

Illuminating the Beatitudes, Pt. 3 (Mt 5:1-12)

This morning I want to proclaim the good news that if we will endeavor to love others like Jesus did, seeking God’s vision of peace - or “shalom” - for all, then we will have more of that peace ourselves.

Last November, we began looking at Jesus’ Beatitudes recounted in St. Matthew’s Gospel. And we confronted the reality that the Beatitudes are very important to Jesus, since He chooses to *begin* His Sermon on the Mount with them, and yet their meaning is mystifying to most of us, and the ways we tend to interpret them tend to not be very life-giving (which is a hint that we’re getting them wrong). And so, our goal with parts one and two, was to get at the *true* meaning of the Beatitudes, relying heavily on the scholarship of the Bible Project, and re-stating that in clearer language.¹ And we got through the first six Beatitudes of the nine, but then we got into the Feast of Christ the King and Advent and so on, and it never felt like a good time to finish. So, I want to finally take that opportunity today to resume this series by looking at the seventh Beatitude, which is found in verse 9, where Jesus teaches, “⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

But first, I need to review how we unpacked the phrase “Blessed are” that begins *all* of the Beatitudes. So often this phrase is taken to be a command, so the first Beatitude is often taken to mean that if you make yourself a ‘poor in spirit’ (whatever that means), *then* God will bless you. But, instead, with this phrase “Blessed are” Jesus is not commanding anything; rather, He is revealing *who* the good life is available to; that is, the *truly* good life that *He* has for us, as opposed how the world - or we in our sin - tend to *imagine* as the good life.

- ❖ So, we then went through the first six, which I want get into the details of today, though they’re reinterpretations are in the charts. I’ll summarize though, that Jesus’ stunning revelation through the first three Beatitudes is that the truly good life is *available to anyone*, including - if not *especially* - to us when our life circumstances are not what we or anyone would ever desire ((or wish upon our worst enemy)).
- ❖ And then, with Beatitudes four through six Jesus teaches that we enter in - or go further into - this truly good life by

Beatitudes 1-3: In Christ, the good life is surprisingly available to those who are without.		
ONE	³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	The (truly) good life belongs to those who are powerless, economically or spiritually, because they will more easily grasp their need for God’s reign in their lives.
TWO	⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.	The (truly) good life belongs to those who grieve, because the failure to grieve loss will leave our souls disquieted.
THREE	⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.	The (truly) good life belongs to those on margins, the unimportant & afflicted, for they will inherit earthly community as God intended.

Beatitudes 4-6: Learning to engage with others the way Jesus did is the path to the truly good life		
FOUR	⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.	The (truly) good life comes to those who hunger and thirst for right & healthier relationships with those close to us, for God will guide us into them.
FIVE	⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.	The (truly) good life comes to those who treat their neighbors with the generous love most might only reserve for (their) family, since this requires us to open our hearts to the generous love of God, who always loves us this way.
SIX	⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.	The (truly) good life comes to those who open our hearts for God to heal our disordered desires, for this will lead us (more fully) into the wholeness and partnership with God that He intended for us all along.

¹ <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/type-people-god-forming-beatitudes-pt-3/>

through learning from Him how to engage with our fellow, fallen human beings as He did, which none of us come by naturally or have the capacity to do apart from Him.

Well, now, with Beatitude seven Jesus is highlighting that where the rubber really meets the road in seeking to love people like He did (and does) is in the midst of the sorts of frustrations and disagreements that seem endemic to living in this world.

