

The Sermon on the Mount - Beatitudes

(Matt 5:1-12)

Introduction

Imagine you're attending a large conference. Maybe it's to do with your work, or perhaps it's a Christian conference. Spring Harvest maybe, or closer to home, Keswick in Lichfield. It's just about time for the keynote speaker to stand up and address the auditorium. Expectations are high. There's been a gradual build up. Notices, introductions, perhaps some singing. And then hush descends.

Speaker steps up onto stage, walks to lectern, opens notes & puts them in order, takes sip of water, draws breath. All this signals that here is something special to listen to.

Jesus sat down

Right at the start of sermon on mount we learn that Jesus went and sat down. Equivalent of walking up to lectern all mic-ed up. Expectation. Hanging on his every word.

Wandering, itinerant teachers strolled about as they taught. When they sat down it was serious.

And the key note speech begins.....blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth....

Now wait a minute – that's not quite what they're expecting from the keynote speaker. That's about as helpful as Monty Python saying 'blessed are the cheesemakers'.

Here we are, week 2 of our series looking at the Sermon on the Mount. (If you weren't here last week Ian gave an introduction to the series talking about how the sermon on the mount teaches us to be 3-Dimensional Christians (exhibiting discipleship, distinctiveness and depth.)

So what are these beatitudes?

Beautiful attitudes

The term 'beatitudes comes from a latin word for blessed 'beatus'.

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Billy Graham called them the 'beautiful attitudes'. It's certainly a way of remembering them. But what's so beautiful about them? Is it really beautiful to be poor, to be mourning, to be persecuted? All situations where if we're honest we wouldn't feel very blessed!

Are these so-called 'beautiful attitudes' the ones we should be aiming for as Christians? Trying to become as sad, as poor, as persecuted as possible?

Tom Wright's translation

I'd like to read to you Tom Wright's translation of this passage from his 'for everyone series'. And to recommend it as a commentary. Down to earth language, easy to understand examples, perfect for me!

Listen to how Tom Wright translates this passage:

Wonderful news for the poor in spirit! The kingdom of heaven is yours

Wonderful news for the mourners. You're going to be comforted.

Wonderful news for the meek! You're going to inherit the earth...etc. etc.
(p34)

Wonderful news!!

There's a noticeable difference isn't there, between saying 'blessed are' the poor and 'wonderful news for' the poor. And it's all to do with the Greek word *makarios* and how it's translated, because there isn't a direct comparison in the English.

Makarios has been translated 'blessed' as we read in the NIV, or 'happy' in the Good News Bible. But others (Tom Wright included) want to say it's more than that. It's someone who is to be congratulated.

Does this perhaps change how we picture Jesus' teaching?

What if rather than saying 'try hard to live like this' Jesus is saying 'the people who are living like this are in good shape, and so they should be congratulated.

In case you think I've just gone off on one, or only consider what Tom Wright thinks, here's William Barclay's take on it...

'These beatitudes aren't a list of pious hopes of what will be. They are not glowing but vague prophecies of some future bliss. They are congratulations on what is' (William Barclay p102)

In some ways it's easier to understand the beatitudes by saying what they are NOT:

They are not a list of people whom God blesses

They are not a list of pious aims

They are not vague promises for the future

They are not outlining a moral code (as Ian mentioned last week)

They are not good advice

But rather they are 'good news'. Wonderful news even. They are 'gospel'.

And why are they such wonderful news? Because something quite momentous has happened. Jesus is outlining to his disciples that the world's values have been turned upside down, because he has come and intervened in history. God's values are breaking there and then into 1st century Palestine.

Poseidon Adventure

Perhaps you've seen the film 'The Poseidon Adventure'? It was made a good few years ago. (early 70s) In case you haven't....a luxury ocean liner, the SS Poseidon, is overturned on new years day by a freak wave. The film is the story of people trying to escape before the ship sinks.

The bizarre thing about the SS Poseidon is that it lies in the water completely upside down. So that what was the top of the ship is now bottom. The hull is on top of the water, and the deck is way down in the sea. Everything is upside down. Stairways are upside down, doors are upside down. Tables are upside down. The giant Christmas tree is upside down. It's a whole new world.

The drama of the film is all in people beginning to realise their predicament, that the ship has turned over, and then responding to it. Working out how to escape. There are a number of approaches and there's disagreement over who to follow, what route to take, the safest way to exit, in this disorientating upside down world.

Jesus - the freak wave

When Jesus sits down and begins to teach the disciples at the beginning of the sermon on the mount, he is signalling as clearly as he can that a freak wave has come. That the ship of Judaism has turned upside down. With his coming into the world everything has changed. All the values that were held

as important have been turned on their head. These beatitudes reflect that upside down nature. This is 'upside down' living. Or rather its living the right way up (God's way up) in an upside down world.

There's no doubt It takes time to adapt, time to learn to live upside down. In the SS Poseidon people were walking on what had been the ceiling. There were new obstacles to negotiate. New ways to learn.

