

## The Blessed Life--Part 3, Matthew 5:

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Matthew 5:3-12. Jesus said,

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 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.”*

In 15 years of pastoral work, I’ve heard and preached many sermons--hundreds, thousands. It struck me this week that I’ve likely preached more sermons than Jesus did; His earthly ministry was much shorter than mine. Be that as it may, in my years of listening and preaching, I have never heard, nor preached, anything that rivals Jesus’ *Sermon*--it is the most brilliant sermon ever preached.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard points out that Jesus’ *Sermon* deals with same two fundamental questions that every

major philosopher--before and after Jesus--have dealt with. Namely, (1) *which life is the good life?*; and (2) *who is the truly good person?*<sup>1</sup>

Many of you here today have already discovered that the “*good life*” is none other than God’s life. The 8 Beatitudes I’ve just read speak of the “*good life*,” the life that God approves of, a life in sync with God’s life. The rest of Jesus’ *Sermon* answers the the 2nd question. Since God’s life constitutes what is *good*, the one who is good is the one who’s thoughts, words, and deeds are being conformed to God’s.

This morning I’d like to wrap up our focus on the Beatitudes by looking at the final two: blessed are the *peacemakers* and the *persecuted*.

1. “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*”

The word *peacemaker* is what has come to be known in the English language as a “complementary” word. A complementary word is the synthesis of two distinct words--words that can stand on their own, but when brought together, define and inform one another. *Peace-Maker* is such a word. We cannot know what to “make” until we understand the nature of “peace,” but neither can we expect “peace” to appear out of thin air--Jesus seems to indicate that “peace” isn’t something that just *happens*, it’s something that someone needs to “make”.

Let’s begin with a definition of “peace.” The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*--it’s one of my all-time-favourite biblical words. *Shalom* is

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life In God*, 97-98.

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an expansive word that can mean: wholeness, fullness, abundance, well-being, health, and vitality. When the Bible speaks about *shalom*, it rarely refers to a private, interior, state of calm. When the Bible speaks about *shalom*, it has in mind wholeness in every direction--relationally, economically, politically, and yes, even spiritually. Biblically, *shalom* is the state of being where one is in harmony/sync with God, self, others, and creation.

**illus:** I can't say that I've ever really watched a beauty pageant before, but I have heard people make fun of pageants. Specifically, I've heard people make fun of the responses given by contestants during the question and answer period.

**Q:** *"If you were to be crowned Miss Universe...what is the one thing you would like to achieve?"* The classic, but often maligned response is: *"world peace"*. I actually think it's quite a good answer--maybe it's a little beyond the influence of Miss Universe, but it's a good answer nonetheless. Who could be against peace? As it turns out, plenty of people.

Did you know that an estimated \$1.7 trillion dollars were spent, world-wide, on military expenditure in 2012? \$1.7 trillion dollars. War is a big-time business and so is economic instability. Instability for some countries means huge business opportunities for other countries. If global peace were to be established tomorrow, not everyone would be happy about it.

At a more personal level, the prospect of peace is equally troubling because we have to help make it. Think about that family member you've been estranged from--the one who hurt you, the one you've hurt--are you, or they, ready to let go of bitterness or judgement? Are

you ready to forgive? Are you ready to ask for forgiveness? Are you prepared to bless the person that has wronged you? *"Maybe just a little longer,"* we tell ourselves, *"maybe I'm not quite ready to make peace."*

As it turns out, the desire for a widespread, all-encompassing, peace is something that both beauty pageant contestants and God hold in common. God has *shalom* in mind for us, for our families, our city, our country, and for the world.

**illus:** I want to tell you a peace-making story, one that I was able to watch unfold over a two-year-period. For a number of years, I've been a part of a guys small group from the church; twice a month we meet to build friendship, encourage one another, pray for one another, and study the Bible together. This has been a life-giving spiritual rhythm in my life.

