

PRIZE THE RIGHT VALUES (Part 2)**MATTHEW 5:6-12**

Last week I began a new series of message that I'm calling "Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: Gracious Demands, Not Optional Suggestions." It's a look at the most important sermon ever preached as it's found in Matthew 5-7. Jesus' sermon begins with a set of eight short sayings that have been called the Beatitudes. Last week we looked at the first three; today we want to consider the other five. It's important that we remember that Jesus' sermon doesn't tell you how to become a Christian. Instead, it describes people who are already part of the Kingdom of God. Jesus isn't saying, "If you do these things, you will earn a place in Heaven with God for all eternity." Instead, He is saying, "When the Kingdom of God gets a hold of a person, he or she will start to act like this. All of my disciples – anyone who follows Me - will start to look like what I describe here." Now, the Beatitudes are all about values. Each one starts with the word "blessed" meaning that God considers you to be a spiritually blest person if these values are revealed in your life. Being a part of God's Kingdom means we prize what God prizes and we value what He values. For example, it means:

I AM CONSTANTLY DESIRING GOD.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (Mt 5:6 NIV) Obviously, Jesus isn't referring to physical hunger or thirst, but a kind of need that's as important as literal food and water. Nor is this a mild form of hunger like the strong urge for a late night snack after you've watched 50 pizza commercials on TV! I don't know if anyone here today has ever been on the verge of actual starvation, but that's the kind of hunger Jesus has in mind here. You can die from lack of water more quickly than lack of food, and that's the kind of thirst Jesus envisions here. Jesus has in mind a very intense, all-consuming desire for something that is constant, all-consuming and bordering on obsessive.

Jesus identifies that desire as "righteousness" here. Jesus isn't suggesting that you and I should have a strong desire to be moral. He isn't saying we should be desperate to become a good or noble person. That word "righteousness" refers to God Himself and your relationship with Him. It's an intense longing to be with God and to know God. It's an all-consuming longing to be controlled and shaped by God in every dimension of your life. You are obsessed with a desire to be right with Him. There's a story about a young man who approached the Buddha seeking salvation and deliverance. The Buddha took him down to nearby river. The young man thought that he was going to go through some kind of rite or purification like baptism. But once they were in the water, the Buddha grabbed the man and held his head under the water by force. He began to struggle and finally when he was almost out of air, the poor guy was able to wrench himself free from the Buddha's grasp. His head popped to the surface where he gasped for air. The Buddha asked him, "When you thought you were drowning, what did you desire the most?" The young man gasped, "Air!" The Buddha said, "When you want salvation as much as you wanted air, then you will get it."

I'm not suggesting that we have to go to Buddhism to find spiritual truth, but in this instance I believe Jesus would have agreed with the Buddha. Do you need God desperately? Do you want to be with God and know Him passionately? Do you constantly desire God? Kingdom people do. Disciples of Jesus do. God is as important to a citizen of His Kingdom as food to a starving man or water to a woman dying of thirst. Is God that important to you? Probably not. Don't be discouraged by that uncomfortable truth. There's a gradual, progressive sense to what Jesus says here. The fact is that few of us constantly desire to be with or to know God. Why is that? One, we still enjoy sin. We enjoy being greedy, lustful, and self-centered. But the longer you follow Jesus, the less you enjoy sin and the more you crave God. Two, God is an acquired taste! You have to develop an appetite for God. Most of us find a steady diet of God hard to take. God is so holy – so beyond us in every way imaginable – that your capacity to be with Him has to grow and develop. The longer you follow Jesus, the more you want to be with Him. Three, we still like to seek other things more than God. Maybe its materialistic junk. Maybe its accomplishments in life. Maybe its happiness. But the longer you live, the more you realize that only God can satisfy your deepest needs. At the end of the day, only God truly satisfies.

