

The Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-12

We all need instructions in life. Whether they are instructions about how to operate some new piece of technology, or how to take a particular medication, how to find our way round a new city or how best to relate to a particular person – instructions provide guidance which is intended for our benefit. But we don't always tend to read or follow the instructions. You may well be familiar with the moment when you think "I know how to operate that" or "I don't have time to read a 40 page document". Not reading the instructions can lead to problems....

The Beatitudes at the start of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthews gospel are an extraordinary set of instructions. They contain a tension between the life we live now and the promise of the kingdom to come. In the Beatitudes Jesus is providing an instruction of how we live now, the attitude with which the Christian is called to live and the way in which that cultivates the promise of heaven in our lives. In his letter to the Romans Paul speaks of the first fruits of the harvest to come when he speaks of the aparche of the Spirit, as the Spirit of God is set in our hearts as a deposit on the life to come.

There are two important aspects when we read the Beatitudes that we need hold in mind.

(1) The Beatitudes are not a recipe for salvation; they do not provide the means by which eternal life is earned through a life of merit and good works. They are intended for the person who already knows Christ as saviour. They are a response to God's gift of grace in our lives. Jesus makes this context clear in v11 when he says "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." The Beatitudes are intended for the person who is responding to Christ, who has heard his call of "Come, follow me" (just as Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew had in 4:18-20 – remember he is speaking to a gathered crowd) and have left their previous life in order to become a disciple of

Christ telling others of Christ's goodness and message of the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

(2) The Beatitudes need to be held together, they are intended as a whole as they describe the whole of our response to God's work in our lives through Christ. Just as Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit is not meant to be split up, neither should these beautiful descriptions of life lived well. But our tendency with instructions can be "well this bit doesn't apply for my needs" or "I know this already". We have a habit of "dipping" with the Beatitudes. We dip in and grab the one we want for the context we are looking at or experiencing but in doing so we actually reduce the impact of the whole upon our lives and upon the lives of others. And in dipping in to grab the one we want we risk removing them from the context of the Christian life so that they become platitudes rather than a set of life transforming instructions for a people journeying home to heaven.

So having thought about the nature of the Beatitudes lets look at their content.

Group 1: Verses 2-6 groups together the Beatitudes that are about the nature of the Christian person. They speak of our inward being – of our attitude towards God. To be poor in spirit is to be someone who recognises that there is nothing we can bring to God that earns our place in heaven. Jesus is speaking in a context of the rich history of the psalms that develop the understanding of the person who is poor - who is afflicted and unable to rescue themselves from their afflictions. In the opening verses of Ps40 we are told of the person who is stuck in a slimy pit and unable to escape but is lifted out of the mud and mire by God. And so Jesus teaches us that in acknowledging God's rescue of us in our own lives, acknowledging his abundant grace and goodness towards us in the person of Jesus – it is through his gift of grace that ours truly is the Kingdom of Heaven. Similarly the second Beatitude about those who mourn is not about those are experiencing bereavement – though God is loving and compassionate – a rescuer of those afflicted, however the mourning that Jesus speaks of that leads to the comfort of God is to mourn the separation between God and humanity. It is not a popular concept these days in our worship that we are to

acknowledge our sinfulness. Cranmer captured it in the Book of Common Prayer when in the confession he wrote, “We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness.” We know that Jesus wept over the sinfulness of others and of Jerusalem that would not accept him. To mourn is not to be punished by God, but to acknowledge our need of his grace through Christ – though whom we are comforted. The role of the Messiah, as proclaimed by Isaiah (61.1), was to bind up the broken hearted. Our nature as Christians is one that should also contain meekness – now that’s not a call for everyone to be a sort of spiritual doormat – but a person who is “gentle of spirit” (it reminds me of the description of God’s nature – slow to anger and abounding in love). Dr Martin Lloyd Jones described it as, “Meekness is essentially a true view of oneself, expressing itself in attitude and conduct...The man who is truly meek is the one who is truly amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do.” And the promise for the person who is gentle of spirit is that they will inherit the earth. It is at these moments I love the way in which the economy of God is expressed. It is no use grabbing and thrusting and pushing – the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it and he will give it to the person who considers themselves least – not in some self-pitying way but in acknowledgment that true greatness comes from God. And finally in group one – looking at the nature of the Christian – we are told the person who hungers and thirsts after righteousness will be filled. Such a quest for spiritual transformation makes absolute sense in the light of the previous three beatitudes. For if we acknowledge our spiritual poverty and need for God, if we mourn that which separates God and humanity, if we seek to live lives ‘gentle of spirit’ then it makes sense that for the Christian the desire is also to know and learn more of God and his ways.

