

“Solid—Living the Blessed Life, Part 2”

Today we’re continuing our look at a section of the Bible where Jesus gives some super concentrated teachings. And a key thing to remember as we look at what Jesus is teaching is that he’s not interested in us learning a bunch of fact that we just regurgitate later. He didn’t teach this stuff for people to have facts that they did nothing with. Jesus taught so that lives could be transformed. So that lives could be truly solid in the face of a sometimes crazy world. In fact he said, **“Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock” (Matthew 7:24, NRSV)**. There’s hearing, and then there’s hearing AND doing.

So when Jesus was teaching about what a solid life looks like, it wasn’t because there was going to be a test later. He taught then, and he teaches now, because he loves us and he wants us to live the best possible lives.

Last week we looked at a section called the Beatitudes. And the first three of those are all about Jesus extending a broad welcome to his kingdom to people who are down and out. He wanted people to know that if they felt spiritually poor, like they didn’t stand a chance of being right with God, he said, “Don’t worry, come on in, follow me in.” The same of people who are grieving and the same for people who were powerless in life. He was saying it in lots of different ways, “My kingdom is open to you now.”

But in the next several beatitudes he changes direction. He goes from just making clear how everybody is welcome, to teaching on what it looks like as we strive to walk in his footsteps. So the next 4 beatitudes are instruction. They’re meant to teach us new ways to live. Let’s take a look at these: **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:6-9, TNIV)**.

And remember that the word blessed means to have powerful inner joy. Powerful inner joy. So let’s take a closer look here. What did Jesus mean when he said, **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”** Let’s talk about being hungry and thirsty for a minute or two. For years I’ve played the I’m-so-hungry-I-could-eat-a-_____ game with my kids. On our way to a restaurant I’ll just start mild. “I’m so hungry I could eat a tire drizzled with cinnamon and sugar.” Then they come up with something. And the unspoken rule is that you can’t start too gross. “I’m so hungry I could eat a bowl of wood chips sprinkled with road salt.” “I’m so hungry I could eat a sack of angry bees.” “I’m so hungry I could eat a...” It just gets worse... A caramel covered in toe nails. A bucket of warm drool. I gigantic booger. “A cup of warm...” well you get the picture. I’m so hungry...

I have been hungry and thirsty before. You have too. But the people that Jesus was talking to knew what it was like to be hungry most of the time. If you did not work, you did not eat. Even if you did work, your income was just enough to survive on. Few of us know hunger like that. A kind of gnawing desperate hunger.

I read an autobiography a couple of years ago by Jeanette Walls, it was called *The Glass Castle*. She lived in abject poverty and many times she would hang around after school so she could go through trash cans and dumpsters and eat what the other kids had thrown away. It would often be her only meal every day. She wrote about being so hungry that she didn’t care if the food was covered in trash, or half-eaten, or nearly rotten. When you’re that hungry, it tasted good.

When Jesus talks about hungering for righteousness, he’s not talking about that feeling I get before lunch when my breakfast gives out. He’s talking about the hunger of a person who is about to starve. He’s talking about having that kind of hunger for righteousness.

But what is righteousness? It’s not rules and regulations and do’s and don’ts. A lot of people think that righteousness is doing the right stuff. But that’s not what righteousness is about. Righteousness means to be in a right relationship with God. Being in a right relationship with God has a lot of the same characteristics of being in a right relationship with a good friend. If I’m going to be in a right relation with my best friend, there are things I really need to do. I need to talk my friend. I need to listen to my friend. Be interested in what he’s interested in. I need to spend time with that friend. I need to have experiences with that friend. It’s important to face challenges with that friend.

Jesus is teaching us to develop a hunger to **be** with God, **talk** with God, **listen** to God, **face challenges** with God, to **strive to know** the heart of God. Develop a hunger for that kind of a relationship with God.

A question that popped into my mind on this was, “Well, but how to make yourself hungry for a deeper relationship with God?” I think the answer is that you have a taste. This is a box of chocolate truffles. These were a gift from my dad to me on Father’s Day. These are no ordinary truffles. These are handmade, from scratch in a woman’s kitchen in Greenwood, Missouri. That’s the only place in the world you can get these. I had one taste a couple of years ago, and since then, I hunger for these things. When I didn’t know these existed, I didn’t miss them. Now, I long for them. I savor them. I enjoy them. I even want to share them...and give you a taste.

Listen, if you want to develop a hunger for a closeness with God, have a taste. In fact a scripture says **“Taste and see that the LORD is good...” (Psalm 34:8, NIV)**. You can get a taste in worship like this. You can get a taste as you study the Bible. You get a taste when you’re hanging out with Christian friends. Serving the world is one of the best ways to get a taste. As you cultivate that hunger for righteousness, Jesus is saying, “that hunger will be satisfied.”

