

ASTOUNDING POSSIBILITIES

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 5:2–12
2nd Message
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New York Times columnist David Brooks has been on quite a spiritual journey the last few years. In his latest book, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, he writes of his movement toward faith in Christ.

For decades, Brooks was an atheist. Looking back, he now says, “At some point I realized that the train of my life had taken me into a different country. I believe. I am a religious person. The Bible, open to an infinity of interpretations, is the ground of truth I am a wandering Jew and a very confused Christian, but how quick is my pace, how open are my possibilities, and how vast are my hopes.”¹

What brought about such a change, what Brooks calls in his chapter heading, “A Most Unexpected Turn of Events”? Part of the answer has to do with the biblical text before us today.

When some people learned of Brooks’ quest, they sent him books to read. But the wisest of them, he said, sent him to the biblical story. “So I kept going back to the stories,” Brooks writes, “wondering if they were true, or, more precisely, letting the stories gradually sink into this deeper layer inside that was suddenly accessible.”

In reading the New Testament, Brooks was especially struck by the beatitudes. “There are a lot of miracles in the Bible, but the most astounding one is the existence of that short sermon,” he writes. The beatitudes, Brooks adds, “feel like a completion to me.” Such is the power of the words of Jesus we’re about to encounter. Let us let them sink into the deeper layer inside us.²

The context for the Sermon on the Mount is the coming kingdom of heaven. Prior to the Sermon on the Mount, John the Baptist said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). The word translated “is at hand” would be better translated “has drawn near.” Then, just prior to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said the same thing, word for word (Matthew 4:17). The kingdom of heaven—that is, God’s healing, loving rule—has come to earth in Christ and the Holy Spirit and is now accessible to everyone.³

In the beatitudes, and in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is addressing a crowd of his followers, including four disciples whom he has just called (Matthew 4:25, 5:1, 7:28). These are words for followers of Jesus. They are Gospel words, healing words.

In a good place

Matthew 5:2-10:

2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

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

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The word translated “blessed” (*makarios*) is a difficult word to translate. It is not the normal word that is usually translated “blessed.” Some translate it “happy,” but that doesn’t quite capture it, because the English word conveys an inward disposition that may or may not be present in the people to whom Jesus is referring. What Jesus is saying, in the language of our day, is that the people he’s singling out are in a good place.

Why are they in a good place? Because the healing, loving rule of God has drawn near—because it is now accessible to them. The kingdom is accessible because the king, Jesus Christ, has come.

The beatitudes, then, are not prescriptions for superior ethics. They are not prescriptive at all, in fact, at least until the surprising finish. They are almost entirely descriptive. Jesus doesn't instruct us to be persecuted, for example, as if we have to preach the Gospel until someone persecutes us. No, he describes certain people who are blessed.

Neither are the beatitudes conditions for being blessed, as if, for example, those who mourn are blessed and those who do not mourn are not blessed. In fact, in the final beatitude, Jesus commands his hearers to "rejoice and be glad."

The beatitudes are not good advice; they're good news. They are royal proclamations. The king is here! Hear ye, hear ye! The beatitudes are good news of great joy. Jesus, in fact, singles out cases of people who are in seemingly bad places to demonstrate that the healing, loving rule of God is available to those in dire circumstances.

Romano Guardini, a twentieth century Catholic priest and intellectual, writes, "In the beatitudes something of the celestial grandeur breaks through. They are no mere formulas for superior ethics, but tidings of sacred and supreme reality's entry into the world."⁴

Echoes of Isaiah

The beatitudes fulfill Isaiah 63:1-4, which anticipated the coming of the kingdom of heaven. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus directly says that his presence means that Isaiah's words were fulfilled (Luke 4:16-21). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is more subtle, more artistic. In Matthew, the Holy Spirit has just come upon Jesus (Matthew 3:16). In Isaiah 63:1, the speaker declares, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me." Watch for how the beatitudes echo Isaiah 61:1-3:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.

The kingdom of heaven, which bursts upon us with the advent of Christ, binds up the brokenhearted, liberates captives, and comforts mourners. The kingdom of heaven, now present and accessible, creates astounding possibilities. Such is the nature of the healing, loving rule of God, which is on display in the beatitudes.

