

“Crazy, Life—Part 4”

If you could ask God one question, what would it be? What you might ask will have a lot to do with what's going on in your life? If you're hurting and doubting you might ask God, "Why is there suffering? Why don't you do something about it? What do you do?" I've been in places where I've asked those questions.

If you're faced with big decisions in your life you might want to ask, "What's going to be the outcome if I take this path—for myself, my kids, my family, my future? What's the outcome going to be if I take that path?" I've been there before.

If you're a kid you might ask, "What's the deal with parents?! I don't get 'em!" If you're male, you might ask, "What's the deal with women?! I don't get them!"

If things are going pretty well for you and you've got some space in your life right now, you might ask, "What's the meaning of life? Why did you create us?" I've been in places in life where I've asked those kinds of questions. If you could ask God a question, or two, what would you ask him?

Today we're going to look at the last two statements Jesus made in a list that's called the Beatitudes. It's in Matthew at the beginning of chapter 5. And Jesus is answering an implied question which is, "How do I find joy—the kind of joy that no storm can damage or blow away? How can I find, and stay in, that sweet spot of life where I feel deeply connected to other people, and to you God, and to a purpose bigger than me?" Jesus teaches his disciples the answer to that question. He says, **“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. 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. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:3-12).**

A quick reminder, the word blessed here means to experience God-like joy. A joy that unshakeable and unbreakable. A joy, a bliss, that can weather any storm that life can throw at it. Part of Jesus' answer is, **“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.”** One key thing to see here is that Jesus says that this blessing comes to the peace **makers**, not the peace **lovers**. Here's the hard truth: If all you do is love peace, that may actually cause more damage. Just loving peace can make you avoid confrontation when it's needed and that just creates a pile problems later on. Like if somebody you love is headed in a dangerous direction, maybe they're misusing funds at work. Confronting them will probably hurt them and maybe hurt your friendship, but it may save their career. If all you are is a peace lover then you avoid the confrontation. You think, "I just want to keep the peace." But in the end your friend gets caught, loses their job, loses their dignity, loses their family.

I once had to tell a really, really good friend that he was spending too much time with a married woman. He was single. I told him that he needed to back away and let her work on her marriage, that I could tell there was an attraction there and that his presence was just making things worse. I think that kept him from having a sexual affair, but that instantly ended our friendship completely. And that hurt.

The peace that Jesus says brings unshakable joy doesn't come from avoiding the issues. It comes from facing the issues, dealing with the issues, conquering the issues. Any fool can be a peace lover and accept things because we don't want to rock the boat, but peace makers realize that avoidance just makes things worse, so they work toward peace even when it's a struggle.

Is there somebody you love that, right now, you need to talk to about something? Maybe you see them sliding into a pattern that could really wreck their life. A pattern of substance abuse, or the way they're treating their wife or husband or kids, the amount of time they're spending away from home, or who they're spending time with, or their work ethic, or The path of least resistance is to just throw a blanket over it and pretend like it doesn't exist--be a peace lover in the moment then watch things blow up later on. But Jesus said, "There is deep joy that's the result of being a peace maker, in doing the hard thing." We all have to choose, being peace lovers, or peace makers. The blessings comes to the peace makers, trouble comes to those who just love peace.

Now I want to shift gears and a minute and talk about making peace with God. Because maybe you, or somebody you know, isn't at peace with God. Let's be clear that God is not at war with you. Scripture says, "**By Jesus, God reconciled [restored] everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of his blood on the cross**" (Colossians 1:20). So, I can have peace with God because of what Jesus did on the cross. It's important that we get this!

God has always been attempting to connect with people. God has always loved humanity. Some people want to say that Jesus somehow changed God's mind from wrath to love. No, no, no! God's mind toward humanity has always been love. What Jesus did was embody that love, demonstrate that love, open the door for us to receive that love. What Jesus did was pay for my mistakes and yours. There are consequences for my sin, and Jesus took those consequences for me. I don't have to live enslaved by shame and guilt. I don't have to look at God as my enemy. God loves you and wants the best for you!

You can hear that today and still be thinking, "That's all great, Aaron. Maybe God's not at war with me, but I still don't **feel** at peace with God." If that's going on, let me toss out a couple of possibilities. It could be that you don't feel peace with God because God's called you to something and you're avoiding that calling. Maybe God's calling you to be in ministry in some way, as a volunteer, or full time Christian ministry, and you've just hid under the radar, avoided that calling like the plague, or just ran and kept running. Maybe it was a calling to help certain people, or a certain person, or to work against an injustice. Maybe it's a calling to be a pastor, or a missionary, or small group leader. Maybe it's a calling to pour yourself into an organization like the Community Clinic or Rapha House. Listen, you will not really feel at peace with God until you face that calling and do something with it.

The irony is that you probably think that following that calling will mess up your life and cause you all kinds of sacrifice and heartache and turmoil. But it's just the opposite! Living out a calling trumps all that. If this is the reason you don't feel peace with God I suggest that you take some time off, get away, find a quiet place with just you and God and face-off about that calling. God has made peace with you, but you won't feel that peace with God until you face that calling of God.