Can you increase your hunger and thirst for God? Sure you can! In fact, you have a responsibility to develop an appetite for God. How do you that? The best way is to feed on His Word – the Bible. That's one reason I'm encouraging all of you to participate in Bible Chat – a weekly 30 minute discussion of a portion of the Sermon on the Mount with someone else. Have you ever noticed that you start getting hungry around people who are hungry themselves? If you spend time with spiritually hungry people your own hunger and thirst for God will grow. Jesus promises here that spiritually hungry and thirsty people will be satisfied of filled up. No, not completely this side of Heaven. In Heaven, our appetite for God will be eternally satisfied, but in this life we will likely go through cycles of spiritual hunger followed by spiritual fullness, spiritual thirst followed by spiritual satisfaction. The bottom line? God will give you what you want if what you want is God. Let's move on to the next Beatitude. Being a disciple of Jesus means I am increasingly valuing or prizes what God values and prizes. That means...

I AM COMPASSIONATELY HELPFUL.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” (Mt. 5:7 NIV) As you know, tolerance of just about anything is highly prized in our culture right now. It's suggested that there's nothing worse than judging someone else's behavior or lifestyle. Everyone's opinions and value systems are to be respected no matter how godless or blatantly ridiculous. That isn't what Jesus meant here by being merciful, because that word is most often applied to God and He never has a tolerant attitude toward sin. Nor is Jesus referring to a certain kind of personality. Some people are just more compassionate and caring by nature. But this is something every disciple of Jesus is to do.

Jesus is talking about the ability to look at other people from God's perspective rather than your own. When that happens, your attitude toward people will change. You no longer regard anyone as loathsome, disgusting and beneath your dignity to have a

relationship with him or her. Like God, you begin to distinguish between the sinner and his or her sin. Like God, there wells up within you a great sense of compassion and sorrow for anyone who is trapped in sin's web of destruction. You realize how duped and victimized people get by the devil. You acknowledge that were it not for God and His grace, you'd probably think and act the same way. This isn't about saying sin is OK or condoning what is wrong. Not at all! It's the God-given ability to see eternal value in people even when they're doing their best to mess up their own lives. You can offer acceptance, because you've been accepted yourself. You can show mercy because you've been on the receiving end of mercy yourself.

Let me suggest three categories of people we need to show mercy to on a regular basis. The first group is the clobbered. These are the folk who are facing some kind of huge life crisis – divorce, the death of a loved one, serious illness, or the loss of a job. The second group who need our mercy are the aching. These are people with more long-term needs – those who are perpetually lonely or frequently discouraged. The third group of people who need our mercy are the lost – people with no personal relationship with Jesus. They need our compassion, never our contempt.

At the present time, many Christians are struggling with how to relate to gay people in our culture. I like the example of Jerry Cook, a pastor in Oregon some years ago. In a conversation with a practicing gay man, he said, "I'm really committed to you as a person. I love you and in so doing I'm committed to confronting your lifestyle and helping you see how destructive it is. You may never agree with me, but this will always be my posture with you." Jerry didn't see this young man again for a year after that conversation. But one Sunday, he showed up at church. After the service, Jerry had a few moments with him alone. "Where have you been?" he asked. "You ran." The young man admitted, "I did. You scared me. You're the first person who ever distinguished between who I was and what I was doing." He eventually became a disciple of Jesus and abandoned his gay lifestyle. I'm not suggesting that's going to happen every time, but I am suggesting that mercy is a powerful spiritual reality and followers of Jesus should be the first to offer it. Being a disciple of Jesus means I am increasingly valuing or prizes what God values and prizes. That means...

I AM CONSISTENTLY SINCERE.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Mt 5:8 NIV) Our culture is pretty concerned about outward purity with its thousands of soaps, shampoos, and deodorants out there in the marketplace. God knows that you can be ever so clean on the outside, but very dirty on the inside. God wants you to be clean on the inside. The real meaning of the word "pure" here is to be unmixed with anything else. Have you ever looked into a peanut butter jar and found so much jelly mixed up in it that you weren't quite sure if it was a peanut butter jar or a jelly jar? It's impure in the sense that it's become mixed. It's no longer just one thing. But when you open that brand new, pristine jar of peanut butter, it's not mixed with anything else. It's pure.

