

The “In Sync” Ones

Jesus' Beatitudes describe a new and different kind of person - one whose life has been turned upside down by the Kingdom of Heaven and who now is turning the world around her, or him, upside down by the new life that is inside. Today we'll look at two more examples of this new, supernatural life, that Jesus says describes the person who is now 'in sync' with God's Kingdom. These are obviously NOT ordinary, natural human qualities. You don't see being poor in spirit, or grieving over the condition of your own heart, weeping for the world or being meek in the face of opposition as being ordinary, human qualities. These are the kinds of things that rise up in the person who has entered the Kingdom, who has tasted the new life and been changed by God's presence. In other New Testament writings, it is the person who has been filled by the Spirit. But in Jesus' discipleship training in Matthew 5, it is the “blessed” ones, the “in sync” ones, who are experiencing this new life.

Our next beatitude gives us yet another example of something that is not normal, natural, instinctive human behaviour. Think back to a time before you were even considering being a follower of Jesus and ask yourself how often you felt like the essential thing in your life, your food and drink, was righteousness - doing the right thing yourself and having a passion to see God's purposes fulfilled in the earth. Wasn't your longing, your food and drink, to find happiness for yourself, or to see what you could get away with rather than to hold yourself to a higher standard? Didn't you hunger and thirst for good friendships that could feed your need for love and acceptance and people to invite to your parties? What would you have thought of these words from Jesus?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
(5:6)

So, what is this 'righteousness' that we have been given an appetite for? Is it the proverbial list of rules that Christians are supposed to live by ... or something else? Gerhard von Rad wrote about this concept in his Old Testament Theology which was the standard way back when I went to seminary:

There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as that of (righteousness). It is the standard, not only for man's relationship to God, but also for his relationships to his fellows, reaching right down to the most petty wranglings - indeed, it is even the standard for man's relationship to the animals and to his natural environment.

What word do you notice - a big word that's repeated four times in this one quotation? Righteousness is all about relationships. Whether it's my relationship with God, my relationship with you or my relationship with the environment, I'm called to live in faithfulness to whatever is required of me in each case.

This is such a central theme of Scripture that it's not unfair to say that the whole Bible is about relation-ships, and especially about God's passionate desire that the

brokenness of all our relationships could be healed and the shalom, the deep peace and goodness of God, could be experienced throughout the world. Because that shalom is not experienced in every corner of the world, we have a mission - a call to live in right relationships and to show others how to do so as well.

This is another passage that reminds us how important the choice of words is to describe what you're trying to convey. The words for hunger and thirst that are used here are not the words that would suggest it's time for a snack, a quick bite at a fast food place or a bite of leftovers. These are words that mean "I have to eat or I'll starve!" and "I have to have something to drink or I'll die of thirst!"

In other words, "Blessed are those ... in sync with God's world are those ... who long for right relationships as if their life depended on it!"

Why is this so important? Because the gospel, the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven breaking into this world, is all about right-relatedness, about God's desire that right relationships can and will be restored in every part of His Creation. Look at Paul's words in Romans 1:16,17:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes ... (and then v. 17) ... For in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.

The gospel is good news of salvation for all who believe, and that salvation includes all relationships, including and primarily our relationship with God, but also all other relationships because it is righteousness that comes from God and righteousness means rightness of relationship, as we've already seen.

When we think of the components of righteousness; things like justice, like freedom from oppression, like integrity in business, like fidelity in marriage, these all are connected to having healed relationships. And blessed is the person who longs to see all these relationships restored to God's standards.

When will these hungry and thirsty ones be satisfied? You're getting used to the answer to this question by now.

1. It takes place at the end of human history when God's great reconstruction program is complete, when every knee bows and every tongue is able to confess Jesus' rightful rule. Then relationships between us and God, between us, and between us and the created order will be fully healed.
2. But it also takes place in the here and now in one special way. As we draw close to Jesus we find ourselves strangely satisfied and yet hungry and thirsty for more. Jesus called Himself the bread of life and told people that if they were thirsty they should come to Him and drink. He once told a woman who came to a well in Samaria that she should ask and He would give her living water. This is the end of being desperately hungry and parched with thirst - to be filled with Him and to experience a well-spring of life flowing deep within us.