In this fallen world we live in, there is always something to be frustrated or angry about, with the way things are. In every society throughout history, there have always been frustrations with the way things are, conflicting opinions about what the most significant issues are, and disagreement about what should be done about it. And, these days, in this empire that we live in, these conflicts and divisions seem to be heightened beyond even normal levels. And so, when Jesus teaches, “⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God,” He’s giving us encouragement in regard to how we respond - what sort of presence and posture we take - toward the various issues (and actors) in *our* day that can so easily fuel attitudes and actions that are nothing like Jesus at all. And what He wants us to know is that **“The (truly) good life comes to those who seek Shalom (well-being) for all, rather than living for themselves or seeking to win at others’ expense, because this reflects the love of their Father in Heaven.”** The good news is that if we can leave behind the worldly ways of managing these conflicts and endeavor to love others like Jesus did, seeking God’s vision of peace - or “shalom” - for all, then we will have more of that peace ourselves. # # #

Well, if it is true that in every society in every age, everyone is going to experience frustration and disagreement about the way things are, then the Israel of Jesus’ day was certainly no exception. Scripture and history tell us that there were four main groups among the Jews who had strong disagreements about various things: these were the Zealots, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. And I’m not gonna get too much into the weeds here; so I’ll only highlight a few of the disagreements:

- The first disagreement was political. Many of you are aware that in Jesus’ day Israel lived under the foreign occupation of the Roman Empire. And while *no one* was *thrilled* about this, the Sadducees were the Jewish aristocrats and chief priests and they were at the top in terms of power and wealth. They had been able to broker this arrangement with Rome to maintain a privileged lifestyle. So the Sadducees were like the top 15% of society, but everybody else - the other 85% - were living under the poverty line; the Roman occupation was particularly rough for them. And so, from among this lower 85% there was a group called the Zealots. The Zealots were radical in their opposition to Rome, to the point of resorting to violent resistance. And they hated, absolutely hated, any of their fellow Jews who were not as radical as they were and seemed to compromise with Rome in any way, and the Sadducees had compromised with Rome most of all! So there was mutual enmity between the Zealots and the Sadducees.
- But there was also a significant religious disagreement, most acutely between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. You see, the Pharisees believed there was a real religious component to God allowing Rome to rule over Israel, that God was punishing them. So they gave authority to an oral tradition that had developed alongside the Holy Scriptures.² And this is where the Pharisees got all of those extra rules they said everyone should follow.³ So, the Pharisees were the religious leaders in the community - sorta like pastors - who taught the people - common folk - how they should live. But Jesus criticized their teaching a lot because it was very onerous for the people

² These would later be written down and codified between the 3rd and 6th centuries A.D. and called the Talmud.

³ Which they believed would persuade God to save them from political oppression

and a distortion of God's intention. So, the Pharisees had enormous sway over the people, but they led people astray and abused their power - while the Sadducees had religious beliefs that differed, but didn't care for the people at all.

- But, finally, there was the fourth group called the Essenes. And the Bible doesn't explicitly speak of them but history does, because their response to all of this political and religious conflict was to withdraw from the society altogether and go live in their own little community⁴ down by the Dead Sea.

So, you can see that all four groups sought to overcome their frustrations with the way things were in different ways. The Sadducees had sold out to the Romans, the Zealots wanted to burn it all down, the Pharisees sought to grow their movement by wielding religious authority over the common folk, and the Essenes just got the heck out of there and created a community of only folks that saw things the way they did. Each group sought to achieve a sort of peace from all these conflicts through the means they thought were the best option for them.

And, if you haven't already made some of these connections, there are certainly rough parallels in our society today: There are elites who are out of touch and unaffected by the challenges everyone else deals with, like the Sadducees were. Politically, there are some who wanna burn it all down, like the Zealots. Then, religiously there are church traditions and leaders who build and maintain followings through control and fear, like the Pharisees.⁵ And finally, there are folks who just wanna check out from all the conflict and frustrations - like the Essenes - politically many are tempted to just disengage from politics altogether or to seek community only where people agree with them. Then, religiously, there's a temptation for those who've been exposed to toxic church environments or are fed up with hypocrisy to just leave the Church or God altogether.

But here's the problem with taking these approaches: the problem is that taking any of these approaches is seeking to remedy the frustrations and all of the conflicts around us by putting our own interests and experience (and well-being) above everyone else's. When we become wrapped up in any of these ways of seeking "peace" for ourselves - our priority becomes our perspectives and preferences winning out: our winning and others losing. But worse than what these approaches can do to others, they can't even bring us the peace that we think winning will bring us - the good life they seem to promise - because the root of our lack of peace is not in what's going on out there; it is in here >< (inside of us). But the good news is that if we will endeavor to love others like Jesus did, seeking God's vision of peace - or "shalom" - for all, then we will have more of that peace ourselves.

