

## **Marks of a Christian: 3 Blessed**

**January 23.2004**

**Matthew 5:1-12, Micah 6: 1-8 , I Corinthians 3: 18-31**

**What does the word “blessed” mean to you? You may think this is a silly question; you may say, “We all know what that word means. It means, ‘happy,’ ‘fortunate’, favored of God.’ Maybe we can all agree about the definition. Maybe the problem comes when we try to identify specific blessings--when it comes to recognizing a blessing when we see it. Perhaps some of you know that old hymn, “Showers of Blessings.” You remember the chorus.**

**Showers of blessings, showers of blessings we need. Mercy drops round us are falling, but for the showers we plead. Is it clear to us what we’re asking for when we ask for showers of blessings? What do we mean when we say “I’ve been blessed?” Are we talking about the things Jesus talks about in the beatitudes? Or are we talking about other things--things the world recognizes as blessings--things like more money, good health, safety for ourselves and our family?**

**Let me tell you about a few people, and you can tell me which ones are or were blessed.**

**First, Joe and I recently saw the movie The Aviator. Howard Hughes was a man who had it all: he was rich, he was extremely intelligent and creative, he did exciting and interesting work. Attractive and interesting women loved him. On the other hand a friend of mine told me about a young couple whose daughter is dying of a brain tumor. Which of these is blessed: Howard Hughes or the young couple?**

**Perhaps all of you would say, “Sylvia, you haven’t told the whole story about Howard Hughes. He was a troubled man. He was paranoid, he was obsessive compulsive. He became very afraid of being around people. He became a recluse. He was very unhappy. Yes he was rich, but I wouldn’t call him blessed.” Well I didn’t tell you the whole story of the young couple either. The young couple told my friend that they were very grateful for the time they had with their daughter. That time was precious to them. They could spend it treasuring her and showing her how much they loved her. The experience was actually drawing them closer to each other--it was strengthening their marriage. It was a very painful, but a very meaningful experience. They feel they have been blessed.**

**The friend to told me about the couple said that, to her, a blessing is a gift from God and is something that brings us closer to God. That certainly would fit with the young couple's experience, wouldn't it? No one would say that their daughter's illness in itself was a blessing, but a blessing could come out of it if the experience brought them closer to God. Another friend told me, "You are blessed if you allow the spirit of God to work through you. You will be truly happy if you live this way."**

**Let's try out this understanding using two more stories--these from the Bible. Jesus tells the first one. It's about a very rich man. He has many fields and his fields are yielding a bumper crop. And he's also a smart man--a man who plans, who thinks ahead. He says, "I'm going to tear down my barns and build new ones, so I can store my bountiful harvest. And then I can retire and enjoy life." Is this man blessed? Well, the Bible says. "No." As a matter of fact, God calls this man a fool. He says, "Today you'll die, and who'll enjoy your crops and your barns and your wealth then?" The things that the world would call "blessings"--wealth, barns, fields, didn't bring this man closer to God. As a matter of fact they may have occupied him so much that they blocked his vision. And certainly the spirit of God wasn't working through him.**

**On the other hand there's this young woman. She gets pregnant out of wedlock, but her fiancé married her anyway. She is married to a carpenter, so never knows wealth or comfort. They have a wonderful, loving son. But he leaves home when he's about thirty and becomes an itinerant preacher. Later her son is arrested and she has to stand by his cross and watch him die. Yet an angel calls her blessed. Would you call her blessed? If that's what being blessed means, do you want any part of it?**

**But applying our understanding of blessedness may help us see Mary's life differently.**

**God chooses her and gives her a wonderful and meaningful job. She is to bring the Savior into the world and to raise him and watch him grow. The spirit of God, surely, was working through her. I imagine that with such an awesome task she turns to God ever day for strength. I imagine she sees God in the smile of her son and that her son helps her see God more clearly. The crucifixion is agony to her, but she also knows the relief and the joy of the resurrection. Mary's life was spent in openness and closeness to God. So by our definitions, then, Mary is blessed.**

**In the light of this let's look at the beatitudes. This is of course the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Let's look at the setting. "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him."**

**Notice Matthew has Jesus go up a mountain. This is only one of the many similarities between Jesus and Moses that Matthew alludes to. Moses went up the Mountain to receive the ten commandments; Moses was persecuted by a king, so was Jesus; Moses came out of Egypt, so did Jesus. But, of course there's a difference. Jesus is greater than Moses: Moses RECEIVED the commandments; Jesus GIVES the beatitudes. Later Jesus says he didn't come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. It seems to me that the ten commandments deal more with rules, while the beatitudes go beyond the rules, to the hearts of people--to their character.**

