

The Luckiest People Alive

The Beatitudes part 1
Matthew 5:1-12 11-1-09

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Matthew 5:1-12 Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, 2 and he began to teach them, saying: 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 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. 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount

Connection with Samuel – Inauguration of the Kingdom

Our church is just over 2.5 years old. One year of that time we have spent studying Samuel, and we still have quite a bit left to go in 2 Samuel. But we don't want to spend so much time in one study that we become imbalanced and neglect the central message of the gospel. So I have decided to take a break from Samuel for a while and spend some time in the New Testament. This morning I want to begin a study of the Sermon on the Mount.

And it is a very natural transition, because we just studied the heart of the books of Samuel, which is 2 Samuel 7 where God promises David an everlasting kingdom. The Bible spends more time talking about David than any other character besides Christ, because David was the prototype of the Messiah. The writer of Samuel has constantly pointed us forward to the coming of the great descendent of David who would be the final, glorious, eternal King who would reign on David's throne.

2 Samuel 7:12-13 I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish ...13 the throne of his kingdom forever.

That promise becomes the focal point and the ground of all the hopes of God's people for the next one thousand years. They would have a lot of ups and downs during that time of David to the time of Jesus. But throughout all those ups and downs the prophets just kept pointing ahead to the time when the great Anointed One would arrive and His eternal Kingdom would be established.

Then finally one day it happened. A young woman was minding her own business, going through her normal routine, and suddenly an angel appeared to her and said this:

Luke 1:31-33 You will be with child and give birth to a son ... 32 The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.

After one thousand years of waiting, the descendent of David who will reign in an eternal, glorious kingdom is about to be born!

Now skip ahead thirty years. Jesus has now gone public in His role as the Davidic King. What did He spend His time doing? Did He devote Himself to politics, networking, making all the right friends, pulling political strings, positioning Himself – maybe a few trips to Rome to gain favor with Caesar? Did He start gathering His army? What did He spend His time doing? In the biographies we have of Jesus there are several places where there is a summary statement of what Jesus spent His time doing. And all those summary statements say the same thing. Jesus spent His time preaching – preaching and doing miracles to prove the authority of His preaching.¹ Now, what do you suppose He preached about? The people of God have been waiting one thousand years for the arrival of the great King whose kingdom would be established forever, and now He has arrived and He is going around on a speaking tour – what do you suppose He is speaking about? He spoke about the same subject every time He preached. The topic that dominated His preaching was exactly what you would expect – the kingdom. They have been waiting for this kingdom since the time of David, now the king is here, and so it is no surprise at all that He spends His time explaining to people what this kingdom is going to be like.

The Overlap Period

It was especially important for Him to do that because of the fact that the kingdom He was about to set up was going to take a form that was very different from what people expected. You see, throughout the Old Testament the promises about the Kingdom focused mostly on the final form of the Kingdom in the eternal age to come when evil is done away with. What they did not know what there was to be a stage of this

¹ The Sermon on the Mount begins in Matthew 5, but back up just three verses and you will see one of those summary statements I told you about that says Jesus spent His time preaching about the kingdom.

Matthew 4:23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

He preached about the kingdom and He did miracles to prove His authority. Let me show you another one of those summaries.

Matthew 9:35 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

The exact same statement from chapter 4 is repeated at the end of chapter 9. What does Matthew repeat that verse from chapter 4 word for word in chapter 9? He is making a sandwich. Those two statements are the bread, and what is in between (chapters 5-9) is the meat. The technical name for that is an *inclusio*. An *inclusio* is where you have two bookends that let you know that everything in between is a unified package. So if you want to sound smart you can use the word *inclusio*, or if the idea of bookends helps you that's fine, but for me it's a sandwich.

