

“God Blessed Living”

Matthew 5:1-12

February 3, 2019

Meditation

“When Jesus saw the crowd he went up the mountain...”

Matthew 5:1

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable unto you: Amen.

Meditation

When I was in college and seminary, I read the theology of the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich was a pastor and theologian who fled Nazi Germany and came to teach in the United States. His thought influenced several generations of ministers.

One of Tillich’s primary contributions was the notion that we are all religious beings, whether we think we are religious or not. He said that whatever is our ultimate concern in our lives is our god, or our religion. Building on Martin Luther, he noted that everyone has an ultimate concern and that when we place our ultimate concern in the place of God we become idolatrous.¹ We miss the point of who God as creator is and who we as creatures are. Therefore, regardless of the age in which we live, we are very much religious people at heart, even though we may not see ourselves that way.

New Religions?

I begin with this in mind because I read an article the other day that put this into a new light.² In this article, the author, Andrew Sullivan, contends that what is happening in most Western democracies these days is that more and more new “religions” or new “ultimate concerns” are struggling to make themselves known.

¹ See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 42.

² Andrew Sullivan, “America’s New Religions,” *The New Yorker Magazine* (December 7, 2018).

And by that he means what he calls two new religions: the religion of progressivism and the religion of populism, religions seeking ultimate allegiance.³

Those who profess belief in the religion of progressivism, he writes, affirm the gradual ascent of humanity toward prosperity. There is the creed of success that we can all claim material benefits and that it is our right to do so.⁴ Indeed, within this new religion, there are priests and priestesses who teach liberation from the so-called dark ages and who assent to various kinds of doctrines of self-promotion.

We also can see something similar happening in the religion of populism. Ultimate concern in populism is typically placed in the tribe, party, or nation. Ultimate purpose here is often found in the idea of following leaders who will make a country or a people what it used to be. And, as with the religion of progressivism, ridicule is also practiced, to the point that where persons who do not toll the line are cast out of the community of true believers.⁵

Now, what is interesting in both religions, the author contends, is how both “faiths” try to keep their tribe pure. There are acts of confession to do so. There are also pledges to transform the world and make sure others are towing the line, but only according to their own totalistic demands.⁶

Sermon on the Mount

To be sure, life is more complicated than what Andrew Sullivan describes. And yet, if anyone has not been living under a rock these days, there are strong religious impulses at work in our world today, impulses which have consequences.

That’s nothing new, of course. However, in the case of the religions I have mentioned, there is a great deal of unthinking going on: more reaction than reflection. We tend to want to label or dismiss others who do not see the world the way we do. Indeed, I suppose it is something we all do to get a handle on life, as life is complicated. But name calling?

Indeed, I know over the last two weeks I have been called both a “fundamentalist” and a “liberal,” both of which are curse word these days, depending on what tribe you belong to.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

I think this is one of the reasons why the Sermon on the Mount continues to confound people today, for the Sermon on the Mount does not buy into the logics of this world; and it doesn't fit into the way we think about politics or religion, but rather points to what God is like and, in doing so, to what true religion entails. It paints a picture of the what followers of Jesus are to be about, rather than what we would like to see happen in the world. In doing so, it turns our expectations upside down about life in God's kingdom. This is why preaching on the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes is so difficult.

I know I may have mentioned his name before, and if so, I apologize, but I am grateful for what Fred Craddock, my professor of preaching and New Testament in seminary, told us about preaching on the Beatitudes. He said that preaching on the Beatitudes is tough and the reason it is tough is because "a beatitude is a kind of speech that does what it says and fulfills what it promises."

It's why the two most important words in the Beatitudes are the words "are" and "will." Blessed *are* those who mourn, for they *will* be comforted. Blessed *are* the meek, for they *will* inherit the earth. And so forth.

Here are the *persons* God is blessing. Not the causes. Not the politics. Not the religions. The people! God blesses people, and not just any people but people who *are* hurting, who *are* humble, who *are* working for peace, or who *are* poor in spirit.⁷ Why? Because that's what God does and that's who God is! It is in God's very character to act in such ways: to bless those who are suffering or who are striving for righteousness; because that's exactly what God *is* doing: God is also working for peace and righteousness.⁸ That's the good news of the kingdom (Matthew 4:2). Jesus is announcing to those who are suffering or who are serving in the kingdom that God *is* making his strength and his mercy *generously* available to them, with all the benefits of his grace.⁹

Again, that's what a Beatitude does: *it announces what it says God is doing and then it fulfills what God promises.*¹⁰

And it is why the message of the Beatitudes is relief to those who are suffering, and it's why we should not see them as more strategies to measure up, or

⁷ See John L. Hügel, *Partnering with the King: Study the Gospel of Matthew & Become a Disciple of Jesus* (Brewster: MA: Paraclete Press, 2013), 62.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone – Part One* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), 37.

⁹ *Partnering with the King*, 62.

¹⁰ *Matthew for Everyone*, 37.

more standards to fit in, or as more hoops to jump through to be part of this group or that group! Rather, we should see them as proclaiming the kind of God God is and, therefore, the kind of people God blesses when the going gets rough (Matthew 6:21-22).

Lessons on Beatitude: True Religion

Again, Jesus is not telling us to go out and be poor, or go out and be sad and mournful and then think that because we are behaving that way, we are going to get some kind of reward. That's works-righteousness, not gospel.¹¹

Instead, Jesus is saying, "Hey, if you are getting crushed because you are trying to live a faithful life, and if you are grieving because you have lost a loved-one, and if you are being merciful to people and folks are getting suspicious of whose team you are on, and if you are working for peace and feeling it is not going anywhere – then know that God not only blesses you, but God *will* – God *will* – bring relief. God *will* bring comfort. And God *will set the world to rights* (Matthew 5:12).

After all, that's why Jesus came in the first place: to reveal to us the Way of God in the kingdom, and that we come into the kingdom, not by our position of success or power, but by God's grace and righteousness.¹² Living the God-blessed life is about knowing how God blesses us in our troubles and then realizing how God is taking us to a new place of hope.

This is ultimately what true religion is. This is ultimately what true religion looks like, and it is what Christ teaches in the Sermon on the Mount: that God blesses those who may have thought they were unworthy or who may have felt their service to Jesus was not being valued, or who may have felt they were losing at life.¹³ Jesus reminds them that they are blessed and that they will receive their reward.

Just as he reminds us that there is grace regardless of where we are and that there is hope no matter what has happened. Just as he reminds us of the nature of God blessed living: life in the kingdom of God.

We come to the table now to receive such blessing. Amen.

¹¹ See John L. Hiigel, *Partnering with the King: Study the Gospel of Matthew & Become a Disciple of Jesus* (Brewster: MA: Paraclete Press, 2013), 62.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.