

Who Thrives in the Kingdom? (Part 2)

Matthew 5:7-12

When I was a senior in high school, our all-school play was M*A*S*H. I had never been in a school play before, but I thought it would be fun, so I showed up at the audition. In case you're not familiar with M*A*S*H, the setting is a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital during the Korean War. The TV series was rather political, but the play we did was pure comedy.

Some people showed up at the audition with a character in mind: Hot Lips Houlihan, Klinger, Radar O'Reiley, etc. But I really didn't really have a character in mind. The teacher directing the play wanted me to audition for the role of Hawkeye Pearce. He was a great surgeon when on duty; off duty he was a rather unsavory character who liked to play pranks on people. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea because I was a brilliant goofball too. I probably wouldn't have chosen that part for myself, but when given the chance to audition, I took it and eventually got the part. It turned out to be a great role for me.

It has been said that when Jesus taught about the kingdom of heaven, He was inviting people to audition for parts. When He tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, He is laying out the different roles that people play in this world and in the kingdom. You have the option of being like the first two who saw the man left for dead lying by the side of the road, or you can be like the Samaritan man who recognized that he was the neighbor of the man lying by the road.

Today as we continue our study of the beatitudes found in Matthew 5, I want us to understand that Jesus is inviting us to audition for parts as well. In these short statements pronounces blessing on different types of people, describing who really thrives in the kingdom. Last week we emphasized that these were blessings, not commands. Jesus wasn't commanding us to mourn, be gentle, or hunger and thirst after righteousness. He was pronouncing blessing on people in such conditions. At the same time, I do think that Jesus is implicitly inviting us to play the roles described by these beatitudes. In other words, when Jesus makes clear what types of people thrive in the kingdom He is inviting us to be such persons.

Last week, for example, we discussed, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Implicit in that statement is the invitation for us to hunger and thirst for righteousness – for things to be "made right" in our own lives, in the lives of people around us, and in the world. If you presently have little or no spiritual appetite – you aren't really hungry and thirsty for God – know that the part is yours if you want it: **you** can be among those who hunger and thirst after righteousness and **you** will be satisfied.

One more comment before we look at the last four beatitudes. . . In my understanding, the first beatitude is an exception to everything I've just said. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In my understanding, Jesus is pronouncing blessing on those who are spiritually impoverished. People who have no spiritual assets can come to God empty-handed and enter the kingdom through faith in Jesus. Once you enter the kingdom, however, you are no longer spiritually impoverished: you now have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). In my understanding Jesus doesn't invite us to play the role of spiritually impoverished people; it's more the case that those who were once spiritually impoverished thrive in the kingdom because they are now spiritually wealthy. We should certainly remain humble because we don't deserve a thing, but I don't think that's what Jesus is saying here.

Let's return to Matthew 5 and consider the last four beatitudes. The beatitudes answer the question, *Who thrives in the kingdom of God?* In Matthew 5:7 we read:

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Mercy is basically "compassion for people in need" (Stott, Sermon on the Mount, p. 47). Those who are merciful are drawn toward people in need, even people in distress. Their hearts go out to people who are in all sorts of desperate situations. Whereas some people keep their distance from needy, distressed people, the merciful move in closer. The merciful actually believe that God wants to show His mercy to people through them. Jesus pronounces, "Blessed are the merciful."

What blessing is promised to the merciful? "They shall receive mercy." Jesus doesn't explicitly state the connection between giving mercy and receiving mercy, and so I'm reluctant to give an explanation that's too neat and tidy. We don't want to say that merciful people now deserve mercy from God. Nobody ever deserves mercy just like nobody (by definition) deserves grace. God obviously shows mercy to people who don't deserve it. We actually read in Luke 6:35 that God Himself is "kind to ungrateful and evil men." God is merciful to people who aren't themselves merciful.

But it may be that the merciful receive more mercy than others because their hearts are able to receive it. An unmerciful person tends to be prideful, looking down on others with an air of superiority. People who are prideful toward others aren't humble before God. Such persons rarely kneel before God and say, "Be merciful to me! I am poor and needy and distressed." I know that when I encounter a needy person and I respond by being impatient or judgmental, I'm not prone to approach God in humility. But I can think of times when I've shown mercy and I'm humbled to the core. When I enter into others' distress, it makes me realize how much I need God's mercy.

