

## **Intro**

Do you feel blessed today? You may not, if we look at our society. There is of course the Covid-19 crisis, which is paralysing still much of our country today. There is the looming Brexit upheaval. There seems to be the polarisation of opinions, where middle ground politics have disappeared and people are more strongly opposing one another. This all seems to be fuelled by a post modernism culture that everyone can have their own ideas, thoughts, motivations which then results into actions that often disregard others. The elections in the USA, Black Live Matter, rioting, all seem to be related to that. People are starting to loose patience with each other and are more willing to make a stand – even a violent stand.

And in the midst of that Christianity, God and Jesus Christ have lost interest and is at best seen as an interesting past time and at worst delusion. Even though from a Christian optic, the whole society seems to suffer from mass delusion!

So are we blessed to be called followers of Jesus Christ?

## **The Sermon of the Mount**

This Sunday is the start of a sermon series on the Sermon of the Mount. Matthew puts the teaching of Jesus first, before we see him do any miracles. This opposed to for instance Mark, who tells about Jesus after being baptised by water and the Holy Spirit, healing various people, including Peter's mother in law. Matthew however describing Jesus' birth and childhood, moves in chapters 3 and 4 to the baptism by John the Baptist, the temptation by Satan in the dessert, and his first sermon: "Repent for the Kingdom of God is near" (4:17) followed by the calling of his disciples. And then at the end of that Chapter and at the beginning of Chapter 5 we see Jesus gathering the disciples and the crowd around him on a mountain side where he begins to teach. And this sermon stretches the length of 3 chapters (Ch 5-7).

So for over the next few months we will delve into these passages and try to understand what Jesus teaching for us in and how really revolutionary Jesus' teaching is. Because as usual, Jesus' worldview (which is God's worldview) is totally different than anything you would believe from how our society behaves as well as how society in Jesus' time behaves.

Long time Christians may be familiar with the terms and the phraseology and the danger is that familiarity may have taken the edge of Jesus' teaching for us. So I hope that we will be surprised and challenged by the passages, which not only portrays that Jesus is counter cultural to the culture we live in, but even counter cultural to our own Church culture.

## **The Beatitudes**

### *The Virtues*

Jesus starts with people demonstrating nine different characteristics which he calls blessed. I will call these characteristics virtues, as I could not think of a better collective

noun. The blessings are also called beatitudes, which is the Latin for blessings. The Greek word for 'blessed' ('makarios') could mean fortunate, happy, in a privileged situation, or well off. But if we read correctly, Jesus is not blessing these groups of people, rather he identifies that they are blessed because of their virtue, and that they can look forward to a form of reward. It is important to understand that they have not received this rewards yet and are still suffering because of their virtues.

So the people who are mourning, are not blessed because they are comforted now, but because they will be comforted. Those people can take reassurance that whatever state they are in today, they will be comforted, they will inherit, their hunger will be filled, they will be shown mercy, they will see God, they will be called Sons of God, theirs will be the Kingdom of Heaven. All of this will happen to them, but they do not have this yet, they have the promise. And it is out of that promise that they live out these virtues.

These are called eschatological statements, or end of time statements. So even at the beginning of his teaching, Jesus looks towards the end and tells the crowds and the disciples: if you are in this situation, hang on tight, don't lose faith, keep doing what you do, even though you go against the tide of society, because you will be redeemed, rewarded.

In these nine statements there is also a progression in both the virtues and their future rewards. So even in the Kingdom of God there are different rewards based on different virtues. But let's have a look at these now:

