

“Crazy, Life—How Bad Do You Want It?”

If you've got your Bibles open up to Matthew chapter 5. We're looking at a section of the Bible that's been called the Sermon on the Mount. Because Jesus takes the 12 men who responded to his invitation to be disciples up on the side of a mountain and begins to teach the stuff that will change them, change others, and change the world. He's giving them the inside information, that we get, too, about how to find joy that is unshakeable, unbreakable. He's giving them and us the ways to find the sweet spot in life. That place where we feel connected to ourselves, and to others, and to God, and to a bigger purpose. We all want that, but we all know there's got to be a trade-off, a catch, something to give up in order to get there, and there is. Jesus is saying if you want this unshakable, unbreakable joy you've got to do some things that will seem crazy, that will seem the opposite of how we normally go about finding joy. It seemed crazy then, and it seems even crazier now, but Jesus knew what he was talking about.

So if you're willing to try something crazy, something that's not necessarily in your comfort zone, something that's not necessarily even safe, then jump in.

Last week we looked at two of these statements: Blessed are the poor in spirit, and blessed are those who mourn. And I want to go back for just a moment to the blessing of those who mourn. Because a year ago yesterday our Youth Director, Josh Jackson was killed in a motorcycle accident. And his wife, Sandra, and kids, Caleb and Laney, and his parents and friends, our youth and our church entered into a time of deep mourning. He was a great husband, and dad, and son. It's hard to believe that it's been a year and never want to forget him. But listen, remembering him today isn't about going back into a time of sadness. Remembering him today, a year later, should be a time for his vision to inspire us. He was all about reaching people with the good news of Jesus Christ—doing whatever it takes. Especially reaching out to the fringes. He was about taking care of family and living life to the full. As followers of Jesus, the Resurrected One, we don't dwell on the sadness, we're inspired by the life, we get busy living out a legacy. One of Josh's sayings was, “Go big or go home!” Yes, we mourn, but the purpose of our mourning is to honor those gone and then live life as they would have. Yes, Josh lost his life here on this earth, but he would not want us to stop living ours. If you knew him, you know he'd want us to do life big. To remember him yes, and live life the way he would have. BIG! With all that in mind, let's pray...

I hope that you will keep reaching out to Josh's family. Keep loving them and encouraging them. They will always mourn his loss. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

Let's take a look at the next statement that Jesus makes in Matthew chapter 5. He says, **“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5)**. Remember that the word “Blessed” here means, unshakeable, unbreakable joy, bliss, euphoria. And it's meant to be an exclamation. “O baby! The joy of those who are meek!” Now, I actually talked about this in July when we were studying the fruits of the Spirit. One of the fruits of the Spirit that Paul lists is gentleness, or meekness. Same word in the Greek language that the New Testament was written in. It's the word, *praotēs*.

Language is always changing and for us being meek is often equated with being weak. This is where we have to be careful. Moses was described as meek, and he was certainly not weak—he was one of the most powerful people in the Old Testament. And Jesus described himself using this word *praotēs*, meek, gentle. But we was certainly not weak or powerless.

Aristotle defined all these virtues as the mid-point between two extremes. And he said that **meekness was the mid-point between the extreme of excessive anger and the extreme of excessive angerlessness**. Meekness is not being weak, or limp, or cowardly. Not at all! It the mid-point between having too much and too little anger. When we talked about this in July we defined this meekness as the ability to always be angry at the right times and never be angry at the wrong times. And the right times to angry are in the face of injustice. One evening on our bike tour we stopped in Birmingham, Alabama at the 16th Street, Baptist Church. It was a place that Martin Luther King, Jr. preached, it was a crucial meeting place in the civil rights movement.

On Sunday, 15th September, 1963, a white man was seen getting out of a turquoise Chevrolet car and placing a box under the steps of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. At 10.22 a.m., that package under the steps exploded killing Denise McNair (11), Addie Mae Collins (14), Carole Robertson (14) and Cynthia Wesley (14). The four girls had been in Sunday school. Twenty-three other people were injured.

Get this: A week before the bombing the Governor of Alabama, George Wallace, had told the *New York Times* that to stop integration, Alabama needed a "few first-class funerals." Many people said that that statement set the bombing in motion.

A witness identified Robert Chambliss as the man who put the bomb under the steps of the church. He was arrested and charged with murder and possessing a box of 122 sticks of dynamite. He was found not guilty of murder and received a hundred-dollar fine and a six-month jail sentence for having the dynamite.

