

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: August 23, 2009
Beverly ECC, Chicago, IL

“BLESSED ARE YOU” ~ Matthew 5:3-10

**“Wonderful news for the poor in spirit!
The kingdom of heaven is yours.**

**Wonderful news for the mourners!
You’re going to be comforted.**

**Wonderful news for the meek!
You’re going to inherit the earth.**

**Wonderful news for people who hunger
and thirst for righteousness!
You’re going to be satisfied.**

**Wonderful news for the merciful!
You’ll receive mercy yourselves.**

**Wonderful news for the pure in heart!
You will see God.**

**Wonderful news for the peacemakers!
You’ll be called God’s children.**

**Wonderful news for people who are persecuted
because of God’s way!
The Kingdom of heaven belongs to you.**

{Mt 5:3-10, N.T. Wright}.

Having immersed myself in this text for the past two months, I find it less startling than I used to. Maybe I am being numbed to its power. Maybe I have begun to take it for granted.

Then something happens, and I realize again how radically unnatural and outrageously counter-cultural this teaching is.

Take the release of Abdel Baset al-Megrahi, convicted of bombing Pan Am Flight 103. His crime killed 270 people in the air and on the ground at Lockerbie, Scotland.

Al-Megrahi was given a life sentence, but since then he has developed terminal cancer. Scottish authorities released him this past Thursday, August 20, so he could die at home.

Al-Megrahi’s release has ignited a firestorm of controversy. Some applaud it; others condemn it. Each side makes a compelling argument.

In his statement the Scottish Justice Secretary acknowledged that al-Megrahi had no compassion on his victims **“But,”** he said **“that alone is not a reason for us to deny compassion to him and his family in his final days....Compassion and mercy are about upholding the beliefs we seek to live by, remaining true to our values as a people – no matter the severity of the provocation or the atrocity perpetrated.”**

Some of the victims’ loved ones are outraged: **“I don’t understand how the Scots can show compassion. It’s an utter insult and utterly disgusting,”** one said. **“I don’t show compassion for someone who showed no remorse.”** Another said, **“I think it’s appalling, disgusting, and so sickening I can barely find words to describe it.”**

Who is unable to sympathize? My initial reaction to the news was anger – and I have no connection with the bombing.

Then, Jesus' words flashed across my mind ~
“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Mt 5:7).

The rightness of the Scottish government's decision is open for debate.

How to apply Matthew 5:7 to this case is open for debate.

What is *not* debatable is the high value God places on compassion. If a convicted terrorist is to be released, this is the best possible grounds. God does not find human mercy **“appalling,” “disgusting,”** or **“sickening”**; He blesses it.

But that isn't always our gut-level response, is it? Does anyone think this is confusing? Is anyone experiencing a bit of emotional turmoil as I talk about al-Megrahi and God's mercy? Does anyone wish I had not even brought this up?

It goes to show how radical and outrageous the Beatitudes really are. Christ's teaching has nothing to do with maintaining the status quo and finding our place in mainstream America!

“Wonderful news”? **“Blessed are those”?** Not in *this* world!

It's true: the Beatitudes are not of this world. They are nonsensical in the dominant culture, not only in the secular realm but in religion as well. In any natural community {NT Wright} **“Mourners often go uncomforted, the meek don't inherit the earth, those who long for justice frequently take that longing to the grave.”**

Matthew 5:3-10 is absurd according to natural wisdom, but it makes perfect sense within God's economy.

Our understanding is clarified as we remember three basic points.

† 1) The Beatitudes reveal the nature of Jesus.

Jesus was absolutely convinced of his need for his Father, so He lived in constant dependence on him. That is what being **“poor in spirit”** is all about.

Jesus grieved the things that grieve God – the ugliness of our guilt, the devastation of sin, the tyranny of Satan. That is what it means to **“mourn.”**

Jesus had unlimited power to compel obedience, yet He restrained himself and did not use force. That is the definition of biblical meekness.

And so on. During his incarnation, Christ Jesus personified the Beatitudes.

† 2) The Beatitudes are a portrait of Christ Followers individually and corporately. They show our identity in Jesus. They describe the qualities and experiences of people who belong, not to the kingdom of the world, but to the alternate reality that Scripture names, **“the Kingdom of God”**.

Citizens of God's Kingdom **“hunger and thirst for righteousness.”** They **“are...merciful”** even to the undeserving. They **“are...pure in heart”** (their words and deeds correspond to their attitudes and thoughts, and their inner being conforms to the goodness of God).

Not perfectly, but with growing constancy. Not every second of the day, but with increasing frequency.

{Rom 8:28-29b, NLT/TNIV} **“For God... chose [his people] to be conformed to the likeness of his Son,”** Jesus, **“that he might be the firstborn among**

many brothers and sisters.” Christ is our model He personified the teaching in Matthew 5:3-10, and so do his people.

† 3) The Beatitudes are an invitation to join the Kingdom of God. They are {N.T. Wright} **“a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God’s promised future; because the future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth.”**

Just about anyone can choose to act on these sayings, to a degree and for a time. Yet to consistently *be* the person described here cannot be achieved by human resolve. To be blunt, they are beyond us.

Alleluia, what is impossible for us possible for God! He is perfectly able to {Heb 13:20-21, NLT} **“equip [us] with all [we] need for doing his will.”** And that enables us to receive the blessings promised in Matthew 5.

This happens only after we enter the alternate reality described in the Beatitudes. We must give our allegiance to God, and live as citizens of his Kingdom.

The Beatitudes reveal the nature of Jesus.

The Beatitudes are a portrait of Christ Followers.

And, the Beatitudes are an invitation to join the Kingdom of God.

Grasping these basic points helps us to understand the original meaning of this text, and strengthens us to wrestle with its application here and now.

I am going to read these sayings one more time. God might give us a glimpse of his kingdom as we listen.

If He does, and if that unnatural and outrageously countercultural reality stirs up feelings of longing or wonder or uncertainty or exhilaration – do not squelch it.

Please, do not dismiss it as a pipe dream or an unattainable ideal or as a foolish mystery that has no relevance for you. Let’s allow God’s Word free reign within our hearts and minds!

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This is the Word of the Lord!