Are you unmixed, sincere, and real spiritually? Life in the Kingdom of God isn't a matter of how smart you are or how correctly you behave. Many smart people are a mess on the inside. Many people who seem to have it all together outwardly have inner lives that are in shambles. God desires purity – sincerity – in your heart. Your heart is the real you. It's the place where your motivations, your desires, your ambitions, and your passions live. It's the most important part of you and God wants to and needs to transform it. Why? The Bible says, “The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives.” (Jer 17:9-10 NLT) You can't make your own heart pure. Only God can do that and He does it over time in the hearts of those who seek Him through the many experiences of life. God gradually transforms your heart so that it becomes more and more sincere. He works gently, but diligently, to remove every shred of hypocrisy, every artificiality, and every inauthentic attitude and action. What's the result? You begin to see God more and more clearly. In other words, you understand Him better. You recognize Him more quickly when He shows up in people and circumstances. You perceive more clearly how and where He is working. Being a disciple of Jesus means I am increasingly prizes what God prizes. That means...

I AM COURAGEOUSLY PEACEFUL.

Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.” (Mt. 5:9 NIV) War – and all of its terrible results - is a very prevalent reality in our world today. At the end of the day, there's only one reason for so much war. Sin. Human selfishness, human self-centeredness, human evil is the cause of any and every war – be it the war against terrorism, literal wars between nations, or smaller-scale, relational wars between people who work together or families who live together. Every person without God is a walking, talking civil war because of the dominance of sin in his or her life. Is it any wonder that people at war with themselves create wars with others?

Jesus isn't talking about the ability to make political peace here. That may well be a noble, worthwhile pursuit in life, but it's not what Jesus meant here. Nor is Jesus blessing people who just love peace for peace's sake. This is about the ability to make peace not to love peace above everything else. We all know people who are so conflict adverse that they settle for peace at any price. Ironically, if you love peace more than anything else, you'll probably just create greater conflict unintentionally. For example, I've known parents who so valued a peaceful, tranquil home that they failed to discipline their kids or confront them about wrong behavior and attitudes. Ironically, they helped to create little monsters. I've known spouses who were so timid about confronting sinful attitudes and actions in their mates just to keep peace, but the result was anything but peace. Jesus doesn't ask you to love peace more than truth.

The value here is to be courageously peaceful. That means far more than just avoiding trouble. It means going out of your way to produce peace. There are many applications. You refuse to gossip about a difficult person. You do something kind for someone who has been deliberately unkind to you. You take hurt feelings directly to the person involved rather than complaining about it to everyone else but him or her. You refuse to

retaliate even when the person who offended you richly deserves it. Each of those responses is a deliberate decision on your part to make peace not simply to avoid trouble. Peacemakers are sorely needed – in your home, in your extended family, in your community, and, yes, even in your church.

Why did Jesus call peacemakers the children of God? What does one have to do with the other? Because when you're a peacemaker, you closely resemble your Heavenly Father. God Himself is the ultimate peacemaker. There was an impenetrable wall of spiritual hostility between God and human beings because of our sin, but He sent His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, into the world to pay the penalty for our sin. God took the initiative to make peace with you and me. He took the action necessary to produce peace. When you do that, you resemble your Heavenly Father. Being a disciple of Jesus means I am increasingly prizes what God prizes. That means...

I AM CHEERFULLY WILLING TO BE OPPOSED.

