

Sunday 29th April 2018
Communion

Text matt. 5.1-12.

We are looking at the Lord's Prayer, our model for what and how to pray. This prayer tells us what we should pray for, and also gives us the priorities and motivation of prayer. We tend to think that prayer is given to us to get things from God. That is not the highest purpose of prayer. We are created by God and for God, and our highest calling is to live to the Glory of God, to live for His honour. It is for this reason that the first three petitions of the Lord's prayer are to do with God and His glory.

We looked last week at the third petition, 'Thy will be done.' In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, this refers back to the Beatitudes which are a masterly description by Christ of the character He requires of the Disciples, of Christians, indeed of all Christians!

The reason that the Beatitudes are central and vital is that they are a description of the character of Christ. If we were to study them, from that perspective, we would find illustrations of every one of these character traits demonstrated in the life of Christ. This would be a good Bible Study for us to do sometime! For example, as regards poverty of spirit, Christ said that He could do nothing Himself, that He only did what the Father told Him to do.

These character traits are God's will, because Christ died to redeem us from being devil like, to being Christ-like. The purpose of the Cross is to change our standing with God. That is Justification. When we believe in Christ for salvation, He declares us to be Righteous with the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, written down on our account.

We are united to Christ, this gives rise to Paul's language in Ephesians where he says much about Christians as regards being, 'in Christ.' The Holy Spirit comes into us, and the work of sanctification begins, all at that moment of conversion. The purpose of this union with Christ, and the giving of the Holy Spirit is to work His righteousness through our whole being, body, mind, heart, and spirit, to transform us to be as innocent as doves and as wise as serpents. This is not an option, this is the will of God. We are to become new creatures not only in word, but in fact. This is a life-long process, a pilgrimage of transformation. The reason it takes all of our lives is because we are much more corrupt than we think!

It is required of all Christians to become transformed to be like Christ. There is a tendency in our present culture to affix qualifiers to the word Christian. People speak of 'Evangelicals,' or 'Charismatics,' or 'Liberal,' or 'born again,' or 'ordinary' Christians. We know what people mean, we love putting labels on things. However, the Bible does not know such distinctions as these. It does have things to say about mature and immature, obedient and disobedient Christians, but there is no distinction between 'sorts' of Christians. We are all meant to be growing more like Christ as the first priority in our

lives, before anything else. Jesus prioritises this even to the extent of saying that unless we hate father and mother, wife and children and even our own lives and take up our cross and follow Him, we cannot be His disciples. Christ says this not to tell us to be hateful to these people, but to indicate the sort of devotion we are to give to Him, first place in our lives, not just a place. Jesus told a number of parables to tell us how singular we are to be in these matters. He tells us that these things, the Kingdom, are like a man who sold all to buy the field in which he found hidden treasure, and then in case we missed that story, He spoke about a man who liquidated all his stock to buy a pearl of great price. Matt. 13 v 44-46.

The thrust of all this is quite startling. The message can be condensed down to this, the purpose of this life, the most important thing to do with our time here is to prepare our souls for eternity! Paul says that physical training is of some value, and if we nurtured our souls as many nurture their bodies, we would be in revival!

I raise all this, because as we understand the Beatitudes, we realise that these are impossible character traits to develop without the work of the Holy Spirit within us. This is so because what the Beatitudes are addressing is not an external behavior in the first place, but the very core of our beings, our hearts being changed! It is not an easy thing to change hearts. All that Law can do is prescribe externals, it cannot change the heart. Punishment, psychology, rewards, disciplines, counseling, seeking advice, all can be useful, but only God can change the heart. Consider this, think of the time, energy and resources put into situations. Consider this, there are more conflicts going on, more slavery, now called people trafficking, and all the rest as there has ever been. What have the multiplication of laws and rules done? Very little, because people's hearts must be changed, and that is the work that only the Holy Spirit alone can do.

The Beatitudes build on each other to form a description of Christian character. We cannot pick one of these and try to become, for example, a merciful person, and so think that we will scrape into heaven. It is all or nothing! Indeed, it is impossible to be merciful, as God requires, without first seeing how poor in spirit we are. Each Beatitude depends on the one before which then gives rise to the next.

There is a dispute as to how many Beatitudes there are, eight or nine, but that need not concern us. I go with the opinion that verse 11 is a commentary on verse 10, so conclude that there are eight Beatitudes. However many we think there are, they are Christ's exposition of what God's will is for us. These are the sort of people He wants us to be. Remember that what God commands and requires, He has also made provision to be accomplished. If we read on beyond the Beatitudes we see that it is these people who are conforming to the Beatitudes who are salt and light, and these alone. The clear implication is that if we truly wish to do good in the world, the place to start and to develop in, is becoming salt and light, and that means working with the character outlined in the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes all have the same formula structure. Each begins with a blessing. God always blesses before He commands. Blessed, happy, to be envied, this is the one God

esteems, who is poor in spirit, and so on. Mary was greeted by the angel who said she was 'highly favored.' Luke 1.28. Each Beatitude starts with a blessing, then there is a requirement, and then the promise of a reward. The reward may come partially in this life, but the full reward is kept for us in heaven.

