

REAL RICHES

by Steve Zeisler

There is an old African proverb that says it takes an entire village to raise a child. Our family has come to a time in our life when it seems important to say thank-you to the people of this church community. Leslie and I will see the second of our three children graduate from high school this month. He is eighteen now, eligible to serve in the military and vote as a citizen of this country, by many measures an adult. He was raised in this church community; and we are grateful to all who have been Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, Boys Brigade instructors, and outing directors; and for all of the other ways in which families and individuals have impacted both of our older children. Our youngest is fourteen, and in many ways he is the most needy of the three; and he too has been received with love by the people of this church. I can't imagine having raised our children without the church.

Yet, the world we live in is increasingly destructive to young people. And in recent months the Lord has been impressing on me that we in this church have a stewardship responsibility. We have been given a great deal---a family that we can rejoice with, truth that we have been taught, and encouragement that is available to us. Let's not forget that Jesus said, "And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required" (Luke 12:48). So let's discover how we can offer what the Lord has given us to others, especially to young people.

In the next six messages as we study Matthew 5 together, I would ask you to repeatedly think about what it is like to grow up in the world that we adults are offering to young people today; a world characterized by hopelessness, confusion and fear! And as we hear Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, I would ask you to ask the Lord for a sense of calling: What should we as individual members of this church do to get involved in caring about young people? What kind of responsibility do we have? And what should all of us collectively do to make a difference for young people today?

A lost world

I'm not going to spend a long time discussing what terrible shape the world is in. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to say in clear terms that the culture surrounding us in this state and in this nation is deteriorating at a tremendous rate. The tide of violence is rising. There are cries of freedom but no direction given. There are hollow slogans with no character behind them. Relationships are built on anger and frustration rather than on love. Families are at a loss to know how to relate to each other. Many have never experienced being part of a family.

Kathy Guisewite, a syndicated cartoonist, was the commencement speaker at the University of Michigan this year, an alumna of the class of '72 speaking to the class of '94. She said:

I graduated with a class committed to open love, open thinking, open doors, open everything. Twenty-two years later the people of my class are getting cash out of a machine and dinner out of a clown's mouth, and it isn't even possible to get a human being on the phone at the phone company. In Los Angeles the only chance I have of a meaningful encounter with a person is if I smash into one with my car.

More technological than ever, we are less able to relate. The litany goes on and on. So I challenge us to hear Jesus' words for the sake of young people as well as for ourselves.

A commencement address

We might imagine chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew to be a kind of commencement speech, if you will. Jesus is

raising the great themes of what we were made for; who God is; how we can be people of prayer and people of character; and how we can learn about money, relationships, marriage, and worship. He begins with a series of pronouncements as to where we will find blessing in life, the Beatitudes. In these he is aligning us properly so that we can hear the truth that will follow.

John Stott in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount says that the theme verse of it all is chapter 6, verse 8: "...Do not be like them...." What Jesus means by that is that we are not to be like anybody else; followers of Christ live counter to every culture. We are not to be like the Gentiles who pray by heaping up phrase after phrase but do not know what they mean. And we are not to be like the hypocritical Pharisees who broaden their phylacteries and pray on the street corner to call attention to themselves but do not know God. If we are followers of Christ, we are to be unique in all the world. And these chapters are a marvelous declaration of the ways in which we are to be unique.

Let me set the context for the Sermon on the Mount before we begin looking at it together. Matthew's gospel, different from the other three gospels, has a dark beginning. Many of the events of the opening four chapters take place at night; for example, the starlit travels of the wise men from the East, and the dreams of Joseph and others. There are lies and then slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem as Herod tries to extinguish the life of the Messiah when he realizes that he has been tricked by the magi. There is the direct encounter that Jesus has with Satan when he is tempted in the wilderness after his baptism. Matthew intends to remind us of how much effort the enemy used to try to snuff out the life of the Messiah so that this Light would never shine in the world.

But after this dark beginning we come finally to the public ministry of Jesus toward the end of chapter 4. Verse 17: "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' As Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men.'" Verse 24: "News about him spread all over Syria...." Verse 25: "Large crowds....followed him...."

