



Series Theme: Helps in following a 12-Step program by reflecting on the Beatitudes

Title: Steps and Beatitudes

Date delivered: January 27, 2019

Preacher: Rev. Joyce Donigian

Synopsis: The first beatitude tells us that it is good to be poor. Poor can mean without money, but it can also mean being without ways to solve problems alone. Trusting in God for help and accepting that we cannot be all we can be without God is an important step toward happiness. The second beatitude tells us that mourning can bring happiness. When we mourn our sins, we can find comfort whether our sins bring us spiritual, emotional or physical pain. God's presence will bring comfort.

THE FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON: Psalm 37:2-8 (CEV)

THE SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON: Matthew 5:3-10 (NRSV)

MEMORY VERSE: **“Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don’t try to figure out everything on your own.”** Proverbs 3:6a (The Message)

Grace to you and peace from the One who was and is and is to come.

Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount contains some of the best loved and most familiar passages in the New Testament. Especially the section known as the Beatitudes. We just heard them read. Sometimes they are characterized as the “Be Attitudes” – attitudes that define how we should act.

They have never felt quite as positive to me as I would like. All of the conditions – like being poor, in mourning, or humble. Those are not the words that come to my mind when I think about being a child of God. I have heard it explained by saying that – “Yes, those are not states in which we want to find ourselves, but even if we do, we must remember that we are under God’s care and therefore, we should feel happy and blessed, spiritually happy, no matter what happens to us. That is one way of looking at these sayings and finding spiritual happiness.

But recently I read an article that puts a different spin on understanding what Jesus was teaching. For example, if we look at the first beatitude – Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. This might sound like a situation where the Spirit is hard to find or is lacking entirely, and this is what would make one feel poor in spirit. But another interpretation can be found by looking at the word “poor.” Poor often means being in a situation where help is needed, whether that need is money or job or friends or even a home. Lacking any of these things can make one feel poor – and cause them to feel like a beggar. If someone is a beggar that usually means that they cannot survive on their own. So being poor in spirit could also mean that a person feels bereft and therefore must rely entirely on God. There is no way to be self-sufficient in this state. In other words, they do not have it within themselves to solve whatever problems face them without help.

This is similar to the first step in a 12-step program – to understand that there is no way for us to control our wrong tendencies alone. We are not self-sufficient in this matter – we need help. Pastor Doug explained this step last week – this first step and the second step as well. This leads us to the second beatitude.

The second beatitude – blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. This beatitude gives us comfort when we are hurting, spiritually, emotionally, or physically definitely. No matter what we are going through, God is with us, to comfort us. This is the usual way of finding meaning in this saying. We can mourn when we lose something meaningful to us – a loved one, a pet, a job, even our health or mobility.

But we can mourn in another way as well. We can mourn because we have sinned. Yes, we often feel sorry that we have hurt someone and it makes us feel better when we can ask the person we hurt for forgiveness. It is good to be able to unburden ourselves when we know we have wronged someone. This good feeling comes from having someone to confess to, someone who can wipe the slate clean for us.

As Christians we can certainly ask others to forgive us when we have done something hurtful. But we have another someone, a Someone with a capital S, and because we know Who that Someone is, we can use a name - God. Our capital S Someone is God. We are to confess the ways we have sinned, and when we do this, God no longer remembers them. Our God, the One who loves us so much that God provided a plan for eternal salvation for us, through the life, death, and resurrection of God's only Son, Jesus. And God gave us an additional bonus – the Holy Spirit to guide us while we are still on earth.

So in this view, we mourn the ways we have not followed Jesus' teaching and in that mourning we get the kingdom of heaven in return. When we admit our sins and trust in Jesus, we become part of God's family. That gives us eternal life in God's heavenly kingdom. This can be seen as a second step in developing a close relationship with God. A second step – and in 12-step programs, the second step is to earnestly believe that a higher being exists. We know this higher being is God.

The next beatitude is – Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Often this word – meek – gives the impression of being weak or easily dominated, but that is not the true definition of meekness. Instead, it means gentle, humble, considerate, and courteous. It carries with it the idea that a meek person does not insist on having their own way and thinks of others first. Meekness was

a defining characteristic of Jesus. Charles Wesley even wrote a hymn – Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild.

This sounds like an attribute that we all would like and one that God would reward. And this also sounds like the third step in a 12-step program – to consciously choose to commit one's life and will to Christ's care and control. In other words – become meek. This does not mean to become someone without feelings. In fact, meek folks have strong feelings – that encourage them to think of others, to act on those feelings, to do things that help others – to be the hands and feet and arms and voice of Jesus.

