

FIRST LESSON: Micah 6: 6-8
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 5:1-12
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“God’s Way”

Sermon © Lisa Farrell

In the ancient pagan world gods were fickle things. Gods only really cared about themselves. They demanded worship. They demanded sacrifice. They especially demanded that things be done exactly in very particular ways. Gods were basically two-year-olds. If a word was spoken out of place during a Roman sacrifice, the entire thing had to be started over from the beginning. If you’ve ever read a story wrong to a toddler you will know that the same rule applies. Ancient gods and toddlers are OCD.

It is almost understandable, then, that the Jews of Micah’s time should think that God required burnt offerings with calves a year old, thousands of rams, rivers of olive oil, and at its most extreme, human sacrifice. Human sacrifice was not common during the time of Jesus. In fact, it was against the law. But it was common among Israel’s neighbors thousands of years earlier. Ancient gods were terrifying things, demanding and arbitrary. But the God of Israel was nothing like these false gods, a fact Micah tried to get across. Micah prophesied, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? **To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.**” These are the same characteristics found in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. They demonstrate God’s way to live.

There are eight statements in the Sermon on the Mount that all begin with the word “blessed.” The word “are” is not in the original. We put that in. Originally it read more like an exclamation: “Blessed the poor in spirit!” About half describe the heart of the person who is in a right relationship with God, and half how we live in a right relationship with one another. And what Jesus appears to be saying, despite all evidence to the contrary, is that people who are this way and do these things are blessed by God. There are no pre-conditions. It is simply a statement of fact.

Luke’s gospel says “blessed the poor.” Matthew says “blessed the poor in spirit.” Either way, the poverty we are speaking about is total. This isn’t first world poverty. This is third world poverty, where starving to death is a real possibility. Those who are “poor in spirit” cast themselves completely on God’s mercy. They know beyond any doubt that they have nothing to bring to the table. They know they are spiritually bankrupt. This isn’t false humility. It is brutal self-honesty. It is a blessing to recognize need God’s grace because only then can we receive. Delusions of adequacy get in the way of God. If we think we don’t need forgiveness, we refuse to receive it. If we think we don’t need strength and can do it on our own, we close ourselves off and can’t receive it.

But those who recognize their true need are able to fully receive all of what God desires to give and are blessed.

While I can understand being poor in spirit to be a blessing, however, I don't know anyone who considers mourning a blessing. Grief is painful. Grief rips our heart apart. Grief hurts so much it is physical. The only possible blessing to be found in grief is that it is God who comforts, and God who draws near to us. Our relationship with God when we are grief stricken is closer than it is at any other time.

"Blessed the meek" is another statement that most of us also find impossible to believe, but part of the problem here is that we don't really know what meekness is. The word "meek" conjures up a pitiful and despised figure in our minds. We define the word as "quiet, submissive and easily imposed on" or "deficient in courage and spirit." But this is not really what the word means in either the Hebrew or the Greek, so "meek" is a poor translation. Moses was described as "meek" in the Old Testament. Jesus was described as "meek" in the New Testament. Neither one was a doormat. Neither was "deficient in courage and spirit." Moses faced down Pharaoh, led a nation and met face to face with God. Jesus confronted the pharisees, turned the money changers tables upside-down and evicted demons. These men exercised **serious** authority. So, what is this "meek" we speak of?

Biblical meekness DOES NOT mean weak, cowardly or timid. It does not refer to a person who cannot stand up for themselves. In both Hebrew and Greek, the one who is meek can CHOOSE NOT to assert himself or herself. **Meekness is power under control.** Those who are meek refuse to inflate their own importance. They feel no need to get defensive. They know who they are. They have nothing to prove. And when they exercise authority, they do it for the good of all, not to showcase their own status. Meekness is never self-promoting. It is justice promoting.

