

Week of January 17, 2021

Matthew 4:23-5:12

²³ Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues. He announced the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people. ²⁴ News about him spread throughout Syria. People brought to him all those who had various kinds of diseases, those in pain, those possessed by demons, those with epilepsy, and those who were paralyzed, and he healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from the areas beyond the Jordan River. ^{5:1} Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. ² He taught them, saying:

³ "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

⁴ "Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

⁵ "Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

⁷ "Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

⁹ "Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children.

¹⁰ "Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

¹¹ "Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. ¹² Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

The Great Teacher

Think about the greatest teachers you've ever had. I've had many - in high school a teacher that cultivated a love of history, in my church a youth leader who helped foster my curiosity about my faith, in college and seminary professors who worked with me to grasp difficult material, and more. But one, in particular, stands out. I had a professor in college who would frequently go on tangents in lectures because he was so passionate about the material he taught. The tangents were so much fun, even if they distracted from the agenda of the day. His love and passion were infectious. While his classes were great fun, he was also a notoriously difficult grader, but students in his classes worked as hard as they could to try and do a good job for him. One of his little quirks was his use of the classic writing style guide by Strunk & White. Papers were allowed two Strunk & White errors before they were each worth 3 points off your grade. Even if you presented the material perfectly, errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and style could reduce your grade by huge amounts. One of my greatest achievements in college was getting a perfect score on a paper in one of his classes. I may not remember those style rules today, and I'm sure I now break them frequently, but it stands out as a proud moment of accomplishing something I didn't believe to be possible because of how much I respected that professor. Maybe you have your own memory of an achievement or success that happened because of a great teacher. Great teachers inspire their students, helping them achieve things they might not otherwise believe they can.

Jesus was that kind of teacher. As Matthew outlines the beginning of Jesus' ministry, we're given a clear understanding of how he operated. He met people wherever they were, traveling constantly, throughout modern Israel, Syria, and Jordan, and then meeting their most pressing needs. He offered them hope. He healed their illnesses. He cast out those things that

plagued body and mind. He held back from no one. What he was doing was so important and meaningful that crowds followed him everywhere he went. They left their homes, their livelihoods, their family, their friends, all to follow this amazing teacher who gave them so much. When the crowd had grown considerably Jesus decided to offer the people a lesson, and Matthew recorded what is Jesus' most famous sermon, and also his first. In this sermon Jesus did something pretty incredible, he told the masses who the truly blessed are. The CEB translates the word most often translated as "blessed" as "happy," but the meaning is the same. In this first recorded sermon, Jesus flipped the script about our assumptions of happiness/blessedness. According to Jesus, the truly blessed are the poor in spirit, the hopeless, the grief stricken, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the humble, the peacemakers, the merciful, and those persecuted for their righteousness. To be clear, this is the exact opposite of what most people would say. Blessedness or happiness is generally thought of as an aspect of being privileged in some way - wealth, supportive family, good job, etc. Jesus' indication of blessedness being attached to difficult circumstances is a reflection of what God values vs. what the world values. God values peace and justice, while the world values a might-equals-right kind of power. Those who work for God's values will inevitably have a difficult life, because the world is against them. They are blessed because they eschew the world's values for God's, no matter the difficulties they encounter because of it. The point of Jesus' sermon was to encourage those following him to keep on in their fight, knowing that when more and more joined in and rejected the ways of the world in order to commit themselves to God's ways, the real fruits of their blessedness would begin to show. Blessings aren't about immediate reward - if we seek immediate rewards we're better off at an arcade where we can turn in tickets for cheap prizes. The blessings God offers aren't cheap and they're long in coming. But they're worth waiting for. Jesus' entire ministry began with this notion of coming hard fought blessings. He was honest and upfront about what it would take, and people flocked to him anyway. He was that kind of teacher.

Loving God, we celebrate your blessings even as we struggle to come to terms with the weight of them. Help us to seek a long term peace rather than short term security. Help us to hear Jesus and trust that the fruit of his blessings will come to us if we keep working for his peace. Help us to have the courage to follow the words of your son, our great teacher and Lord. Amen.