Now in case anyone thinks that these rewards and blessings are our due for adopting the character outlined here, let us remind ourselves that these requirements are impossible to accomplish on our own. We are dependent on co-operating with the Holy Spirit, and even when we do grow like this, it is only our duty we have done! God does not owe us anything for becoming what we are meant to be. He is generous and rewards out of love and grace, not because He owes us anything! To put it in common language, the least thing we can do is to become Christ-like! It is also the best and highest thing for us. However since it all comes from what Christ has done on the Cross and the present working of the Holy Spirit in us, we have no grounds for boasting.

If we consider the first Beatitude we will see the truth of this. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit,' what is that? It is the growing realization of our natural state. We were born under the power and pollution of sin, and our hearts are completely corrupt until God acts in us. What then have we of our own to offer God? Everything which is good, He has given us, all we have is our sin and sins! There is nothing good in us, even at our best, our motives and desires tend to self and self-interest.

The Beatitudes are not things which are a one-time concern. Character takes all of our lives to develop. The character of Christ is to permeate and rule in us as yeast works in bread. This will take all our lives and all our attention, and will only be completed in heaven.

Let us then comment briefly on the Beatitudes. I will focus of the command aspect. We are not slow to look at the blessings often failing to see the high demand we are called to, and failing to see our utter need to pray for God to work these things in us. The first four Beatitudes take to do with a person as they live their lives before God. The second four Beatitudes relate to how we live our lives in the world in the light of these first four.

1. The poor in spirit. This is that we see ever more clearly that we are wretched in ourselves. We see that we have nothing to commend ourselves before God. We see that even our best efforts are filthy rags, and we abhor ourselves because of the depth and prevalence of our sinfulness. This sounds like bad news to modern men, but there are no other ways to this blessedness given to us in the Bible. This requires us to examine our hearts and become ruthlessly honest when we consider our motives desires and the things we think about.

If you read the Christian lives of those who have made a difference in the world, we find in their journals language that tells us they sometimes felt that the more they grew, the worse they found themselves to be. We need to understand that heart examination is essentially looking at the perfections of Christ, and considering where we fall short. We must look at Christ all the time, and our hearts now and then! Christ is the mirror in

which we see our-selves, our faults, sins, corruption by the light of His purity and holiness. Think of Isaiah's encounter with God. He came away from it utterly undone, but different! Isaiah chapter 6. In the light of God's glory, he saw his uncleanness, but it was when he saw his corrupt condition that God acted to clean him. He saw he was poor in spirit.

2. Blessed are those who mourn. This is the most realistic response to seeing who we are meant to be, as set against who we are at present. Isaiah cried out, 'woe is me!' We mourn because of the curse of sin, what it has done to us and how it has defaced the image of God in us. We mourn because we have offended and provoked a God of grace with our waywardness and sin. This is not the grieving we do when we lose someone we love. There we are essentially mourning for our loss. This mourning as it becomes more real is also mourning for the despite we have done to the One who loves us and gave His life for us. We mourn because we have regarded Him shamefully.

3. Meekness. This is not being a shrinking violet. This means that we see we are nothing, so when someone tells us we are nothing, we don't rise in indignation and punch them or take revenge on them. Jesus was meek. When He was reviled, He did not revile back. Moses was the meekest man on the earth. If you read about the wilderness journey you will find the people often screaming for his head. God judged them, and the people came to Moses to ask him to pray for them that the judgment be turned away. You will read that Moses did pray for them. We don't find him saying that he will not pray because they deserve what they are getting! Time and again, even when scorned and treated badly, Moses acts on their behalf as if his reputation and well-being did not matter. That is meekness!

4. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Here we come from climbing up to the mountain of human need, to the solution of the need. Our greatest need is righteousness, to be able to come to God and approach Him without fear of destruction. We need to be able to come to God with consciences which do not condemn us. We are given the righteousness of Christ when we believe, but we need His righteousness to permeate our hearts and souls. For this to happen we need to realise our need, and hunger and thirst for this imparted righteousness. Hunger and thirst are strong words, this is how we will long for righteousness as we see our poverty, mourn and become meek and humble. It is a drive that takes us into action, we seek righteousness imparted by being in God's presence. We desire to be in God's presence a lot! God Himself is the answer to our need. The promise is that those who so hunger and thirst shall be filled!

