

“Winning is a Beatitude”

Sermons from the Mound – sermon #1

Matthew 5:1-12

I don't know much about baseball, although I used to be a pretty good outfielder. But I know one thing: the most important player on the team is the pitcher. The pitcher, in most cases, is the true leader who sets the tone for the rest of the team. When the pitcher sets foot on the mound, everyone else is paying attention, or should be.

We are starting a new series today called “Sermons from the Mound.” I think Jesus would be a great pitcher. He definitely throws out some curveballs using his words. So we will spend the next five weeks examining what Jesus is pitching in In Matthew 5-7, a section commonly called the “Sermon on the Mount.” The main question is: Why should we do what Jesus tells us to?

I'll start with the pregame context. Jesus has been teaching in the Jewish synagogues, preaching good news, healing diseases, casting out demons, healing the paralyzed and those with seizures and extreme pain. The Bible says Jesus had sellout crowds. (Matt 4:25)

Matthew 5:1 is sort of a reverse national anthem. Jesus sees the crowds, and does three things: 1 – He goes up a mountain. 2 – He sits down. And 3 – He gathers his disciples around him. Everyone is ready for the first pitch.

This is a significant game. If I have learned anything in the last two weeks at seminary, it's this: when the teacher teaches, the students better listen. The author of the gospel is setting Jesus up to be a great teacher. Like Moses, Jesus climbs a mountain. Remember, the Ten Commandments were given on a

mountain. Jesus sits down, like a typical Jewish teacher. And notice this fact: Jesus’ disciples were the closest to him. Yes, the crowd is also listening – these words for everyone – but what Jesus is about to say is especially meant for his disciples. Do you call yourself a disciple of Jesus? Then listen up, because the Master is speaking.

Coaches like to say, “Winning is an attitude.” I think Jesus would say, “Winning is a Beatitude.” These Beatitudes are nine sayings that describe the life of a Christian in the kingdom of heaven. Each time Jesus says, “Blessed are...” he means, the spiritually prosperous, the happy, those who are to be admired. (AMP Bible) I am blessed to be married and have three children. Blessed, not lucky. Being blessed does not mean having a perfect life. I would say that I am blessed to be the pastor here, which has its ups and downs. Understand here, being blessed, according to Jesus, means you know what matters for eternity.

Let’s look at Jesus’ first pitch: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (5:3) On any sports team, you need the right spirit. Having no spirit is bad, but having a contrary or prideful spirit is worse. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. (Prov 3:34, 1 Peter 5:5, James 4:6).

The first thing Jesus says is those who don’t have it all together are the ones who are actually in the right place in God’s kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is not for the arrogant. There is no “I” in TEAM. There is no place for selfishness in Jesus. To be a disciple, we have to die to self. Disciples die with Jesus on the cross. We are buried with Jesus in the grave. And we are resurrected with Jesus on Easter. This is the first rule in discipleship: it’s not about you. So if you are poor in spirit, you are in the right place.

On to the second pitch: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (5:4) Jesus really likes the curveballs! I have done 34 funerals in the last four years. In this church, we know what it is like to mourn. So how can Jesus say we are blessed? Here’s how: we will be comforted. If you don’t grieve, you can’t experience comfort. If you are dead in your soul and have no reaction to death, pain, and loss, then you cannot be a disciple of Jesus. God created our hearts to feel something. Numbing the pain, or pretending it didn’t happen, is not healthy for anyone, whether or not you are a disciple. But if you mourn, you’re following Jesus. Christians believe God has the final word of comfort. Mourning is a part of discipleship.

Here’s comes the third pitch: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (5:5) This is similar to the first pitch about the “poor in spirit.” And this is totally counter-cultural. The world says, “Blessed are the proud, the mighty, and the powerful. The ones who have the loudest Twitter and Facebook feeds. The one with the most clicks.” Do know what they inherit? Trouble. But Jesus says the meek and the humble will inherit the earth. They will become the ones who rule in God’s kingdom. Again, this is totally opposite of the world’s understanding.

The pitch count says three strikes. How’s your batting average so far?

The fourth pitch is a slider: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (5:7) Do you hunger for what is right? Do you desire truth? Righteousness in God’s kingdom is not something we can achieve ourselves. It is only through the cross that we become right with God. How much do we hunger for that? I’m not talking about physical hunger. It’s

more intense. This is the hunger certain teams have for victory. Their strong desire for victory fuels them; it overcomes distractions and setbacks and petty differences between teammates. Do you desire Jesus more than anything else? Then Jesus promises you will be filled. He promises you will be filled to the brim with the Holy Spirit. (John 14) This is not a snack. It's not a power bar to get you to the seventh inning stretch. Jesus is talking about a hunger for a deep and satisfying meal of righteousness and joy that cannot be taken away. That's kingdom food. Disciples of Jesus are hungry and thirsty for righteousness.

I think the fifth pitch is a changeup: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” (5:8) This actually makes sense. It's like the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them to do you. Forgive others, and they will forgive you. Do you know what mercy is? It is removal of punishment that one deserves. When someone asks you to forgive them, and you do, you show mercy. We know it's too easy to desire revenge. We think, “You hurt me, so I want to hurt you.” This wisdom from Jesus is unnatural. You can only be merciful if you understand what great mercy God has shown us. If you understand what it cost God to forgive you, you will show others mercy. But if you never experience mercy yourself, it is next to impossible to show it to others.