Next stop is verse 7:

Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.

This one seems like less of a surprise than those we have already looked at. The implication is that the person who draws close to Jesus, who becomes His disciple, will become like He is - more merciful, more compassionate. Jesus is saying that the Kingdom person, the one who is 'in sync' with God's values and priorities, will be a person who shows mercy. That doesn't surprise us in the least. After all, when Jesus encountered people who were blind, who had leprosy, who were demonized or lame, He responded to them with mercy. "Lord have mercy" was met with mercy, time and time again.

But Jesus also taught the importance of mercy. When the Pharisees questioned Him about eating with tax collectors and other sinners, He responded with, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire compassion (or mercy) and not sacrifice' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Matt. 9:13). When these Pharisees criticized Jesus for allowing His disciples to pick and eat grain on the Sabbath, Jesus responded, "If you had known what this means: 'I desire compassion (again, mercy), and not sacrifice', you would not have condemned the innocent (Matt. 12:7). And later Jesus confronted these rule-keepers with the accusation that they had neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23). And in Luke 15 we read a whole parable of mercy in the story that Jesus taught of a prodigal son and his merciful father.

Well, that sounds straight-forward, but let's look a little bit deeper. When Jesus called for people to show mercy, was it a suggestion or a requirement? And under what conditions should one person show mercy to another? Jesus told a parable that we now call the 'Parable of the Good Samaritan' in which a man was robbed and beaten badly while on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. Two people passed him by without showing any mercy at all: one a priest and the other a Levite. But a Samaritan had mercy on the man and gave him the help he needed. There's no indication that the Samaritan quizzed the man about his attitude - had he been arrogant or shown the thieves some attitude that led them to not only rob him but beat him within inches of his life - the Samaritan didn't ask questions - he saw tragedy, and he responded with mercy, with compassion, took care of the man's needs, and saved his life.

On another occasion Jesus told a parable about a slave who owed his master a massive debt, one he could never repay. When confronted, he asked for mercy - and the master forgave the debt. Then that same slave turned around and demanded the repayment of a relatively minor debt from a fellow slave and when that second slave asked for mercy, the first refused. Here's some helpful background to that story, from Dale Bruner's commentary:

The rabbis of Jesus' day taught that every sin created a certain deposit of debt before God, the accumulation of which formed a kind of separating wall between

the person and God. On the other hand every righteous deed contributed to the believer's accumulation of assets before God and so created a kind of bridge. Sins were demerits that separated; righteous deeds were merits that connected. The corporate name for those separate demerits was "debts".

And that's the word that Jesus used in the parable to describe what was owed - the debts were causing a separation between people and God and He, the Master in the parable, had come to announce that debts were being forgiven, that relationship was being restored, that from God's mercy we could begin a new life, debt free!

How does this apply to us? Can we receive mercy from God while at the same time refusing to show mercy to another? Here's one of the places where we can put the whole list of beatitudes together. If we are poor in spirit and if we know enough to grieve our own sin and if we are meek and if we are hungering and thirsting for right relationships, then we will also be a people who show mercy. I'll say it again: in the Beatitudes, Jesus is describing the new kind of person who has welcomed the Kingdom like a little child, a person who has been transformed by the presence of Jesus and who is now 'in sync' with the things God wants. We will gravitate towards mercy in ways we never would have before, and if we struggle in a particularly painful or challenging situation, we will still experience the pull towards mercy, because that's who we are now.

One last one for today - verse 8:

Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.

This time we seem to be venturing into the unreal. How can any of us be pure in heart? And how can any human being "see God"?