Some of you excel at showing mercy. One of the things I love about being a pastor is that people tell me their experiences/stories. I routinely hear reports of people spending long hours talking and praying with people who are going through traumatic circumstances. I have talked to many people who have been blown away by the way people in this congregation have entered into their distress and walked with them. It has meant the world to them. It's costly. It costs you lots of time and energy. Sometimes housework or personal projects get put on hold. But it's worth it because Jesus pronounces you blessed. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

If you're not a particularly merciful person, Jesus says that the part is yours if you want it. If you are apprenticed to Jesus, He will teach you how to show mercy. He will probably start by opening your eyes to the mercy you've received. And then mercy can flow to others.

Consider the blessing Jesus pronounces in verse 8:

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

In the Scriptures, the heart is the internal command and control center of the person. We live from our hearts. That's why Proverbs 4:23 tells us, "Watch over your heart with all diligence,

for from it flow the springs of life.” For example, Jesus said in Matthew 12:34 that “the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.” People with anger in their hearts say angry things in angry ways; people with generosity in their hearts say gracious things in gracious ways, etc. That’s only one example. Our words, our actions, our motives, and our affections all flow from our hearts.

Here Jesus pronounces blessing upon those who are “pure in heart.” This category of person would have been available to Jesus from OT texts such as Psalm 24:3-5:

3 Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?
And who may stand in His holy place?
4 He who has clean hands and a *pure heart*,
Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood,
And has not sworn deceitfully.

Here the pure in heart is someone whose heart is single-mindedly oriented toward God. He doesn’t lift up his soul to what is false *and* to God. He is oriented only toward God. Jesus seems to be using this expression the same way. The pure in heart are those who live out Deuteronomy 6:5 – they love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and might.

When you hear this beatitude, you may be discouraged because you know your own heart. I doubt anybody here today would come up front and say, “I am completely pure in heart. My heart is completely oriented toward God and nothing else.” Depending on your temperament, you might think, “I could never be completely pure in heart, so why try?”

In this connection it’s important to understand how Jesus taught. Jesus taught in absolutes in order to give us a vision for our lives. He didn’t teach in absolutes in order to imply that you’re either perfect or your worthless. He taught in absolutes to draw us closer to the heart of God – who is absolutely perfect in all of His attributes. Jesus would say things like, “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Jesus was painfully aware that His disciples weren’t perfect and wouldn’t be perfect until heaven. But He wasn’t going to say, “Your Father in heaven is perfect, so do the best you can.”

And here Jesus wasn’t going to say, “The purer in heart you are, the more blessed you’ll be.” Ultimately, I think that’s true, but His teaching method was to say, “Blessed are the pure in heart.” I’m belaboring the point because I think most of us have written off this beatitude as an unattainable standard and therefore irrelevant. But I think Jesus is genuinely pronouncing a blessing that He wants us as His disciples to receive and experience.

Much of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount (SoM) explains how to pursue purity of heart. It will involve dealing with all sorts of pollutants: anger, lust, grudges, dishonesty, revenge, hatred, spiritual pride, unforgiveness, materialism, anxiety, judgmentalism, etc. If your heart is a field, these are noxious weeds that can take over and choke everything else out. These are the impurities that we all battle. Even if you don’t think you’re particularly pure in heart right now, keep this blessing tucked away somewhere. Jesus is inviting you to audition for this part; actually He’s saying that you can have it if you’re His disciple. If you are apprenticed to Jesus, He will progressively teach you to become more pure in heart.

What specifically is the blessing of being pure in heart? “For they shall see God.” This is a striking thing to say because the refrain throughout the OT is that “No one can see God and live” (Exodus 34:20, Isaiah 6:5, see also 1 Timothy 6:16) – nobody could survive the experience of looking directly at the white-hot holiness of God. But here Jesus says that the pure in heart will “see God.” I know Jesus isn’t saying that we’ll see God with our physical eyes, but it’s still a striking thing to say. He is saying that God will give the pure in heart the thing that they want the most – a glimpse of Himself. People who see God are never the same. Oh God, make us a people who are pure in heart that we might see You!

In the seventh beatitude in verse 9 Jesus speaks of the blessing of the family resemblance of peacemakers.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

The peacemaker is the person who enters into a situation that has the potential for division and disunity asking the question, “What can I do that might bring about peace?” The peacemaker is passionate about lessening tensions and pursuing unity. The peacemaker follows Paul’s advice in Romans 12 when he says, “As far as it depends upon you, be at peace with all people.” The peacemaker seeks to live out Paul’s exhortation in Ephesians 4 when he wrote, “Be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Some people, quite honestly, could care less about peace/unity. Some people aren’t really interested in the well-being of the larger body of Christ. The only questions they ask are, “Am I right?” and “What do I want?” and “What do I think is best for me and mine?” They don’t care about questions like, “What would help bring peace and preserve unity?” They tend to preface their comments with, “Don’t take this personally. . .” and they tend to follow their comments with statements like, “I’m sorry if that offends you, but that’s just what I think.” If people are upset with them for what they’ve said or done, that’s *their* problem.