You see, Jesus taught that true peace comes through engaging (worldly) conflict, in a different way than the world goes about it: through pursuing God's vision of peace that the Bible calls Shalom. While the way of the world is to overcome frustrations & disagreements by seeking for our own interests to win out over others', **God's vision of peace** is one where people are working together (in harmony) for each other's benefit. That is shalom, and it can only be attained when we *give up trying to win & living for ourselves and partner with God for restoring what is broken to wholeness*.⁶

So, how did Jesus do this? How did He seek shalom for all people, and never one at the expense of the other? Well, no matter who he interacted with - whether they were from any of these four groups, a Gentile, a Roman soldier and rulers, lepers, women, the rich, the poor, and so on - He treated them all with the same human dignity - He valued them all equally - and He called each of them onto the path toward shalom. Perhaps some peoples' lives were pointed away from shalom through mental or spiritual

⁴ Footnote

⁵ Guilt and shoulding on people

⁶ <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/shalom-peace/>

bondage, such as greed or lust or rage or envy; for others being socially isolated may have kept them from shalom; others were exercising power in ways that stole the shalom of others; others might've have lost hope through loss or grief, and so on. For anyone Jesus encountered, whatever was keeping them from shalom, Jesus would call them away from it - from being consumed with self - and point them toward the way to receive the shalom of God, the restoration and wholeness of themselves *and* others. Now, this is not to say that everyone always responded to Jesus' call toward Shalom, but through His words and presence Jesus called them just the same.

Then, when it comes to some who **did** follow this call, we have some particular examples in His group of 12 disciples, who were a motley crew, to say the least. It's often been noted how Jesus chose disciples from a diversity of backgrounds. Four of them were fishermen; then there was Simon the Zealot; Matthew had been a tax collector, which meant he worked for Rome to make himself wealthy; and Philip was thought to be partially Greek, so only a half-blooded Jew. Well, a big part of following Jesus for these 12 - a major part of His discipling them would've been helping them move beyond the cultural norm of despising each other and learning to see the humanity in each other, to repent of attitudes or solutions for problems that were self-interested, and to love each other over the differences that remain. And what shalom they received as a result, the sort of peace that worldly efforts cannot bring.

With the Beatitude, Jesus is teaching that **“the (truly) good life comes to those who seek Shalom (well-being) for all, rather than living for themselves or seeking to win at others' expense, because this reflects the love of their Father in Heaven.”** And this is the way Jesus is calling us toward. But it requires that we leave behind the lie that we can find peace through winning, through worldly circumstances going our way. Because, again: the root of our lack of peace is not in what's going on out there; it is in here ><.) And so the path toward living for Shalom necessitates that we lament to God what frustrates us & grieve with Him about devastates us, instead of trying to fix it through unholy means. Naming what we want, and asking Him to align it with love for Him and our Neighbor. This is the way we can begin to move beyond the false path toward worldly peace...

- Where politics no longer has to be my interests over yours, but about Shalom for all,
- Where the goal of our faith is not being right or pretending to be perfect, but pursuing God's Shalom for ourselves and others
- Where we no longer seek peace in our personal relationships by getting people to do what we want or be what we want them to, but seeking for them to discern & become who *God* is calling them to be.
 - The only way to help people receive more of God's Shalom is (for us) to love them there. Not by calling them out and not by hiding out, but by inviting them toward His grace and truth, but knowing the Holy Spirit will be the one to get them there.

The good news that if we will endeavor to love others like Jesus did, seeking God's vision of peace - or “shalom” - for all, then we will have more of that peace ourselves.

And, as we turn our focus toward the baptism of Naomi, I know that her parents, Andrew & Meaghan, seek to be peacemakers in this way - partners with God in bringing His shalom to the world. And I'm confident that this is their prayer for her as well.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.