Let’s look at the next one here. He says, **“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”** He’s saying, “Powerful inner joy will be experienced by those who are merciful.” The kind of mercy Jesus is talking about is not just sympathizing with somebody, it’s stepping inside their skin, and seeing things through their eyes, and feeling things with their feelings. That’s mercy.

The opposite of being merciful would be to be merciless. Being utterly unwilling to see from another persons’ perspective and feel with their feelings. I can’t say that I’m the most merciful person walking around. But I’ve learned over the years that if I can know a persons’ story, I can understand so much more of why they do things and I can be helpful in the right ways. Years ago someone taught me that it’s almost impossible to hate a person if you know their story.

Our natural reaction is to make snap judgments, about people. About the man at the corner of 32nd and Main who looks like he’s been burned. He stands there begging. We think, “He could get some help. He could get a job. He must be lazy or a junkie, or whatever.” That’s what we think when we don’t try to step into his skin.

Or the cranky woman at the customer service desk. She’s cold and mean and makes me feel like I’m ripping her off—all I’m trying to do is return a defective radio. She must just be cold-hearted and evil. That’s what I think when I don’t step into her skin.

Or the relative who all he does is complain about everything, the cost of this, the changes in that, the government, big business, religion, you name it. All these people get under my skin. Jesus is saying, “Get under theirs. Do what you can to see through their eyes. This is what mercy looks like.”

Stephen Covey, author of the best-seller *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* tells about riding a subway in New York City on a Sunday morning. He said people were sitting quietly in the car; some reading, others looking out the window. It was calm and peaceful. The only sound was the quiet rumbling of the subway.

The train stopped and a man with his kids got on the subway car. Covey said that instantly the climate of the car changed. The father took a seat next to Covey and just put his head down and closed his eyes. But the kids were yelling back and forth, grabbing papers, jumping on the seats. It was chaos. A total interruption of a quiet Sunday ride.

Covey wondered how that father could be so insensitive to let his kids just run wild like that. Everybody in the car was getting irritated. Finally, Covey said he just couldn’t stand it anymore. He turned to the man and said, “Sir, do you realize that your children are disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn’t control them a little more.”

The father lifted his head and said, “Oh, you’re right. I am so sorry. I guess I should do something about them, but I’m at a loss right now. We just came from the hospital. Their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to do, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.”

Covey wrote, "Can you imagine how I felt at that moment? Everything changed in an instant. The way I looked at that man, the way I looked at those children changed instantly. Before, there was aggravation; now there was only love, compassion, sympathy, and understanding...because now I knew the truth of their hidden pain." That's what mercy looks like.

This is so important when it comes to forgiveness too. There is always a reason why people think and act the way they do. And if we know the reason it makes it so much easier to understand, to sympathize, to forgive.

It's hard to step inside someone's skin, somebody's story, and see life from their perspective. It's hard, but the result is taking a step toward understanding where they're coming from. Whether that's a relative with Alzheimer's, or an obnoxious co-worker or boss or employee. Or the elderly neighbor who won't stop talking. Find a way to hear their story if they'll tell it. Jesus said that in doing so you will be blessed, you will encounter powerful inner joy.

Ultimately, this is what Jesus did. He took on human form, our skin. He did that so he could know what it's like to be you and me. To know our temptations, our frustrations, our weaknesses, our pains. He stepped into our skin and as a result we experience his mercy. His invitation is for us to do the same for others. In fact we decide how much mercy we want to receive from God by how much mercy we give to others. That's right, we decide how much mercy we'll receive from God by how much we give to others.

Let's look at the next beatitude where Jesus says, "**Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.**" Jesus is saying, "If you want powerful inner joy, constantly work on purifying your life. We're big into purifying stuff these days. We know that we're contaminating the environment with all kinds of chemicals that we're not sure what kind of long-term effects they have. So we buy air purifiers, and water purifiers, and vacuum cleaner purifiers. There's nothing wrong with all of that, but what about taking it inward and doing some purification of our minds and hearts.

I believe that the call of this beatitude is for self-examination. If we drift through life and never take the time to look at why we do what we do, we'll gradually get so tainted that we disconnect from God.

A couple of weeks ago, my computer crashed. Which means that I crashed. I rely on a computer for research, for information, for doing a significant chunk of what I do. I did my best to fix it and just made it worse. So I had to take it in to the Software Center. They did whatever they do and fixed it. They said they had to do a fresh install of the operating system. One that wasn't cluttered up with all this little programs that get installed over the years. Little programs that slow things down and conflict with one another and ultimately make the thing crash.

That's like us in life. We go through our ordinary days and as we just do life stuff starts to cling to us, and get inside us, and slow us down and if we don't do something about it, it will make us crash. And you think it's ugly when a computer crashed. That's nothing compared to when your life crashes. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about because you've been there. Relational crashes, financial crashes, emotional crashes.