Wild and beautiful

I believe in the kingdom of heaven, but in recent years I've come to believe that I've only begun to appreciate its greatness—its celestial grandeur, as Guardini puts it. Paul prays that the Ephesians would be able to comprehend "the breadth and length and height and depth," but sometimes, my comprehension seems to only dance around the edges (Ephesians 3:18). I have the sense, not least based on my study of the Scriptures, that the world, now that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near, is touched with wonder and is therefore far more wild and beautiful than I know. Frederick Buechner speaks to me; perhaps he speaks to you as well:

People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's. They are prepared for a mustard-seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt but not for the great banyan it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian but not for the marriage supper of the Lamb . . .⁵

When Buechner writes of what people are prepared for and not prepared for, I find that I'm one of those people. But as Buechner so eloquently illustrates, there's so much more going on than meets the eye—so much more than meets my eye. Therefore, I keep reading and studying and watching and praying, especially that the eyes of my heart would be enlightened (Ephesians 1:18).

Let's look at each beatitude and see if we can peer into the greatness of the kingdom of heaven.

The poor in spirit

Who are "the poor in spirit"? Those who want to see being poor in spirit as a condition for being blessed often infer that Jesus meant something along the lines of, "Blessed are those who recognize that they are poor in spirit," or, "Blessed are those who are contrite in spirit." On the face of it—and I take the face of it—Jesus is speaking of those who are spiritually poor, whether they are aware of their state or not. Isn't it better to be rich in spirit?

—Jesus encourages us to be "rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

—The apostle Paul prays to God "according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being" (Ephesians 3:16).

—Paul says he and the other apostles are "making many rich"—spiritually rich (2 Corinthians 6:10).

—Paul says Christ became human so that we "might become rich"—spiritually rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

—Paul preaches "the unsearchable riches of Christ"—spiritual riches (Ephesians 3:8).

—James says that those who love Christ are "rich in faith"—spiritually rich (James 2:5).

—Jesus tells members of the church in Smyrna who are poor monetarily that they are "rich"—spiritually rich (Revelation 2:9).

The poor in spirit are spiritually destitute. No, the poor in spirit are not in a good place—unless the kingdom of heaven is here, that is, because now even the poor in spirit can be rich in spirit, even rich in the Holy Spirit.

Souls in the subway

It could be said that David Brooks was poor in spirit. For decades, he was an atheist. Eventually, he became "a friendly supporter of faith but had none." Then in 2013 his marriage of twenty-seven years came to an end. "I was unplanted, lonely, humiliated, scattered," he writes. Between his apartment and his travels, he realized that

he had eaten forty-two straight meals alone. What kind of place do you have to be in so that you not only eat forty-two straight meals alone but that you also *count* how many meals you eat alone?⁶

Then strange things started happening. Or, if the kingdom of heaven is here, maybe they weren't so strange. Brooks writes: "I was going about my normal day-to-day life when suddenly, for reasons I don't understand, some mystical intrusion pierced through, hinting at a deeper reality." Matthew would call that deeper reality the kingdom of heaven. Brooks writes about one such episode:

One morning, for example, I was getting off the subway in Penn Station in New York at rush hour. I was surrounded as always by thousands of people, silent, sullen, trudging to work in long lines. Normally in those circumstances you feel like just another ant leading a meaningless life in a meaningless universe. Normally the routineness of life dulls your capacity for wonder. But this time everything flipped, and I saw souls in all of them. It was like suddenly everything was illuminated, and I became aware of an infinite depth in each of these thousands of people. They were living souls. Suddenly it seemed like the most vivid part of reality was this: Souls waking up in the mourning. Souls riding the train to work. Souls yearning for goodness. Souls wounded by earlier traumas. Souls in each and every person, illuminating them from the inside, haunting them, and occasionally enrapturing within them, souls alive or numb in them . . .

And if there are souls, it's a short leap to belief that there is something that breathed souls into us through an act of care and love. I remember that as quite a wonderful thought.

The kingdom of heaven is breaking in, and it's even breaking open atheists.