Once Jesus begins his public ministry at age thirty, having survived all efforts to destroy him, two groups of people are in view. One group is made up of "called ones" or disciples, for example Simon and his brother Andrew. These are people who have been revolutionized by their contact with Jesus and have become his followers. That is, they will obey his command; he is their Lord, the One who is at the center of their life. Beyond the disciples is a circle of what Matthew calls the crowds or multitudes. These are people who have been touched and healed by him. They have been fascinated by his preaching. Their hearts have been stirred by the call to repent, and they wonder if perhaps that is an important word for them. But they are still uncommitted and needy. So one concern of Jesus' is the requirement that those who follow him become different, and another is the requirement that those who do not know of him hear of him in a setting where they can believe.

Inner revolution, outreach to the lost

Then finally in chapter 5 we come to one of the most often read, best known of all the texts in the Bible, the Sermon on the Mount. What Matthew records of what Jesus taught in this sermon is actually a condensation of teaching that may have taken place over a day or more. It was very much like what happens when we go off to a retreat center and spend some time in concentrated study. Let's begin with verses 1-6:

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:

"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."

When Jesus sees the crowds, he deliberately withdraws to a mountain top and calls his disciples together for this time of important instruction and challenge. The great teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is to revolutionize his followers, those who obey his command; but not apart from the context of the multitudes who don't know him yet. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 7 we read, "...The crowds were amazed at his teaching...." The Lord is training followers to serve him and then to act out his loving concern for the crowds of people who are still in the darkness. Both are important.

The same is true for us. We have an opportunity as a community of disciples, brothers and sisters who will hear his calling together, to be changed by what we hear---and then to go out to the crowds with something revolutionary to say. These truths alone are light. They change lives. The world we live in grows darker and darker and there is less hope, and less direction. Today's young people live with uncertainty about who they are, why they are here, and what they should attempt. They free-fall in a kind of vertigo with nothing under them and no place to stand. But the disciples of Jesus can gather and hear his voice, understand what matters to him, and then offer it to others. In exactly the same way that this first sermon was preached and then passed on, it can be preached and passed on again today.

The Beatitudes are a series of eight pronouncements that begin this sermon. Each of them has the form, Blessed are people of a certain condition, because they will eventually experience a certain result. We will look at the first four in this message.

The word blessed is *makarios* in Greek. It can have the unfortunate connotation of being religious, but originally the word was not particularly religious. It connotes the idea of essential well-being. This word is sometimes translated happy, although happiness is a bit too transitory. It is also occasionally translated joyful. It describes people whose inner lives are rightly aligned. They have discovered what is really important in life, and there is a profound sense of well-being that descends on them as a result. Things are as they ought to be, like an instrument that is in tune. There is a kind of peace, settledness, happiness, and sense of approval that comes from being in such a condition.

Jesus is going to teach us about essential well-being. Where does it come from? What characterizes a person who is as he ought to be? And it is striking what awful surprises Jesus raises. He is saying all the wrong things. Who are the people who are happy and well off? Who are the people for whom things have developed as they ought to have? Who are the ones whose inner lives are secure and right? Why, it is those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who don't fight back, those who hunger....!

These issues that Jesus raises all have to do with deprivation; an ability to honestly recognize that life is not what it ought to be. That is Jesus' grand starting place. We have to be able to talk about brokenness and hurt and loss. We have to be able to say to young people or anyone else that because this world is not what it ought to be, it will never pay off, no matter how hard they work in school, no matter how tight their gang is in its efforts to fight off the bad things around. It doesn't matter whether they have succeeded in getting into the right college and making a lot of money. It doesn't matter if they are popular. The things that young people hear invoked over and over again to grant them success and happiness will not do so. What we have to begin with as Christians, if we are going to help anybody, is to be able to articulate that this world is profoundly broken and we are not going to pretend otherwise. The fears and uncertainties and struggles of young people exist for a reason. There are answers, but not simple answers.