The next four Beatitudes relate to how we live our lives in the world as regards other people.

5. Mercy. We all know the parable of the unforgiving servant. He was forgiven much, but would not forgive another who owed him a pittance. The meaning of the parable is not that we are forgiven by God because we forgive. The meaning of the parable is that the evidence that we have seen our need and have received forgiveness of our huge debt,

is that we forgive the lesser debts others owe us. We grow in mercy as we see others as likewise corrupt and sinful, and extend mercy to them because God has been so merciful to us.

Mercy is often regarded in our age as weakness. However, the greatness of a King, Proverbs tells us, is in showing mercy.

6. Pure in heart. The Bible uses different words to describe this quality. It talks of being single in heart. Do you remember Linfield Christie the British sprinter? He was often regarded as stand offish because at the start of a race you could talk to him and he would not respond. The reason for that was that when he got to the starting block, the only thing in his mind was getting down that 100 meter track to the finish line as fast as he could. That was all that he was thinking about. He was single in his intent. We are to be single in our intent, to please God by universal obedience which comes from love.

Other words used speak of an un-divided heart, a heart that does not carry two loves in opposition to each other. This is an immensely demanding idea. Often, even the best things we do have a huge bit of self in it. We like it when people congratulate us and speak well of us, or comment on how nice or kind we are. We can't stop people doing that, but we must be careful of believing or own press! Pride and arrogance rise up in all of us so easily. Preachers are far from being immune to this. Sadly so many have come to a bad place by thinking they had grown above such things as these Beatitudes. Do pray for leaders and ministers, missionaries and church workers, and ourselves.

7. Peace makers. These are not do-gooders or campaigners for this anti-war cause or that. By all means advocate for peace and join groups if you wish. However be aware that wearing a badge is not necessarily the same as being a peace maker. This is the peace of being reconciled to God and to others. Peace makers do so even at personal cost. Go to your brother and confess. Go to your brother and rebuke. The goal is restoration of relationship with God and each other. It does not always work. The greatest peace maker the world has ever known was nailed to a Cross and killed!

8. Persecution. We don't make ourselves to be persecuted because we are foolish and obnoxious. We are persecuted for being righteous, for being different from the others in the world who do not believe in Jesus. We will be persecuted because Jesus was persecuted for being who He was, holy and righteous. The reason for this is that holiness and righteousness are a moral light, and a sinful world and people hate for this light to expose their evil.

How can such an experience of persecution be a blessing? If we are persecuted in this way it is because the world sees righteousness in us, and that shows us that who we are becoming is the real, sincere thing. Please don't think being carted off for shouting abuse outside some organization which is morally questionable is being persecuted for righteousness sake. The violence of the Kingdom is a spiritual violence, not a physical violence. Persecution, if, and when it comes, is to be because we are becoming more like Christ.

Remember this, the blessings and rewards combined in the Beatitudes come in no other way than by living in this way. To do this we must look at both the requirements and the promises. There is no point in praying for God to give us the kingdom of heaven if we do not engage the difficult and grievous work of self-examination in the light of Christ and Scripture to see our poverty of spirit and to own it.. What we often do is compare ourselves with other people. It is very easy to play down our condition when we compare ourselves to others. We can always find someone who drove faster, lied more, is heavier than us, or whatever. We look at Christ and the Scriptures, these are the mirror that does not lie or flatter us.

As we do this looking to Christ, and grow in Christlikeness, we have the promise of God that by His power we will be transformed from one degree of glory to another.

Don't think that this is also a menu for misery. We may not be foolishly happy, but we will know a happiness and joy that comes and is not destroyed or affected by the events of life, the joy that comes by the Holy Spirit and is real and lasting!

Remember the beginning of each of these Beatitudes – blessed. God's will for us is that we be blessed by becoming like Christ. This will produce a happiness which is not dependent on things and people which can change like the weather. The hymn writer had it correct when he said that it was solid joys and lasting pleasures none but Zion's children know. There is no secret to a happy life. Jesus spelled it out to us. It is a difficult path, and one that will often cut across our wills and desires. However most things which are truly valuable are very costly, but worth it. This treasure of Christlikeness is worth it both for this life, and for all eternity.

If anyone wishes to search out these matters more fully, and I think you should, the best and most readable book is the two volume series by Martyn Lloyd-Jones. The books are the 'Sermon on the Mount.' They were published by IVP. They may be more widely published now. If you have a birthday coming up, or an early Christmas present, consider these. They will provide good material and are worth reading again and again. I am not sure, but they may even be on line somewhere. However, buy the book, you can underline the bits that arrest your attention and scribble all sorts of notes and thoughts on the pages – lovely.