It could be that you don't feel at peace with God right now because of an unforgiven sin. Something you did or are doing habitually, a wrong relationship, an infidelity, a breach of integrity, a moral lapse. Listen, until you get honest with God about that, you're not going to feel peace. Jesus gave his life so you and I could be clean, but to feel clean, we've got to come clean. Get honest, own what you've done, God might ask you to make right what you did wrong. Do it and let it go. The irony here is that we think confessing and getting honest with God, making reparations to others, will be so ugly and shameful and disturbing, that we don't do it. But the reality is that it will feel so cleansing, so freeing, so purifying and we will finally feel the peace that Jesus paid for.

One other possibility. Maybe you don't feel a peace with God because God has disappointed you. Maybe it was an unanswered prayer. You wanted healing for yourself or your child, or a friend,

or parent and it didn't come. Or you asked God to fix your broken marriage, or to bring your lost son home, or break that addiction in your mom or dad. And it didn't happen. And because of that, you don't feel at peace with God.

The answer here is trust. Can you trust that God is working for your good, even when you don't see it? It's easy to have faith, when you see God's hand at work. But faith becomes very real when you trust even when you can't see the results, when you can't see God. Check out what God said, **“I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11)**. Faith means saying, “I can't see what you're doing right now, and I don't understand why, but I will trust you and I will still follow you, I will still love you, I will still seek you.” That kind of trust, faith, leads to feeling the peace with God that gave you in Jesus.

Does all this take work! Yes it does! Is it worth it! Yes it is! Are you going to do it? Maybe...the choice, as always is yours. OK, the Aaron Brown translation of this blessings goes something like this, **Oh baby! The joy of those who choose to make peace with others and with God, they will find peace with themselves and know they are sons and daughters of God.**

Let's take a look at the last of these powerful statements. Jesus says, **“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven...” (Matthew 5:10-12)**.

The first thing to see here is Jesus' sheer honesty. He never led people on to think that following him would be the easy way, the way to avoid suffering. He wanted his early followers to know that he did not come to make life easy, but to make people great. And the early Christians did suffer. There was a period in the Roman Empire when every man had to go to a temple and burn a pinch of incense to the Roman Emperor and say, “Caesar is Lord.” And after a man burned his pinch of incense he was given a certificate that allowed him to hold a job, buy food for his family, sell his produce in the market. But a lot of Christians refused to burn that pinch of incense and lost their jobs, and could not buy food. Even worse they were hunted down as political criminals—even when they were model citizens. Their only crime was putting Christ above Caesar.

Documents from the time report that they were thrown to the lions as entertainment in the weekly gladiator games. Nero covered them in tar and used them as torches. They were tortured having had molten lead poured on them, their skin sliced off, parts of their bodies were cut off and roasted in front of them, their eyes were gouged out—cruel, lengthy, torturous deaths. We don't like to think about these things, but that's what those early Christians had to be prepared for if they chose to follow Jesus Christ.

In fact, many Christians over the last 2,000 years suffered in all kinds of ways, big and small, so that we wouldn't have to. They suffered persecution to make it easier for us. And in certain parts of the world Christians still suffer because of their faith. Christians are still persecuted, tortured, marginalized.

Listen, nobody wants to be persecuted for anything. But as we live out our faith, it's going to happen. I think that living your faith boldly will mean that you will experience some form of persecution at some time in your life. Why is that? Because Christians, when they are actively living out their faith, are going to be the conscience of a society. When good things are happening, Christians praise that, when evil things are going on, Christians have to speak out, or at least by our actions, condemn what is wrong, what is evil in the world. Nobody likes to hear their conscience convict them when they're doing something, and when Christians speak out, some are not going to like it.

It's very unlikely that any of us will be tortured or put to death when we take a stand for Christ. But we might face insults when we insist on doing the right thing at work, when the wrong thing has a

big pay off. We might be made fun of when we offer forgiveness and grace when everybody else wants to get revenge. People might chuckle and think we're simple-minded and naïve when we choose to love the unlovable, when there's no profit in for us or anybody else.

We don't face a lot of persecution in the U.S. especially in this part of the country. But I'll ask a question that I've asked before. **If being a Christian were a crime would there be enough evidence in your life to convict you?** In how you love God, and love others, and serve the world, would there be enough evidence to say, "Yes, that one is a Christian, grab him!" In your language, in your sexual ethics, in how you spend your money, would there be enough evidence to say, "She is clearly a follower of this Jesus, take her away!" If being a Christians were a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you. I hope so. If not, I hope you are working to make that evidence real.

Jesus is saying, "It's very hard to believe, but trust me on this one, you will have amazing joy, unshakable joy, when you stand up for me and bow down to nothing else." So the Aaron Brown translation here would be something like, **Oh baby! The joy, the bliss, of those who are persecuted for living out an active faith. They are walking in the footsteps of the saints, and of Jesus himself!**

My hope as we wrap up this series is that we're all a little different because we've encountered God's word in a very direct way. I realize that it's easy for teachings like this to slip off our radar screens in the face of all the information we face everyday, but this would be a part of the Bible to come back to every so often, to internalize, to realize that Jesus is giving us the inside information on the blessed life, living life in the sweet spot. And as you look back at all he described here in these beatitudes, he's describing himself. He was poor in spirit—trusting in God alone. He was one who mourned—his heart was broken for the suffering of people. He was meek—he got angry at the right times and never at the wrong times. He was righteous—having a right relationship with God and with people, he was merciful, and pure, a peace-maker and persecuted. In all these statements he's saying, "Come follow me, see me as a role model and know that I will help you become what you see." Let's choose to make this our life goal and find the unshakeable, unbreakable joy he was talking about, the life that really is life. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.