

## *What Does the Lord Expect? Part Two*

Isaiah 58: 1-9a      Matthew 5: 1-12

Yes, I'm continuing from where I left off last week. I only managed to cover the first three Beatitudes and there are a bunch more.

We were considering what God expects from God's people. Given our natural tendency to make things fit our worldview, we have a habit of distorting and indeed corrupting the God-view that we should be recognizing in scripture.

Buying things online instead of in-person can have its drawbacks. There is the story of a couple who wanted to get a really nice dresser for their bedroom. Most everything they saw was far outside their budget. They decided to try eBay, the online auction and shopping site. They found a dresser for several hundred dollars that was exactly what they wanted, half the price of what they had seen in-person or anywhere else. They bid for it and they won.

Within a week, the UPS man was at their door with a box. It wasn't a big box; he was holding it in his hands. Not recalling having ordered anything besides the dresser, they had no idea what *this* parcel was. Imagine their surprise when they opened the box and discovered that carefully packed and wrapped within the box was their dresser. What the couple had failed to notice in their swooning for the bargain dresser of their dreams was the dimensions of the dresser. This dresser was an exquisitely handcrafted, fully functional, legitimately priced piece of doll house furniture.

God has big things for us to obtain by pursuing the path toward the kingdom of God, however we downsize the blessing to something that we can handle. By diminishing the gift, we diminish the blessing to the point of it becoming tragically comical.

Echoing last week's complaint that God voiced through his prophet Micah, two centuries later, the prophet Isaiah – this being the late voice from the Isaiah compilation, written around 520 BCE – shares God's complaint about what God's people are doing. In similar fashion to Micah, the complaint concerns empty devotions, the religious activity of God's people that makes great pretensions of caring about God's will, about seeking God's ways, being obedient in fasting, prayer, and in professing their humility before God.

God calls them out because their devotion to God doesn't seem to go much further than ritual action – “thoughts and prayers”? – like going to church regularly on Sunday, doing personal prayer and bible reading, and of course, putting money in the collection plate. Is this what God wants? Is this the faithful response that God expects from God's people? God's people are probably quite satisfied with what they're doing. What more could God want?

God gives them a whole wish-list of things: *Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

Hmm. That sounds like a social action agenda, not doing worship and devotions. That agenda is much bigger than the faithful seem ready to undertake. It is a whole lot easier to do the religious thing; church lasts about an hour, about the size of dollhouse furniture compared to what God wants.

If God's people can get their act together and do what God expects, there is a real promise in it for them. Do this, Isaiah says, and *your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.*

I read one commentator's remark that, upon close examination, Jesus really didn't have much **original** teaching; everything that he teaches can be found clearly and often repeatedly spelled out in the Hebrew scriptures and its teachings. Jesus simply put it all together in cohesive fashion with his teaching about the Kingdom of God. So, we shouldn't be surprised to find echoes of his teachings in the Torah and in the writings of the prophets. But his compilation into a vision of the Kingdom of God is exceptional. It is also radical and challenging, particularly when you have had a tradition that has provided dollhouse furniture rather than the big, whole, full-sized promise and expectation of God. That is what Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount which begins with a string of expressions of blessings called the Beatitudes.

Let me do a quick review of last week's look at the first three Beatitudes. Let me also mention that the Beatitudes have a beginning and ending, identified by the highest reward – the first and last Beatitude says, *for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven*. Verse 12 also begins as a blessing, but it simply expands on the last Beatitude as if adding emphasis to it.

Let me also highlight Matthew's use of conditional phrases versus the simpler version that we find in Luke 6's Sermon on the Plain.

In the first Beatitude in the Sermon on the Plain, Luke has simply: *Blessed are the poor*, clearly meaning **materially** poor. Matthew's first Beatitude has that added conditional clause: *Blessed are the poor **in spirit**, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven*. "Poor in spirit" does not refer to being sad, depressed, or spiritually empty. It makes no sense that the highest reward comes to someone in that state. Luke meant materially poor; it's unlikely that Matthew would spiritualize away the material nature of the poor of the original sense. This spiritualized notion is dollhouse furniture.

I interpret the phrase to indicate those who have made themselves poor by their spiritual commitment. They weren't poor but **made** themselves poor in order to

minister to the poor and stand with the poor. Think Francis of Assisi who was born to wealthy, leading family in Assisi who cast it all aside, making himself poor in a spiritual commitment in order to minister to the poor and stand with the poor. This is the real deal, and it fits with the highest reward. There is more to support this in a minute.

