

***“Saints? Who?”***

You gotta wonder about it. Jesus said to his followers, ***“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”*** Why blessed? Because, ***“Your reward is great in heaven...”***

More than two decades ago, Ted Turner called Christianity a *“religion for losers . . .”* [Readers Digest, Sept 1998]. His reasoning was based in part on what we call “The Beatitudes.” His thinking was that any religion which asks its followers to be meek and merciful even in the face of oppression can be a religion only for losers. Sure, Jesus said, ***“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven . . .”*** but this reward in heaven business is the kind of *“pie in the sky by and by”* thinking that Karl Marx called *“the opiate of the masses.”* No clear thinking, twenty-first century realist would buy these concepts, would they?

As a matter of fact, no self respecting realist of the first century would have embraced the lifestyle suggested by the Beatitudes. The Emperor Julian (known as “The Apostate”) is reported to have said that he wanted to confiscate all the property of Christians so that they *“might all become poor and enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Ah, that Julian! What a riot! A veritable first century Ted Turner who could tell winners from losers! Or could he? It really depends on your view of reality.

If life is simply a sprint which is over after a short burst of energy, then Ted and Julian just might be right. However . . . if life is a marathon, a long and sometimes difficult journey, which winds up in the presence of God — then the values of Ted and Julian are destined for the scrap heap of empty illusions. In other words, there is more to this picture than meets the eye. In fact, the values which Jesus laid out before the crowd in his “Sermon on the Mount” represent an incredible call to a totally counter-cultural style of life. Even if the values of this world could stand the test of time — and that’s highly questionable — the values Jesus asks us to

embrace will stand the test of time and eternity!

These Beatitudes are intended for whom? John R. W. Stott wrote a brief commentary on Ephesians entitled, “God’s New Society.” The title sums it up. God has designed the Christian community to be an illustration of what human relationships were meant to be. There is fellowship with God, fellowship with each other, and the rule of mutual love is the norm. There is peace, harmony, and unity.

When we leave the community of faith, the inspiration of worship and the encouragement of fellowship — we are “deployed” as representatives of Christ in the world. We are, in other words, an outpost of the kingdom of God (which is precisely the word Paul uses in Philippians 3).

When Jesus taught what we call the “Beatitudes,” He taught them to His disciples. Note how Matthew sets this up: Jesus sees the crowd, hikes up the mount, sits down, and “*his disciples came to him*” — not just the twelve disciples, but the group of people who had been following him as disciples (or learners) in the larger sense.

This instruction is critical for their life as followers of Christ. At the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus sends his disciples out to “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and teaching them...*” [Matthew 28:19-20] The instruction or teaching Christ wants us to have goes to the heart of who we were meant to be in the world.

The Beatitudes are a key part of the core curriculum for us Christians as we are “deployed” into the world. In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches in nine statements seven qualities we are to embrace and live out and two consequences that result. In all nine words of blessing, Jesus calls those who embrace his teaching and experience the consequences of living out his teaching are μακαριος “makarios.”

The word μακαριος (makarios) has been translated in a number of ways. The Good News Bible (and several others) says, “*Happy are those who...*” J.B. Phillips translates it, “*How happy are those who...*” The

New Living translation tries to get across the idea that it is God who does the blessing by saying, ***“God blesses those who...”***

The word μακάριος (makarios) most commonly describes a person who is singularly favored by God. It is almost an exclamation about how God is pleased with a person and the sense Jesus intended might best be translated as, ***“Oh the blessedness of the one who . . .”*** We are blessed — that is, we are in just the place we need to be (and in that sense “happy”) — because our lives become more fully what God intended us to be as we embrace and grow in these qualities.

So what is this “Core Curriculum”? Who is in just the place we need to be?

***“The Poor in Spirit”*** The one who is poor in spirit is the one who is not full of self and therefore has room for God. It is humility rather than arrogance. Ted Turner’s remark comes from a spirit that is so full of self that it has no room for God. Jesus is saying that the one who lives in reliance upon God is already living in the kingdom. Paul says it in these words, ***“For we walk by faith, not by sight.”*** [II Corinthians 5:7] In other words, we look to God for direction and fulfillment rather than to the values of the world around us or our own self-centered desires.

***“Those who mourn”*** Specifically, this means to lament or mourn for the dead. It is a strong term indicating a grief that takes possession of our lives so much so that we can not hide it. We experience this in a personal way when we encounter bone crushing grief at the loss of someone close. Jesus also is speaking about those who have grief in their hearts for the poor and dispossessed of the earth.

When hurricane after hurricane hammer the southern and then eastern coasts of the United States and wildfires keep devastating the western third of our nation, thousands of lives were lost and millions of people were left homeless. Picture after picture show people who lost everything, including in many cases loved ones and friends. This the kind of grief Jesus is talking about. God wants us to share the grief and pain

of the world around us and Jesus promises that there will be comfort for those who grieve.