Yet this step does challenge us because becoming meek means that we then would need to turn control of our lives over to another. Even though we know there is no better being than God through Jesus to be in charge of our lives, we all have difficulty giving up control, especially of our own behaviors and beliefs. How do we give up control? Giving up control means we need to turn from our own deep desire to control our lives to making a conscious decision to give that control over to God. There are several aspects that are important in this turning over to God. The first is trust. In step three, or beatitude 3 we see the need to recognize our shortcomings and desire a better life.

We also need to understand on the very deepest level that we cannot make this change without help from God. Steps 1 and 2 are necessary first steps – first, we need to recognize that we cannot handle our lives, especially those things that try to control us, by ourselves. And then need to feel sorrow, remorse, and repent of those things which we cannot control alone. That is the second step – mourning our behaviors and accepting the need to have a confessor, someone who can relieve our grief and mourning over our behavior. That is God. Then we need to take step 3 – action – turning over that control we so want to manage ourselves – turning that control over to God. We are to keep in mind that confession and repentance are necessary elements in this turning away from our own self-control to control from above. This we know leads to new life, both in our current circumstances and in the life to come.

Here is a story that highlights the importance of turning to God and trusting in God's plan for us.

The year was 1975, and it was time for John Kavanaugh, a newly minted Jesuit priest, to spend a year in prayer, service, and humble ministry. He was trying to sort out what

his future should hold. A year of ministry would help him find that path, whether he was to devote his future to working with the poor or in teaching college students. He was searching for answers.

He traveled to India where he hoped to get a new perspective on his own life while learning firsthand more about poverty around the world. Kavanaugh chose to spend this year of prayer and service with Mother Teresa at her House of the Dying in Calcutta. He had never met her, but he was familiar with her work. So in December of that year Kavanaugh flew to Calcutta. Mother Teresa met him at the airport and took him to her compound, the building where she lived and worked. It was called the House of the Dying. It was a former temple converted to a home for women and men found dying on the streets. One of the potential life paths for him was ministry to the poor.

On the first morning there he met Mother Teresa and she asked him, "And what can I do for you?" Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him. He was struggling with his decision as to whether he should return to America to become a university professor or if he should stay abroad and work with the poor. Then she asked him, "What do you want me to pray for?"

He said, "Pray that I have clarity."

She said firmly, "I will not do that."

When he asked her why, she said, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of."

When Kavanaugh observed that she seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, "I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."

Kavanaugh saw ministry in action with Mother Teresa, but even she, a role model for turning away from selfishness and trusting in God, someone who was the epitome of caring, humility, and trust, had bouts of doubt regarding her faith and her call to ministry. Her decades-long struggles with her faith and calling were recounted in books written about her later in life. So in her advice to Kavanaugh she was both offering what worked for her and at the same time was reminding herself of her own need to continue

to trust.

He saw in her actions her desire to help people by taking on their suffering, including their feelings of abandonment and absence of love. Talk about a role model. One might conclude after his experience with Mother Teresa that Kavanaugh became a life-long minister among the poor, but that was not the case. He returned to America and to St. Louis University where he taught philosophy until he retired. He was a most beloved professor. He had entrusted his future into God's hands.

Step 3 then is a call for us to give control of our lives over to God, no matter how difficult that task may be, or how often we fail in our attempts. It may feel that by turning control over to God, we lose our independence, our freedom, lose who we are – just becoming the hole in the donut. Yet the reality is just the opposite. Just as an example, think about your house. Then think about your house during a power failure. In normal times, we rely on electricity for light, heat, entertainment, communication, and safety. Without electricity we must find other ways to do these basic tasks. The more willing we are to depend on something else, like electricity, or someone else, like God, the more independent we become.

Sometimes it is difficult to make this step from relying on things like electricity, to applying the same reliance on outside help when it comes to personal decisions. We so very much want to control our own lives. That is what step 3 is all about - becoming meek, gentle, humble, considerate, and courteous, not insisting on having our own way and thinking of others first. That is the essence of the third beatitude.

God is patient with us, in fact, God trusts us to do the right things. God is always ready to forgive and forget our failures. No matter how many, no matter how often. God's desire for us is to continue to strive toward dependence on God and not dependence on substances, behaviors, or negative thoughts or beliefs. God's desire for us is to be available for ministry and not controlled by those things that hurt or weaken us. God needs us. After all, we are the only earthly hands God has. What an amazing statement that is. A real point to ponder. Let us pray.

Wonderful Father, we are so thankful that You are always there for us, guiding us to do the things that

are good for us. We thank You for Your patience and Your willingness to accept our attempts to be meek, gentle, humble, considerate, courteous, and not insisting on having our own way. Help us to always try to think of others first. Just like Jesus. Thank You for giving us Jesus. It is in His name we pray. Amen.

You always give us the best gifts - and the greatest gift of all is the love You show us through Jesus in whose name I pray. Amen.