The poverty that leads to life

The first pronouncement that Jesus makes is,

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

If you woke up one day and tried to discover whether you were poor, how would you go about it? Ultimately,

it is a question answered by comparing oneself with another. Imagine a Stone Age tribe in Malaysia that had never had contact with the outside world, and of the thirty people in the village one man had three potatoes and everyone else had two, the man with three potatoes would be the rich man. But he certainly would not be rich compared to any of the people in this community who own cars and television sets, and so on. Wealth is always a comparative concept.

That being the case, what should we compare our spiritual wealth to? What our Lord is calling us to do here is to measure our life against his to see whether we are rich or poor. We cannot find it out by comparing ourselves to each other in terms of our refinements, civilized habits, the genteel way that we treat one another, or the bits of restraint that we have learned over the years. We cannot say, "I'm better off than that person because I read my Bible more than they do, I've memorized some verses, and I go to the right church. So I am spiritually elevated above them." No, the comparison we should make is to Christ, because we were made to live as he lived. We were intended for real intimacy with God. We were intended not just to read the Bible in a dutiful and perfunctory way, but to love it with all our hearts. We were intended to perform acts of kindness that are completely humble in their origin.

It saddens me to realize how often I do the right thing for the wrong reasons; motivated by wanting to show off, gain some sense of approval, or pat myself on the back. When I look at Christ I realize that he lived only to please his Father. Not only were his actions right, but his motives were right. He awoke hours before everyone else to go off and spend time with God, not because anyone made him do it but because he wanted to pray like that. He was completely at home with tax-gatherers and sinners on the one hand, and completely at home with Pharisees on the other. He always knew what to say to people because he listened to the Spirit. When I compare myself with Christ, I see enormous poverty spiritually, and that is the comparison that Jesus intends that we make. But in the long run, concluding that we are far away from who we ought to be inwardly is the way to blessing.

You may remember the musical *The Man of La Mancha*. It tells the story of Don Quixote, an adventuresome madman who thinks of himself as a noble knight. He enters a village and stops at an inn, and there he meets a scullery maid named Aldonza who sleeps with men for a price at night. Don Quixote decides that she is his companion for life, the exalted Lady Dulcinea, the matron of La Mancha. He sings to her and tells her stories about her beauty, her exaltation, and the marvelous person she is in his eyes. Finally Aldonza cries out, "Stop saying this! I could stand who I was when I was only Aldonza. But if you tell me that I could have been the beautiful Lady Dulcinea, if someone can imagine me high-born and valued and honored, then it is crushing to be Aldonza!" In the same way, Jesus insists that we should have been someone great---we were made to be like him. And when we discover what we are in fact, it ought to break our hearts.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. It is when we discover the truth that we are not what we ought to be, and we can't run from it anymore, that we can finally receive life from Christ. Because he is the royal Son, we are royal sons and daughters ourselves. Ours is not just this day, this earth, this time. The kingdom of heaven itself is ours. The way to real wealth begins with seeing clearly that our spirituality apart from the Lord is rubbish.

The prerequisite to comfort

The second beatitude builds on the first:

"Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted."

The idea seems contradictory to begin with. Blessedness is happiness, and mourning by definition is sadness. Happy are the sad? You wonder if Jesus hasn't lost his way a bit. But that is indeed the point he is making. We must mourn for the poverty of spirit that we discover in ourselves. We must face what we see in the mirror and not let ourselves go past the heartache, but begin to sorrow and weep over what we have become. And we must let the pain of other broken people who are also living hurting lives begin to break our hearts. Jesus went through agony on the cross because sin is not just unfortunate but horrendous. If we permit ourselves to mourn this way instead of anesthetizing ourselves in response, turning on the TV and trying to make it go

away, then we will be in a position to be comforted by God himself. Remember Paul Simon's old song that says,

"I am a rock, I am an island...
For a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries."

But if we will follow Christ, we must not protect ourselves by keeping hurt at a distance.

The self-restraint that builds trust

Thirdly in this series, Jesus says,

"Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth."

