

February 1st, 2026

Matthew 5:1-12 “A Promise of Blessing”

If you want the best example of Jesus’ core values and teachings turn to Matthew chapter 5-7, also known as “The Sermon on the Mount.” For a lot of folks, this is an awkward section of the Bible because it contains a lot of “uh-oh” passages. You know when you think you have something figured out, or you think you know everything there is to know about someone, and then you discover that you really don’t? You know that saying, “Never meet your heroes?” It’s a piece of advice that suggests that meeting people you idolize—like celebrities, artists, or authors—usually leads to disappointment because they rarely live up to the idealized image that you have of them. The Sermon on the Mount can be like that with Jesus.

Some might say, “Oh that’s a terrible thing to say when you’re talking about Jesus! *Everything* Jesus says meets my expectations! In my favorite Gospel John, chapter 10 verse 30 Jesus says, ‘The Father and I are one.’ The words that proceed from Jesus’ mouth are the very words of the Holy and Perfect creator of the universe and all that is in it. To say otherwise is blasphemous!” Okay. So to make sure there’s no misunderstanding, you’re saying that what Jesus says is 100% divinely authoritative. No ifs, ands or buts. “Amen.” When Jesus says we need to do something, it carries the same authority of God. “Yup.” Without exception. “Yes.” Okay. Would you agree that what Jesus says supersedes anything and everything else in all of scripture? The buck stops with him? “Well of course.” Even here in the Sermon on the Mount? “Yes, *especially* the Sermon on the Mount.” Okay. Just checking. Well, buckle up buttercup. We’re in for a ride.

The sermon on the mount is a big deal in Matthew’s gospel. The parallel in Luke’s gospel is chapter six, otherwise known as the sermon on the plain. Same teachings but for a Gentile audience. Matthew’s readers are Jewish, and this idea that Jesus was teaching from a mountain gives extra credibility to the idea that Jesus’ words are God’s words. After all,

Moses was on a mountain when he received the Ten Commandments and passed them on to the Hebrew people. The passage that Dave just read is the opening words of the sermon on the mount and they bear repeating –

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

The beatitudes are not nine inspirational fortune cookie messages. They are the foundations for what it means to be human beings in a world that doesn't always value human life. The beatitudes are a list of *promises*-- but not necessarily promises we would prefer. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," but we'd rather hear, "Blessed are you who *have no reasons* to mourn." Or instead of hearing, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake," we'd rather hear, "Blessed are you who are *not* persecuted nor *have any reason* to be persecuted."

When we have Bible study, we encourage people to bring different translations or interpretive paraphrases to the table. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* seems to be a favorite paraphrase among our folks. Peterson tries very hard to leave his theological biases at the door and makes it very clear that he is not translating from the original biblical languages. This is strictly interpretive. In his first draft of *The Message*, Peterson didn't use the word "blessed," he used the word "lucky."

“Lucky are the merciful.” The editors said, “No way. Nobody is going to buy into the idea that the poor and meek are ‘lucky.’” Plus the word ‘luck’ itself will alienate most pastors and theologians who work very hard to teach their congregations that “luck” has no room at the table in most churches. Luck is what gamblers rely on. People who aren’t comfortable with saying “God bless” often say, “Good luck.” But is that what “good luck” means? Is it just a substitute for “God bless?”

Other translations of the Beatitudes like the Contemporary English Version use the word “happy” instead of “blessed.” And that’s a valid translation of the Greek word “μακάριος” for sure. It shines a spotlight on the paradox – “Happy are those who mourn.” What do you mean? People who mourn aren’t happy! How could they be? When you’re translating scripture from Greek to English, there’s always an element of interpretation that takes place in order to bridge the temporal and cultural gap. I think it’s safe to say that in the context of the sermon on the mount, we could say that this word could mean “supreme blessedness.” But it still doesn’t make the concept any easier to get our heads wrapped around. This list of people still aren’t ones who we associate with happiness *or* blessings. In fact, for some of the ones on the list we’ll say, “They don’t *deserve* to be happy” or “they don’t *deserve* to be blessed.” At least that’s what we think because that’s how the kingdoms of the world have trained us to think. Jesus, however, sees things differently. He represents and speaks for the Kingdom of God. And remember, this is just the first twelve verses of his sermon on the mount. He’s just getting warmed up. There are ninety-four more verses in this sermon, and they get incrementally more difficult to swallow for people who are as immersed in the values of the world as we are.

God’s kingdom is different from the Earth’s kingdoms. Not only is it different, but it is vastly better. The gospel writers don’t make it very easy for us to think that Jesus came into the world to baptize our worldly values so that we can feel better about our prejudices. That being said, be thankful that we get Matthew’s version of the sermon on the mount this week. Luke’s version is hard core. Luke says, “Blessed are you who

are poor" *period* - whereas Matthew says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Luke says, "blessed are you who are hungry now." Matthew says, "Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Luke also throws in some "woe to you" statements that include "the rich" and "those who are full now." But here's some good news - the sermon on the plain doesn't show up in the lectionary again until February, 2028 so you're off kind of off the hook until then. For now we get Matthew's more softball spiritualized approach.

The point is, we are quick to engage in theological acrobatics when Jesus says something that makes us feel uncomfortable. "Oh, Jesus wouldn't say that the poor are blessed. He means the poor in spirit. It's the poor's own fault that they're in the situation they're in. Why should they be blessed? Why should the meek inherit the earth? That's not how things work in the real world. Blessed are the merciful? Okay, Jesus, in what context? What do you really mean by *mercy* because mercy means different things to different people."

No matter how you look at it, the promise of the Beatitudes is not that suffering disappears, but that God refuses to let suffering have the final word. The Beatitudes are not a checklist and they are not a job description. Jesus is not saying, "Go be poor, go be sad, go be persecuted so that God will finally love you." He is naming where God already is. The promise of blessing is not a reward for spiritual achievement. It is God's stubborn refusal to abandon people when life grinds them down. The kingdom of God shows up exactly where the kingdoms of the world would say, "Nothing good can come from here."

So maybe the question is not, "Am I poor enough, meek enough, merciful enough to be blessed?" Maybe the question is, "Do I trust that God is already at work in the places I'd rather hide, fix, or avoid?" Jesus opens his sermon not with commands, but with promises. And that promise still stands: God's blessing is not reserved for the strong and successful, but spoken over those that the world has written off. Let us rest in the promise that God's blessing meets us exactly where we are.