**"...his disciples came to him." While the crowds overhear the sermon, it's really for the disciples. It's been called Jesus' inaugural address--his vision of what his kingdom is to be like and how his followers are to live in it. And, as we've seen from the previous stories, Jesus turns the world upside down with his words. His vision of what is important and what is blessed is just the opposite of the world's point of view.**

**The first four beatitudes have to do with our relation to God, and so have more to do with bringing us closer to God.**

**"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The world would say, "Blessed are the confident and self-assured, for they will get ahead." Jesus says, "Blessed are those who depend on God, because they know they must, for their is the kingdom of heaven." Right here at the beginning of the beatitudes I need to say that I believe this is more than pie in the sky by and by. Jesus says, the kingdom is at hand. The kingdom was and is breaking into our lives--for we can truly be a part of God's kingdom now.**

**"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Commentators believe this points back to the Hebrew Scriptures, alluding to mourning because of injustice and oppression. A few years ago a TV commercial showed a highway cutting through the dessert. It was strewn with litter. A Native American was standing beside it. The camera panned to his stoic**

face. A solitary tear was running down his cheek. Jesus says, “Blessed are all those who mourn the destruction of the environment, the destruction of war, the destruction brought to human life by injustice. These people are blessed because they share my pain and I will comfort them.”

“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” The Greek and Hebrew words here mean “humble” and “teachable.” Moses was called meek. So was Jesus. They were humble before God; they allowed God to teach them. But that didn’t mean they were wimps, when it came to facing up to the world.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled.” We probably don’t know what it’s like to be really hungry or thirsty—to be so hungry and that we can’t think of anything else, so thirsty that our bodies cry out for water. That is how strong the desire for righteousness is for the blessed. And in the context of Matthew—the desire isn’t for righteousness in the abstract—it’s for the righteousness of God, the will of God. Blessed are those who hunger to know and do God’s will, for they will be filled. What a blessing!

The rest of the blessings have to do with the way we relate to others—blessings that come, as my friend says, from letting the spirit of God work through us.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” Pure in heart here means, not only morally clean, but also having a heart that is whole, that is unalloyed, pure as in pure gold. In other words, blessed are those who are people of integrity, who do not serve two masters.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” Names are important. Those who work for shalom, for the peace and wholeness of the world are called God’s children and are therefore brothers and sisters of the Prince of Peace.

Finally, we come to the hardest sayings for all, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Then Jesus turns and speaks personally to the disciples. It’s no longer third person, but second person. “Blessed are YOU when people revile you and

**persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecute the prophets who were before you.”**

**How can persecution be a blessing? First we need to remember that it is persecution for righteousness sake, or for Jesus sake--that it persecution for doing God’s will, for living as Jesus’ disciple. We think of Mary standing at the cross, of Peter and John saying to the priests, “We must obey God rather than you,” of Luther saying, “Here I stand, I can do no other,” of Bonhoeffer taking a stand against Hitler, of Rosa Parks quietly sitting down at the front of the bus. Their suffering wasn’t lessened, but we must believe that the inward joy they knew because they were true to God, and the sense of God’s presence and power in the midst of suffering, and the knowledge that they were a part of a great community of the faithful made them blessed people.**

**E. Stanley Jones said, “You read the beatitudes and they seem impossible. You read them again and nothing else seems possible.” As followers of Jesus we take heart in the knowledge that the blessings comes from God, and the ability to become the kinds of people who receive the blessings also come from God.**

**Amen**

**God doesn't bless us just to make us happy;  
He blesses us to make us a blessing.**

**It is called "Green Fields" and was unfamiliar to me until I got this CD. The whole hymn is quite nice and if you can hear Thomson's setting of it, I would encourage you to do so. Here is the first stanza:**

**How tedious and tasteless the hours  
When Jesus no longer I see!  
Sweet prospects, sweet birds, and sweet flowers  
have all lost their sweetness to me.  
The midsummer sun shines but dim;  
The fields strive in vain to look gay;  
But when I am happy in Him,  
December's as pleasant as May.**

**This hymn expresses our tendency to associate our feelings and emotions with the presence or absence of God, a tendency we all-too-often follow. We too often base the state of our faith on our feelings. The greater, deeper truth is that God is with us always, no matter our current state of emotions, no matter whether its December or May. Indeed, sometimes we are closest to God when we feel the most alone, most desolate or most in pain. One of the gifts of music is to give us songs to sing that express our longing for God, as well as our praises of God and thanksgivings to God. Here is another song to add to our faith repertory.**

**May your heart sings God's love to you this day, regardless of how you feel.**

**Grace & peace**

**Geoff**

**Few in the world are untouched by the catastrophe in South**