We should be angry about hatred and injustice like that whether it's related to civil rights, or predatory Wall Street practices, or persecution around the world. Those are the right things to be angry about. In fact somebody did get angry, the Birmingham bombing case was reopened thirteen years later and they found that evidence of Chambliss's guilt had been suppressed and in light of that evidence he was arrested and convicted of murder. Injustice is the right thing to get angry about!

The **wrong** things to get angry about are the little slights we face in life, the times we don't get what we want, the times when we experience life's minor unfairness. True meekness, *praotēs*, knows when to be angry. It's the difference between selfish anger and selfless anger.

Another meaning behind meekness here is humility. Humility allows us to be open to so many good things. When we're humble in relationships, it allows us to be loved because we know that we need love from others. When we're humble about ourselves it allows us to be teachable and learn new things. If you think you know it all, how can you learn something new? When we're humble about life and how frail life is, and brief life is, and how ultimately weak we are, it opens us up to our need for God, the realization that God is God and we are not. It opens us up for a real relationship with God. It puts us in a place where we are allowing God to guide us because we don't have all the answers. Meekness opens the door for us to move through our world with power that is under control, with amazing strength, God's strength, that's tempered with gentleness.

Meekness is also tied to gratitude. We see others, and the things they do for us, and we give thanks. In fact, we as a city we are about to humbly show our thanks to the country. Through the school district and the city and Bright Futures a thank you campaign has been organized. There are going to be billboards put up in cities all across the nation that say, "**Thank you for loving us, without even knowing us. The people of Joplin.**" We've received so much from the country and it's only right to say thank you, it's an expression of the character of our city, a genuine thankfulness.

The billboards will be awesome. But that's just the tip. About 86,500 people have come to Joplin as registered volunteers since the tornado. And as a city we are going to thank them all individually. Thank you notes are being printed and businesses, the hospitals, churches, small groups, individuals can take a few of those thank yous, write a note inside and they'll be mailed out the week of Thanksgiving. As a church we have a very ambitious goal and that is to take 10% of those thank yous, 8,600, and put hand-written notes of thanks in them. Other people and businesses are taking care of printing costs and postage. But we, along with St. Johns, and Freeman and College Heights, and the Chamber of Commerce and others are stepping up to take 10% each.

It will be work, but some of the most rewarding work, as we say thank you to all those people who took vacation time, loaded up in cars and vans, brought supplies, dug through debris, rescued belongings, cooked food, offered shoulders to cry on, went through our yards, and parks, and school grounds moving gigantic tree stumps and picking up tiny pieces of glass and metal, they blessed us with their hard work and we get the chance to bless them with simple, heart-felt thank you. It's the least we can do. We'll have the thank you cards available as soon as possible and I hope every single one of you takes as many as you can write and go for it. Meekness gets shown in gratitude.

Why would you want to be meek? Jesus is saying, "Because it's the way to unbreakable, unshakeable joy!" Meekness guides our reactions and channels our anger, it keeps us open and teachable.

So HOW do we cultivate this in ourselves? It sounds so canned; it sounds so cliché, but pray! Say, “God, give me eyes to see how I can be meek today.” I think it comes through ruthless self-examination. Those times where you look at your reactions in the past day or two and say, “Did I exemplify meekness? Did I get angry in selfish ways, or selfless ways? Did I allow myself to learn something new? Did I move through my day with gratitude?” I’m a big believer in journaling and this is one reason why. Writing down those time of ruthless self-examination can actually help me make the changes I need to make to become more like what I have the potential to become. That’s what Jesus means when he says the meek will inherit the earth. If you are moving in your little corner of the world, your family, your neighborhood, your workplace with meekness you will become a leader in those areas, a role model, a true servant that people will look to with love and respect. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. **Oh baby! The unshakeable, unbreakable joy of the truly humble, the grateful, the ones who get angry in the right way!**

Let’s move on to the next statement Jesus makes about us experience unbreakable, unshakeable joy and bliss. He says, **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6).** First, we should know what righteousness is. If we’re supposed to be hungry for it and thirsty for it, what is it? **Righteousness means to be in a right relationship with God and with others.** Being in a right relationship with God means to look at your life and say, “I’ve been given this life by you God, I freely give it back to you. And knowing that you’re the owner of this life of mine how should I live it today? I want to live it like you want me to.” It’s approaching every day like that.

Then it’s applying what you learn about being a follower of Jesus. Being in a right relationship with God means seeking to live a generous life because we serve a generous God. It means living a life where you forgive others when they do you wrong, because you know how much you’ve been forgiven. It means that you look for opportunities to bless others and serve people, because you see how God has blessed you and given everything for you. It means you speak out for those who cannot speak out for themselves, because our God cares for the least, and the last, and the lost, and asks you and me to do the same. It means you do the hard work of rooting out sinful habits. Righteousness toward people means that the feelings and needs of others became more important than your own feelings and needs.

