

The Beatific Life

(Matthew 5: 5-10)

This morning we are continuing to look at the Beatitudes. Last week I said the beatitudes concentrate on Christian character. As we prayerfully think about these eight sayings and ask the Holy Spirit to apply them to our lives we will grow in cultivating a Christ-like character. As we then move into the rest of the sermon, Jesus will tell us that when we have a character like his, we are like salt and light to the world. He will then go on to show us through the rest of chapters five, six and seven how this character shapes our conduct.

I have entitled this morning's sermon *The Beatific Life* because I want to convey the idea that when we apply these sayings to our own lives, both individually and corporately, we will be sharing in the divine life. To share in the life of God means that we will be sharing in relationships of holiness. What is holiness?

Ruthy pointed at two weeks ago that the verse that is the theme of these three chapters is Matthew 5.48. "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." The New English Bible translates this verse "There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds"

But this word "holy" can turn some people off. Why? The word "holy" has received bad press and has become associated with some kind of grimness. We think "holy" people are those who look as if they have been steeped in vinegar or soaked in embalming fluid. Some people react initially to this word as did the little girl who happened to see a mule looking over the fence at her. She had never seen a mule before, and she said to it, "I don't know what you are, but you must be a Christian -- you look just like Grandpa." Others associate it with strangeness, apartness, as though holy people are weird, peculiar individuals who live out in the desert somewhere, remote from the rest of us. They are "different." But the Bible itself suggests none of these ideas concerning holiness. Psalm 29.2 speaks of "the beauty of holiness," (Ps. 29:2, KJV). When you know what holiness is you will agree it is a beautiful thing.

If you want to get at the meaning of this word, you must go back to its original root. This word is derived from the same root from which a very attractive English word comes. This word is wholeness. So holiness means wholeness, being complete. And

if you read wholeness in place of holiness everywhere you find it in the Bible, you will be much closer to what the writers meant. We all know what wholeness is. It is to have together all the parts which were intended to be there, and to have them functioning as they were intended to function.

This is what Jesus is talking about throughout the Sermon. So when he says we are to be perfect, he means we are to be whole because our Father is whole." God is complete. There is no blemish in God; he lives in harmony with himself. He is a beautiful person. He is absolutely what a person ought to be. He is filled with joy and love and peace. He lives in wholeness. And he looks at us in our brokenness and says to us, "You too, shall be whole."

That word wholeness has power to awaken desire within us. We long to be whole people. Don't you? Don't you want to be what God made you to be, with all the ingredients of your personality expressed in balance? That is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about. In fact, so is the whole Bible.

We are so aware of our own brokenness, of our lack of wholeness. We know how much we hurt ourselves and each other. We are aware of our inability to cope with life. We sometimes put up a big facade and try to bluff our way through as though we are able to handle anything. But inside, half the time, we are running scared. That is a mark of our lack of wholeness. We also know our diabolical power to irritate, to enrage, and to inflame others -- and ourselves. But the good news the Bible declares is that God knows all about human brokenness and hurt. He knows that we are that way. He sees this in sharp contrast to his own wholeness. And his love reaches out and says to us, "You shall be whole; for I am whole. That is my purpose, Jesus says for those who are being saved by me."¹

As we share in the life of holiness, what I am calling the beatific life, we will see that the beatitudes capture beautifully for us the character of those who are becoming whole.

¹ This description of wholeness/holiness is taken from a sermon by Ray Stedman on the Book of Leviticus called "The Way to Wholeness" If you would like to see this teaching in its larger context go to "staugcal.ab.ca" and click on the "Link" icon. Scroll down to *Adventuring Through the Bible* and click the Leviticus sermon.

Last week we considered the first two beatitudes. So let's move on to verse 5: In the bulletin there are two versions of this verse. The NIV translates it this way. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Now look at it in the Message: "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."

This second version helps us to understand what the word "meek" means. God wants us to be content with who we are. This doesn't mean that we are to be content with those areas of our life where we act out of our sinfulness and wounded-ness. But it does mean that we are to be content with the person we are, with our core personality. You will remember that the tenth commandment teaches that we are not to covet other people and what they have. The reason for this is because God wants us to be content with who we are. He doesn't want us to spend our time day dreaming about being someone else. As long as we do this, he cannot fully get our attention and so shape a Christ-like character in us.

Remember this. God desires you. He doesn't want you to be another person. He wants you to be in relationship with him and he wants to use you so that he can relate to others through you. But the Holy Spirit can only do this when you are meek, content with who you are.

