

Making Peace

Today we come to the finishing line in our study of the Beatitudes. We come to the place where we see what this progression of Kingdom traits has been leading us towards all along.

Let's begin today with a review. We have discovered, during our study of the Beatitudes, that Jesus was not describing eight different spiritual qualities, or even personality types, that we should be pursuing if we want to be Kingdom-minded people. He was describing the characteristics of any and every person who draws close to Him, who accepts His invitation to be a disciple and who takes up the mantle of representing God's Kingdom on earth.

In the course of our study we have seen that it all starts with being poor in spirit, which is to say that we recognize our spiritual poverty. This recognition, and our willingness to admit our poverty, is the key that opens to us the blessings of the Kingdom. So, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs IS the kingdom of heaven. Being welcome into the kingdom we draw close to Jesus and we sense His pain over our sin and the brokenness of the human race. We feel His love for lost people, people held captive to the lies of the enemy, people who are kept in a cycle of pain through their sin and inability to find a way out of hurtful patterns. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Then we saw that being poor in spirit and being able to grieve over the lostness of our world leads to a condition called "meek", being humble in the face of our own shortcomings, in the face of the complex problems facing the human race, and in the many challenges of our relationships with each other.

This awareness that we fall desperately short of God's standard of goodness churns up a hunger and thirst for righteousness. We begin to see how our words and actions and attitudes have torpedoed our relationships, have put up barriers between ourselves and God, ourselves and others, ourselves and the physical world we live in and even within ourselves. That stirs something in us; a desire to have our relationships healed. And part of that healing is found in learning from Jesus to be merciful, to extend grace to folks who don't deserve it, who have said and done awful, unjust, unrighteous things and have nothing to fall back on now — except if we show them mercy.

As we press in to know Jesus, we see that He acts out of who He is; that He acts humbly because He is meek, that He weeps over the brokenness of our world because He genuinely grieves over it and that He seeks right relationships because He loves us and wants good for us. And so we value integrity at the core of our being, an inner life that is focused on truth and the goodness of God. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

And although these things are happening in our lives since we began to draw close to Jesus, they don't happen easily - these aren't quick changes that we are immediately

comfortable with, and neither are the two that follow today. In fact, these last two may be the most difficult, most challenging of all the Beatitudes.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.
(Matt. 5:9)

We've already seen how important it is to the cause of right relationships that we show mercy; now we see the call to be peacemakers - people who help to make peace between those involved in conflict, those whose relationships are broken.

In behind this Beatitude is the Hebrew word for peace which you have all heard at some time: the word is *shalom*. It's a really BIG word, in that it means soundness, wholeness, well-being. *Shalom* is life as God originally intended it to be lived: a well-rounded, holistic existence. At the core of this word is the idea of harmony: harmony with God, harmony with other people, harmony with a person's inner self and harmony with the physical earth. *Shalom* describes more than an absence of conflict; it describes a soundness, a health, a profound peace that characterizes every aspect of our lives, including the economic aspects, the political aspects, the relational and spiritual and ecological and psychological aspects. God's vision is for a deep peace, a peace that defines us, that is evident testimony to the world that He lives within us.

Hear the word of the Lord:

And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat ... and the lion will eat straw like the ox. (Is. 11:6f)
The wilderness and the desert will be glad ... it will blossom profusely ... the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. (Is. 35:1f., 5f)

That is *shalom*, and so is this:

And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. (Is. 2:4)

And this:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household. (Eph. 2:19)
And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying or pain. (Rev. 21:4)

The Beatitude that Jesus spoke didn't describe the blessed ones - the "*in sync with God's message*" people - as peace-lovers, peace-seekers, or even peace-keepers. He describes us as peaceMAKERS, people who share in the mission of Jesus to bring God's *shalom* to the world around us.

To understand how we are to make peace in the world, we need to understand what takes *shalom* out and brings violence and suspicion and hatred in. When the angels announced the birth of the Christ, the Messiah, to shepherds in Bethlehem over 2000

years ago, they ended the announcement by declaring, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace.” Where God is not receiving glory from human beings, there is a lack of shalom in all our relationships. Giving glory to God is prerequisite to our experiencing peace on a wide and on a deep level.

We have, tragically, seen the results of following the idea that God is dead, that we are products of blind chance and survival of the fittest. Nations that called themselves “atheist states” in the twentieth century were responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of their own people and others, like Hitler’s Nazi Germany were totally committed to the “survival of the fittest” idea and used it to justify the killing of millions more. When God is out of the picture as a nation chooses its course of action, there are no limits to the evil that can follow.

Why? Because without an ethic that places someone else besides ourselves at the centre, the world becomes the playground for unlimited selfish-ness. And unbridled selfishness results in painful consequences for those who are weaker, those who are disadvantaged in any way, those who get ganged up on or who run afoul of powerful people ... and on and on the list goes. Limitless selfishness does not, cannot, produce the shalom of God - this can only be produced by people who are daily drawing closer to Jesus and learning from Him.

Vaclav Havel, the former president of the Czech Republic, once gave a speech at Stanford University in which he said:

Humanity probably will have to go through many more Rwandas and Chernobyls before it understands how unbelievably shortsighted a human being can be who has forgotten that he is not God. (September 1994)

That’s the condition of the person who does not give glory to God, who refuses to bow his or her knee to the greatness and wonder and power and wisdom of the Creator and Lord. You can probably already see that there will be a cost to being a peace-maker in this world - not everyone wants peace.