A few years ago, one of the guys in our group shared about a rift between his dad and his uncle--for the sake of his privacy, I'll refer to my friend as "Craig". Craig's father and uncle had been really close, but they had a disagreement, they stopped talking to one another, bitterness set in, and 20 years went by in the blink of an eye. Unfortunately, this is a story that many of us could tell--a friendship that has been fractured, or a family member that has become estranged.

Over a two year period, we prayed that Jesus would reconcile these two brothers, that Jesus would make peace; we also prayed that the Holy Spirit would give Craig wisdom as he entered into Jesus' peace-making work.

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The peace-maker, notes Dallas Willard, is “always in the middle,”<sup>2</sup> and the middle is not always the safest place to be. Picture a referee in the middle of a hockey fight. Picture a police officer in the middle of a domestic dispute. Picture Dave Sattler breaking up a fist fight in the Lynn Valley Petro Canada station--it’s a true story, you’ll have to ask him about it sometime.

Craig found himself in the middle during that two year period. He talked with his dad, he talked with his uncle, he tried to organize extended family events, but inevitably, one of the brothers wouldn’t come. Craig persevered in his peace-making, we persevered in praying, and one day God gave him an inspired idea.

Craig’s father and uncle had a sister down in California, she had end-stage M.S.; she was dying. The inspired idea was to bring everyone together for a family portrait--twenty years earlier, before the falling out, a family picture had been taken. Since that time, people had grown up, gotten married, and had kids of their own--it was time for an updated picture and with Craig’s aunt dying, there was no time like the present.

Craig pitched the idea and everyone agreed, everyone came together, and everyone talked. The family portrait marked the beginning of the end for the 20 year feud; the two brothers broke their silence, and as of today, the two are enjoying shalom: relational health, wholeness, abundance, and well-being.

Two weeks ago I encouraged you to think about the 8 beatitudes as kingdom-character-qualities. Peace-making is a kingdom-character-quality because peace is an essential quality of God’s kingdom.

In a few minutes I’m going to talk about the 8th beatitude, but first, let’s consider together what peace-making looks like.

- **First, it begins by experiencing peace with God.**

Peace-makers don’t sit on the sidelines until things settle down and then swoop in to declare peace--they enter the fray with their steel-toed boots double-knotted and their sleeves rolled up. In a far greater way than Craig, Jesus is One who stands in the middle as the ultimate Peace-Maker. Jesus stood between God and humanity--He hung in the middle, suspended on a cross between heaven and earth.

In order for us to be reconciled to God, our sin and rebellion needed to be dealt with, paid for: Jesus left the splendour of heaven, took on our flesh and blood, in order to bear the full weight of punishment for us. Listen to the words of Romans 5:1-2, “*Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us...Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God’s glory.*”

There is a reason you were born, a God-given reason--you were born to be loved by God and to love Him in return. Jesus has made peace with God on our behalf; we need only receive this peace as a gift. Do

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<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life In Christ*, 118.

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you know peace with God? Is His peace the foundation of your life? Would you like it to be? Receive His forgiveness, invite Him to lead your life.

One doesn't have to be a Christian to engage in peace-making, but, ultimate peace begins when we experience peace with God. *Peace with God leads to peace within.* Experiencing God's love and forgiveness then empowers us to extend love and forgiveness to those who stand at odds with God and others. Peace-making is not a natural human quality, it is born of God, empowered by God, the work of God in us and in our world.

- **Second, peace-making is intentional, costly work.**

Psalm 34:14 says, "*Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*" The word "seek" means "a striving after." The word "pursue" is a related, but more intense word. In the Hebrew language it has the connotation of pursuing someone, or "hunting" something--it's an aggressive word: to run after, to hunt, to chase something down.

Jesus went to great extremes to seek peace, to pursue it, to make it--peace doesn't just "happen," it is elusive by nature. And God's people are invited enter into His peace-making work.

