

JESUS' SERMON ON THE MOUNT

I. "The Entrance"

9-10-06
Ken Peterson

Mtt. 5:3-10

INTRODUCTION

Chadsworth was quite a scoundrel. He lived in Tennessee in the late 1800's and was finally hanged for horse stealing and train robbery. The only known photo of him shows him standing on the gallows. The inscription informs us:

"Chadsworth, horse thief, sent to prison in 1885, escaped in 1887, robbed the Tennessee Flyer train six times, caught by Pinkerton detectives, was convicted, and hanged."

Well, the family didn't really want that on the record, so they gave the obituary a bit more of a positive slant. Here's how it read:

"Chadsworth was a famous rancher in early Tennessee history. His business empire grew to include acquisition of valuable equestrian assets and intimate dealings with the Tennessee Railroad. Beginning in 1883, he devoted several years at a government facility, finally taking leave to resume his dealings with the railroad. In 1887, he was a key player in a vital investigation by the renowned Pinkerton Detective Agency. In 1889, Chadsworth passed away during an important civic function held in his honor when the platform upon which he was standing collapsed."

The truth can be elusive, can't it? We live in a time when words are everywhere and, while they can reveal truth to us, they often are used in deceptive, manipulative ways. I don't think there's ever been a time in history where moral and spiritual truth has been so depreciated. Any objective, enduring standard is denied, leaving us merely with our various viewpoints and "my truth" which (in today's atmosphere) we are careful not to suggest that it should be anyone else's "truth." Unfortunately, Christians are being sucked into this quagmire of moral relativism, philosophically referred to as "modernity." It is influencing us in ways we may not even realize.

We've all been immersed in forest-fire smoke for many weeks now. Sometimes you're very aware of the smell of smoke, when it is especially strong. But, we've grown so used to much of it that apart from not being able to see too far, most of the time we don't notice the smell. Over Labor Day, we went to visit our kids in Everett. Getting out of the smoke enabled us to become sensitized again to it. After being there a day, I got in our car to go somewhere, and I was amazed at how much the ventilation system retained the smell of our forest fires. Are there filters in there that are contaminated? In the midst of the contamination, we become desensitized to it. When we break out of it, we're amazed at how much we quit noticing.

Our noses aren't all that gets desensitized. Spiritually we are in the same danger. That's why I'm beginning a series of sermons from the Sermon on the Mount. This summer, as I prayed and tried to discern God's direction for the sermons this fall, my spirit was increasingly alerted to the moral, spiritual pollution of our times—a pollution that touches all of us. It is especially true in

the area of truth, where even believers are believing the lies of the devil through his spin doctors who are every bit as clever as Chadsworth's relatives. There is a great need to get back to the pure, unadulterated truth as to what it *really* means to follow Jesus. I'm tired of all our attempts to make the Gospel relevant to us. Instead, we need to make ourselves relevant to the Gospel. And in the Sermon on the Mount, we see the basics of this life of following Jesus as His disciples laid out. In Matthew's Gospel, it stands at the beginning of Jesus ministry.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

As school began this last week, what usually happens at the beginning of a new class? From my experience, the teacher usually gave an overview of what the class was about, what was expected of you, and some basic rules of operation. Here, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has just begun his ministry and He's called His 12 disciples. Now, in these three chapters (5-7), He is giving an overview of what it means to live within the kingdom of God that He is proclaiming— how a disciple should live and what it means to follow Jesus.

The heart of the Sermon on the Mount is love— loving God and one another. But, as Richard Foster says, "Love is so compact a word that it needs unpacking, of course, and this is what Jesus does in this famous sermon." There's hardly an aspect of life Jesus doesn't deal with here: it includes Christian witness, a theology of Scripture, anger, murder, sex, revenge, giving, prayer, worry, judging others, and much more. The sermon is a description of how Jesus lived and the life He came to empower us to live.

What Jesus says here is rather intimidating. We must remember that Jesus' words are not just words of instruction. They are the Word— divine words alive with enabling power. All that is, all of creation, was brought into existence out of nothing by that powerful Word. So, as we believe and respond to these words of Jesus, they become the Word enabling us to live in this brand new world of the kingdom of God with Jesus, the Master. Luther states it well in his larger catechism:

The Word possesses such power wherever it is seriously considered, heeded, and put into practice, that it never remains barren of fruit. It always awakens new thoughts, new pleasures and devotions, and cleanses the heart and its meditations.