The word from which we get the English word "meek" had in Greek usage an association with the domestication of animals. It is the word used for an animal who has been trained to obey the word of command. So we could also understand this verse as meaning "Blessed is the person who has every instinct, every impulse, every passion under control. Blessed is the person who in being content with who they are is entirely self-controlled.

But the moment we state it like this, we realize it needs a slight modification. It isn't that we are to be self-controlled. As we will see, self control isn't enough if we are to live out the Sermon. The beatific life can only be lived out if we are God controlled, for only in his service do we find perfect freedom, and in the doing of his will perfect peace"

As we learn to be content with who we are, as we bring our lives under the control of the Holy Spirit we will discover the promise of this verse. We will know treasures that cannot be bought because we are becoming more holy as we accept that it is in my life

that God wants to have the opportunity to work with me in directing my path. Then together with others who are fellow citizens of heaven I can live fully the life God has given to me.

Verse six has a wonderful promise attached to it. Listen carefully. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Or in the Message, “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.”

The promise of this verse is that if we truly desire to grow in living a life of righteousness we will be satisfied. Let's think about this in terms of wholeness. What Jesus is saying here is that if we truly desire to grow in living a life of Communion with God and with others according to God's original purpose he will satisfy this desire for us.

But here is the thing. The more you desire this life, the more you will recognize there is to grow into the fullness of God's wholeness. What I mean by this is the more holy you become, the more you will desire holiness. You will also see more clearly those ways in which you fall short of God's holiness and wholeness. With the psalmist you will say: “As a white-tailed deer drinks from the creek; I want to drink God, deep draughts of God. I'm thirsty for God--alive. I wonder, "Will I ever make it-- arrive and drink in God's presence?" ²Paul knew what it was to hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is what he is talking about when he declares:

“I have not yet become perfect. But I keep going on to make that life my own as Christ Jesus made me His own. 13 No, Christian brothers, I do not have that life yet. But I do one thing. I forget everything that is behind me and look forward to that which is ahead of me. 14 My eyes are on the prize. I want to win the race and get the prize of God's call from heaven through Christ Jesus.”³

Do you see the movement of the Beatitudes? They begin with our recognition in verses 3 and 4 of how impoverished our spirit is and in need of Christ's comfort. This in turn brings us to the place where in accepting our poverty we can be filled with the Spirit's gracious presence. This in turn brings us into the place where we have the freedom to accept who we are. Out of this we become less focused on ourselves and

² Psalm 42:1. (The Message)

³ Philippians 3:12-14

more focused on God's righteousness and make it the goal of our life to keep focused on God's purposes for us.

This in turn brings us to beatitudes five, six and seven. If beatitudes two, three and four concentrate on our inner life, what I called our personality last Sunday, the ones that follow concentrate on how we will relate to others. Putting this another way we can see these three beatitudes as an expression of how our Christ-like character is to be exhibited to others.

Let me take them together: Reading first from the NIV and then from the Message we hear Jesus say:

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

7" You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'carefull,' you find yourselves cared for.

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.

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.

I don't have time to comment on these three in any detail this morning. In the weeks to come we will see how Jesus will take these verses and elaborate on them in the rest of the Sermon.

What I do want to point out is that these three beatitudes when applied to our relationships will allow us to see others in a new way. If in every relationship, every conversation, every action we treated others with care, saw that person in the way God sees them and worked with others to win cooperation we would experience the kingdom of God in our midst.

One would think that all people would want to share in this life, catch a glimpse of the beatific vision. But also it is not so. That is why Jesus ends the beatitudes with the eighth saying:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

Jesus ends with this beatitude because he is all too aware that the more whole we become others will want to persecute us. This is because that as long as a person is unwilling to begin to surrender their will to God they will be threatened by and even despise those who have surrendered their wills. The values of the world and the spiritual influence of the devil would have us remain dead in our trespasses and sins. When you exhibit the life of the Spirit those who are without His presence in his life and have allowed in the presence of the evil other will seek to persecute you. As he will do with the previous beatitudes, so too with this one, Jesus will elaborate on its meaning in the verses that follow.

To live the beatific life is a blessing because as we choose to follow Jesus his holiness and wholeness will work their transforming power within us by the Holy Spirit. This in turn will help us to know what Jesus meant when he said "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly."

May we together share more fully in the beatific life and have our characters transformed into the likeness of him who is the way the truth and the life. Only His life can inform our lives as to how we can live most faithfully in this life and look for the life that is to come.