Other people care about peace/unity, but they just don’t have the will to get involved to help bring it about. Maybe conflict (or the potential for conflict) is more than they can bear. They really want peace, but they aren’t actually peacemakers.

Peacemakers are those who actually enter in and do the difficult, risky work of cultivating unity. Peacemakers understand that the kingdom of God is moving toward reconciliation. They look beyond the limited concerns of their own preferences and they look beyond the pettiness of “being right” and they ask questions like, “What is God doing here?” and “What role does God want me to play?” In a healthy church the pastors aren’t the only ones who are peacemakers; the elders aren’t the only ones who are peacemakers. Rather, there is a broad commitment to peacemaking in a healthy church.

Some of you are amazing peacemakers. You run *toward* situations that everybody else runs away *from*. If you hear about a conflict that is causing strife within the church, you pray and seek God and you work to bring healing to relationships.

The blessing Jesus pronounces on peacemakers is that “they shall be called sons of God.” In Jesus’ day, to be called a “son” of someone was to have that person’s character. You may remember that James and John were called “sons of thunder” – presumably because they

rumbled a lot. If you are called a “son of God” you share the character of God; you exhibit the family resemblance with your Father in heaven. To the peacemakers in our midst, on behalf of Jesus, I say, “You are blessed, we see the family resemblance in you.” Your presence in this church is the presence of God Himself. Through you we see the heart of God.

The last beatitude addresses those who suffer because of their allegiance to Jesus.

10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The basic meaning of the term translated “persecute” is to pursue or run after something. If you are persecuted, others are pursuing you or coming toward you with hostility. Persecution could be verbal abuse or martyrdom. It has been estimated that more Christians were killed because of their loyalty to Christ in the 20th century than in the previous 19 centuries combined. Here in the US, persecution normally involves being mocked or made fun of and being excluded from friendships.

Notice that Jesus pronounces blessing on those who suffer “for the sake of righteousness” – because they are living in a way that conforms to the will of God. There’s no blessing in being obnoxious or overbearing in the name of Christ. But if you are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed because “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The first and last beatitude include this blessing. Such bookends (called *inclusio*) indicates that everything in between is about the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus for the first time speaks directly to His apprentices when He says:

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

When I was a sophomore in college I took a composition class with a good friend of mine who was also a follower of Christ. Our professor happened to be an atheist. He liked to ask us in front of the class, “How are my two little religious boys today?” I forget exactly what the assignment was, but I took the opportunity to explain why Christianity was true. I broke out some C.S. Lewis quotes and some Scripture. I thought it was great. When I went into his office for his evaluation, he threw my paper down on his desk and said, “You don’t really believe this @\$% do you?” I have no idea what I said; I just remember being shocked that he would be so hostile and direct in his mocking of Jesus Christ.

Some of you have had similar experiences. Some of you have become disciples of Jesus and your family and/or friends think you’ve “gone off the deep end.” They think you’ve become unbalanced and/or irresponsible. They feel judged simply because you won’t participate in things you used to do together. They insult you and say all sorts of evil against you because of your allegiance to Jesus.

Sometimes we experience this type of opposition or trouble and think, “What am I doing wrong? Why does God let this happen?” Jesus puts it all into perspective by saying, that when these things happen to you, you’re in good company: they’re doing to you what they did to “the

prophets” before you. Don’t despair. “Rejoice and be glad” – find satisfaction that you are part of a select fellowship of those who have suffered for righteousness: from the prophets to Jesus Himself to countless disciples ever since.

Response. Again this week during our response time, respond as God leads. Perhaps you never realized that Jesus wants you to receive the blessings He pronounced. Perhaps while we’ve been going through this passage you remembered times when you’ve been merciful, pure in heart, or a peacemaker. You may even remember times when you’ve been persecuted. If so, don’t be afraid to receive the blessings Jesus pronounces.

Or perhaps your soul has been stirred by some deficiency you’ve seen in your own life. Maybe when you hear the statement, “Blessed are the pure in heart,” you are immediately convicted by some impurity in your life. Don’t ignore that conviction. The Holy Spirit doesn’t convict you to condemn you, but to draw you closer to the heart of God. He wants you to experience cleansing – deep, abiding cleansing so that you can be more pure in heart than you ever imagined. Jesus says that in the kingdom of God, you can be pure in heart. The part is yours if you want it.