



Congratulations! Really!?

Devotional Thoughts for the
Week of September 13, 2020
by Ed Green

This is our second week as we journey through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount this fall. Each week we are asking you to read through it

(Matthew 5-7), which should only take about fifteen minutes. We also invite you to use these reflections to further guide you as we dig into Jesus' teaching this fall. This week's sermon and devotional thoughts focus on Matthew 5:3-16.

Day 1: "Congratulations" for What?

It's on the card you send to the happy couple getting married. Or what you say when you find out a coworker got that promotion, or your niece when she graduates with her masters. Congratulations! It is a recognition of achievement, good fortune, or a job well done. But read what Jesus says in Matthew 5:3-12. The word that Jesus uses in the beatitudes ("blessed") could just as easily have been translated "congratulations." Some folks make the mistake of understanding the beatitudes almost like a "to-do" list: "How can I be more poor in spirit?" "Am I mourning enough over my sin?" or "I should be more merciful," etc. But that's not what Jesus is doing here.

In the end of chapter 4 we find Jesus attracting large crowds from throughout the whole land. He is teaching, proclaiming the good news, and healing folks of all sorts of sickness, as well as casting out demons. Many of these people were considered the less fortunate, the poor, the rejects, the sinners. But to these very people Jesus offers the good news: the kingdom of God is open to them as well. Congratulations!



You see, it's not just the rich and the religious who have access to God, but the poor and the persecuted. That was kind of "upside-down" compared to what everyone thought (thinks?). And that was the point. So, Jesus calls them "blessed." They're not blessed *because* they're poor, or mourning, or persecuted, but because they, too, are loved by God and welcome in his kingdom. Is there someone you know who needs to hear that same good news?

Day 2: Good News Indeed

In one sense, the first beatitude, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (5:3), serves as a heading for the remaining seven. (The final beatitude, "*blessed are those who are persecuted...*" holds out the same promise.) What kind of people can be described as "poor in spirit"? Dallas Willard paraphrases it this way: "Blessed are the spiritual zeros— the spiritually bankrupt, deprived and deficient, the spiritual beggars, those without a wisp of 'religion'— when the kingdom of the heavens comes upon them."

Read Luke 4:16-21. As Jesus preaches in his hometown synagogue, he reads from the scroll of Isaiah: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...*" (Isaiah 61:1). Jesus understood this to be his Spirit-directed mission. Putting together this passage from Luke 4 and the beatitudes from Matthew 5, what folks might be considered as the "poor" or "poor in spirit"?



If this was Jesus' mission, then shouldn't our mission as believers and the Church reflect his? What does that look like for us today?

Day 3: Where will you turn?

Jesus said, “*Blessed are the meek...*” (Matthew 5:5). The word translated as “meek” was used by Aristotle several centuries before Christ in a positive sense as the virtue between the extremes of excessive anger and apathy. But in later Jewish usage it developed the idea of lowliness, and either an inability or a choice not to advance your own cause. Jesus uses the same word to describe himself as “*gentle and humble in heart*” (Matthew 11:29).

One of the hardest things for us to deal with are feelings of powerlessness. Especially as Americans we take pride in our self-determination and freedom. When we feel trapped or victimized or lack the ability to do anything about a particular situation, we feel powerless.



Jesus makes the kingdom available to those who have nowhere else to turn. He invites them to come to him. He invites trust. How about you? Do you have a situation or area in your life that seems chaotic or feels like it’s spinning out of control? Where do you think you can turn?

Day 4: Persecuted

There are several places in the Gospels where Jesus tells his disciples to expect persecution because of him. In chapter 10, the second major teaching segment in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus prepares to send out the Twelve on a preaching and healing tour in Galilee. He tells them, “*You will be hated by everyone because of me...The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!*” (10:22, 24-25).

Some people believed they were “doing God’s will” by violently opposing this new movement (read later about Saul/Paul in Acts 9).

But rather than the religious and political leaders being right, Jesus declares that God is on the side of those being persecuted.

An estimated 260 million Christians live in places in the world today where they experience high levels of persecution. Take a few minutes today to visit the website of *Open Doors*, a ministry that supports persecuted believers (www.opendoorsusa.org), and learn more about the persecution of Christians worldwide. Pray for your brothers and sisters, those whom Jesus calls “blessed,” because they share in the kingdom of heaven.



Day 5: The Power of the Ordinary...

Last weekend would have been the 2020 Beaver Creek Popcorn Festival. Popcorn is one of those things (like donuts) that I can’t say no to. And on my popcorn, I like a lot salt (in fact you probably don’t want to eat from my popcorn bucket at the theater). Salt not only flavors, but in cultures and locales without refrigeration, it preserves. In

Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus tells his disciples, these ordinary folks who are choosing to follow him, that they are the salt of the earth. And they are the light of the world. We all understand that light illuminates and scatters darkness.

When we think of influence we usually think big things: world-altering kinds of impact. But what if Jesus’ point was quite the opposite? Let’s end this week with another quote from Skye Jethani’s book *What if Jesus Was Serious?*...

“To be the salt and the light of the world does not require a person to do extraordinary acts or amass spectacular influence. The world does not need more ambitious Christians. Rather, salt and light are the outcome of ordinary lives lived in rich communion with God. Our world desperately needs more of those.”