What kind of sandwich? What is the meat in between those two pieces of bread? What happens in between chapter 4 and chapter 10? Two parts – chapters 5-7 are the Sermon on the Mount (Jesus' teaching about how to live in the Kingdom), and chapter 8-9 are various accounts of Jesus' miracles. Before all that Matthew says, "Jesus went around preaching about the Kingdom and doing miracles" Then he gives you one of Jesus' sermons about the Kingdom followed by some accounts of His miracles. Then after all that he repeats what he said at the beginning – Jesus went around preaching about the Kingdom and doing miracles. So the structure and purpose of this portion of Matthew is not very hard to discern. He makes it about as clear as it could be made. Matthew's sandwich teaches us something about those people who want to pick and choose when they read the Bible. Some people like chapters 5-7, but reject chapter 8-9. They love Jesus' high ethics. They love the Golden Rule, and turn the other cheek, and all that stuff. But they don't buy into any hocus-pocus about a miracle worker who actually, literally walked on water and raised the dead and all that. He is a great moral teacher, but don't try to make Him out to be God. To those people Matthew says, "No – you can't take half of Jesus. Take the whole sandwich or take nothing – the teaching and the miracles go together." Without the miracles Jesus would not have the authority to teach what He taught. Only God Himself can make the kinds of authoritative pronouncements Jesus made in His teaching.

There are other people who want to focus on chapters 8-9 and ignore chapters 5-7. They love Jesus the healer. "Jesus – if You want to heal me, prosper me, do a miracle a day for me – wonderful! But don't start making moral demands on my life. Healing and miracles sound great – and I'll read chapters 8-9 over and over, but don't come to me and say I can't divorce my wife, or I can't love both God and money." You can't take Jesus' miracles and leave His ethical demands.

One of the movements that has been guilty of that recently is the Emergent Church movement. The people in that movement talk a lot about what they call "incarnational" ministry. They say, "Jesus didn't approach people from the intellectual side. He didn't focus on propositional truth; He focused on incarnational truth." And what they mean by that is Jesus did not try to appeal to people intellectually through propositions and truth claims; rather He won people by His actions.

That is a false distinction. Jesus did show love in His actions, but His actions were meaningless until they were interpreted by His preaching. The Sermon on the Mount is 100% "propositional" truth.

Jesus is the miracle worker who preached and taught and demanded the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. That is the whole sandwich, and you can take all of it or none of it, but Matthew won't let us pick and choose.

Kingdom at the beginning that would be much different. And that is what Jesus wanted to explain to the people – what this initial stage of the Kingdom would be like. The final form of the kingdom will be a glorious paradise – better than the Garden of Eden before the fall, where the Lord Jesus Christ will be universally honored and worshipped, and He will bring about justice and peace.

That is what the people expected as soon as the King arrived, and Jesus needed to let them know that yes, that will be the *final* form of the Kingdom, but first there will be a period of overlap in which evil and unbelief and injustice and persecution of God’s people and suffering still persists. There will be a period of overlap when this present, evil age of sin and death will coexist with the beginnings of the age to come, like when a baton is being passed and both runners are running together for a little ways. The Sermon on the Mount was Jesus’ instruction on how we are to live during this overlap stage of the Kingdom.

Hermeneutics of the Sermon on the Mount – Kingdom living here and now

The Problem

Now you need to know that that last statement I just made is very controversial. In fact, any statement about how to interpret the Sermon on the Mount is controversial. When it comes to interpreting Jesus’ other sermons there is a general consensus among scholars – but not with the Sermon on the Mount. Interpreters are all over the map. I read about thirty-six different theories on how this sermon is to be interpreted.² And the main reason for all the controversy is the fact that the ethics are so high that they seem impossible. Turn the other cheek? Love your enemies? Leap for joy when you are persecuted and slandered and lied about? Give to everyone who asks of you without asking for anything in return? Charles Ryrie, who wrote the Ryrie Study Bible notes, says, “If a businessman practiced the Sermon on the Mount today he would go broke!”³ And so Ryrie and others have come up with all kinds of different ways of dealing with the fact that Jesus is requiring us to do what seems impossible.

Didn’t intend for us to try to obey?