*“The meek”* This “blessing” may offend our contemporary sensibilities more than any of the others. Meekness is seen as weakness. People pay a lot of money to attend seminars to learn how to be assertive. Why? Because nice guys finish last. Meekness won’t win you a big raise in salary or get you on the fast track in your company. Meek is “mousy,” “milquetoasty,” “wimpy!”

But that isn’t the meaning of the word Jesus uses. The heart of the term Jesus uses is “silent strength.” It is the meekness Jesus Himself demonstrated when He would not open His mouth at the judgment bar of Pilate. It is the strength he showed when he asked for forgiveness for his executioners and those who reviled him. In Jesus’ teaching, meekness is the silent strength that comes from trusting in the ultimate victory of God over evil.

*“Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”* To hunger and thirst for righteousness is to long for — even ache and agonize for — things to be set right. Things are right when they are as God would have them be. There is an absolutely amazing promise in this beatitude! Those who long to see things as God would have them be will see it come to pass. When? We don’t know that, but the promise of the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation is that the right will prevail and the wrong will be defeated.

That’s the beatific or beautiful vision of Revelations, expressed into today’s Second Lesson. Meanwhile, we are called to do whatever lies within our power to see that the right prevails. If there is a hurt within our view, we are called to bring whatever healing we can. If there is a wrong within our sphere of influence, we are called to do whatever we can to right it.

*“The merciful”* Those who have a heart of compassion and reach out to hurt and suffering will receive compassion and mercy from God. This one is easy to understand. It is the sense of being moved to pity and

compassion by pain or suffering and includes the recognition that this could happen to me. But it goes beyond understanding and feeling — mercy means action! As a congregation we have taken on many ministries of mercy. The promise of this Beatitude is that we “*shall be mercied in our mercy*” — God will provide what is necessary to bring His love to others.

“*The pure in heart*” Perhaps the easiest way to understand this principle is to say the pure in heart are those who give themselves as fully as they can to the great commandment: “***You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.***” [Mark 12:30] This love is to dominate every other love in our lives. The highest position any other person or any other thing can ever attain in the life of the committed follower of Jesus Christ has to be “second fiddle.” The purity of heart which results from this soul fulfilling love of God translates to clarity of vision for what life is truly meant to be and thus, Jesus says, the pure in heart will see God.

“*The peacemakers*” (or literally, “the peace doers”) In very basic terms, you and I are called to be a “chip off the old block,” or to use St. Paul’s term, “imitators of Christ.” As children of God and followers of Jesus Christ, we are commissioned to bring peace to the world around us. The peace and peacemaking Jesus speaks of here is much more than the simple absence of warfare or conflict. Peace here is akin to the Hebrew term “Shalom.” It has to do with well being, prosperity, reconciliation or oneness with God and wholeness of heart — again, not just for self, but all those around us.

There is a cost. Jesus brings the beatitudes to a close with the fact that there is a price to pay when we commit to following him. If you always pursue honesty, integrity, and justice, you will encounter first the cold shoulder, then the caustic remarks, and finally rejection and persecution.

Jesus brings this section of his teaching to a climax by addressing his followers directly. Up until now it has been kind of third-party “blessed are the[y] ...” But now Jesus makes it personal — to a crowd gathered on

a Galilean hillside almost 2000 years ago and to us who are gathered here today. Listen to the words he speaks to you, ***“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”*** In the gospel of John, Jesus warned his followers that the world would give them the same treatment it gave him. ***“If the world hates you, be aware that before it hated you, it hated me.”***  
[John 15:18]

What all of this means is that we are blessed but in that blessing we are also asked to make a commitment. Most of us do not — and will not — experience the kind of persecution as did Jesus’ original followers. Our free expression of our faith is built on the sacrifice and oppression experienced by our forebears. It is not so in every place on the planet even today. A missionary nurse who spent a number of years in Pakistan told of a young woman who had become a Christian and later came to the women’s hospital for treatment. While there, two male members of her family entered the hospital at night and murdered her. They preferred her dead to being Christian.

Even though you and I don’t face such frightful consequences for our faith, we may be sure that to embrace and live out the beatitudes in our culture today would carry a cost. There is an old question that might take on fresh meaning if we ask it in light of the Christian’s “core curriculum” — *“If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”*

The Beatitudes demand a lot of us — as does the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount. Luther called it *“the impossible demand”* — impossible for us to live it — *“that God demands of us nonetheless.”* But note how, before we are commanded or enjoined or required to say or do or even think anything, we are reminded, informed, assured that we are something. We are blessed — in just the position God wants us to be — and in God’s eyes, before we can offer one shred of evidence on our behalf, we are declared to be “saints.”

Amen.