All that means being in a right relationship with God and with others. Jesus is saying, “Hunger for that, thirst for that.” This is where it’s really helpful to know what life was like for the people who heard this when Jesus first said it. The people he was talking to regularly knew real hunger, and lived on the edge of starvation. Few of us know real, lasting, gnawing hunger that is beyond our control.

And then there’s thirst. Very few people 2,000 years ago in Palestine had easy access to fresh water. We’ve got fresh water available to us almost everywhere we go. Few of us know what it’s like to be devastatingly thirsty and not know where water is. Just talking about this make me thirsty!

The people that Jesus was talking to knew real hunger and real thirst. They knew a hunger that couldn’t be satisfied with a little yogurt. They knew the thirst that couldn’t be quenched with a latte. Jesus was talking about starving for food and the kind of thirst that you die from. He’s saying, “Have **that** kind of hunger, **that** kind of thirst for having a right relationship with God and with others.” It becomes a question. How much do you want it? Do you want righteousness as much as a starving man wants food, or a woman dying of thirst wants water? Would you walk on your lips through busted glass to get it? How intense is your desire for righteousness?

Lots of people, lots of Christians, suffer from the disease of not wanting this. But think of the difference it would make if we desired this righteousness, this goodness more than anything else.

Oh, and there’s one other thing about this statement that Jesus made. It’s an unusual twist in the original language. Typically when Greeks used language of hunger and thirst they would use language that specifically says, “I am hungry for **some** bread. I am thirsty for **some** water. I would like part of the loaf, or some of that pitcher of water.”

But in this statement, it’s very unusual the way it’s written in the Greek, it means to hunger for the whole thing, to thirst for it all. “I want the whole loaf of bread, I want the entire tank of water.” So the literal translation here should be, **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for complete righteousness, the whole thing.”**

Now, when we look at this beatitude from this perspective it should scare us at least a little. It should make us back up and see what we're getting ourselves in for. Yeah, we get this whole unshakeable, unbreakable joy thing. But righteousness sounds way too big to get my heart and mind around. Listen, this statement from Jesus should scare you a little, but it should also be very comforting. Because look at it carefully. Blessed is the person who **not** who achieves righteousness, but the one who **longs** for it with his whole heart. If this blessing only came to the people who achieved it, nobody would be blessed! But this joy comes to the man, the woman, who, in spite of failures and failings still strives for that righteousness, that goodness. You see, because of God's grace, even if you never attain righteousness, if you've spent your life hungering for it, you will still get the blessing, the joy, the bliss.

Here's one last thought of good news. In the 23rd Psalm the writer says, "**Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.**" The word for goodness there, is the same as righteousness. Goodness is being in a right relationship with God and with others. So think of it this way: Goodness is following you. Even if you want nothing to do with it right now, it's stalking you. Goodness and mercy are pursuing you ready to pounce when you're ready to be pounced on.

Some people say, "I don't want that goodness stuff. It will steal my fun. It will get in the way of pleasure." Say that all you want, but goodness is following you.

Some say, "If goodness/righteousness means being generous, in the words of Cee Lo Green, Forget You!" Keep saying that, but goodness and mercy are going to still be stepping on your heels.

You slip over the edge into addiction, pornography, bitterness, abuse, dark dealings, even there over the edge, goodness and mercy follow so close you can feel their warmth.

Some say, "I don't believe in God. Why would I even want to be a right relationship with a God I don't believe in?" Say that all you want, but feel that? Goodness and mercy are breathing down your neck!

I just got this email last week. A woman wrote: "Aaron-I am a Joplin resident, my family and I lost our home and 3 vehicles near the high school. I have not been a 'church going' person, or even sure I am a believer....BUT.....listening to your speech at the memorial made sense to me.... I am just reaching out, as maybe, just maybe, to me, there is a God and this is his/her nudge for me to start the process of believing, trusting, and considering that faith might be a real thing (still not sure, but somehow I feel different). I felt something change inside of me listening to your speech Aaron. I just want you to know that." Goodness and mercy pounced!

You may give up on God, but his goodness and mercy will follow you like the hounds of heaven. Where you go, they will go, and when you're ready, they will be there. Stop running! Hunger for the whole thing! "Oh baby! The joy, the bliss, of those who hunger and thirst for a right relationship with God, for real goodness!"

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled. And for today that is the good news! In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.