And so with the inward nature and attitude towards God of the one who seeks to follow Christ.

Group 2: Verses 7-10 – speak of our outward nature and our attitude towards others. The first of these outward attitudes is that of mercy. John Stott in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount states, “Mercy, is compassion for those in need” and in

showing mercy we will be shown mercy by God – it is an earlier form of what Jesus would say later in the sermon on the mount “If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” It is a call to demonstrate an outward expression of what has already been given to us. God in his grace has already shown us mercy – therefore our outward response must be one of mercy towards others. For if we cannot show mercy, then do we truly know what it is to have received mercy? Jesus moves on in verse 8 to speak of the pure in heart who will see God. This is a call to simply live outwardly who we are on the inside. Jesus tells us in Luke’s gospel that we speak out of the overflow of our hearts. If there is goodness in our hearts then we should speak goodness into the lives of others. But it is too easy to wear masks in our lives. We place on a mask that conforms our behaviour to a particular situation or context – it is the tendency to hide away who we are rather than bring out our true selves before people, trusting that we are a work in progress before God. A pure heart is a person who is honest about who they are and the work of God in their lives. The Psalmist in Psalm 24 asks who may ascend the hill of the Lord. Who may stand in his holy place? The answer comes, “He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. In other words our call is to follow God and to let our yes be yes and our no be no. To be straightforward in our dealings with one another – yet not in anger or harm – for our outward purity of heart comes from the inward transformation of God’s grace in our lives, our acknowledgement of our poverty of spirit, our mourning of separation, our gentleness of spirit and our desire to be transformed by God – these inward beatitudes lead to an outwardly pure heart which will see God at work in the world around; the beauty of God in others, and His transforming presence at work in the lives of those they know and love.

So outwardly we have a call to show mercy, to be pure in heart. Next we come to the call to be peacemakers. To be women and men who sow seeds of reconciliation. It makes sense that this beatitude follows on from the call to purity of heart – because it is only with the honesty of a pure heart that conflict can be resolved and peace proclaimed. Conflict is caused when people hide their true motives, their true

feelings. Honesty brings both the good and the ugly into the light of God's presence so that healing can be brought between people divided. It is the call of every Christian to be a peacemaker in both their community and in their church. At the heart of Christ's mission was the reconciliation between men, women and God. It is little wonder therefore as God's Son is the prince of peace that those who outwardly follow his ways as peacemakers will be called children of God. And finally in these outward attitudes we are told that blessed are the persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. In being peacemakers we will not always be successful for there is much pain and evil in our world that would seek to harm and divide with force and violence. Many women and men have given their lives over the centuries to serve Christ and to be peacemakers to communities and people in conflict. A dear friend of ours serves in a dangerous part of the world at the moment, and every single day her life is in danger as she seeks to tell people of the peace of God made known through Jesus. The recent deaths of Christians in Egypt and Iraq is a continual reminder that we are blessed to live in countries where our greatest risk of persecution is to be considered irrelevant or at worse pilloried for what we believe. And yet we so often pull back from sharing the good news of the kingdom of God with others because we fear what they will think of us. Perhaps our greater concern should be to follow God's call in our lives to be a people willing to outwardly endure the words and attitudes of others for in doing so we demonstrate that that inwardly we are disciples of Christ Jesus and the promise of God to us is that one day we will reside with him in heaven. We are each pilgrims travelling through a foreign land (as the words of guide me o thou great redeemer remind us).

John Chrysostom described the beatitudes as 'a golden chain'. They are the most wonderful description of the inward and outward nature of the Christian life and I pray that these instructions taught us by Christ himself may dwell in your hearts richly as you follow him.