**True Righteousness**

**Text: Matthew 5:5-6**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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When someone asks you, “How are you today?”, I’m guessing that you say, “Fine,” or “Not bad;” or if it’s someone that you know and trust and you’re really *not* fine you might say, “Well, I’m having a rough day.” Those are conventional responses to that question. But we’re not all conventional. I knew a guy who, if you asked him how he was, he’d say, “I’m fantastic!” Sometimes he’d even tell you before you asked. He wanted everyone to know just how fantastic he was! Turned out that he was engaged in some shady business deals and the police finally caught-up with him, but in *his* mind, he was fantastic!

Sometimes, if you ask someone how they are, they’ll say, “I’m blessed.” Biblically speaking, that’s a better answer because the truth is that none of us is fantastic. The Bible says that we’re all sinners. But we’re still blessed. You see, whoever you are, God loves you. Whatever you’ve done or failed to do, God holds you in a warm embrace, and God will not let you go. Even if you don’t spend a whole lot of time attending to your relationship with God, *God* has a relationship with you. God has reached out to you, and tenderly touched you. That’s a blessing. Whoever you are, whatever kind of day you’re having, you’re blessed.

Jesus had something to say about what it means to be blessed. The way that Matthew tells the story, it was early in Jesus’ ministry when he sat down on a mountain-top with his disciples and he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;” and so on. 9 expressions of what it means to be blessed. We call these verses “The Beatitudes,” and they form the first part of the Sermon on the Mount.

Beatitude: the word comes from the Latin for *blessed* or *happy* or *fortunate*, and the Good News Bible even uses the word *happy* instead of *blessed*. But this sounds rather strange when we get down to the 8th and 9th beatitudes: Happy are those who are persecuted? Happy are you when people revile you? That doesn’t sound like a whole lot of fun to me.

But Jesus’ sense of being blessed goes much deeper than simple happiness or feeling good or having a nice day. Jesus is talking about a kind of well-being that flows from a right relationship with God. The fact of the matter is that things might *not* be going well in your life. You might be poor or hungry or grieving or persecuted, and yet you can still know the joy of being loved. There were some rough days early in my ministry when I was not at all sure that I was in the right vocation. There were some days of discouragement and despair. But even in those dark days, I had some colleagues who so surrounded me with their love that I experienced a blessing.

That’s the way it is with God. To be in a relationship in which you are accepted, unconditionally, gives you both comfort in the moment and courage to address the conditions that have made you poor or hungry or persecuted or otherwise oppressed. God has created that kind of relationship with you. If you hear nothing else today, hear this: you are loved unconditionally. God has embraced you. You are blessed.

Being blessed begins with a right relationship with God. Which is also the beginning of *righteousness.* In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his disciples to *true* righteousness, which is based not on showing people how good you are but on how great *God* is. It’s got nothing to do with *you* being fantastic; it’s got everything to do with *God* being fantastic. And God, in God’s fantastic mercy, has embraced you and me and the whole world.

So true blessedness – true righteousness – begins with a right relationship with God. That’s the first thing that we need to know about the Beatitudes. And the second thing that we need to know is this: that relationship *deepens* when the righteousness of God begins to take hold of our hearts; when it begins to soften our hearts; when it begins to transform our hearts. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” Jesus says, “for they will see God.” Not that any of us can expect to have a completely pure heart this side of heaven, but when we feel our hearts strangely warmed by the grace of God it *begins* the process of purification. It starts to turn a hard heart, or an egotistical heart, into a gentle heart; a humble heart.

“Blessed are the meek, Jesus says,” and what he means by this is “blessed are the gentle; blessed are the humble; bless are those whose hearts have *begun* to soften.” In our day “meek” has taken on the connotation of weak or timid, but if we had the Greek in front of us we’d see that the mean is more like *humble* or *gentle*. At least one translation even says *gentle* rather than *meek*. And this need not mean weak or timid. You can be quiet and humble and gentle and still be courageous and strong. Kind of like Thomas, an engineering student at Stanford. He’s the son of one of my childhood friends. The guy is brilliant. But you may not know it by talking with him. He’s quiet and gentle, he’s one to sit back and observe things. If you want him to solve a complex problem, ask him and he’ll do it for you. If there’s *anything* that needs to be done – however complex or simple it might be – he’ll bring his quiet, analytical mind to the problem and come-up with a solution. But you might have to ask him first. Thomas exemplifies the kind of “meekness” that Jesus is talking about. The meek are not weak or timid, but they’re also not ones to call attention to themselves.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth;” meaning the new heaven and the new earth that God will provide because maybe the more egotistical folks have destroyed this one. It is the gentle and the humble who will be ushered into the Kingdom of heaven when God brings the Kingdom in its fullness. The meek are those whose quiet and reserved nature often masks great wisdom. Their hearts are well on the way toward being purified by the heart-warming grace of God.