One suggestion has been that Jesus is purposely giving an impossible standard so we can learn how ridiculous it is for us to try to be righteous through obedience. They say Jesus does not actually expect us to do all those things – He is just showing us how impossible the standard is so we will finally throw up our hands and give up on righteousness through human effort and just fall back on grace. Those people teach that the Sermon on the Mount is law, not grace, and that Jesus never intended for us to actually live it out.

It is interesting to me that the people who teach that still live most of it out. At one point in the sermon Jesus said, “Ask and you will receive.” These people don’t have any problem with that command. At another point in the sermon Jesus says, “Do not worry about money and clothes, because God will take care of you.” And they think it is fine to obey that command – that is not legalism. It seems to me that the people who teach that this sermon only has the purpose of making us give up all hope of obedience are only focusing on the parts that seem unreasonable. But some of the other parts they make an effort to obey.

Did Jesus intend for us to strive to obey His Words in this sermon? Yes!

Matthew 5:19 Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus expects us to obey all His commands. And if you come up with some theory that says you don’t have to, keep it to yourself because if you teach that theory to others you will be the least in the kingdom. Take a look at Jesus’ conclusion to this sermon.

² Blomberg

³ Cited by Bob Deffinbaugh <http://bible.org/seriespage/%E2%80%9Cblessed-are-poor-spirit%E2%80%9D-matthew-51-13>

Matthew 7:26 everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

That is how the sermon ends. He didn't say, "Anyone who makes an effort to obey these words of mine falls into legalism, and anyone who says you don't have to obey them understands grace." He said, "You are going to face storms in your life, and when those storms come the thing that will determine whether you stand firm or your life falls apart is whether or not you are obeying My commands in the sermon I just preached." Jesus fully expected us to obey His words.

When people write this sermon off as being law rather than grace they are showing that they understand neither law nor grace. Law and grace are not opposed to each other. Where there is grace there is always obedience to God's commands. It astonishes me that anyone could read the Sermon on the Mount and not be able to see grace there. You do not have to read any farther than the first line to see grace. The first beatitude is one of the most beautiful portraits of God's grace anywhere in the Bible.

Matthew 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The word **poor** refers to absolute destitution – being so utterly without resource that the only way to survive is to beg. It means you have nothing to offer spiritually – nothing to commend you to God. Spiritually speaking you have nothing going for you. And it is those people – the people who deserve nothing, have nothing, can do nothing of any value – who can only beg for mercy, it is those people who receive the glorious, unspeakable riches of the very kingdom of heaven! If you can find any verse anywhere in the Bible that is a more sweeping, grand, spectacular description of grace than that then you know something I don't know. God blessing the spiritually destitute with the kingdom is the *essence* of grace. Does the Sermon on the Mount teach that people earn the kingdom through law-keeping so that they build up spiritual currency before God? No! The very first line in the sermon states emphatically that anyone with any spiritual currency at all is completely excluded from the kingdom.

Just for the Jews?

So that approach won't work. Another approach has been to say, "Well, Jesus' teaching was intended for the Jews of Jesus' day, but not for us. They say, "That was another era. Jesus taught a legalistic message to the Jews, but Paul taught a different gospel to the Gentiles. And we are Gentiles, so we need to listen to Paul, not Jesus."

But if that is the case why did Paul quote Jesus in Acts 20:35? And Paul did not just quote Jesus on occasion – everything Paul taught came from Jesus.

1 Corinthians 15:3 What I received I passed on to you

1 Corinthians 11:23 I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you

Was the Sermon on the Mount only for the Jews of Jesus' day and not for us? Were Jesus' words temporary – only for the years prior to the cross?

Matthew 24:35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

The Millennial Kingdom?

Another approach is to push this sermon off into the future. Those people say, "These aren't instructions for us; they are instructions for the Millennial kingdom – the one thousand year reign of Christ on earth that will happen after the Second Coming." But that view runs aground before Jesus even makes it through His introduction. In verse 10 Jesus talks about how to handle persecution. We are not going to be persecuted after the Second Coming.

