

“Truly Blessed”
Matthew 5:1-12

At the end of the American Revolution, as the British surrendered, the band played a song that shared the feelings of all involved, “A world turned upside down.” That idea was so powerful that that’s how Lin-Manuel Miranda ends his telling of the Revolutionary War in Act 1 of his musical masterpiece, *Hamilton*. Miranda makes it clear, that for all his turning of American mythology on its head, the core story of that “young, scrappy and hungry” rag-tag army of George Washington’s improbable win against the might of the British empire is still compelling and inspiring.

We see worlds turned upside down in other places, too. DC Comics has a bizarro world, where everything is reversed, where good is bad and bad is good. Star Trek has the Mirror Universe, a parallel dimension where the good guys are the bad guys and vice versa, and you can tell who’s bad by their goatees. Netflix’s recently concluded hit series *Stranger Things* featured the Upside Down as the home of the Demogorgon, the Mind Flayer, and Vecna, the forces of evil.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus shares the introduction to His three-chapter long Sermon on the Mount, a section we call The Beatitudes. The word beatitude comes from the Latin word *beatus*, meaning fortunate, happy, well-off, or blessed. Whenever beatitudes are uttered in the Bible, because Jesus wasn’t the first person to give beatitudes, the speaker is not saying, “You will be blessed if,” but “You are blessed now and in the future.”

And every beatitude is from God...not from the world, not from coincidence or luck, not from the sweat of our brow or our hard work...but from God alone. It’s better to be blessed than to

be lucky because blessings come from God while luck doesn’t exist.

And so, in the Beatitudes, Jesus isn’t laying down a new law that He expects us to keep. Jesus isn’t saying, “If you do these things, you will be blessed.” Jesus isn’t saying, “If you behave in these ways, life will be all sunshine.”

Jesus, in fact, is describing life in an alternative world He calls the Kingdom of Heaven. He is saying that all who seek to follow Him each day are blessed. They live in His kingdom in all circumstances. And to the world, that looks like the world is upside down.

It does not begin with power. It does not feed on self-aggrandizement. The religion of the cross can’t be about winning. It begins with sacrificial love -- Christ’s love for us and all people. It includes welcoming the outsider, caring for the sick, forgiving enemies, forgoing violence, upholding life and glorifying God in all that we do.

We have trouble believing these beatitudes, though, and so we try to change them, turn them upside down, in a couple different ways. The first is to make them as though they are things we need to do. We try to make them our Be-Attitudes, the attitudes we should have as we go through life, and face these challenges. But that’s not the case. Many of these blessings come from circumstances we can’t control. More than that, we’re not the ones who make ourselves blessed. Only God does that. The passive voice makes it a bit awkward in English. In fact, in several of the Beatitudes, the agency of the verb in the second half is in the passive voice: they will be advocated on behalf of, they will be filled, they will be shown

mercy, they will be called children of God. If it's passive, who is doing the action? God! God is the one doing the blessing. God is the one showing mercy. God is the one bringing children into his family. God is the one doing the actions.

Jesus isn't just telling us to try hard to live like this. These are not simply timeless truths about the way the world is. They instead show us an upside-down world, or perhaps more that we live in an upside down and the world described in the beatitudes is right side up. And in Jesus, with his work, it's starting to come true. This is an announcement, not philosophical analysis. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. God's rule and reign is breaking into the world. And when it does, the world looks different than it did.

The second way we misinterpret the Beatitudes is to think they don't apply in the real world. They only apply in church, in Jesus' world, in heaven, but not here, not yet.

Russell Moore was president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, the Southern Baptist Convention's official entity assigned to address social, moral, and ethical concerns, from 2013-2021. In an interview with NPR after resigning from the SBC, he said "it was the result of having multiple pastors tell me, essentially, the same story about quoting the Sermon on the Mount, parenthetically, in their preaching — "turn the other cheek" — [and] to have someone come up after to say, "Where did you get those liberal talking points?" And what was alarming to me is that in most of these scenarios, when the pastor would say, "I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ," the response would not be, "I apologize." The response would be, "Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak." And when we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as subversive to us, then we're in a crisis."

That's the point, though. The Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, all of Jesus' teachings go against how we think the world works. We live in a world tainted by sin, where might makes right, where the one with the gold makes the rules, where the context where the word "blessed" is often associated with and hijacked by the wealthy, the healthy and the most powerful. That's the way the world works.

But that's not the way God works. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). Jesus clarifies that it is precisely the poor, the sick and the meek that are entitled to the blessings of the new kingdom. Not because of what they have done, but because of what Jesus has done for them.

Blessed is not something we do. Blessed is something Christ does and gives. The sermon on the mount shows us how Jesus molds and shapes the life and will of his disciples, leading them to a life wholly drawn from God. Because of His love and mercy flowing from His life given up on the cross, we are blessed with His kingdom of heaven, His comfort, His righteousness, His peace.

You are blessed. You are blessed no matter what happens in your life. You are blessed because Jesus died on the cross to forgive your sins. You are blessed because Christ Jesus rose from the dead. You are blessed because Christ will come again. You are blessed because Jesus calls you his disciples and calls you blessed.

The Beatitudes remind you of how the world should really work, and does really work, in God's kingdom. The Beatitudes don't tell you how you ought to be. The Beatitudes remind you who are—and whose you are—because of Jesus. And that makes you truly blessed.

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