Standing in the lead-off position in this sermon are eight paradoxical statements often referred to as the beatitudes, because each begins with "blessed." Now I have a bit of a dilemma. I preached a series of six sermons on these during Lent this year— and I'm sure you all remember all I said. So, do I just skip them and begin with verse 13? Well, I decided I can't do that. The beatitudes are so essential to the rest of the sermon, we miss huge amount if we don't put them in the context of the whole. This morning we're going to cover all eight beatitudes in the remaining time of this sermon in order to keep in mind the significance to everything else Jesus is teaching.

I find The Message in its paraphrase of each beatitude wonderfully interpretive. So, for our Scripture, let's read these from the bulletin insert, the NIV text for each one followed by The Message. I want you to notice there is a natural division here where the first four deal with our internal life, the heart, and the next four with relating to our outside world.

THE BLESSING OF RECOGNIZING OUR NEED– Beatitudes 1-4

Remember, the word translated “blessed” is a rich word in the Greek, “makarios” which refers to a transcendent happiness beyond the reach of circumstances– beyond all care and labor. It includes security and satisfaction– a blessed state, indeed. Imagine the shock in first hearing these from Jesus. They turn our way of thinking on its head. Our world thinks,

“Blessed are the strong, for they will be successful.”

“Blessed are the wise, for they will not be fooled.”

“Blessed are the wealthy, for they will have everything they want.”

Instead, Jesus gives us a list of losers: people at the end of their rope; those who have lost and are mourning that loss; the meek– those not insisting upon being in control.

In these first four beatitudes, Jesus is telling us how we enter into the kingdom of heaven, which is synonymous with the life of discipleship here and now. This is the doorway to everything else. Let’s look at each of these conditions of entrance.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (5:3)

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

“Poor in spirit” is, I think, well interpreted by The Message’s, “at the end of your rope.” This is when we recognize our need and that we can’t handle life on our own. All we’ve tried has come up short. There is a humility here, a crying out, “Lord, help me!”

It is part of our fallen human nature to keep tight control of our lives, doing things our way. Thus, it often takes a crisis like a health problem or other overwhelming circumstances that are beyond us for us to cry out for help. Or, maybe its after we’ve totally messed things up with our bad choices that we finally are willing to turn it all over to Jesus for His help. You see, the problem is, He is the rightful Lord of our lives. He enters into our lives only on that basis. He doesn’t come as a mere supplement to our plans and efforts. He is Lord. That involves a surrender of our all for His all. That is the humility of the “poor in spirit”– not needing to cling to their way, their rights, their demands– but letting it all go in Jesus’ capable hands. There is a sense in which every teaching in this Sermon on the Mount drives us back to this first beatitude.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (5:4)

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

When we mourn the loss of someone or something dear to us, we are aware of a hole in our hearts– an empty place. It is important to not just cover over that loss and fill-in the place with activity, things, or medicate it with drugs or alcohol. That emptiness within is a place Jesus can fill with His presence. In that, we find ourselves in deeper relationship with Him.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (5:5)

You're blessed when you're content with just who you are– no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

“Meekness” is certainly not attractive to most of us. We think of “Meek as a mouse”– shy,

frightened souls scurrying around to hide in the corners of life. But, as The Message suggests, the Greek word here has a lot to do with being content, not striving to be in control of things. It is not weakness, but power under control as in a tamed wild horse under the control of its master. In this beatitude, we let Jesus be totally in charge, directing our lives. It enables us to relax and trust that we will be given everything that is *really* important, His inheritance.

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

You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

Here, “righteousness” may not seem too attractive since terms like “self-righteous” or “holier than thou” come to mind. But it is best thought of as being like Jesus. That is what we desire, to hunger for and seek. And, it is a warning to not seek the cheap junk food of this world as a substitute.

There you have it, four beatitudes enabling us to enter into this walk with Jesus. But after we begin, there needs to also be an outflow from our lives.

THE BLESSING OF INVOLVEMENT– Beatitudes 5-8

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” (5:7)

You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being "care-full," you find yourself cared for.

