matthew 5:8

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Those who are pure in heart are single-minded in their focus – to be free from the tyranny of a divided self. What does God require of those who ascend the hill of the Lord (Psalm 24:3-4)? Clean hands and a pure heart.

Greatness requires focus. Winston Churchill in June, 1941, said to the House of Commons, "I have but one purpose, the destruction of Hitler, and my life is much simplified thereby." British scholar William Barclay claimed, "A man will never become outstandingly good at anything

unless that thing is his ruling passion. There must be something of which he can say, 'For me to live is this.'"

Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters, for he will hate one and love the other, or he'll be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Matthew 6:24). And James said, "Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8). To be purified of the heart, we cannot be double-minded. We must have a single, transforming purpose in life. What is your purpose in life?

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Next is Matthew 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Everybody loves a fight. On the school grounds, the crowd quickly encircles as the challengers throw punches. We pay men millions of dollars to enter a ring as we cheer them on in their exchange of blows. In our violent culture, boxing is no longer good enough. Now we put men in fenced cages and allow them not only to box, but they box with little or no gloves, kick, elbow, and seek to destroy another man's body in a fierce fight.

But it's not only physical blows. There is the lashing of the tongue. We share a bit of gossip that increases tensions. We watch politicians dredge up the filth of days past.

No, blessed are the peacemakers.

You know, there are some people who, if there is not tension or a fight going on when they enter the room, there will be when they leave. They cannot stand tranquility.

But not so with God's people. God's people bring in the wind of peace.

**When he was an attorney, Abraham Lincoln was once approached by a man who passionately insisted on bringing a lawsuit for \$2.50 against an impoverished debtor. Lincoln tried to discourage him but the man was bent on revenge. When he saw that the man would not be put off, Lincoln agreed to take the case and asked for a legal fee of \$10, which the plaintiff paid. He spent \$10 to regain \$2.50. Lincoln then gave half of his \$10 to the defendant, who willingly confessed to the debt and paid the \$2.50. But even more amazing than Lincoln's ingenious settlement was the fact that the irate plaintiff was satisfied. (Clifton Fadiman, *Little Brown Book of Anecdotes*, p. 356-357).**

Did he not realize that Lincoln walked off with \$5, he only gained back \$2.50 of his \$10, and the debtor walked off with \$2.50 in his pocket?

Blessed are the peacemakers.

Matthew 5:10

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

When Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness,” He must have already anticipated the storm clouds that would gather in his own life and, indeed, in the experience of those who were listening to him. (Carl Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 33). Jesus prays on one occasion, “Father, take this cup away from me.” But He also says, “Nevertheless, not my will, but Thy will be done.”

Jesus told His followers on more than one occasion that they would face the same hostility that He was facing. Peter often spoke of unjust suffering.

Notice in the first Beatitude the reward was the kingdom of heaven. And notice how it closes again, “the kingdom of heaven.”

You suffer because of your dedication to the Christ. Blessed are you, for you will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Dr. Sweet remembers a time when he was at a church banquet and he was going to speak on the Beatitudes. The reason he said he’d never forget it was that while the coffee was being served, the pastor of the church (Dr. Sweet’s host for the evening) leaned over and whispered in Dr. Sweet’s ear, “Lynn, should we let the people enjoy themselves a little longer, or had we better begin with your message now?” Hmm. Kind of an odd question, if you think about it. And after Lynn Sweet’s meditation on the Beatitudes, one woman – one of those who ceased to enjoy herself the moment that Lynn Sweet stood up to speak – came and said to him at the close, “Well, Dr. Sweet, if that’s what you call the Beatitudes, I’ll leave them to you.”

Here was a Christian who could not have cared less. She had no desire to hunger or thirst for righteousness. She had no desire to be more than she already was. Least of all, she had no desire to be challenged to be different than she already was. If God had such strange tastes – when He was really going to go for those who were meek, those who persecuted, those who were hungering and thirsting for righteousness, those who were peacemakers – well, that would be okay if some people wanted to join God in finding some blessedness in being odd. They are certainly free to do so, but these things were not for her.

What about you? Are they for you today?

I want you to notice what happens to the people who live by these Beatitudes.

Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

They shall be comforted.

They shall inherit the earth – meaning the new earth.

They shall be satisfied.

They shall receive mercy.

They shall see God.

They shall be called the sons of God.

And finally, repeated again, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

How about you?

Are you interested in being poor in spirit, in admitting your own spiritual bankruptcy before God?

Are you willing to mourn for the blackness of your sin?

Are you willing to be gentle and meek, withholding power?

Are you willing to hunger and thirst for the things that God desires?

Are you willing to give grace when no grace is deserved?

Are you willing to be single-minded for the purposes of God?

Are you willing to bring peace and not strife to the people of God?

And will you dare be persecuted for the sake of the kingdom?

If so, blessed are you.