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NEITHER STATION NOR STATUS

Matthew 5:1-12

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Imagine you have a tremendous task ahead of you. A gargantuan responsibility suddenly thrust upon you after working in the family business for years. You might initially panic, but very quickly you would turn to preparation. Jesus didn't have much time – forty days to be precise. His preparation needed to be concentrated, intense, and productive. He chose to spend this time in solitude; alone with God...and the devil.

After his baptism, which was his commissioning and calling (not entirely unlike our laying on of hands when we ordain elders and deacons), Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted, which accordingly happened three times. But, I imagine, the rest of those hours, days, and weeks were spent in reflection, in Bible study and prayer, in planning his ministry, and crafting his message.

Next he begins to gather his team. Peter and Andrew, James and John. Even the Lord of heaven and earth won't do this alone.

Now it is time to begin.

Jesus launches his ministry, not only with words but with actions.

He cured every disease and healed every sickness.

Crowds began to surround him,
and his fame began to spread.

And then Matthew gets more specific,
adding a sense of an electrifying,
growing

MOVEMENT.

We know how hundreds of thousands of people
in our time will go to faith healers
desperate for relief.

Just imagine in Jesus' time
how much hope was placed in these healers,
when medicine
did more harm
than good.

*So his fame spread throughout all Syria,
and they brought to him all the sick,
those who were afflicted
with various diseases and pains,
demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics,
...and he cured them.*

And great crowds followed (Matthew 4:24ff)

And now they are ready. He has shown he cares, truly cares for them, and they will listen. The next words out of Jesus' mouth will tell us a tremendous amount about him. This is his first extended message for a large gathering. He wants to get this one right.

It will serve as Jesus' prolegomena. This fancy word is used to describe a summary of an academic paper which homes in on the crux of the argument. The definition is very instructive for Jesus' self-understanding of the crux of his ministry: *A formal essay serving to introduce and interpret an extended work.*

For Jesus, the extended work wasn't written; it was his life. This means we can understand his three years of healing, teaching, and his self-sacrifice on the cross through these beatitudes. It's why he is doing all of this.

And in these verses, we don't find a message of doctrine concerning his eternal nature or frightening people to faith through the flames of Hell; there is something more important to Jesus than right belief. In fact, the first followers of Jesus were not called Christians but people of THE WAY. And perhaps no place in all scripture sums up this path better than these twelve verses in Matthew. These verses carve out a "way" Jesus wants people to live in the world, while also disclosing the type of person that is close to his heart.

And they are not the powerful and the successful, though at that time it was believed that those were

the people favored by God. Instead, Jesus favors those knocked down by life; trampled by the world and life's circumstances.

The first beatitude sets the tone for the rest and it sounds odd and... well... wrong:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs IS the kingdom of heaven.

We might think they will be promised the kingdom of heaven as a future reward, but Jesus uses the present tense. Right now they are blessed, that is to say, "happy" (which some scholars claim is the more accurate translation). In many ways we know this to be false, for there is so much hardship, sometimes deep and abiding shame, not to mention at times a dramatically-reduced lifespan. Pastor McDaniel, from Macedonia Baptist, told me last month that deep poverty, combined with racism, can have the same effect as a soldier returning home from war. The PTSD leaves some shell shocked, with a severely diminished sense of self-worth.

But in one respect, there is something the poor have in abundance compared to those of us well to do:

They know they are in need of a Savior,
and that is what it takes in Jesus' kingdom.

One can see this with crystal clarity in Haiti.
Because material blessings of the world
have abandoned them,
they turn to God without holding

ANYTHING

BACK!

The churches overflow with thousands of people,
singing for hours
with an exultant joy,
rarely matched anywhere in our land.
The more tragedy strips away their pride
and sense of self-reliance, the more
they turn to the Lord.

On my recent visit to Haiti, a pastor told us his story of growing up in Cité Soleil – there were dozens of gangs to navigate, earthquakes, water

shortages, sometimes rampant disease, choking on dust and grime, amid a spiral of drugs. It sounds like a tragic story, but not to hear him tell it. For him, it is all a backdrop to the wondrous love of God that walked with him every step of the way.

But Jesus has all people in mind, in addition to the literally poor. This is why he proceeds on to the meek, to those who mourn, and to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, but still they are all found in the first beatitude.

The word Jesus used for poor literally means, "bent down". The poor in spirit are all those that have been bent down by loss, abuse, rejection. By a void in their life and a lost sense of meaning. Those bent down by the relentless climb to be the perfect parent, the perfect child, to do everything perfectly – every time. NEITHER STATION NOR STATUS MATTERED TO JESUS; only hearts that had been broken or spirits that were willing to be molded and shaped. Jesus' heart is for all those bent – for whatever reason – and he wants them to know that God will lift them up; that the kingdom is for them.

This a radical departure from the teachings of the time. The pharisees taught that animal sacrifices and ritual cleansing were the path to God and the system often categorically excluded the poor, and the poor in spirit, from these rituals. But Jesus saw transformation and love as the overarching principle. The promise in this passage is for all you here today bent down by the burdens in your life. Pray these beatitudes, from the depths of your heart, and you will know this peace and this promise is real and it is for you.

Next, after offering supreme comfort
for all those knocked down by life,
he offers a challenge,
a challenge for everyone,
that gets to the very core,
the very essence
of what it is to walk in the Way.

It's what he spent all his time thinking about
in the wilderness, while wrestling with the devil.

It is THE WAY that will change the world.
Truly change it.
Even right now.

And it is about mercy and peace – and moral courage to be merciful and peaceful when others, who claim to be on your side, spew words of hate and judgment.

Blessed are the merciful,
Blessed are the peacemakers,
Blessed are the persecuted for my sake...

A few months ago our country saw a man, a young man, live out this mercy, this peace, and indeed we saw him reviled as well. But his heart was pure and so his mercy and love stayed strong.

On September sixth, 2018, in Dallas, Texas a Caucasian police officer, Amber Guyer, was returning to her apartment when she found what she believed to be an intruder. In the dark and in fear, she murdered Botham Jean, an unarmed Afro-Caribbean man from the Island of St Lucia. Only it wasn't her apartment. It was his. Hers was three floors directly above.

At her trial, Botham's brother, 18-year-old Brandt Jean, said these words to his brother's killer for all the world to see,

If you truly are sorry, I can speak for myself, I forgive and I know if you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you. ...but I love you just like anyone else. And I'm not gonna say I hope you rot and die just like my brother did but I presently want the best for you. And I wasn't going to ever say this in front of my family or anyone, but I don't even want you to go to jail. I want the best for you, because I know that's exactly what Botham would want you to do. And the best would be to give your life to Christ. I'm not going to say anything else. I think giving your life to Christ would be the best thing that Botham would want you to do. Again I love you as a person and I don't wish anything bad on you. I don't know if this is possible, but can I give her a hug, please? Please?

And then, unbelievably, the two embraced, their eyes filled with tears, for a full minute.

A twitter storm erupted, castigating Botham's brother. But if you believe that the path to the kingdom lies through the WAY of Christ, there is no other way to peace, to healing, and to wholeness. The Gospel rides on the powerful shoulders of our Lord and people like Brandt Jean who follow his path.

Blessed are the merciful
Blessed are the pure in heart,
Blessed are the peacemakers
Blessed are all those that truly believe in the good news of the gospel
and who, like our Lord, live it.

Amen.