1. *Poor in spirit and theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* Those who are poor in spirit, are not the economical poor, but also 'those who have a lack of arrogance and sense of their own need'<sup>i</sup>. This first one is almost a summary of all the other virtues and blessings that follow.
2. *Mourning and comforted.* Can mourning be a virtue? It depends on the kind of mourning. We normally associate mourning with personal loss, but I do not think Jesus had this in mind. This is the 'mourning of those who lament the present condition of God's people and God's programme in the world'<sup>ii</sup>. It is like the lament that I started with on the current situation of our society and the lack of Christian faith and discipleship in society. It is lamenting that Israel had turned away from God in the time of Jesus, or the lamenting that Great Britain has turned away and is turning away from Jesus. If you look at the mourning in this way, then this is a virtue in God's eyes. And Jesus promises those who do, that they will be comforted, presumably because the world will change and adopt Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.
3. *Meek and inheriting the world.* Meek is not what we made of it over time: submissive. 'Meekness is here a synonym for "poor in spirit" (v3); [...] it characterises those who are aware of their identity of oppressed people of God in the world.'<sup>iii</sup> Inheriting the land is the exact opposite of that, instead of slaves they become owners and masters
4. *Hunger and thirst for righteousness and filled or satisfied.* Matthew uses righteousness to indicate those who 'actively do the will of God'<sup>iv</sup> These are people who long for the Kingdom of God and the vindication of what is right and

are doing God's will now, even when it is not required or expected. They are satisfied, because they will see a just world.

5. *Merciful and being shown mercy* – This is not just an attitude of mercy, but actively doing acts of mercy. This is the mercy that Joseph showed to Mary when he realised she was pregnant but not by him. This is not demanding your rights and privileges, but looking to the well-being of the other party in a conflict. And so these will also receive God's mercy at the last judgement.
6. *Pure in heart and seeing God*. This is 'not merely the avoidance of "impure thoughts (e.g. sexual fantasies), but refers to the single-minded devotion to God [...]'.<sup>v</sup> It is being devoted to God. It is the attitude of first four of the ten commandments: Love God above everything else. The opposite is a divided heart, the person with two masters. Wanting to do God's will some of the time but not all of the time. Those follow God wholeheartedly will therefore see God.
7. *Peacemakers and called Sons of God*. Apparently the Roman emperors called themselves peacemakers and "sons of god". But Jesus uses the terminology not as a title but to indicate those who are actively working towards reconciliation. Reconciliation between people, but also reconciliation between God and people. To be called Sons of God relates back to Hos 1:10, 'they will be called "Children of the living God"'.<sup>v</sup>
8. *Persecuted because of righteousness and theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*. The sign of how alien the Kingdom of God is, is that those who live according to the above virtues will be persecuted. Because power in society is based on the opposite: self promotion. And society can handle and control and manage that, as that is what it wants for itself. But this is promotion of God, justice and righteousness, and that will bring us into conflict with society. As it feels threatened and judged, and it goes against its own objectives. Christians were persecuted in the first centuries after Jesus and in many are persecuted today in totalitarian regimes, whether they are based on ideology or religion. And as we Christians are coming more into conflict with the ideology of our culture, we will start to see it too. But Jesus sees that persecution is a virtue – i.e. that you are willing to hold on to your ideals that you let yourself be persecuted.

And then Jesus makes it very specific, and links the persecution not only to being virtuous in this way, but because of himself. Here he predicts that Christians will be persecuted because we speak out on behalf of Christ. But then he reassures as well: 'great is your reward in heaven' (v12)

### **Application**

It is the next section about Salt and Light and the city on a hill cannot be hidden that gives us the application. If we strive to have these virtues then, although we will suffer today, we are blessed because of our future reward. This future reward Paul also mentions various times with the analogy of a race, e.g. 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the **race**, I have kept the faith.' (2 Tim 4:7). But if you run a race, you need to be ahead of everyone, you need to make a difference, and be different. This is what Jesus means by being light, salt or a city on a hill. You cannot be a Christian and be

invisible! If you are ... you are like salt that is not salty, or a light under a bowl. So I will end with the last verse that stand on its own: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."  
(Matt 5:16)

**Amen**

- i The Gospel of Matthew, Introduction, Commentary and reflections, M. Eugene Boring; New Interpreter's Bible, Abdingon press 1995; p178
- ii p179
- iii p179
- iv p179
- v P179