Perhaps you think that faith is not possible for you. May I say to you what people said to David Brooks: Go to the story. Let the stories within the story gradually sink into this deeper layer inside you. Read the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7. Then watch. Watch and see if the kingdom of heaven pierces through your day-to-day life.

The kingdom of heaven creates astounding possibilities. Perhaps you will say one day say with Brooks: "how quick is my pace, how open are my possibilities, and how vast are my hopes."

Those who mourn

Are those who mourn in a good place? Some mourn because they have been brutalized or rejected or forgotten. Others mourn because of what a loved one has done or what has been done to a loved one. Still others mourn for the wretched state of the world. No, those who mourn are not in a good place—unless the kingdom of heaven is here.

The meek

Are the meek in a good place? The meek don't assert their will. They let others go first. They don't defend themselves. They get passed over and left behind. No, the meek are not in a good place—unless the kingdom of heaven is here.

Those who hunger and thirst

Are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness in a good place? Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness long for a world in which the lion lies down with the lamb. They long for a world where the power of love prevails over the love of power. You can die of hunger and thirst. No, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are not in a good place—unless the kingdom of heaven is here.

The merciful

Are the merciful in a good place? If you are merciful in this world, at some point, and more likely at many points, people will take advantage of you. The merciful are vulnerable. No, the merciful are not in a good place—unless the kingdom of heaven is here.

The pure in heart

Are the pure in heart in a good place? The pure in heart represent an affront to those who are sinning. When people are gossiping or having fun at other people's expense, the pure in heart don't go along. They're sticks in the mud. They're party-poopers. Who wants them around? No, the pure in heart are not in a good place—unless the kingdom of heaven is here.

The peacemakers

Are peacemakers in a good place? Peacemakers try to bring warring factions together. They're caught in the middle. Members of each faction want the peacemaker

to take their side, and when he doesn't, he's pilloried. Peacemakers are hated. No, the peacemakers are not in a good place—unless the kingdom of heaven is here.

Those who are persecuted

Are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake in a good place? They call out evil. They blow the whistle. They get ostracized or fired or even killed. No, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake are not in a good place—unless the kingdom of heaven is here.

The first beatitude and the beatitude in verse 10 both conclude with the same phrase: "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Structurally, this phrase encloses the beatitudes, acting as literary bookends. So, the beatitudes end in verse 10, right? Not quite.

You

Matthew 5:11-12:

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Each of the beatitudes up to this point has followed the same form. The fact that Jesus gives us another beatitude beyond the final bookend is surprise enough. The fact that he changes things up a bit in the final beatitude is yet another surprise.

He no longer speaks to his hearers in terms of categories of people ("the poor in spirit," "those who mourn," "the meek," etc.), but he specifically identifies his hearers as being in this final category, addressing them directly. In fact, in this final beatitude, he uses the word "you" five times.

In the first eight beatitudes, the listeners must have wondered whether they were among the people Jesus was lifting up. No doubt, some of them would have thought to themselves, "I mourn," or, "I'm meek," or, "I hunger and thirst for righteousness," etc. Indeed, Jesus was lifting them up. And in case there's any doubt, he addresses them directly. In this way, he first draws them in and then affirms them.

Jesus not only inserts his hearers into the final beatitude, he also inserts himself into it. He expands upon the previous beatitude, in which he said that those

who are persecuted for righteousness' sake are in a good place. In the final beatitude, it's not "for righteousness' sake" but "on my account." It's not people who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, it's "you" who are persecuted "on my account." To be persecuted for the sake of righteousness, then, equates to being persecuted for following Jesus.

And, by the way, if we're going to be persecuted, let's make sure it's for righteousness' sake, let's make sure it's on account of Jesus, not because we're arrogant or hypocritical or idiotic.

If people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of Jesus, are you in a good place? No, you're not in a good place—unless the kingdom of heaven is here.

The final beatitude features the only command: "Rejoice and be glad." When others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of Jesus, don't cower and don't retaliate. Instead, rejoice and be glad.