Kingdom living here and now

The purpose of the Sermon on the Mount was for Jesus to teach how we are to live during the beginning stage of the Kingdom – the period between His first Coming and His Second Coming. John MacArthur has a book on the Sermon on the Mount titled, Kingdom Living Here and Now. That is an excellent title for the Sermon on the Mount. Kingdom living here and now.

And you can see that in the verb tenses of the Beatitudes. Look at all the rewards starting in verse 4 – they are all future. Those who mourn will be comforted. The meek will inherit the earth. Those who hunger will be filled. Those promises are all future.

But now look at verse 3.

Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Look at the last one in verse 10.

Matthew 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The Beatitudes start and end with “theirs is the Kingdom,” and in between is, “Blessed are those people because in the future they will receive wonderful things.” So Matthew makes a point to show us that the Kingdom Jesus is preaching about is a Kingdom we are now currently a part of. Kingdom living here and now. The Sermon on the Mount is the King spelling out the behavioral standards for His kingdom. The word “righteousness” appears again and again in the sermon. If you have ever wondered what a righteous life looks like, this is the place to look. That is what this whole sermon is about.

Outline of the sermon

As I see it, the Sermon on the Mount has three basic parts – an introduction, the main body, and a conclusion.⁴

Introduction: The blessings of the Kingdom (The Beatitudes)

Body: Righteousness in the Kingdom

Conclusion: Warnings about exclusion from the Kingdom

What I would like to try to do this morning is show you the relationship between the beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon. What I am calling the body of the sermon begins right after the beatitudes. and in the body Jesus shows us all the various facets of righteousness. The first section is about what righteousness looks like when it comes to dealing with a hostile world (5:10-16). Next Jesus discusses what righteousness looks like when it comes to interacting with individuals (5:17-48)⁵. Then the third section is what righteousness looks like when it comes to interacting with God (6:1-18). Then the fourth section is about righteousness in relationship to stuff – money and earthly treasures (6:19-34). Next, righteousness in relationship to dealing with sinners (7:1-6), and then 7:7-18 is a summary of righteous living.

⁴ When I teach people how to teach and preach in the Expositors' Class one of the things I tell them is to avoid introductory and background material that is not essential for teaching the text. Most people, when they first start out, go way overboard on introductory material. If they are teaching on Ephesians they start out with whole biography on the Paul, and a whole geography lesson on the city of Ephesus, and a history lesson and a discourse on the parchment that the letter was written on and every other detail they come across. They figure all the commentaries do it, so they should too. My philosophy is, if it is not needed for the people to understand the text, then just skip it and jump right in to preaching the text. And if some piece of background information is needed to understand some passage in the book, then wait until you get to that passage and then talk about it. But generally speaking I don't like the idea of blowing a whole sermon on introduction.

However, the Sermon on the Mount is an exception to that rule. The interpretations and approaches to this sermon are so varied and diverse that an in-depth introduction is crucial because many of you have been taught that this sermon is not for us. That Jesus never intended for us to try to obey it, or it is for some other era, or it is law and not gospel – or some other approach that would mean this sermon is not for us. I have to address all that, because what good would it be for me to preach the meaning of the sermon if you are not even convinced the sermon applies to us?

⁵ Jesus goes through the second half of the 10 Commandments – the ones that have to do with loving your neighbor, and explains how that love has to be an internal attitude and not just external actions. So He talks all about anger and adultery and divorce and honesty and forgiveness and loving enemies.

Now I realize those categories are arguable. However even if there are some flaws in my categories and divisions, still it seems clear to me that for the most part what Jesus is doing in the body of the sermon is showing us what righteousness looks like in relationship to all the various aspects of life – interaction with a hostile world, with individuals, with God, with sinners, and with earthly possessions.