Mother Theresa is quoted as saying, "When I feed the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor they call me a communist?" Jesus didn't bless those the peace-lovers or the peace-keepers, He blessed the peace-makers. The peace-maker isn't trying

to keep everyone happy, they do the hard work of pointing out where peace does not exist and then advocate for the attitudes, actions, and relationships that will allow peace to reign. Peace-making is intentional. *And it can be costly.*

We might expect Jesus to say, "*Blessed are the peacemakers for they will know peace,*" but He says no such thing. The peacemaker stands in the middle, and at times, they do not experience the very thing they seek for others; this was the case for Jesus. The prophet Isaiah writes, "*But he was pierced for our rebellion, he was crushed for our sins; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*"<sup>3</sup>

- **Third, peace comes in small steps.**

Peace-making will require patience and perseverance; we need to set our expectations from the beginning so that we can commit to a process that will lead others into peace. Think about how patient God is with us, how He perseveres with us until we are willing to allow Him to change our desires, our attitudes, our plans. Those who seek peace in a hurry rarely find it for themselves, or, lead others into it.

Jesus blesses the peace-makers, saying of them, "*for they shall be called children of God.*" Is this not the ultimate blessing? The peace-maker is blessed because they are living in sync with their Father in heaven--they share in their Father's character, in His desires, and in His patient, persevering, peace-making work.

In the time remaining, let's look at the final beatitude.

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 53:5.

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2. *“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.”*

This is a tough one--there's no way around it--Jesus seems to bless what most of us want to avoid: persecution. So let's take a closer look--*who*, and *what* exactly, does Jesus bless?

First, let's look at the *who*. Jesus isn't blessing the rude, the proud, the dogmatic, or the obnoxious--these behaviours may lead to persecution but Jesus doesn't call them blessed. Jesus blesses those who are persecuted because of righteousness, in other words, those who experience difficulty because their lives are in sync with God's life.

Last week Pastor Keith talked about hungering and thirsting for righteousness--Jesus uses the same word here. The *“righteousness”* that Jesus speaks of has to do with living in *“right”* relationship with God, in sync with His life, His character, desires, and actions. Even when a person lives this way implicitly, the status quo is disturbed. Even when we aren't trying to make waves, to live in, and for, the Kingdom of God is to make a frontal assault on the culture around us.

When we follow Jesus, when we embrace His way, every other way, every false way, is exposed. We cannot say “no” to chasing after self, money, power, or sex, and still fit in the mainstream of our culture.

When we live for Jesus, we will experience His Kingdom and our Culture in conflict--persecution is frequently the result.

**illus:** a number of years ago I went to Cairo to visit some International Workers who were stationed there, and over that week I got to know a local, Christian, cab driver. Egypt is one of the few countries in the Gulf region where it's not illegal to be a Christian. But in Cairo, your job status is directly tied to your religion--if “Christian” has been stamped in your passport, your job opportunities are severely limited.

As I talked with my new friend, I noticed that he had a small cross tattooed on his hand, between his thumb and his forefinger; at one point I asked him about the significance. He told me that many Christians had a small cross tattooed on the underside of their wrist--it's a voluntary identity marker. Because this practice is so widely known, many Muslim Egyptians will shake a person's hand and then turn over the wrist to see if they are Christian. With a big smile on his face my friend said, *“When they shake my hand they don't have to wonder who I am following--I follow Jesus.”* What faith! What courage!

Less than a month ago, 85 people died when two suicide bombers rushed the Anglican All Saints Church in Peshawar, Pakistan. But as horrific as this news is, it is not an isolated incidence. According to the International Society for Human Rights, a secular organization based in Germany, 80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed at Christians--this makes Christians the most persecuted religious group on the planet by far.

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According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, an average of 100,000 Christians have been killed each year, for the past 10 years, because of their allegiance to Jesus. That amounts to 11 Christians being killed every hour, seven days a week, 365 days a year. India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Nigeria, Iran, and North Korea are just a few of the countries where these atrocities are taking place.

When we talk in the West about “religious persecution,” pundits are quick to point to the Crusades or the Inquisition, and these are truly dark stains on Christian history. But in the present, power has dramatically shifted--Christians are not the ones in power, oppressing other peoples--Christians are the ones who are fleeing oppressors, in an attempt to save their own lives and the world hardly notices.

