

## **“Gone from Preachin’ to Meddlin’”**

### **Scripture**

**Matthew 7:15-29** *(The Message)*

<sup>15</sup>"Be wary of false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off some way or other. Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character. <sup>16</sup>Who preachers are is the main thing, not what they say. A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions or your pocketbook. These diseased trees with their bad apples are going to be chopped down and burned. <sup>17 18 19 20</sup>

<sup>21</sup>"Knowing the correct password - saying 'Master, Master,' for instance - isn't going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience - doing what my Father wills. <sup>22</sup>I can see it now - at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, 'Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.' <sup>23</sup>And do you know what I am going to say? 'You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don't impress me one bit. You're out of here.' <sup>24</sup>"These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. <sup>25</sup>Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit - but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock. <sup>26</sup>"But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. <sup>27</sup>When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards." <sup>28</sup>When Jesus concluded his address, the crowd burst into applause. They had never heard teaching like this. <sup>29</sup>It was apparent that he was living everything he was saying - quite a contrast to their religion teachers! This was the best teaching they had ever heard.

### **Scripture**

**Matthew 5:11-16** *(The Message)*

<sup>11</sup>"Not only that - count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. <sup>12</sup>You can be glad when that happens - give a cheer, even! - for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

<sup>13</sup>"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

<sup>14</sup>"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public

as a city on a hill. <sup>15</sup>If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. <sup>16</sup>Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

### **Scripture**

### **Matthew 7:15-29 (NRSV)**

<sup>15</sup>"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup>You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup>In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup>A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup>Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup>Thus you will know them by their fruits.

<sup>21</sup>"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup>On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' <sup>23</sup>Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.' <sup>24</sup>"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. <sup>25</sup>The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. <sup>26</sup>And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup>The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!" <sup>28</sup>Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, <sup>29</sup>for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

### **Scripture**

### **Matthew 5:11-16 (NRSV)**

<sup>11</sup>"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

<sup>13</sup>"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. <sup>14</sup>"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

As we reach our last of the Beatitudes today, I'd like to start by saying what I had hoped would happen in this series. But let me do so by telling you the observation of a friend of mine, who talks about having a two-volume recording of the mountain/bluegrass music of Ralph Stanley. The first volume is named *Saturday Night* and the second, *Sunday Morning*. As you no doubt can imagine, the two volumes contained quite different music. *Sunday Morning* was about "preachin', prayin' and singin'," while *Saturday Night*, of course, was about the "real stuff" of life, like working hard, raising children, having your heart broken, going out, taking care of Mama and Daddy, and generally, finding one's way down the highway of life. While enjoying the music, my friend quietly lamented that the two volumes were made quite so distinct.

In fact, the distinction between Sunday morning and Saturday night – or why not say, Monday afternoon for that matter – had my friend thinking about what connection we might draw between the two. After much wrestling, he suggested that what happens on Sunday morning should really be something that talks at depth of what we experience the rest of the week. Indeed, that's been my purpose in this series on the Beatitudes. I've wanted to talk about "blessing," but have it relate to what's going on in our lives and in the world in the other six days of the week. On Sunday mornings, I wanted to speak with a depth of how the Monday through Saturday world is essentially connected with the promise and spirit of God's benediction.

There were four things that I spoke to.

First, I spoke to ***the times*** in which we live: a postmodern era where change is the norm, and yet where the traditions of the past (instead of representing the status quo) have seemed to gain a new voice. For such reasons, an old text about blessings held a sense of wisdom fit for a fresh consideration.

Second, I spoke to ***the change*** that Jesus' beatitudes called us to. Counting our blessings isn't so much about numbering our wealth, our gates of security, or our insulation from others. Blessing as Jesus defines it asks where we have a need for God. It asks about the ways of God and the essential matters of life where mercy, righteousness, hope and peace rise to the top of our priority lists.

Third, I spoke to ***the exuberant generosity*** of God who anticipates these needs and longings from us. Going beyond just what is personal, I tried to speak to the global sense of this. God gives the beauty of the earth. God gives us hope even in what have suddenly become anxious times. God has equipped us with amazing gifts which are already being used and which give us resources for a future which is not ruined but is still full of promise.

Finally, I sought to speak of how we appropriate these blessings by the way we live our lives ***in daily practices***. As simple as having a cup of coffee with our loved one in the morning, the beatitudes can be lived out by practices that show hospitality, justice, patterns of reflection and contemplation, regular worship, appreciation of diversity and beauty, generosity, and finally, today, testimony.

In the times we live, we are called by our exuberantly generous God to changes of our practices of living, so that blessing might be our promise and in our present. Sound like Sunday morning words, don't they? There's a depth to them, to be sure, but the question remains, do they speak to the raucousness of Saturday night, or even of the workaday world of Monday afternoon. That's where you come in, I'm afraid.