The Beatitudes: The Blessedness of the Kingdom

Now, if you can hold that in your thinking for a few minutes, let's think through the purpose of Jesus' introduction in the first twelve verses (the beatitudes).

Only one command

According to the beatitudes, what is it that God wants us to do? The Lord has some definite expectations for our behavior – that is why He preached this sermon. So off the top of your head, without looking at your Bible, if someone asked you “What is the summary of what the Lord commands of us in the Beatitudes,” what would you say? How many of the commands can you remember? Would it come as a surprise to you if I told you there is only one command in the beatitudes? In fact, there are actually no commands in the beatitudes themselves – the one command comes immediately after the beatitudes in verse 12.

12 Rejoice and be glad...

The only thing that is commanded in the entire section is the command to **Rejoice and be glad**. In Luke's gospel it says, “**Rejoice and leap for joy**” (Lk.6:23). The gateway through which you must pass in order to get from the introduction to the body of the sermon about righteousness is this command. By the time you reach verse 12 Jesus wants you to be bursting with joy.

Contrast with Sinai

Have you ever noticed how upbeat the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount is? This mountain Jesus stood on to deliver this sermon has been called the Mt. Sinai of the New Testament. When God delivered His requirements for righteous living to Moses in the Ten Commandments, He did so on Mt. Sinai. In the New Testament when God delivers His requirements for righteous living He does it on this Mount. And the contrast between the two is stark. The first word in the Ten Commandments is **not**. In the Hebrew word order the first commandment is “**Not shall you have other gods before Me.**” When Jesus delivers the law for His Kingdom in the New Testament the very first word is **blessed**. And He repeats it nine times. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed ... blessed ... blessed ... blessed ... blessed ... blessed ... blessed. The message of this Kingdom is first and foremost all about blessedness! Now, was there blessedness in the Old Covenant? Absolutely. Deuteronomy 28 is known as the “blessings and cursings” chapter, and in it God pronounces a whole lot of blessings on those who obey His Law. And the Sermon on the Mount has its share of warning and negative parts as well. So the negative and the positive are present in both. However the major thrust and emphasis Jesus gives is decidedly more positive than the Law of Moses.

Hebrews 12:18-22 You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm ... 22 But you have come to Mount Zion ... You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly...

So when Jesus announces this kingdom, the introduction to His sermon is all about joy and happiness. In fact, the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount are unique. A beatitude is simply a statement that starts with the word “blessed.” “Blessed are those who...” – that is a beatitude, and they are all over the Bible. The book of Psalms begins with a beatitude.

Psalms 1:1 Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked

I counted over forty beatitudes in the New Testament. They are very common in Scripture, but as common as they are, nowhere else do you ever see more than two in a row. But when it comes time for Jesus to describe life in His Kingdom He lets loose with machine gun fire of blessedness – nine beatitudes piled on top of each other.

“Blessed”

Now, it is important that we take some time to make sure we understand how to interpret a beatitude. The dictionary definition of this word translated “blessed” is “happy,” but when it appears at the beginning of a sentence in a beatitude form it communicates much more than just the idea of happiness – which is obvious enough. If I told you, “Happy is the person who shows up here this Thursday night at 6:30,” how would you interpret that statement? It is not mainly a statement about happiness – it is primarily a statement about the event on Thursday night. If I say that I am not trying to tell you something about happiness; I am trying to tell you something about the Thursday study we are doing. That is the function of a beatitude.

In all my study and research into the original language and culture and context and extra-biblical literature, combing through the commentaries and lexicons and examining all the uses of this word “blessed ,” the most accurate English equivalent of this word is the phrase, “lucky duck.” When children use that phrase, what they mean by that is very close to what this word means. When kids say, “Aw, what a lucky duck. He gets to go...” what they are saying is that the person is fortunate or in an enviable position because of the benefit he is getting or going to get. And that is exactly what this word means. Jesus started His sermon by saying, “Let me tell you who the real lucky ducks are. These are the people who really have it made in the shade.” Jesus is describing a certain kind of people, and he says, “These people have it made, because the condition they are in places them into very wonderful, highly desirable circumstances.”

