

**Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish  
Saint Francisville, LA  
29 January 2017  
190th Annual Meeting of Grace Church**

**Matthew 5:1-12**

The Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth is good news for a lot of people: The poor in spirit receive a kingdom, those who mourn are comforted, the humble inherit the earth, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness receive the justice they need, the merciful receive mercy, the pure in heart see God, the peacemakers are called children of God, the persecuted receive the kingdom of heaven, and those who are reviled rejoice and are glad for their reward is great in heaven. This is a future Jesus of Nazareth offers the crowds in his famous sermon on the mountain in the Gospel of Matthew. This is a passage filled with reversals and unexpected results. It turns the world of the day upside down and presents a vision of the future no one would have imagined.

The first revolutionary statement this passage makes is that the blessings the people listed receive come from the outside. They don't earn these blessings themselves, but, rather, they receive a kingdom, are comforted, inherit, are given justice, etc. These blessings are given to them by God himself. This is revolutionary because in first century Palestine a blessed person was a person of means, a wealthy man who has become quite successful, perhaps indicating that because of his wealth he is a righteous man who has been "blessed" by God with vast possessions, fertile wives, lots of children, etc. But, in our passage the blessed are the destitute, the ones deprived of justice, the ones who cry and suffer. Perhaps the real meaning of the passage is that the vulnerable are blessed because they show their need for God. They need intervention from the outside. They need the salvation that comes from the mountains. The wealthy are comfortable in their wealth, but the destitute know that because they have nothing, they need God.

The second revolutionary statement the passage makes is that the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth means good news for those on the margins of society, those who suffer a number of social and spiritual conditions. We see clearly the idea of reversal. Whereas the poor in spirit possess nothing, one day they will possess a kingdom. Whereas those who mourn are afflicted, depressed, sad, and fill the void in their lives with tears, one day they will be comforted by God himself. They will receive peace and comfort. God himself will dry all the tears from their eyes. Whereas the humble tend to be passed over, trampled on, taken for granted, eaten up by the bullies of the world, one day they will inherit the earth, they will be in a position of power. They will be in charge of their own destinies and no bully will ever subjugate them or impose his or her will on them any longer. Whereas those who hunger and thirst for righteousness often have no voice, no one hears their cries, they see evil people in all the positions of power, while they lack representation,

inclusion, and a place at the table, one day they will receive the justice they deserve. God will hear their cries and listen to their laments. God himself will give them an audience and will right all the wrongs.

This message was important for the congregation of Matthew to hear. God's ultimate vindication will become a reality some day. They needed to hear this because when this Gospel was written the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed and many Christians had been forced to leave the city and wander in Gentile territories. The Christians had been kicked out of the synagogues by the Jews and there was widespread violence against them. In short, there was injustice everywhere. Many in Matthew's congregation were beginning to wonder if Jesus had forgotten about them. If he was ever coming back. If the announced kingdom would one day become a reality. Matthew remembers the story at the mountain at the time when his people needed desperately to hear good news. In fact, Matthew is telling them God is in control of history. He will institute a radically different kingdom one day. A kingdom of justice and love. A kingdom where love of God and love of neighbor will ultimately become a reality. A kingdom where those who trust in God and believe that his son is the Savior of the world will find the peace, tranquility, love, and justice they seek and deserve.

This was a message of hope at a time of darkness. I don't know about you, but I believe our world is in need of this hope today as well. I look around the world and I see such injustice against the weak and the voiceless. I see such great poverty in places like Honduras and Haiti. I see such depression and an epidemic of untreated mental illness in many parts of the world. I see so many unjustly incarcerated and deprived of their freedom because they don't have a voice and can't afford to hire a lawyer. I see so many around the world turning their backs on their own brothers and sisters and forgetting that we are called to care for each other, to protect the weak, to give voice to the voiceless, to feed and clothe the hungry, to advocate for freedom and to protect the rights of those who can't defend themselves. I see the world turning more inwardly directed, more preoccupied by parochial concerns, less altruistic, more suspicious and more paranoid. We are in need of this hope God offers us through his son.

Now, when Jesus offers these beatitudes, he is talking about a future reality. We see this by the use of the future tense in some of these statements. The meek will inherit the world, the peacemakers will be called the children of God, etc. The passage does not tell us when these things will occur, when these reversals will take place. All it tells us is that one day they will become a reality. Many believe Matthew is talking about heaven, the ever-after, paradise. One day, God himself will prepare a place for those who suffer and thirst, a place for those who believe in his Son. This is true to a certain degree. There is a future offered to those who believe. An eternal reality in God's own presence. But, there is also a sense that this future does not have to wait until we all die and go to heaven. This passage is not about suffering in silence and accepting all abuse because there will be a great future

promised to us. This is not some kind of passive acceptance of the status quo that is often mislabeled as “faith”.

In a way, Matthew expects his hearers to start working to institute a more just and peaceful world here and now. After all, Matthew is concerned about ethics and the way Christians lead their lives. He often speaks about producing fruit, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Matthew expects his hearers to get busy making this kingdom a reality here and now. Heaven begins on earth. We are the instruments through which God intends to bless his people. We are the peacemakers, the ones who work for justice, the ones who feed the hungry, and comfort the afflicted. We are the ones who make the kingdom happen through our faith in Jesus of Nazareth and our obedience to his will for our lives. We are instruments in our Redeemer’s hands.

I often pray that today would be the day Messiah comes. I pray that God’s kingdom will soon become a reality for all. But, I am often reminded that I must become the change I want to see. I must become a kingdom builder because I am the hands and feet of Jesus in a hurting world. But, of course, it is not I, but Jesus in me. This is the key of Christian ministry. It is Christ who works in us and through us and he deserves all the glory, all the adulation, all the praise. We are called to do our part, even if we don’t see the fruits of our labor. We are called to a life of faithfulness for the sake of Christ’s kingdom, a life of full engagement and love of God and others. Christ will do the rest.

This congregation has worshipped uninterruptedly on this location for 190 years. During this time we have seen God’s blessings in so many different ways. God has given us so much. We are in one of the most beautiful places in the world, surrounded by amazing oak trees, reminded daily of the legacy left to us by faithful Christians who did their part to advance God’s kingdom in West Feliciana Parish. Today we celebrate their life, we give thanks for their efforts, praise God for his faithfulness, and commit ourselves to the task of advancing God’s kingdom even more. Today, we pledge to do our part to create a lasting legacy for many Christians yet to come. And this legacy must be deeply rooted in love of God and love of others. We are poised to grow in finances and in numbers in years to come, but we must not neglect our spiritual growth and our commitment to the least and the lost among us. We can not forget that we are Jesus’ feet and hands in West Feliciana Parish and that he depends on us to bring about that reversal the passage from Matthew talks about today.

It is up to us to create a more just society. It is up to us to bring about a kingdom of peace. I pray that today we will let Christ work in us and through us to advance his kingdom deeper into our community, deeper into our homes, and deeper into our hearts. May he continue to bless you. Amen!