For Jesus, it involved a cross. Here’s Paul:

For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Christ, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross. (Colossians 1:19,20)

As we move forward in the Sermon on the Mount, we will see examples of the costliness of being a peace-maker and we see similar teaching in Paul’s letters as well:

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone ... But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if your enemy is thirsty, give him a drink ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17,20,21)

That’s the roadmap for peacemaking, and it is a costly one for the person of peace, but even more costly is the last of Jesus’ eight beatitudes, which we’ll look at next:

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. (Matt. 5:10)

Jesus goes right on from there to address His disciples directly, with a “blessed are you” statement:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (5:11,12)

So, this is the full result of drawing close to Jesus: we will become aware of, and mourn for, our sin; will be humbled; will earnestly pursue right relationships, including showing mercy to some and making peace with others. As our passion for God and His Kingdom grows, so will the purity, the focus, of our core, and so will our willingness to suffer the hatred of others for the cause of God’s great love. Blessed, in sync with God’s order, are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Notice that Jesus mentions Himself for the first time in the repetition of this final Beatitude. He tells them that they are blessed when people insult them, persecute them and falsely say all kinds of evil against them, *because of Him*. “I’m going to be the cause of a lot of trouble for you,” Jesus seems to be saying. But in the first part of this saying, Jesus also tells them that they will be persecuted because of righteousness, because of their commitment to right and godly relationships. These things that they learned from Him will cause people to attack them, to criticize them and perhaps even to kill them.

David Barrett is the editor of the World Christian Encyclopedia and he tells us that if we add up the total number of Christian martyrs in the twentieth century alone, the average is 454,000 per year. That’s over 45 million martyrs during the twentieth century, people who gave up their lives for Jesus’ sake. It is estimated that, right now, over 200 million Christians in sixty countries are being denied basic human rights simply because of their allegiance to Jesus. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. And Jesus says to them, “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.” It’s hard for us to think that persecution could be a cause for rejoicing, but the promise is for something greater than the cost.

Why would people, or nations, persecute Christians? What have we done that makes people hate us so badly? The simple way to answer that question is to ask why people hated Jesus so much. Jesus did many wonderful things, included opening blind eyes, delivering people tormented by evil spirits, making the lame able to walk, cleansing people from the horrible disease of leprosy, raising people who had died back to life. His teaching about the attitudes and actions that make for beautiful community, that make for right relationships, that make for shalom in all aspects of life, is the finest, most profound teaching this world has ever heard. We’ll be seeing more of this as we work through the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. So why the hate? Why did Jesus

end up on a Roman cross surrounded by mockers and supported by only a few of those who had followed Him throughout Galilee and Judea?

Jesus confronted the old order of things, the established power base of His day. He called the religious leaders hypocrites and challenged them to observe the heart of the law and not just focus on externals. He announced the presence of God's Kingdom, which further threatened people who were content with building their own kingdoms. He was a threat to those people who resisted change and who rejected the idea of submitting to His leadership. And so they killed Him. If you are a threat, you are also a target. Christians are a threat to man-made gods, to a morality based on selfishness, and to a political system built on injustice and control. Being a follower of Jesus requires change - "follow Me" is not a suggestion; it's a command - and so people are threatened by Jesus' authority to command change in their lives.

And, perhaps most troubling of all to the modern world, Jesus did not describe Himself as "a way, a truth or a life", but "the way, the truth, the life." He made exclusive claims that would admit no other way to the Father - and people hated Him for it. And His followers did the same thing. When Peter and John healed the crippled beggar at the gate of the Temple, not everyone was happy about it. The religious authorities hauled Peter and John into their 'court' and demanded that they tell them in whose name they had done this miracle. Peter told them, but then he added this inflammatory remark:

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

That's why followers of Jesus will be persecuted; because, even if we are nice about it, even if we say it kindly, we have to say that Jesus is the name above every name and at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He and He alone is Lord - He is our true King. How insulting to all the gods that human beings worship!

Blessed, in sync with God's order, are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Jesus. Rejoice, and be glad, because . . . great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. There are rewards that we strive for here on earth - a comfortable home to live in, the odd dinner out, a car that doesn't spend all its time in the shop, a promotion, a raise, success, respect - but these pale in comparison to the rewards that God has for the people of right relationships who have entered His Kingdom.

And, even though you feel alone when people laugh at your faith or argue with you about it, you're not alone at all. There is a long line of people who have chosen to honour God more than honouring the people who have rebelled in their hearts against God. Jesus talks here about the prophets, the men of Old Testament times who were persecuted by kings because they spoke the truth that people would rather not hear.

Isn't it the same with us today? Don't we face a world that would really rather not have to deal with the claims that Jesus made, would much rather have no claims on their

freedom to choose whatever than to have to bow the knee to Jesus and follow His will for their lives? Of course — and we have had to face that same battle, the fight to surrender, in our own lives.

But we made the choice to draw close to Jesus, recognizing our sinful nature and our need for forgiveness - that was the beginning of being poor in spirit. Being poor in spirit, we grieved for our sin and for the brokenness of our world and received comfort from Jesus. We were humbled and began to desire more of God's order of things in our lives, hungry and thirsty for right relationships. We began to show mercy to people who didn't deserve it, and as we paid that price, our inner core came into line with outward action - we grew in integrity; the pure in heart.

And then things became more costly. Jesus called us to be people who make peace, who bring God's *shalom* on earth, and we stepped into things that were difficult, confronting the evils that separate people. Ultimately, our loyalty to Jesus and our desire to honour Him above all others, separates us from the main stream, makes us different, a threat, not as easy to like, uncomfortable for some to be around. Jesus said it would be like this - and that this is being *in sync* with your Father in heaven. Blessed are you. Rejoice!