So does the word “blessed” mean “happy”? Well, it means you certainly have reason to be happy. It is possible to be the type of person Jesus describes here and still lack happiness because you are blind to the wonderful position you are in. But if a blessed person is aware of his true condition then yes, he or she will be happy. Being blessed means having cause to rejoice – but it points not mainly to the rejoicing, but to the reason for the rejoicing.

Blessedness = being in the kingdom

So, who are life’s lucky-ducks? Who are life’s lottery winners, who really have it made? Who should everyone be pointing at and saying, “Man, I wish I were in their shoes!?” Who do you think of? Is it the super rich people? Is it the really attractive people? Is it the young? Is it the guy who is married to a gorgeous wife? Is it the guy with a great job, or the couple with a dream home? Who are the people most to be envied? The answer is in verse 11. Take a look at it – what does it say?

11 Blessed are _____

You - the citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Those people are the people who really have it made, and if you happen to be one of those people you should be leaping for joy.

Now, why do you suppose Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with beatitudes? Is it just a pep talk, or is there a reason why Jesus began the sermon this way? I believe there is, and I would like to see if I can show it to you. The beatitudes describe a righteous person – humble, repentant, godly desires, merciful, pure, peacemaking, persecuted – all marks of a righteous man or woman. And Jesus begins His sermon not by commanding those things, but by pronouncing blessings upon those things. It seems to me the beatitudes are motives for righteousness.

The first section of the main body of Jesus’ sermon is about what righteousness looks like in the face of a hostile, persecuting world. Answer: The righteous heart will be salt and light to a hostile, persecuting world. That is not easy. The impulse of the flesh is to want to retaliate, not serve and love. How can we find the motivation to be righteous in response to persecution? The motivation comes from beatitude #8 – the blessedness Jesus promised to the persecuted.

I believe one of the main purposes of the beatitudes is to provide us with the motivation we need to live out the hard standards of righteousness in the rest of the sermon. Andrew taught us last week that you win the war within not by resisting bad desires but by developing good desires that are stronger than the bad desires. And that is exactly what Jesus is helping us to. If we follow the standards of righteousness in this sermon it is going to cost us a lot in terms of earthly things. We will have to let go our grip on money and possessions. We will have to let go our grip on all our rights, our reputations, our preferences, our comfort, our physical wellbeing, maybe even our lives. Giving up all that will require a pretty hefty motivation. That greater joy is going to have to be some joy in order for it to be enough to motivate us to be willing to give up so much.

And that is the purpose of the beatitudes. There is a promise in the beatitudes that corresponds to each facet of righteousness in the body of the sermon. Righteousness toward the hostile world? Beatitude #8 – great is your reward in heaven. Section 2, righteousness in relationship to loving individual people? Beatitude #7 – Blessed are the peacemakers. Section 3, righteousness in relationship to God? Beatitude #6 – blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. (And also 5 and 4 – mercy and righteousness.) Section 4, righteousness in relationship to money and material possessions in this world? Beatitude #3 – Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Section 5, righteousness in relationship to sinners? Beatitude #2 – blessed are those who mourn. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you? Beatitude #1 – blessed are the poor in spirit.

Deferred Gratification

“That sounds great in theory, Darrell, but the truth is I’ve known about the promises in the beatitudes all my life, and still I’m not having a lot of success in living out the righteousness Jesus calls for in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Why isn’t it working? Why am I not motivated? Why is it that at the moment of decision the promise of inheriting the earth seems like nothing compared to the cheap thrill I get out of indulging in some sin? I’m tempted with the pleasures of sin, and I tell my soul, ‘If you indulge in that you’re going to forfeit great reward in heaven,’ and my soul just says, “So what?” and chooses the pleasure of sin. Why isn’t it working?”

