



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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What Heaven Values

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But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:20-21 NIV).

One day last March about a dozen of us from Westminster gathered on a hill by the Sea of Galilee, not far from Capernaum, that's known as the Mount of the Beatitudes. You can't always be sure in the Holy Land whether the ground you're standing on is the actual site where a biblical event took place, but you may know that you're in the neighborhood. So here on this hill, or on a hill not far away, Jesus sat down one afternoon and looked out over a crowd.

The towns and villages around here are not large, and there's not much going on by way of entertainment, so when a man shows up with a reputation for extraordinary wisdom and an amazing ability to heal the sick, everyone for miles around turns out to see him and hear what he has to say.

Fishermen and their families are in the crowd. There are some widows on the hillside—a few elderly, but also young women whose husbands died and left them with small children to raise, eking out a living. There's a blind man, and a deaf woman, and a number who have trouble walking. There are young people looking for love, and a few who wonder whether there's more to life beyond their own little village. There are brothers who haven't spoken to one another for years, each one bitter about some grievance in the past. The people who run things are also in the crowd: the mayor and members of council, leaders of the

synagogue, the men who own the boat building business and live in big houses. And at the edge of the crowd are a handful of soldiers sent to keep an eye on things, since there's been more talk of terrorism and you never know when some zealots will try to stir up trouble again.

Jesus looks around the crowd, and he begins to speak. "Blessed ...," he says. Some people translate the word as "happy," but happiness is not nearly a big enough notion for what Jesus has in mind. Happiness tends to be based on circumstances, on what's "happening" now. You hear the connection in the words themselves. When things are going well and we have whatever we want, we're likely to be happy; when things aren't going well, or when something we want is missing, we're not so happy. But Jesus isn't talking about circumstantial happiness. He means a fundamentally contented, hopeful state of mind that finds peace beneath whatever else is going on, the way the depths of the sea stay calm even when winds are whipping up waves on the surface.

"Blessed," Jesus says, making eye contact with one group after another in the crowd. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Those whose lives are not so rich here and now, as the world counts riches, will find the deepest longings of their hearts one day.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Sorrow may linger for the night, as the psalmist says, and some nights can feel very long, but joy will come with the morning.

Blessed are those who are strong enough to be gentle, humble, and considerate of others. That's what the word means that's translated so misleadingly now as

“meek.” It has nothing to do with being timid or wimpy. Far from being weak, the quality Jesus has in mind is a special kind of strength.

Blessed are those who yearn to do justice and want what’s right in God’s eyes. They who hunger and thirst have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, and they want their whole lives to reflect God’s righteousness, which is part of God’s goodness.

And blessed are the merciful, because God Almighty is merciful, and mercy is yet another sign of strength. Any small soul can seek revenge. Only a great soul is big enough to show mercy.

Blessed are those whose motives are pure. There aren’t many of them in the crowd, and not many among us human beings in general; but this world is a workshop for the soul, and the closer anyone gets to loving God with their whole heart, the closer that person is to seeing God. It may take a heart transplant for it to happen, but that’s just the sort of thing the Holy Spirit does—which is why King David prays, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

Blessed are the peacemakers, because making peace is hard and lots of people would rather just keep on fighting. They pile up their own grievances and ignore the grievances of others to justify whatever gain they can take for themselves and whatever pain they inflict on their opponents. But peacemakers will be called children of God because the realm of God is a peaceable kingdom, and those who stir up strife will not be welcome there.

And blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. People who are up to no good want nothing to do with righteousness, of course, and those who are indifferent to other people's needs make fun of what they call "Do Gooders," as if doing good was not the very commandment of God. Prophets are unpopular with the prosperous, since they bring word that God is not pleased so long as others suffer while we could do more to relieve their suffering. The prophets have always been persecuted in this world, Jesus says, but heaven admires and rewards them.