I remember hosting a guest preacher when I was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Wolcott, New York. He was there because our daughter, Karen, had been born the weekend before and I was having a paternity leave of sorts. And we wanted him to baptize our little girl, as well. He was a minister member of the Geneva Presbytery and to tell you the truth, I don't even remember his name. What I do remember was that he was aware that all of this was a bit odd – not knowing us well, he was called off the pulpit supply list in our Presbytery to come to preach and baptize our child. He said something to this in his sermon. He was going beyond just giving a sermon in order to do something quite personal. He said that it was going from preachin' to meddlin'. Or in other words, he was crossing over from Sunday morning words, to being involved with what goes on with us for the rest of the week.

If you look at the Beatitudes, they do something of the same. For eight verses the pattern is "blessed are those . . . , for they shall be . . . ." But at the ninth beatitude we get a twist: "Blessed are you . . . ." It's not "blessed are they," impersonal, objective, words that can be left behind at church. It's "blessed are you," where the sermon goes from a word to everyone and therefore not necessarily to anyone, to a word that is personal, weekday, "real stuff." In fact, the beatitude would indeed fit with a Ralph Stanley Saturday Night country song: "Blessed are you when people revile and persecute you, say all kinds of wrong and accusatory things about you. Rejoice and be glad for so they persecuted the prophets who came before you!"

It's the word "prophet" that the key here. Jesus is telling us that our faith is something that should be spoken out. Yes, we are also to be salt and light, our deeds are supposed to be on display. And yes, we should beware of speaking words which are empty like the false prophets of our other Matthew 7 reading, and those who say, "Lord, Lord," and don't back up their words with acts of witness. Yet, the blessing is for us to speak – and to be persecuted. In other words, somehow, it's up to you to bring the Sunday morning worship words into the rest of the week where the real stuff of life is happening.

Tom Long has something for why we need to speak our faith, to give testimony, if you will, as a regular practice. Despite our wariness to bring Sunday words up during the week, he gives us this encouragement. "When two people love each other, they naturally speak to each other of their love. But as they whisper love's words to each other deep into the night, they are not simply expressing their love; they are *discovering* their love, even *creating* their love, its power, its prospects, its limits. Putting their love for each other into words gives it a content, a shape, a definition, a depth, and a future it did not have when it was just a formless emotion surging wildly in their hearts." And so it is with speaking of the blessing of God in our lives. We are called to tell it.

For just this reason, I'm glad in the first of our Sunday morning services, our weekly Call to Worship is a bit of a testimony. Instead of a printed responsive reading, the liturgist in the first service is asked to relate how the subject matter of the day is related to his or her life, and so to our lives, as a way to call us to worship God.

I didn't know that I was getting on the cutting edge of new ministry when I first suggested doing this some time ago. In her wonderful book for mainliners like us called, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass highlights how this is being used in various churches. I especially liked the story she told of the power of a testimony in her own, Church of the Epiphany, an Episcopal church just a few blocks away from the White House.

There she heard, Gregg Browne tell about how he came to a sense of call about being at their church. It seems that he came to visit the church early on a Sunday morning only to find a service already going. So he decided to wait for the next service. But the next service was not the next thing on the schedule. "Instead, someone came into the sanctuary from the side door and began calling off names from a list. [Although Gregg did not know, the list was a sign-up for homeless people who planned to attend breakfast that morning.] One by one, every person in the room, upon hearing their name called – left and headed to somewhere in the back of the church. Eventually I was alone in the sanctuary because my name was not on the special list and therefore, I had not been called. But looking back on that morning," he said in his testimony, "I realize that although my name wasn't read aloud I had nonetheless been called."

What he got called to was a ministry. He went on to be a regular volunteer for the Welcome Table breakfast, which became an "incredibly rewarding experience for me." And what happened when he shared this story was that he affirmed this ministry for this Episcopal church, which "to paraphrase a line from an old car commercial, 'Was not my parents' Episcopal church.'" Bass said: "By telling his story, he invited the congregation into his surprise—seeing themselves as a newcomer might, affirming their practice of doing justice, and welcoming participants into a deeper life of service....By remembering his own transformative moment in a faith story, he opened the way for others to experience the unexpected presence of God."

So, in first service, once a week, a worship leader gets up and tells some testimony of their own faith, or ministry, or blessing. Not that there is too much persecution occurring because of it, but it does make the Sunday morning words somehow more connected to Saturday night or Monday afternoon. And that's the key: how is it that being blessed as those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, merciful, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, pure in heart, a peacemaker, or persecuted gets spoken in your Monday through Saturday world? I hope that this series on Jesus' blessing has been spoken well enough to get you to ask such a question in your daily life. I encourage you to make your own testimony for how these old words can be new for you in our time of change, when, nevertheless, God is still the one who is exuberantly generous. Amen.