I have been thinking a lot about Andrew’s sermon, and what he said about winning the war within by fighting lesser desires with greater desires. I believe that principle is why Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes, so let’s explore it a little deeper. When you have conflicting desires (part of you wants to do the right thing and another part of you wants to do the wrong thing), what is it that makes you choose one over the other? When it comes time to exercise I have conflicting desires. My desire to be in shape says, “Work out hard” and my desire to be comfortable says, “Sit on the couch.” When I wake up in the morning one of the first things I experience is conflicting desires. One desire says, “Get up at 5:15, because I want to have a quiet house for my prayer time, and I want to have time to get all my work done.” The other desire says, “It feels so good to just lie here in bed. Stay here and rest for a while longer.” Sometimes I choose the better desire and other times I don’t. What is it in a particular circumstance that causes me to decide in favor of one or the other?

Usually people say, “It’s simple – whichever desire is stronger is the one you will choose.” But I am not so sure that is true. There have been times that my desire for something has been incredibly small and I have still chosen it. There is a doughnut sitting there, I’m not hungry, I’m not in the mood for a doughnut, I don’t want to gain extra weight, the doughnut is kind of old and stale, I know I’m not going to enjoy it very much, and yet I take a bite anyway. And when the first bite confirms all my suspicions about how little pleasure this doughnut is going to be, still I go ahead and eat the rest of it. Sometimes the desire for a treat can be overpowering, but in cases like this it is not an overpowering desire at all. It is really a very weak desire – yet I still choose it.

And that can happen even when your good desire is very powerful. There are people whose desire to lose weight is so strong that at times they have been in tears over it. And they spend huge amounts of money to achieve it, and go to all kinds of extreme measures. It is not that they don’t want it bad enough. It is not that their desire to lose weight is weak – it is very strong. And yet still at the moment of temptation they will cave in to a very weak impulse to eat something that brings them very little pleasure. Why? Why is it that sometimes I can stand strong against a really powerful evil desire, and other times I cave in to the weakest

little evil impulse? If it is not the strength of the desire, then what is it that makes me decide in favor of a good desire or a bad desire?

I do not want to be overly simplistic. No doubt there are many factors involved. I am sure spiritual warfare is a big part of it, for example. When you are under attack and the enemy is working hard at tempting you, surely that makes it harder to choose what is right. Spiritual strength in general is a factor. Your prayer life – have you been asking God to guard you and protect you? Your knowledge of God’s Word, the amount of biblical truth that is treasured up in your heart, your knowledge of what Scripture teaches on how to fight temptation, how much help are you seeking from brothers and sisters in Christ? – there are a whole lot of factors. But one of the most basic factors, and the one that’s pertinent for this study this morning, is your perspective on rewards.

In each of the examples I gave about conflicting desires, the good desire yielded a greater reward than the bad desire, but the bad desire offered more *immediate* reward. The pleasure of a nice trim, thin, healthy, attractive body is way off in the future, but this bag of potato chips is offering pleasure *right now*. And if I tell my soul, “Hey, the reward of the good desire is greater than the reward of the bad desire” my soul will say, “I know that – but I’m choosing the bad desire anyway because even though it’s a much smaller reward, I can have it *right now*.” It is not enough for the good desire to be greater, because the flesh is more than willing to forfeit the greater pleasure in the future for the lesser pleasure right now.

That is characteristic of children, isn’t it? If you go to the 3-year-old and say, “Would you rather have this one piece of candy right now and no more candy the rest of your life, or nothing now and starting tomorrow have unlimited all-you-can-eat access to a full candy store for a year?” it would take him all of about one second to decide – “That’s easy – give me the piece of candy now.” Three-year-olds are not into deferred gratification.