Jesus concludes this part of His sermon by saying, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Mt 5:10-12 NIV) This might be the most misunderstood Beatitude of them all. It doesn't mean you're blessed by God for being persecuted in general. For example, people can be persecuted for being Jewish, African-American, or just being refugees from war as we've seen in the news recently. While those are examples of injustice, it's not what Jesus is referring to here. Jesus isn't even addressing when people get persecuted for doing something good and noble in life. Nor, does it refer to being held accountable for doing something criminal or fanatical even if it's for a good cause. For example, someone who is arrested and jailed for murdering a doctor who performs abortions can't legitimately apply this beatitude to himself. Yes, opposing abortion is good. No, killing abortion doctors is wrong. Nor does Jesus' statement refer to well-meaning Christians who witness to or try to evangelize other people insensitively. I still remember many years ago trying to strike up a conversation about Jesus with a student. We were complete strangers to each other. He was offended by my presumption and lack of sensitivity. He let me know it in no uncertain terms. I wasn't truly being persecuted for righteousness. I was being confronted for having been rude. There's a big difference!

What is Jesus talking about here, then? This is hatred, opposition and antagonism toward you simply because you're a devoted follower of Jesus. The recent brutality of Islamic groups like ISIS has reminded us that the outright persecution and killing of Christians is still very much of a reality in today's world. It's still a crime to be a follower of Jesus in many countries and cultures in our world today. Yes, we can be opposed or hated even in our own country simply because we identify with Jesus. Christians have sometimes failed to be promoted at work or even lost their jobs not because of poor performance, but because they had a supervisor who disliked their allegiance to Jesus.

Sometimes other people – neighbors, co-workers, even family members – can ostracize you socially once they learn you're serious about your faith.

If that ever happens to you, how should you react? Jesus says you must not retaliate. You're even asked to reject any feelings of resentment or depression over the injustice of it all. Instead, Jesus says rejoice and be glad about it! We're called to be downright cheerful if we ever have the privilege of being opposed or persecuted simply because we love and serve Jesus. Why? First, Jesus says it's proof that you're becoming like Him. People are seeing Jesus in you. It's a fact that some people will hate you for no other reason than that they just hate Jesus. Here's a second reason to be cheerful in the face of persecution. It guarantees incredible rewards in Heaven. That's what Jesus says here! I have no idea what they are, but God will lavish rich blessings in Heaven upon any and all who face persecution and opposition for their allegiance to Jesus.

The Nigerian city of Jos sits on Africa's great fault line between the Muslim north and the Christian south. It has faced terrible things in recent years. A Nigerian Baptist church was attacked by Muslim extremists who burnt down the church building and the house of the church's leader, Pastor Sunday Gomna. When the people of that Baptist church returned for worship, they gathered in a little mud wall community center about one kilometer from the burnt church. Pastor Gomna stood up and said, 'First, I am grateful that no one in my church killed anyone.' Apparently, during the chaos of the attacks, some of the Muslim people had said to him, "Pastor, thank you for the way you taught your people. Your people helped to protect us." Pastor Sunday was proud that his people did not kill any Muslims. "Second," he said, "I am grateful that they did not burn my church." Everyone looked at Pastor Sunday with disbelief. After all, everyone was meeting in this small, uncomfortable community building. But Pastor Sunday continued: "Since no church member died during this crisis, they did not burn our church. They only burned the building. We can rebuild the building but we could not bring back to life any of our members. So I am grateful that they did not burn my church." Finally he said, "Third, I am grateful that they burned my house as well. If they had burned your house and not my house, how would I have known how to serve you as pastor? However, because they burned my house and all my possessions, I know what you are experiencing and I will be able to be a better pastor to you. So I am grateful that they burned my house as well."

It's easy to dismiss the Sermon on the Mount, generally, and the Beatitudes, specifically, as just too difficult to live out. They're impossible! They're unrealistic! No one can live like this! But then you hear about a Pastor Sunday and those Nigerian believers and you recognize that, yes, you can. It's a choice – a decision. As G.K. Chesterton put it, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried." But by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, even imperfect, sinful people like you and me can experience the transformation Jesus teaches about here. That transformation begins when we prize what God prizes and we value what He values.