In the Bible, the word 'heart' refers to the centre of a person's being: the centre of their emotions, their will, their thinking. The Greek word that is translated 'pure' is the word *katharos*, from which we get our English words 'catharsis' and 'cathartic'. It means clean, unmixed, unadulterated. So the pure in heart is the person who has a core that is unmixed, un-alloyed. The pure in heart is the person who is characterized by integrity at the centre of their being. Darrell Johnson writes, "Blessed are those who crave truth: seek truth, face truth, tell truth, live truth." J.B. Phillips renders this sixth Beatitude, "Blessed are the utterly sincere".

Once again, we need to be reminded that this is not one of several different kinds of personalities that Jesus is describing as "blessed" or "in sync with the Kingdom of Heaven". This is one part in a series of eight parts that describe the new person who has come close to Jesus through faith and is now being transformed into His image. And there is a progression here in this list of beatitudes:

1. It begins with being poor in spirit, which is coming to the life-changing realization that I'm not like Jesus in my own strength and not good enough to enter His heaven. That opens the door for us to enter the Kingdom.

2. The second step is being able to grieve, with Jesus, over our own sin and over the condition of a world that is in rebellion against God. As we come close to Jesus, we start to feel His pain ...
3. And that leads us to the third step, which is that we are humbled by our own weakness, by our inability to be righteous, by our need for God ...
4. And out of that humility we become hungry and thirsty for the right relationships that are pleasing to God and enjoyable and fulfilling in our own life as well.
5. Drawing close to Jesus and being hungry and thirsty for right relationships causes us to become merciful, to show people the same mercy that we have been shown by our loving God.
6. And that leads us to this beatitude and what it means to be pure in heart. The person of integrity will be the one who is poor in spirit, aware of sin.

He or she will also be a person who grieves over that sin and what it does to all relationships, but especially our relationship with God. Purity of heart is also an expression of meekness or humility, It is a fruit of hungering and thirsting for right relationships because integrity is key to trust and trust is key to healthy relationships. Mercy towards others comes from the person who has the integrity to admit their own weakness, who sees people as no better or worse than themselves and who can therefore show compassion to others without condemning them.

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

In what sense will they see God, and when will they see Him? We know that, in the Old Testament times, it was made clear to the people of Israel that they could not look on the face of God and live - and yet, there are passages that indicate that certain people at certain times did, at least in some sense, see God. In a passage we looked at last week, where Miriam and Aaron spoke out publicly against Moses, we saw Moses' humble response as an example of meekness. But this same passage also contains these words (the LORD speaking):

With (Moses) I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; He sees the form of Yahweh. Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?
(Num. 12:8)

There is enough vagueness about that passage that, although it indicates a special situation around Moses, the degree of "seeing" is not certain. But, at the end of the book, in Revelation 22, we read:

The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and His servants will serve Him. They will see His face, and His Name will be on their foreheads.
(Rev. 22:3,4)

Jesus once told His disciples that, if they had seen Him, they had seen the Father (John 14:9), and He told a parable on another occasion that indicated that how we treated the poor and the prisoner was a picture of how we treat Him ... but I think this one is only really fulfilled at the end when we see His face.

Applications:

1. We write people off way too easily - and I know because I've done it too. Yet relationships are so obviously of vital concern to God. Consider what He has done to restore relationship with us, and then consider what you could possibly do to restore any broken relationships in your life. Even if all you can do for now is pray, do that.
2. Who is there in your life who could use a good dose of mercy? What undeserving, ungrateful person do you know who desperately needs to experience grace? What is it possible for you to do that will allow that person to be touched by mercy in the days ahead? Pray about it and ask God to show you what He wants of you.
3. While you're at it, ask Heaven's doctor to give you a heart examination - much like David does at the end of Psalm 139 - to see what impurities, what compromises, are there. Ask Him to clean your heart, to make it pure, to give you the courage to live with integrity.
4. As you draw close to Jesus, expect that He will change you - and don't be afraid of that and don't resist His work in your inner person. Be excited about living more deeply, more richly and more closely in tune with God's Kingdom.