Now and not yet

Notice that the bookend promises are in the present tense ("for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven"), whereas all the promises between verse 3 and verse 10 and are in the future tense ("for they *shall* be comforted," "for they *shall* inherit the earth," etc.). The timing of the fulfillment in the final promise is ambiguous, because there is no verb. Literally, it reads "for your reward great in heaven."

If you are a disciple of Jesus, when the kingdom of heaven comes in full, yours will be the kingdom of heaven. You will be comforted by God. You will inherit the earth—that is, the new earth in the new creation. You will be satisfied by God. You will receive mercy from God. You will see God. You will be called sons of God. Your reward in heaven will be great.

However, all these promises are yours in part in the present through the Holy Spirit, who is the "guarantee," or down payment, of your eternal inheritance, so that you have eternal life even now, before the new creation (Ephesians 1:14). Yours *is* the kingdom of heaven. Even now, "in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God" (Galatians 3:26).

Consider, also, the reward in heaven for being persecuted on account of Jesus. The reward is currently

being stored up in heaven, to be given in the future, in the new creation. But when the apostles were persecuted on account of Jesus, they applied the final beatitude and rejoiced (Acts 5:41). If it's possible to "be glad" when you're persecuted, isn't that a reward? Who doesn't want to be glad?

The kingdom of heaven must be great indeed if it makes it possible to rejoice and be glad when you are reviled, persecuted, or falsely accused. The kingdom of heaven creates astounding possibilities.

Are the promises for all who fit these descriptions? For example, if you're meek and you hate Jesus, will you inherit the earth? If you're a peacemaker and you don't believe in God, will you be called a son of God?

The eternal promises are only for those who turn to Jesus. Remember, the beatitudes are preceded twice by the words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Remember also that Jesus is addressing a crowd of followers. But if the kingdom of heaven is here, repentance, which involves forsaking sinful ways and culminates in turning to Jesus, becomes possible for everyone.

Hard place or good place?

What kind of place are you in? Are you in a hard place? Are you poor in spirit or are you mourning or are you meek or are you hungry and thirsting for righteousness or are you merciful or are you pure in heart or are you a peacemaker or are you being persecuted? If so, consider this possibility: Could it be, in view of the beatitudes, in view of the staggering nature of the kingdom of heaven, that you are actually in a good place? In some ways, the hardest place is the best place, because people in the hardest place are often more open to the kingdom of heaven.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and finally executed for his opposition to the Nazis. Malcolm Muggeridge comments:

In his cell, however, the theologian became a mystic, the pastor became a martyr, and the teacher produced, in his "Letters and Papers from Prison," one of the great contemporary classics of Christian literature . . . His greatness grew directly out of his affliction, and through the very hopelessness of his earthly state, he was able to generate hope at a dark moment in history, when it was most sorely needed, comforting and heartening many.⁷

For Bonhoeffer, the hard place was the good place, and darkness became hope. If the kingdom of heaven is here, and if the beatitudes are true, then the hymn writer was right: “Earth has no sorrow that heaven can’t heal.”

The kingdom is here

What kind of place are you in? The kingdom of heaven is here; so every place becomes a good place, whether you’re getting off the subway in New York or rotting in a prison in Germany, whether you’re breaking your back plowing the same old field or sitting down for the potluck supper at Peninsula Bible Church. The kingdom of heaven creates astounding possibilities.

The kingdom of heaven is here. Can you believe it?

Endnotes

- 1 David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), 241, 245-46, 262).
- 2 This section of the Sermon on the Mount came to be known as the beatitudes based on the Latin translation of the Greek adjective *makarios* (“blessed”) and based on subsequent Anglicized versions of the Latin noun *beatitudo*.
- 3 In Matthew, Jesus uses the term “kingdom of heaven” more often than the term “kingdom of God,” which is prevalent in other gospels. These are two ways of describing the same kingdom. When “heaven” is used, the emphasis is on the realm of the king, and when “God” is used, the emphasis is on the king himself.
- 4 Romano Guardini, *The Essential Guardini: An Anthology of the Writings of Romano Guardini* (Liturgy Training Publications, 1997), 77.
- 5 Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1977), 70.
- 6 Brooks, xxi, 211-52).
- 7 Malcolm Muggeridge, *A Third Testament* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 184.