Every person on the face of this earth needs mercy. Everyone wants to receive mercy. It is a needed quality of life as we interact with one another. We all get wounded and hurt by one another. People are stupid, inconsiderate, rude, selfish, forget, break promises and in countless other ways transgress against us. Mercy is a wonderful gift we can extend to each other. If we want to know what it looks like in practice, we look to Jesus.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” (5:8)

You're blessed when you get your inside world– your mind and heart– put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

The Greek word for “pure” used here means uncontaminated, single-mindedness. As Kierkegaard puts it so well, “To have a pure heart is to will one thing.” Of course that one thing is following Jesus in all aspects of our lives. When we are undivided inside, we’ll become freshly aware of how God is at work everywhere in the world around us. Then, we can work in cooperation with what He is doing, not at cross-purposes.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” (5:9)

You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

We are to be involved in making peace wherever we can. We tell people how they can have peace with God. And, between other people, our calling is to help stem conflict and promote peace.

And finally, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the

kingdom of heaven.” (5:10)

"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

Jesus adds two verses of commentary on this that say it better than I can (from The Message)

"Not only that— count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens— give a cheer, even!— for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

So, in summary, we enter into this walk with Jesus not out of our strength and goodness, but out of our poverty of resources. There, as we offer ourselves to Him and invite Him to be our Master, we begin living the spiritual life— His life, power, and resources are ours. Then, the natural step is for us to share those gifts with others, as these last four beatitudes call us to.

CONCLUSION

This week, I read about John Sung, whose life struck me as a great illustration of the spiritual life Jesus is setting forth here. John was born in 1901, the son of a Methodist minister in southeast China. When he was nine, a great revival swept through their city and John turned his life over to Jesus. He immediately began to assist his father in the ministry. Throughout his teenage years, he gave himself to evangelism and study. At age 18, he had a vivid dream God gave him that one day he would be a great evangelist.

John felt the political climate in China would restrict his studies, so he came to America, where it sounds like he began to drift from his calling. Here he threw himself into the study of physics and chemistry. He earned a Ph.D. in chemistry in just 21 months. Then he went on to Union Theological Seminary in New York City to pursue a theological degree. There he felt his faith in Jesus slipping away amidst his studies of rationalism, Taoism, and Buddhism.

Then, in the middle of this drift away from Jesus during seminary, he attended an evangelistic service at a local church. There, he was deeply touched as he heard a fifteen-year-old girl read from the Scriptures and speak of the gospel with conviction and passion. It stirred within him a longing for the faith and power he saw in this girl. Later in his room, he read again of the death of Christ in Luke 23. He was moved to deep repentance and filled to overflowing with the power of the Holy Spirit. He could not contain his newfound joy and peace. He ran throughout the campus shouting for joy and singing the praises of his Savior.

Sung's enthusiasm for his reclaimed faith was not seen as positive by all at the seminary. He had previously been an intensely serious student. Now he was running around, jumping for joy, and singing. Thinking Sung had lost his mind, the president had him committed to a mental institution. The Chinese consul was able to intervene and get John Sung sent back to China. For the next 15 years, his driving passion was to proclaim the joy of the gospel. While he only lived to the age of 42, many thousands were led to Christ through His two-hour sermons.

Do you see the truth of the beatitudes here? When John Sung began trusting his abilities, enamored with pursuits of the mind, he lost his peace, joy, and the power of that life. He was drifting. Humbly coming back to the entrance through repentance and trust restored him to the passion and outflow of the Christian life. He was misunderstood and rejected by the seminary, but that only served in getting him back to China.

Perhaps you feel like you've lost your joy, your passion, your desire in following Jesus with your whole heart. If things aren't working for you right now the way you'd like, that is a means to bring us back to the very beginning— the first four beatitudes:

- being poor in spirit, at the end of our rope;
- feeling and mourning what we've lost;
- giving up control of things in meekness;
- and desiring God, hungering for His fullness.

As John Sung lay dying, he recovered from his coma enough to sing the verses of three hymns just before he went to be with his Lord: "The Sweet By and By," "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross," and "Jesus is All the World to Me."

As we close, let's join in one of those hymns, "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross." The cross is all about our powerlessness, our letting go, and trusting Jesus alone for the life He provides. It marks the entrance to the spiritual life. And, on the cross we see the first four beatitudes most perfectly demonstrated.