It's hard enough learning to comb your hair looking in a mirror as a child when everything is opposite. Or steering a narrow boat for the first time, pushing the tiller left to go right, or snowboarding on the wii if you're goofy (for those of you who know about being goofy or regular!!). They all involve retraining your brain. So I'm sure the disciples wouldn't have got the hang of it straight away. In fact there's plenty of times in the gospels when it's made clear that the disciples haven't got the point at all.

But the disciples spent a lot of time with Jesus. Whether you think the sermon on mount was one long talk, or Matthew putting sections of Jesus' teaching together, we can be pretty sure that more was said than is recorded, that Jesus revisited themes, went over his teaching, expanded as was necessary. Because when you're learning something you don't need to hear things once. You need to hear them over and over again.

And seeing something demonstrated or modelled is a very effective way of learning. Being with Jesus, over time his ways would have rubbed off on them. They would have begun to live this upside down world.

As a teenager I had a hero, someone who I looked up to and wanted to be like. His name was (well it still is, and I'm still in touch with him) Jim – my Duke of Edinburgh's Award expedition officer who sparked in me such a passion for mountaineering.

Nothing was as beneficial as spending a weekend hill walking in his presence. Soaked up an ethos over time of how to be a mountaineer. Listened to what he said, but also watched what he did, looked at his equipment, benefitted from his experience, etc, soaked up his stories.

The disciples hung around with Jesus. They adopted his ethos, even though they didn't always understand what he was doing. They learnt to live in his upside down world.

If we're going to adopt Jesus' ethos, if we want to learn how to live God's way up in this upside down world then we need to hang around Jesus too!! We don't have a physical presence in the person Jesus, of course. But by

reading his word, thinking about his word, engaging with and debating his word, communicating with him through prayer, setting time aside to listen, allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us, then more and more we see the values of this world as upside down, and God's as the right way up. We retrain our brains, we retrain our values, our expectations, our standards, our aspirations.

'The beatitudes are a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God's promised future, because that future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth. It may seem upside down, but we are called to believe, with great daring, that it is in fact the right way up.' (Tom Wright again)

The Problem

The problem is that the majority of people in our society still think that the 'wonderful news' is success, wealth, long life. Completely at odds with what Jesus is saying. And if we're honest most of us probably still think (at least some of the time) that the wonderful news is success, wealth, long life.

Living upside down, or rather 'the right way up in a world that is still upside down' is going to cause us problems and conflicts. It's going to cause us to look very odd at times. It's going to make us look naive when we trust people society doesn't want to trust, when we give them value society isn't prepared to give them.

A friend from college organised a night shelter for rough sleepers staffed by volunteers at their church through the winter months. When it was desperately cold she took three of them home to sleep on her lounge floor. She received all kinds of criticism from the church for that act. Including 'what if they'd nicked off in the night with all your electrical goods'? What if you'd ended up with no telly?

Living out this upside down way of life is going to make us look unworldly, foolish even, when we decline a promotion at work because we'd rather have some spare time to do voluntary work than more money.

Acknowledging that we have got something badly wrong, apologising for it and doing our absolute best to put it right is going to look weak in a society that likes to pass the buck and push the blame on to others wherever possible.

Wonderful news. It is the world we're in that's upside down. God's world is the right way up. Have courage to keep heading that way. Keep going against the flow.

House Group Notes
Sermon on the Mount 2 – ‘The Beatitudes’
(Matt. 5:1-12)

When Jesus sat down to speak to his disciples, it indicated that what was about to follow was very important.

‘The Beatitudes’ have been coined as ‘beautiful attitudes’. But what is beautiful about them? *Makarios* can be better translated as ‘wonderful news for’ rather than ‘blessed are’

Does this perhaps change how we picture Jesus’ teaching?

What if rather than saying ‘try hard to live like this’ Jesus is saying ‘the people who are living like this are in good shape, and so they should be congratulated.’

In many ways it is easier to say what the beatitudes are not:

They are not a list of people whom God blesses

They are not a list of pious aims

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They are not outlining a moral code

They are not good advice

But rather they are ‘good news’. Wonderful news, even. They are ‘gospel’.

The wonderful news is that Jesus has come and has turned the world upside down, or rather the right way up. Jesus is calling the disciples to live that upside down way.

‘The beatitudes are a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God’s promised future, because that future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth. It may seem upside down, but we are called to believe, with great daring, that it is in fact the right way up.’ (Tom Wright)

Spending time with Jesus makes it more natural to live life ‘upside down’

Most people still think that the wonderful news is success, wealth, long life. We will look odd living ‘God’s way’ in an ‘upside down’ world. But have courage. It’s wonderful news!

For Discussion.

1. Jesus sat down to indicate that his was serious teaching. What forms of communication capture your attention and cause you to take note?
2. Which do you prefer: ‘Blessed are...’ or ‘Wonderful news for....’? Why?
3. How do you spend time learning from Jesus?
4. Are there particular beatitudes that are harder than others to come to terms with? Why? Why not?

5. What areas of our lives/church do we need to turn on their head so that we are living the 'right way up' instead of the way the rest of society is living?