The second Beatitude also seems to reflect on sadness when taken at face value (and the deceiving nature of the interpretation rendered here), like mourning a death or loss – *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*. Not so, you who covet miniature-sized dollhouse furniture. The expressions for “mourning” and “comfort” are not part of some grief counseling session. They refer to sinfulness (see Isaiah 61: 2, 3 and Isaiah 40: 1), and that is the full-sized item. There is mourning over one’s sinfulness that cannot be overcome or avoided. In the context of the Kingdom of God, there is mourning that one cannot be fully and completely faithful to God and his Kingdom because one is always, unavoidably caught in the web of worldly powers. That is why it is the second Beatitude; it has direct bearing on where one stands in regard to the Kingdom, even for those who made the spiritual commitment to follow the Kingdom way of life. That there is “mourning” recognizes and confesses being inextricably caught in a failure to be fully faithful to God and God’s way. For this recognition, the one who mourns will be comforted.

The third Beatitude is another one that suffers from a weak interpretation: *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*. The “meek” are the timid, shy, or humble; that’s the dollhouse version. The “meek” are referred to in Hebrew as the *anawim*, the materially poor, destitute, weak, and vulnerable. Where the first Beatitude gave the highest reward to those becoming poor by spiritual commitment, here Matthew focuses on those who are materially poor and have made **no** spiritual commitment in becoming poor. And what is the reward: *for they shall inherit the earth*.

The fourth Beatitude helps us in understanding Matthew’s use of conditional clauses. It says: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*. Being hungry and thirsty are not the cause of blessing. Hunger and thirst **for righteousness** is a cause of blessing. Hunger and thirst for righteousness expresses the urgent desire to pursue the high righteousness of the Kingdom, a righteousness that will soon be revealed in vs. 20 when Jesus teaches: *For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven*.

The fifth Beatitude is nice and simple: *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*. It provides that mirror image that we also hear in the Lord’s Prayer, that as we have been graciously forgiven, so we should be graciously forgiving.

The sixth Beatitude is also blessedly simple: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*. The pure in heart are not duplicitous or hypocritical, who embrace the high and radical standards of God’s will for God’s people. They are not content with merely outward appearances of pious devotion, but sincerely – purely – seek the Kingdom alone and to see God’s will fulfilled.

The seventh Beatitude is also simple: *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.* Jesus will highlight this teaching a bit further in the Sermon on the Mount as he talks about renouncing violence while also resisting the control of the worldly powers. That is a whole other sermon.

We come to the eighth and last Beatitude: *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* Again, Matthew's conditional clause makes it clear that simply being persecuted isn't a blessing. One could be persecuted or feel persecuted for most any reason. There is a clear Kingdom-based reason for this persecution – for the sake of righteousness. Again, we have that word which so deeply characterizes the will of God and the Kingdom of God, righteousness. Here, to close out the Beatitudes, is the highest reward also. The one who has so clearly embraced faithful allegiance to the Kingdom that it draws persecution from whatever source among worldly powers, that one who is persecuted also deserves the highest reward – the Kingdom of God.

Matthew's community was likely undergoing some form of persecution because he extends the Beatitudes even further with vs. 12: *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 extended word of assurance simply expands what was said in the last Beatitude – perhaps a bit of editorializing by the writer – and recognizing the history of God's efforts to awaken God's people to God's will. It never goes very well. There is always fierce resistance from the powers of the world.

Returning to our original question – what does God expect? – we can affirm that God expects a **lot** more than we may have imagined. That is because God wants more from his creation than one particular group of people feeling good about themselves, or being encouraged when things don't go their way, and being good, polite, thoughtful citizens in their daily lives. That isn't why Jesus was crucified, or why the early church grew at a stunning rate.

Rather than an ancient receptacle for wise teachings, the gospel accounts of Jesus reflect God's will to transform individual lives and to transform human society so that the full promise and blessing of God for *all people* would be realized. It is a vision of poverty, sinfulness and righteousness, mercy, purity, peacemaking, and the endurance of persecution because it all so radical and so sure to arouse the concerted, even violent resistance of the powers-that-be when it is fully embraced.

As hard as it is for us to imagine, so it was for people in Jesus' time. It is a lot easier when you have nothing to lose really. But for those of us who have much, it gets heard as a radical call to something we may never have expected.