What a blessing it is to be meek! Just because someone pushes my buttons doesn't mean I have to jump! Just because a bully is intent on making my life miserable doesn't mean I have to play the game. I can actually take two steps back, shake my head, and refuse to bite. The meek are calm. They do not feed fire with fire; they pour cold water on it. Even in circumstances that may lead to death, those who are meek are in control. Jesus before Pilate was meek, and Pilate was deeply unsettled by the experience.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." We might announce that we are absolutely starving at dinner time, but we never are. We might think we are going to faint with thirst, but it rarely happens. But we still know the feeling, even if we don't live on the edge of survival, and we all know that when we are really hungry or really thirsty it is hard to think of anything else. Jesus was speaking of a single-minded type of focus—hungering and thirsting, for righteousness.

Okay . . . righteousness. What does *that* mean? Those of you who have been here for years may remember me saying this, but for the sake of newer members I will tell you that when my Scottish Hebrew professor in Edinburgh was trying to get the concept of righteousness across to us he said, "if my car is in perfect working order, **it is righteous.**" We have attached a whole aura to a

word that just means “right” and running correctly. (Of course, the “Righteous Brothers” does sound better than the “Right Brothers.”) Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness passionately desire things to be right in the world, not broken as they are now. And the good news is that in providence of God rightness will come.

Jesus said, “Blessed the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” Mercy treats people how we would want to be treated, even if we don’t think they deserve it. Mercy is helping someone in need who has harmed us in the past. Mercy is living by the concept of “there but for the grace of God go I” and extending help. Mercy may involve doing things that won’t benefit us personally at all. But when we give mercy, we receive mercy, and if we have a healthy understanding of our own weaknesses, we know that we will need it.

The pure in heart are also blessed, but pure has two meanings. It can mean moral purity, which is what we normally think of, or purity in the sense of content—like 100% pure olive oil. The pure heart is completely devoted to God. The pure have an unwavering faith, and integrity is a direct result of such faith. The pure see reality as it truly is. To be pure does not mean to be naïve and ignorant. It means to be 100% committed to God.

The peacemakers are blessed because peacemakers do what God does. Peacemakers are involved in reconciliation, the work of God. Peacemakers save lives. Peacemakers work to heal and restore relationships. Even in the very imperfect way that we work for peace in our world, peacemaking is still the work of God.

Finally, we are told by Jesus that those who are persecuted are blessed! But not blessed in general. We are not blessed if people are angry with us for doing something wrong. We are blessed if people are angry with us for doing something right. There’s no blessing out there for being obnoxious. But there is for living God’s way and getting it in the teeth for doing so.

In school or on the job when I defend someone who everyone else likes to pick on and mock, I will be persecuted. I will end up sharing their burden. I will very likely find myself despised and mocked too. I should still do it.

If I speak out about a wrong practice at work that is lining the pockets of my colleagues, I will NOT be popular for drawing attention to it. I may quickly become persona non grata. I should still do it.

If I expose discrimination or corruption, it may cost me my job. And yes, God still wants me to expose discrimination and corruption. This is painful! This is hard! But this is what is involved in identifying ourselves fully with God and living God’s way. And the blessing we receive for this level of faithfulness is great, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets.

We often look at the beatitudes and consider them to be impossible standards, so far removed from daily life that we don’t even try. But they are not really that esoteric. There is real power and grace to be found in living according to these principles. We can strive in the direction of knowing in every bone of our body that:

- We can’t do anything apart from God’s grace.
- God will be especially close to us in our times of deepest need and sadness.

- We can be so secure in our knowledge of who we are in God's eyes we have nothing to prove. God's Spirit can help us be calm and in control even when under siege.
- Our desire for justice will be fulfilled.
- If we are merciful, we will receive mercy.
- If we are completely devoted to God, we will see God.
- When we do the work of a peacemaker even if we fail, we are doing the God's work.
- And being persecuted for doing the right thing will bring great spiritual blessing.

Regardless of the struggles we live through, when we are faithful in those struggles, God's blessing is upon us. Amen.

Micah 6: 6-8

- ⁶ With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
⁸ He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Matthew 5:1-12

⁵ Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them.

The Beatitudes

He said:

- ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
⁵ Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
⁷ Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all
kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is
your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who
were before you.