One of the clearest markers of maturity is the ability to prefer a greater future pleasure over a lesser immediate one. And the more mature you become the farther into the future your appetites can see. To a 3-year-old tomorrow is pretty much the same as never. But a 7-year-old may very well choose a big treat tomorrow over small one today. The 7-year-old’s world is big enough to encompass tomorrow. Although if you promise a 7-year-old something a year from now it probably won’t have much impact on him. His world isn’t that big yet. But as an adult it would be the easiest thing in the world for you to say no to a candy bar today if in return you could have an all-expense paid dream vacation next year – or a brand new car, or something like that. The more you mature the larger your world becomes, and the greater your capacities to appreciate bigger and bigger kinds of pleasure that are worth waiting for.

But what do we do about the areas where we lack that kind of maturity? Jesus is saying if you are suffering for righteousness now you have it made because of the magnitude of the payoff that will come as a result in heaven, but if a promise like that does not make me very excited, what can be done about that? I have matured to the point where a promise about tomorrow can motivate me. And I have matured to the point where a promise about next year can motivate me. How do I get to the point where a promise about eternity can motivate me?

How to be motivated to prefer future treasure over present impulses

Jesus offered some wonderful insights into that question in chapter 6, verses 19-24.

We are out of time, so I can’t talk about them, but I would urge you to spend some time this week meditating on that passage. Let me just quickly list a few of the things I saw (I can’t develop them this morning, but maybe just listing them will help get you started in your thinking).

- 1) Preach to your own heart constantly about how inadequate temporal pleasures are to satisfy (v.19)
- 2) Spend time thinking about the value of eternal reward (v.20).
- 3) Pour your resources into heaven, because where your treasure is there your heart will be (v.21).
- 4) Look at everything in life through eternal lenses (vv.22-23).
- 5) Draw crystal clear lines in your mind between temporal rewards and eternal rewards.

Let me just say a few words about that one and we will be done.

24 "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

If you have any grey area in your thinking on this you can forget about ever having success in choosing the greater treasure over the smaller one. If your flesh convinces you that maybe you can have it both ways – you can have both the immediate pleasure and the future reward, you will never have success in saying no to your immediate impulses.

Draw clear lines between sin and righteousness. That bag of potato chips, that extra half hour in bed, seeking that earthly pleasure – in each specific context it is either righteousness or it is sin – there is no in-between. There is no, “Well, I know I really shouldn’t do this, but it’s not actually sin.” If you should not do it then it is sin. Every enjoyment of an earthly pleasure is either worship of God or idolatry – no in-between.

And it is crucial to understand that because as long as your flesh thinks it can have it both ways, you will never be able to resist your impulses for immediate pleasure – no matter how small they are.

Jonah 2:8 "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

There has to be a sure, definite connection in your mind between discipline right now and the reward in the future. You have to be convinced that there is no other way to get the prize apart from the self-denial. Have you ever been on a diet, or trying to watch your calories, and you are tempted to eat something you shouldn’t, and you think, “It’s OK – I’ll make up for this. I’ll just eat less tomorrow or I’ll work it off”? If you think you can have your cake and eat it too – if you think you can enjoy the immediate pleasure and still get the future reward, then future reward will be no motivation for you to say no to an immediate pleasure.

And conversely, you have to be sure that if you do make the sacrifice now, it will for sure pay off in the future. If saying no to the immediate pleasure may or may not pay off in the future, it is hard to pass up the immediate pleasure. In order for a future reward to be a motivation for self-denial it has to be clear that the self-denial will really pay off.

Conclusion

I wish we had time to develop each of those this morning. You will have to do that on your own, but I wanted to at least give you some kind of starter in your thinking, so as we move through the beatitudes we can begin to train our hearts such that by the time we get to verse 12 we really are bursting with joy over the promises. When we talk about Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted, my main goal will not be to persuade you to mourn. My main goal will be to make you want God’s comfort so bad that you would give up anything to get it. The same goes for each of the promises in the beatitudes - being filled with righteousness, inheriting the earth, receiving mercy, seeing God, and being called sons of God. If we can get to the point where those things really motivate us, then we will obey the command to rejoice and be glad, and all the virtues mentioned in the Beatitudes will take care of themselves.

Benediction: 1 Peter 1:13 Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.