We are halfway through the inning. The sixth pitch is: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Of all the beatitudes, this one is the hardest for me. Seriously, Jesus, I'm hit by the pitch, can't I just walk to first base? Do you know how much temptation we face every day? And most of it comes through our eyes. Is it even possible to be pure in heart? Jesus says yes. It takes time and accountability, but the reward is great: the pure in heart will see God.

Not many people in the Bible saw God. In the Old Testament, those who saw God can be counted on two hands. But Jesus said, children “see the face of my Father in heaven.” (see Matt 18:10) Childlike purity and innocence are the ultimate desire of God for our hearts. God wants us to see him without experiencing guilt, without hiding, like Adam and Eve. If we learn to confess, we can be pure in heart. If we guard our purity and our integrity, if we help each other to be pure, we can see God together, see his face, see his smile. That’s a good thing.

Time for the seventh inning stretch. Everybody stand up and sing, “Take me out to the ball game.” Just kidding! The seventh pitch is: “Blessed are the peace makers, for they will be called children of God.” (5:9) Being a peace broker is dangerous. It means stepping in between two warring parties, taking risks. Why should we do that? In order to bring others into the kingdom. To strive for peace, you have to seek to understand before you are understood. You have to understand the systems that contribute to war. You have to be in it for the long haul. How many years have they been fighting in the Middle East and other places? Peacemakers don’t give up. Peacemakers are the “children of God” who receive God’s inheritance. They are the ones who claim God’s family name. When we strive for peace, people will know us as children of our heavenly Father. That’s a great legacy.

There are two more to go, but they are really the same. The eighth pitch is: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (5:10) If you do all the previous seven beatitudes, odds are, the world will mock you, because God’s kingdom runs contrary to the world. That’s why this final promise from Jesus is so critical. He gives us hope. He gives

us reassurance. You are doing the right thing if you are humble, peace-loving, and righteousness-seeking. Notice the reward is the same as the first Beatitude: you will receive the kingdom of heaven. When you do all these things and experience persecution, that is a confirmation that you have entered the kingdom of heaven.

Let's read the last two verses together. “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.” (5:11-12) A mark of a true disciple of Jesus is, you will have trouble in this world. Mockery. Lies. And Jesus takes full credit for this. He says, “It's because of me.”

Know this: when we follow Jesus, we get a bullseye on our chest. The devil knows if he can discourage us, we might give up. So Jesus pours all of his encouragement into this last pitch. He says, “Rejoice and be glad.” That's counterintuitive. I don't rejoice when I'm getting picked on, do you? Jesus is saying, “Keep your eye on the prize. Life is short. The only things that truly matter are those that matter in eternity.”

Where is your focus? Are you focused on heaven? Or are you seeking earthly rewards? Discipleship is no easy path. No team won the World Series by just showing up. It takes hard work, but following Jesus is worth it. If we obey Jesus by doing these things now, we will be rewarded. Not just in heaven. We will see our current relationships improve, and we will find satisfaction in life.

Batter up, folks. Everyone is called to step up to the plate and live for Christ. This is not just a nice sermon. No one stood at the bottom of the

mountain and shook Jesus' hand and said, “Nice job, preacher.” This is way deeper than that. Jesus is showing us how to live for him.

So what you do? Will you live for Christ? Will you obey him? It is a choice that must be made.

Jesus shows us how to be a disciple. It's not about money, fame, success, or a dozen other things the world wants us to chase after. It's about living for Christ, being filled with the Holy Spirit, and making a real difference in this world.

I'm not a great ball player. But I recognize a great player-coach when I see one. A player-coach is an athlete who not only plays but also manages the team. Jesus didn't thrust this list of commands on us with practicing them himself. Jesus was poor in spirit, humble, and meek. He mourned. He hungered and thirsted for righteousness. He refused to sin. He showed mercy on the cross. His heart was the purest of the pure. He was the Prince of Peace. He was persecuted and crucified. And he overcame!

We can't be Jesus, but we can follow him. He provides the power, the spirit, to obey his commands. The question is, will we follow him?

Maybe you are in a place where you haven't fully trusted Christ. You've been in the batter box, but never stepped up to the plate. You've sat on the bench, waiting for the ninth inning, when the game is already over, hoping the coach won't call your name. But none of us were meant to be bench warmers. We are star players on Jesus' team.

This is your challenge this week: pick one Beatitude and practice it. Practice, practice, practice. Great players always practice the fundamentals. Pick peacemaking, or meekness, or purity, and practice it. Find someone to hold you

accountable. Make a decision. We can't expect to win if we never go out on the field and play. Remember, Jesus is our coach and he calls us out. It's time to play ball.

Memory Verse: Matthew 5:6

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.”

Reflection Questions:

- 1.) Which of the Beatitudes surprises you the most? Challenges you the most?
- 2.) What Beatitude seems to be most opposed to the world?
- 3.) Do you consider yourself a disciple of Jesus? Why or why not?
- 4.) What effect would practicing the Beatitudes have on your family? Your job? Your neighborhood? Your church?