

Sermon

Matthew 5:1-12: “The Sermon on the Mount”

The location of the mountain is uncertain, but it is likely in the vicinity of Capernaum. Following the custom of the rabbis, Jesus sat while teaching. The disciples included a wider audience than the 12 disciples. In 7:28,29 we read: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.”

Enormous crowds were following Jesus – he was the talk of the town, and everyone wanted to see him. The disciples who were the closest associates could have been tempted to feel important, proud and possessive.

The crowds were gathering once again. But before speaking to them, Jesus pulled his disciples aside and warned them about the temptations they would face as his associates. Don’t expect fame and fortune, Jesus was saying, but mourning, hunger and persecution. Nevertheless, Jesus assured his disciples they would be rewarded – but perhaps not in this life.

Each Beatitude includes a pronouncement of blessing, a description of the ones considered as blessed, and an explanation (for) the blessing. The poor in spirit are those who recognise their spiritual poverty, and, casting aside all self-dependence, seek God’s grace.

There needs to be a willingness to give when others take, to love when others hate, to help when others abuse. By giving up your own rights in order to serve others, you will one day receive everything God has in store for you.

The Beatitudes can be understood in at least four ways.

The beatitudes are:

- ❖ A code of ethics for the disciples and a standard of conduct for all believers.
- ❖ They contrast kingdom values (what is eternal) with worldly values (what is temporary)
- ❖ They contrast the superficial “faith” of the Pharisees with the real faith Christ wants.
- ❖ They show how the Old Testament expectations will be fulfilled in the new kingdom

The beatitudes are not multiple choice – pick what you want and leave the rest. They must be taken as a whole. They describe what people should be like as Christ's followers.

Each beatitude tells how to be *blessed*. "Blessed" means more than happiness. It implies the fortunate or enviable state of those who are in God's kingdom. The Beatitudes don't promise laughter, pleasure or earthly prosperity. To Jesus "blessed" means to experience hope and joy, independent of outward circumstances. To find hope and joy, the deepest form of happiness, follow Jesus, no matter what the cost.

In my late teens I trained as a mothercraft nurse at the Methodist Babies Home in South Yarra. One Sunday night a group of us trainees decided to go to church at the local Baptist Church, which wasn't far away. The service was one of missionary challenge. When we arrived back and I went to bed, I couldn't get to sleep. I felt as though God was asking me whether I would be ready to be a missionary. I didn't want to be! I didn't want to go somewhere like China or Africa. I was engaged to be married, and assembling items in my glory box – I wanted to stay in Australia.

However, I couldn't sleep. The call of God kept coming. So I finally got up and knelt by my bed and told the Lord that I would be a missionary if He really wanted me to be.

The reality was that when some years later God called my husband and myself to service in the Highlands of PNG, they turned out to be some of the most wonderful years of our lives.

With Jesus' announcement that the kingdom was near (4:17), people were asking "How do I qualify to be in God's kingdom?" Jesus said that God's kingdom is organised differently from worldly kingdoms. In the kingdom of heaven wealth and power and authority are unimportant. Kingdom people seek different blessings and benefits, and they have different attitudes.

Jesus said to rejoice when we're persecuted. Persecution can be good because:

- ✚ It takes our eyes off earthly rewards;
- ✚ It strips away superficial belief;
- ✚ It strengthens the faith of those who endure, and
- ✚ It serves as an example to others who follow.
- ✚ We can be comforted to know that God's greatest prophets were persecuted, e.g. Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel.

The fact that people are being persecuted proves that they have been faithful – faithlessness would be unnoticed. As we have noted, the last of the Beatitudes is: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In the future God will reward the faithful by receiving them into His eternal kingdom where there is no more persecution.

The first two Sundays in November this year have been designated as International Days of Prayer for Persecuted Christians. It is reported that the global tide of persecution against the Lord’s people is rising higher and higher, but so is their eternal hope in Christ. Persecuted Christians around the world have endured a huge added burden to their suffering this year as multiple disasters of locusts, coronavirus and devastating floods have swept the globe in 2020. But, before these disasters, so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ were already marginalised, violently attacked, kidnapped, raped and even killed simply because they follow Jesus Christ.

Yet in the midst of this are glimpses of the marvellous hope we have in our Saviour, and the inspiring resilience of the suffering church.

The global impact of the COVID-19 crisis looks set to change our world forever. Coronavirus is an emerging disaster on a fully-global scale we have not seen before.

Around the world, Christians are often at the sharpest end of the pressure and persecution in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes and governments. North Korea is routinely ranked as the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian. Believers have been executed just for owning a Bible, or face a life sentence in a harsh labour camp if they gather to worship together.

Christians are under increasing pressure in China. In Iran and Saudi Arabia Christians, especially converts from Islam, face harsh restrictions and punishments.

Eritrean authorities arrested and detained 30 Christians as they attended a wedding ceremony in the capital city in the last week of June this year. In April, fifteen Christians were arrested during a service and taken to a prison camp.

National identities, shaped by religion, culture and history, are reasserting themselves leading to nationalism. This is “worship of nation” that takes the view: “My nation right or wrong. My nation exists at the expense of all others.” Patriotism is love of one’s country, which all people should have. But to worship one’s country leads to destructive nationalism.

Since the times of the early Church, Christians have been like a “third race”, neither Jew nor Gentile, but God’s new creation. Nationalism is based on an idolatry that makes each nation its own god. But as Christians, we believe there is only one God, the universal Triune God who has created all humanity.

In many countries, State-sponsored suppression of Christians has been seen. The Christians are viewed with suspicion by governments for following a “foreign religion” and perceived to be a threat to stability in their homeland. This rising time of nationalism could place Christian minorities in greater danger of being seen as not belonging to their societies, and therefore being marginalised, discriminated against and persecuted more widely.

Many people have interpreted the COVID-19 world event through the prism of their own religious objectives. Some Islamist militant organisations have declared COVID-19 to be Allah’s punishment to unbelievers. A spokesman called on Muslims to rejoice in the “painful torment” inflicted on non-Muslims by COVID-19. Some have celebrated the virus, describing it as a “small soldier of Allah” sent to attack his enemies. Some even believe that fighting jihad will guarantee protection from becoming infected with the virus.

Current events can be interpreted from a spiritual and eternal perspective, but Christians must maintain their testimony as people of truth and love. What is important is what Jesus calls Christians to be and to do.

There are reports of Christians being discriminated against and excluded from covid-related food aid. For example, in certain Indian states, distributors refused to give food to Christians, and especially to pastors. There have been similar incidents in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nigeria with some Christians unable to access food aid meant for everyone.

The World Health Organisation has drawn attention to the psychological impact of COVID-19 across the world in terms of elevated levels of stress and anxiety. This stress is leading to an increase in suicides.

Paul, in Romans 12:14 says that people should bless those that persecute them, bless, and not curse.

When we move over to our reading from Revelation [7:9-17] we have the wonderful picture of Christians who have suffered standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and with palm branches in their hands. Any suffering is now behind them, and ahead is only joy for evermore.

We have watched a video of a singer, Bart, who sang with a group “Mercy Me”. His father had been an angry, violent man. But then he gave his life to Christ, and he completely changed. When the father died, Bart’s grandmother said “I can only imagine what he is experiencing now.” At the funeral, Bart used the same words “I can only imagine” when addressing the crowd present. {We have the video if anyone wants to borrow it}

In our reading from 1 John 3:1-3 it states that “it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”
We can only imagine.

Barbara Hutton

(You may register your thanks to the worship team by clicking [HERE](#).
Thank you.)