Taking time to regularly do self-examination is one of the keys to purity. That's why you hear me talk all the time about taking time daily to pray, and not just on the fly. Do that too, but carve out a time every day, the same time if at all possible. It's a way to purify your heart and mind. To look at what's going on and why you do what you do. Take time look at key areas of life. "Am I doing my work to serve others or just to get a paycheck? Am I serving others because it's the right thing to do or because it's a good way to get some attention? Is my spiritual life (worship, prayer, reading scripture) am I doing that because I want to walk with Christ, or so I can have a feeling of superiority?

Regular, regular, times of self-examination help us to shrug off impurities that we encounter all the time. And we can't forget the friendship piece. Developing friendships where you help each other see your blind spots, see your impurities, that helps so much too.

Jesus is teaching us to constantly work on our purity. What we think about. How we think. What we allow ourselves to see and do. It's not something you ever get done with, it's a lifelong pursuit. And Jesus is saying that as we pursue and work on purity, the payoff is that we see God. And here's the interesting thing, God is able to be seen all around us, every day. In people, in nature, in scientific discovery, in times alone, in

times with people, in conversations, in acts of service. God is there to be seen, he's no hiding! It's as we work toward purity that we see him those places.

I've had times in my life where my mind was filthy, my heart was filthy. Everything I saw, everybody I looked at, I could make something dirty out of. I looked for ways to make people's words sexual or derogatory. I looked for the off-color side of everything. I've got a long way to go in my purity, but I've come a long way too. And as I work on purity, I see God in more and more places; in more and more faces. I hope that we'll be the kind of people who commit to working on purity lifelong. And I hope we're the kind of people who never use that pursuit as a way to feel superior to anybody.

Let's look quickly at just one more. **"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."** Remember, to be blessed means to have powerful inner joy. If that's something you want then strive to be a peacemaker. The thing that caught my eye here is that Jesus did **not** say, "Blessed are the peace-lovers." I believe at some level everybody loves peace because peace is the foundation of prosperity. So many good things happen in an atmosphere of peace—so we love peace.

But look at this. Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are the peace-lovers." What did he say? He said blessed are the **peacemakers**. Loving peace is easy! Anybody can love peace. Working toward peace is another thing altogether. And let's not mistake conflict-avoidance for peace. Some people avoid confronting issues with their spouses, or their kids, or coworkers and they think that's peacemaking. Nope. That's just peace-loving. That just conflict avoidance. And ultimately that's just piling up your troubles for later! The peace that Jesus talked about and pointed to does not come from evading issues, it comes from facing them and conquering them—even when it's hard, even when it's a struggle.

Jesus said if we're the kind of people who strive to make peace, we'll be called children of God. That phrase, children of God, has a very specific meaning. It means to be working alongside God, to be doing God-like work. The work of reconciliation. That's what Jesus was all about. Bringing reconciliation between humanity and God. He's the ultimate peacemaker.

For you and me to seek to be peacemakers means we're open to those times when God impresses upon us to do something. To work toward reconciliation. In all of your private little battles; the little skirmishes and wars that are going on in your relational world. The battles some of you are having with your spouse, even this Sunday morning. The battles some of you are having with relatives, or children, or parents. The battles some of you are having with co-workers and bosses and employees, former employees. The battles some of you are having with other church members, or former church members.

If there were one word that would summarize this beatitude it might be the word, "Enough!" For the sake of Christ, enough! Enough anger, enough rumors, enough slander. Enough case-building and campaigning. Enough distrust, enough division. Enough.

When I die, one of the greatest things that I hope will be said of me is, "He was peacemaker." Others will shake their heads and say, "Yeah but he was trouble-maker too!" But I want to be a peacemaker.

Here's the final thought. The first three beatitudes we looked at last week were Jesus' attempt to tell us that any and everybody is welcomed into his kingdom and his kingdom is now. He simply says, "Come on in. Follow me in. You are welcome no matter what. Just follow me in." The beatitudes we looked at today are more instructional about how we can live out the blessed life. But listen, today can sound like a bunch of stuff you have to do to get into God's good graces. Be righteous, be merciful, be pure in heart, be a peacemaker! But the first three beatitudes override the rest. That's why Jesus said them first. Because if you're not righteous, or merciful, or pure in heart, or a peacemaker, that makes you poor in spirit and he said in the very first beatitude, "My kingdom is open to you." So you can fail at everything we talked about today and still experience his kingdom now and later. But you'll miss out on the whole meaning of being blessed—experiencing powerful inner joy. I don't want to miss out on that, and I don't you to either. So I'm committing to working inside God's grace on being more righteous, and merciful, and pure, and more of a peacemaker. My hope is you'll strive with me. What do you think? I think that for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.