Listen to the Beatitudes of Jesus and you get the idea that things are different where he comes from. Heaven's values are not always the same as worldly values. What's admired in heaven is often looked down upon here, and much of what this world admires looks petty and paltry from the perspective of heaven. Can you imagine Jesus' Sermon on the Mount sounding something like this:

Blessed are those who look out for Number One, for life is a rat race and the point of living is to get ahead.

Blessed are those who accumulate the most, for he who dies with the most toys wins.

Blessed are the boastful, for winning isn't everything, it's the only thing, and they deserve their bragging rights.

Blessed are those who show no mercy, for God admires the ruthless and mercy is mainly for the weak.

Blessed are you when you judge and condemn whole groups of people, because you're much better than they are.

Blessed are those who ignore the prophets, for prophets are annoying and fail to appreciate the powerful and successful.

Can you hear Jesus saying that sort of thing? If not, the interesting question is, why not? What do we make of the contradiction, the great gap between what Jesus says and so much of what this world admires?

Is it that Jesus is just naïve? Maybe these ideals he preaches are fine for the kingdom of heaven, but they don't work so well here, and this is the *real* world where we live. Jesus got himself crucified, after all. Doesn't that go to show that his Sermon on the Mount is unrealistic? Idealism is all well and good, but you have to be practical in this world.

But when you think about it, what would it mean to say that Jesus is naïve? I suppose that depends on who you think Jesus is; or to put it another way, whether or not you really are a Christian.

If you're not a Christian you might think Jesus was just some well-meaning, if not altogether practical, teacher and preacher, and maybe even some sort of healer back in the day. Then you might take what he has to say as one of many philosophies of life, from which you can pick and choose what you want to believe, based on what fits your lifestyle and doesn't get in the way of other priorities and interests. People do that with Jesus all the time.

But if you're a Christian—if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and profess your faith in him as Lord and Savior of the world, and therefore as your Lord and Savior too—then everything is different. It's quite literally a different story that shapes your life and makes sense of the world you live in. Then you have to take seriously what Jesus says, and if there's a tension between his values and the world's values, you're likely to believe that it's the world that has things wrong. It's worldly wisdom that's naïve, not the wisdom of Jesus.

Yes, Jesus got himself crucified by the rulers of this world, but if you're a Christian you believe that's not the end of the story. On the other side of Good Friday there is Easter. The one who was crucified, dead, and buried rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. If that's true, then who has the power after all? Who turns out to be strong in the end, and how do the power and prosperity and status and success of this world compare with the glory of the risen Christ?

Jesus himself points out the foolishness, the naïveté, of so much worldly wisdom. The man who boasts in the temple, "O Lord, I thank you that I am not like other men" turns out to be far lower in God's eyes than the tax collector who knows he's a sinner and repents of his sin. The man who has to build bigger barns to hold all his stuff in Jesus' parable hears from God, "You fool! This night your soul is required of you, then who will have all those things you've acquired? And so it is," Jesus says, "with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

The man we call St. Paul started out believing that Jesus was naïve and that his crucifixion proved how foolish

he was; but that was before he met the risen Lord. Then Paul came to see that it was the powers of this world, the religious authorities and the secular rulers, who had it wrong. Now, Paul says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”

“Our citizenship is in heaven,” says Paul, who was proud of the Roman citizenship he worked so hard to win. The words of Jesus ring true because Jesus himself is the truth, and our hearts were made for that kingdom of heaven where God’s will is done. “So I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus,” Paul tells us. He knows that only Jesus is able to transform this humble earthly body of ours to become like Christ’s own glorious body in heaven.

So when Jesus sits on that hillside and tells the crowd what it means to be truly blessed, maybe he knows what he’s talking about. He comes from that place where we were made to end up if we love God—which is why Jesus’ words have the ring of truth. He’s talking about the way things are in the place our hearts will call home one day.

In the meantime, Jesus tells his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” The world needs to see that light reflected in you, and taste some of the salt from the kingdom of heaven. The world needs to know that there’s a better way to live, and the followers of Jesus need to help make it known.



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