

WEEK ONE: “The Beatitudes”

Opening Reflection

What does the word “blessed” mean to you?



Read **Matthew 5:1-12 (NIV)**:

¹Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ²and he began to teach them.

He said:

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 children of God.

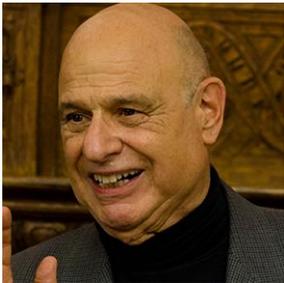
¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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.

1. What do you notice in this passage? What resonates with you?

2. Which beatitude is most challenging to you? Why?

3. In her book, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jewish scholar Amy-Jill Levine says that the words “blessed are” could also be translated as “Happy are,” “Fortunate are,” “Praiseworthy are,” or even “Congratulations to” (7). Does this change how you read these statements? Why or why not?



Dr. Tony Campolo is Professor Emeritus at Eastern University. A sociologist and Baptist pastor, he is the author of over thirty books and has traveled extensively as a speaker. His best-known sermon is “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming!” He is the founder of the Campolo Center for Ministry which offers scholarships, mentoring, and spiritual formation to students at Eastern University and Palmer Theological Seminary who are serving in or entering formal ministry.

Listen in as Dr. Campolo shares his insight on this text:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

There are two ways of handling the first of the Beatitudes. The first is blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who recognize their own spiritual need and hunger, and those who have that will soon find fulfillment. The other is...economic. It's just blessed are the poor period. And in case you missed the point, Jesus later says and woe to those who are rich. There is a sense in the teachings of Jesus that it's not a bad thing to earn a lot of money, it is a bad thing to keep it.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.

We say it's time to take the words of Jesus seriously. It's ironic, isn't it, that the church does not take Jesus seriously? You know, when we look at the Beatitudes or the overall Sermon on the Mount, the idea is that these are very extremist views and what we basically are saying is that Jesus set the levels so high in order to challenge us to move in the right direction, but surely he didn't expect that we would take these things seriously. If I was teaching the New Testament course at Eastern, I think I would take the Sermon on the Mount and hold it up and say this is what it's about. These are the teachings of Jesus. Jesus said you're my disciples if you do so whatsoever that I tell you do. So the question is, if we're not radically committed to peace, are we doing what Jesus would want us to do?

When we end a prayer in Jesus' name, we're really saying I'm praying in the spirit and with the values of Jesus. Maybe the reason why the church is rather anemic in this country is because we don't take these hard sayings seriously.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

When the church makes pronouncements [on social issues], it often does so from the position of arrogance. I mean, it's one thing to be right, but it's another thing to present

righteousness with the spirit of humility and meekness. I was very active during the civil rights era and we'd go to jail when needs be. The interesting thing was that we were right, but we were so sure that we were right, that I look back on it and feel that when I spoke, I often did so with an air of arrogance. My way is Yahweh. This sense of I'm morally superior to you because I take Jesus seriously and you don't. But that attitude is anything but meek. It's very clear that we're to stand up for righteousness and justice. You know it's very easy to get arrogant about that, and as they're carrying you off to jail, to shout back, I do this because I'm following the teachings of the Bible. And you're not. It's important to lift up Jesus, but you need to lift up Jesus in a way that does not put down those who seem to be opposed to what you're all about. So that meekness is very, very important. As a matter of fact, as a sociologist, perhaps the one good sociological insight I've ever had, is that power and love are diametrically opposed to each other.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

[This one is often misunderstood] because there's so much in the Bible about "I have come that my joy might be in you and that your joy might be full." And so many of the testimonies are these smiling Christians. Maybe, if I were putting out my own translation, I would translate it, blessed are those whose hearts are broken by the things that break the heart of Jesus, and I think that's what it's really all about. There isn't enough mourning in the church. We think becoming a Christian is so you don't say bad words anymore. No, it's allowing your heart to be broken by the things that break the heart of Jesus.

1. What did you hear Dr. Campolo say? Did anything challenge or inspire you?
2. What do you think of Dr. Campolo's challenge to stand up for justice and righteousness with humility? How do we balance using our voice on behalf of others with an attitude of meekness and humility?
3. If you could ask Dr. Campolo one question, what would it be?



At the heart of the matter

In relation to “blessed are those who mourn...,” German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, says, “the emphasis lies on the *bearing* of sorrow. The disciple-community does not shake off sorrow as though it were no concern of its own, but willingly bears it. And in this way they show how close are the bonds which bind them to the rest of humanity.... They simply bear the suffering which comes their way as they try to follow Jesus Christ” (Bonhoeffer, 122).

1. If, as Bonhoeffer says, we should not shake off sorrow, where are the places and situations in the world that cause you to mourn?
2. Generally speaking, why do people try to avoid sorrow and suffering?
3. Where and for whom might God be calling the church to bear sorrow?

Closing Reflection

Amy-Jill Levine suggests the practice of developing our own beatitudes, such as “Blessed are those who care for broken bodies or lonely children, blessed are those who sit by the dying at night, blessed are those who can sing of God asking ‘Whom shall I send?’ and can respond ‘It is I Lord...I have heard you calling in the night’” (22).

If you were to write your own beatitude, your own “blessed are those who...”, what would it say?