And it is to situations like these, as well as to our own, that we must apply Jesus’ words: “*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”

We’ve looked at the *who*--Jesus blesses those who are persecuted because of righteousness--now let’s take a look at the *what*. What exactly does Jesus bless? Does He bless persecution? Does Jesus bless insults, false accusation, oppression, violence, and injustice? No, Jesus doesn’t bless oppression, He blesses those who faithfully follow Him in the face of oppression.

The persecuted could choose another path, the path of least resistance, but they would rather follow Jesus and suffer, then follow someone else and “prosper.” Those who are persecuted because of righteousness bear the wounds of their King, Jesus, and the kingdom is their reward.

At present, in Vancouver, it is highly unlikely that we will be thrown in jail, beaten, or killed because we follow Jesus, but it is very likely that at some point we will face persecution. We may be mocked, ridiculed, or ignored. Some lucrative jobs have shady ethical practices--we may find that following Jesus limits our job opportunities. If we follow Jesus we may be marginalized, ostracized, or we may be labelled “intolerant”--which is, ironically, shockingly intolerant.

**illus:** the friend I mentioned earlier, Craig, told me a story about one of his first encounters with a professor at UBC. Craig was in a class with some 300 other students, and after the class he went up to introduce himself to the professor. The professor asked him a little about himself and one of the things Craig mentioned was that he was a follower of Jesus.

In the very next class, Craig’s professor went on a mocking rant about Christians being religious fanatics. Then the professor paused and asked, “*do we have any religious fanatics in our class today?*” As you can imagine, the room was silent. But Craig broke the silence when he put up his hand and said, “*I don’t consider myself a fanatic, but I am a Christian.*” The professor laughed and proceeded with his lecture.

Four years later, when Craig graduated, he still had people who would come up to him and ask, “*why on earth did you raise your hand?*” At 18, Craig knew something that all of us must learn along the way: *we don’t follow Jesus in a closet, we follow Him in a fishbowl--the world is watching.* The one who is blessed is the one who rather follow Jesus and face persecution than play it safe and miss out on kingdom living.

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The Bible gives many reasons why a Christian can rejoice in the midst of persecution--because it purifies our faith<sup>4</sup>, because we are counted worthy of bearing the wounds of Jesus<sup>5</sup>--but here in Matthew's Gospel, only one reason is given: *because great is their reward in heaven.*

Two weeks ago I had you read the following words out loud: "*Joy is not pleasure, a mere sensation, but a pervasive and constant sense of well-being.*" I then asked the question, "what in the world could provide pervasive and constant well-being for the entire human race and all of creation?"<sup>6</sup> Can alcohol? How about money, respect, education, achievement, or applause? None of these will do the trick--only God can do this.

When the Bible talks about about rejoicing, it is very specific. It doesn't say, "be joyful," what it says is "rejoice in the Lord always."<sup>7</sup> The reason being that God alone can provide this pervasive, constant well being for the human race and all of creation. Nehemiah writes, "the joy of the Lord is your strength;" in Jesus we find all-powerful strength, and His strength leads us to joy--to a pervasive and constant sense of well-being.

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 1:6-9.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 5:40-42; 1 Peter 4:16.

<sup>6</sup> John Ortberg, *The Cycle Of Grace*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 4:4.

<sup>8</sup> John 15:18-20.

You might say, "*But Mark, how can I have a pervasive and constant sense of well being when all is not well? Isn't the persecution you've described a clear sign of things not being well?*" My dear people, I know some of you are suffering for righteousness sake--your commitment to Jesus has cost you influence, respect, a job or a relationship. I know this is painful for you, Jesus knows it is painful because He bears your pain with you.

Jesus suffered for righteousness, so will we as we follow in His footsteps--we too will be misunderstood and mistreated.<sup>8</sup> Jesus doesn't speak a word of false hope, instead, He speaks of the hope that is coming. "*Rejoice,*" Jesus says, "*rejoice and be glad, because your reward is certain, and it is coming.*"

Listen to these words from 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, "*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*"

## Pray