Meek people are not weak people. Rather, they are people who have learned not to respond defensively, with a chip on their shoulder; or to demand their rights. If there is any word that is lost on our modern culture it is this one. We live in a world that is very defensive and frightened. It is filled with the cacophony of people demanding that their rights be protected. Major-league pitchers can't even throw "inside" without batters charging the mound and starting brawls. A misspoken comment leads to a lawsuit. An argument between kids leads not to a fist-fight after school but gunshots at night. Everywhere we go people are on edge, responding with unrestrained defensiveness that no one can ever, to any degree step into their space without paying a price for it.

Jesus is saying, on the other hand, that the people who have figured life out and who are aligned rightly are those who know they are poor in spirit, who are broken-hearted, and who find that when someone speaks negatively of them it may be that the person is seeing in them what they have already seen in themselves. Martin Lloyd Jones has written a classic book on the Sermon on the Mount, and one of the points he makes is that it is one thing for us to pray, "Oh, Lord, I'm a woeful, miserable sinner." But we really don't like it when someone else comes up and says we are a woeful, miserable sinner. "Who do they think they are, anyway?" we protest, "and what about their sins?" Immediately we respond defensively.

But the meek person is willing to let someone else correct them or even challenge them at times, not because they are incapable of fighting back, but because they have recognized that it may do them good to learn the hard lessons of self-restraint. They don't fight for every inch of territory they can get and then defend it at all costs. Yet ultimately they will inherit the earth. In the long run, people who learn to live with restraint and non-defensiveness are sought out, listened to, and accorded leadership. They are finally the only ones other people will trust, appreciate, and thank, even in this life. But the one who fights for every inch of respect he can gather will find that everyone else always defends themselves against him.

There are young people today who have no notion that there is a God who will protect them if they trust him. They have no idea how to live with self-restraint; they can't imagine responding without violence to people who challenge them. As they band together into gangs to fight more effectively, over and over again the stakes are getting raised. The defensiveness does not consist of just shouting anymore, but violence. Young people need more and more to hear the wisdom of these words of Jesus. How can we help them realize that the God who loves them and who will comfort them in their mourning, will also protect them in their self-restraint?

Longing for righteousness

The last of the four points that we are going to consider is Jesus' word,

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

That is, they will be satisfied. Our bodies were designed by God to function in such a way that we grow hungry periodically and (it is hoped) intake a healthy meal that leads us to vital activity. Energy spent in

honorable activity leads to hunger again. That is what the Lord has in mind here. We must hunger and thirst for righteousness (God's life within us). He grants us all the good that comes with righteous experience. That in turn leads to a life of vitality that is worth living, and "righteous exercise" leads us to hunger again for more righteousness, and so on. The one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness will be satisfied.

One thing that impedes that process is the "junk food" that we indulge in. If we are content with human effort and the praise of others we won't experience the fulfilling righteousness of God. When we really want the best, the Lord will grant it to us, and then that will make us hungry for more. The experience of serving God will grow greater over time.

In conclusion, it is important for us to recognize that Jesus begins this counter-culture teaching of his to be different from everyone else and to give the truth away, by saying that the world is not what it ought to be. We should be able to say that we are broken, and receive the kingdom of heaven. We should mourn for our brokenness, and be comforted. We should be willing to be restrained because of it, and inherit the earth. We should hunger and thirst to have righteousness in place of what we are now, and be filled.

We need to be able to talk with young people who are anorexic, who are doing drugs, who don't know how to relate to their parents, who are involved with gangs, or who are sick at their stomach every night because they are successful and desperate that they can't keep it up. And we need to be able to say to them, "This world is not what we were made for. But there is Somebody who knows that, who can give us the riches of his kingdom, who will comfort us in our mourning. The broken world you are experiencing is real, but there are answers to the brokenness." That is what this sermon of Jesus' is about, and that is what we are being called to as a church.

Let this be our prayer:

Lord Jesus, I long to be renewed by you. Grant me a life that is blessed by a deep encounter with you, that is captivated by the truth you teach, that is founded on and directed by your claim on me. And make me a source of hope for others. Lord, would you have me give of myself for the young people of my community? How shall I serve? Make me willing. Amen.

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Steve Zeisler
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