True righteousness begins with a right relationship with God. It deepens as that relationship begins to purify our hearts. But here’s the third thing: hearts so purified will send out a glow that warms an ever-widening circle of God’s children. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus says a few verses later in the Sermon on the Mount. “Don’t hide that light under a bushel basket,” Jesus says. “Let it shine before others so that they can give glory not to you but to your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:14-16). The light that glows from a purified heart is designed to encircle the globe. It might start just with the people around you, but it radiates out from there. Jesus, after all, began to preach just to the Jews; just to his own people. But it didn’t take long before Gentiles started to listen as well. And by the end of Matthew’s gospel the Risen Lord is saying, “Go into *all* the world, make disciples of *all* nations” (Mt. 28:19). The righteousness of God, the embrace of God, the *Kingdom* of God includes – potentially – *everyone*. As New Testament scholar F.W. Beare put it, “The reign of God who made the world cannot be locally or racially circumscribed, and those who enter it are called to serve it in its *fullness*.” So it’s not about me and how fantastic I am, it’s not about the people who are like me and how fantastic we are, it’s about God and sharing the love and justice of God with *everyone*: including people who might not look like you, including people who might live in another nation, including people who might even want to harm you. Hatred and disdain for others does not nurture a pure and gentle heart. The blessings of the Kingdom come to those whose hearts are overflowing with love, even for their enemies. Which is why the peacemakers especially are called the children of God.

Being blessed begins with a right relationship with God; a relationship whose foundation is God’s unconditional love for you. Being blessed deepens as one’s heart is warmed and purified and made gentle by such love. The blessing then radiates out to others through the glowing light that God has placed in your heart. And the broad community that is created by that light demands our highest devotion. That community is called the Kingdom of God; or, in Matthew’s gospel, the Kingdom of heaven. The Beatitudes, in fact, are something like talking points that summarize what the Kingdom of heaven is all about. They describe some of the responsibilities of citizenship in the Kingdom. And by sharing these blessings with his disciples, Jesus is saying, “If you want to follow me, you will become a citizen of this Kingdom. You will leave behind your former loyalties, be they to friends or family or nation, and your *primary* loyalty will be to the Kingdom. You will seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness,” Jesus says, and this will be a blessing because when do so, “*All* that you truly need will be granted unto you” (Mt. 6:33).

Yes, to be a Christian is to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God. “Our citizenship is in heaven,” St. Paul says (Phil 3:20); we are citizens of “a holy nation,” St. Peter affirms (1 Pet 2:9). The Kingdom is our nation, God is our Sovereign, and it is the coming of *God’s* Kingdom and the doing of *God’s* will to which we pledge our allegiance each and every Sunday when we pray the Lord’s Prayer.

That is ultimately what true righteousness is all about: affirming that our first allegiance is to the One who first loved us, and then living out that allegiance in our daily lives: by seeking to be pure and gentle-hearted peacemakers who hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God’s Kingdom.

This is where it gets tricky. Because, of course, we are also citizens of the United States; or, if you are from abroad, perhaps another nation. To be a Christian is to be a dual citizen, and sometimes our loyalties clash. One of the ways in which Hitler rose to power is that he convinced the majority of Christians in Germany that they were *first* Germans, and *then* Christians. Jesus makes it clear that it’s the other way around. Whether we’re talking about Germans in the 1930’s or Americans in 2017, we are first Christians, and then citizens of a nation on earth. “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God,” Jesus says.

And so it was with great concern that I heard our new President, in his Inaugural Address, say these words:

“At the bedrock of our politics will be a *total* allegiance to the United States of America, and through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other.”

My friends, these are dangerous words. And I would be saying that regardless of the political party or ideological affiliation of our President. For the Christian, our total allegiance is to the Kingdom of God, and it is through our loyalty to the *Kingdom* that we are reconciled to each other. It is Jesus Christ who breaks down the walls of separation, says St. Paul. God is the foundation, Christ is the cornerstone, it is in *him* that the whole structure is joined together. Check out the 2nd chapter of Ephesians; it’s all there.

And so, when the question is, “Who will and who won’t be offered the biblical practice of hospitality,” the first issue isn’t what country they’re from, or even my own safety. The first issue is “What would Jesus do?” The first issue is “What does the Kingdom of God demand? What does the Lord require of me?” The Lord who said, “Come unto me, *all* who carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28).

For the Christian, the bedrock of politics is the Kingdom of God. That is where our primary loyalty lies. Nation and family and neighbor and self are *secondary* loyalties, but they *are* secondary. You can *serve* God in the sphere of nation and family and neighbor and self, but for the Christian, the *primary* loyalty is to God. That’s what true righteousness is all about.

So how are you today? Whether or not you respond by saying, “I’m blessed,” you are. You are blessed because God loves you. You are blessed because God has embraced you and drawn you into a right relationship with the One whose mercy is infinite. You are blessed because, by God’s grace, your heart is being made gentle and strong and pure. You are blessed because you are a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

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

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

It is the righteousness of the Kingdom, the righteousness of the One who loves the whole world, the tender and true righteousness of God that each and every one of us is to seek, with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength. If we seek *God’s* righteousness, then someday, beyond this world, by God’s grace, we will all be fantastic! Amen.