



January 29, 2023

BLESSED are the peacemakers

BLESSED are those who mourn

BLESSED are the poor in spirit

BLESSED +

BLESSED are the meek

BLESSED are the pure in heart

First Words

Dr. Jo Forrest

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"That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

You may recognize this statement, spoken by Neil Armstrong. As he descended the lunar landing module, these are the first words spoken by a human who walks on the surface of the moon.

Inventor Samuel Morse typed the first words, "what hath God wrought," into his telegraph machine, both fearing and marveling at the future of communications.

President George Washington defines his service to our country at his first inauguration with "I was summoned by my Country, whose voice I can never hear but with veneration and love."

One of the most eloquent speakers, self-schooled in the King James Bible, Abraham Lincoln, addressed a nation about to fracture into bloody war with: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies." He concludes with a plea for all to rise "by the better angels of our nature."

First words matter. When they name what clearly exists; the triumph of creativity, the wretchedness of evil, or the potential of a new future, the speaker appeals to the habits and hearts of the listeners to chart a new course.

Jesus' first words matter.

The Gospel of Matthew defines Jesus' lineage, born from the royal line of Hebrew ancestors to fulfil the divine prophecy of a messiah. The narrative of his birth anchors his existence to something far greater than human initiatives.

Jesus submits to baptism by John, with the voice from heaven proclaiming "this is my son, the beloved" only to be immediately tempted beyond human capacity by the devil over the next forty days.

After angels nurse him back to health, he begins his ministry along the shores of the Galilee, saying only "change your hearts and minds for the kingdom of God is coming near."

His disciples begin to follow and he proceeds to heal "those afflicted with pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics."

Only then, as crowds gathering from across the region, Jesus speaks.

Dear God, like the prophets before him, we know your son speaks for you, and gives us even more. Clear the clutter from our minds. Correct any notions we have about your vision for us, so bruised or ignored over the years. Give us a fresh slate to hear his startling words and receive his good news. Amen.

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"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 receive 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 for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

To a crowd of people more often labeled “loser” by established society, Jesus looks out and says, “blessed are you.”

After healing all manner of physical ailment, he turns to the deep wounds in the hearts and minds of people who struggle in life who find themselves still wondering if God will ever notice them, if they will ever catch a lucky break, or if they can ever feel peace.

His first words paint an utterly counterintuitive picture of blessedness: looking around the world, then and now, and it's easy to conclude that the “blessed” are the rich, happy, strong, satisfied, ruthless, deceptive, aggressive, safe, and well-liked. And yet, here's Jesus, saying that despite appearances, the truly “blessed” are actually the poor, mourning, gentle, hungry, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking, persecuted, and reviled.

That first word Jesus speaks as he looks at a sea of people is *makarios*, translated as “blessed.” Other faithful translations of this word include, “happy” or “flourishing are you,” or “congratulations,” equally as foreign to anyone who feels as though they sit at the bottom of despair.

Yet, Jesus' simple statement means that he sees them and chases after each person as if to say, "know that you are included in God's realm."

These blessings describe what he sees. They do not prescribe what to do.

His beatitudes are about what we cannot achieve and what we cannot make happen. His blessings startle.

Today, we may find the phrase #blessed next to photos on social media that reflect some genuine gratitude for a gift, such as "blessed to have such a supportive family behind me." Anyone whose family ignores or belittles them craves such a blessing.

And we see images labeled "blessed" to mask self-promoting.

Think of the selfie taken against a multi-hued sunset over the beach with #blessed.

Consider a smiling, runner with #blessed on a photo taken after medaling in a race. A remarkable achievement and call to celebrate the gift of physical endurance.

How often does a marathon runner post #blessed on a photo snapped while exiting the course after hitting the wall at mile six? And, yet that's exactly when Jesus might say, "blessed are you who fall apart, for you will receive the grace to start over."

Not that Jesus pushes anyone to such an extreme, but when you reach the end of endurance, he wants you to know, he cares, he is with you.

In recent internet searches, a young mother posted a selfie with #blessed, grateful for miracles of healing. We are blessed God calls men and women to pursue medicine and science. All healing comes as divine gift.

But how often would anyone ever write #blessed next a photo of her kneeling before a toilet after chemo? Jesus' first word in ministry implies that he blesses her, he assures her that when it feels as though the bottom of life falls out, there is no place she will go that he has not already been. He will always catch her.

I stand in awe before those who will claim in the depth of illness feeling the comfort of prayer, blessed by faith. They are my heroes.

No one would trade shoes with RowVaughn Wells, the mother of Tyre Nichols. And yet, Jesus blesses those who mourn, promising they will receive comfort.

To the protesting crowds, he blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – a divine gift to be satisfied. He confounds us by saying to anyone who is reviled and persecuted with all kinds of evil on his account, “rejoice and be glad.”

First and foremost, Jesus' words of consolation are good news for the poor, mourning, gentle, many of whom were among those initial crowds, and many of whom, too, were among Matthew's early readers.

These are also words of declaration for all to hear, throughout the ages, announcing the fact that the dawning "reign of heaven" involves an overturning of the world's hierarchies of status and privilege. God seeks all of creation to redeem. To heal. To love.

Fundamental to our understanding these blessings, beyond the analysis of the words, whether they make sense, or if they can steady us today, is to know these words come from Jesus.

To know that Jesus spoke these words, and embodied them in his ministry, shapes the way we measure any other wisdom.

For example, bookstores sell thick compendiums of wisdom and the internet overflows with self-help quotes. Preacher James Howell observes we often pick and choose these wisdom bits like casting a fantasy football team.¹

You might select for your team Kate Bowler, scholar from Duke Divinity School, who survived an alarming cancer diagnosis in her early thirties. She combines deep intellectual prowess and the grit of existing.

¹ James C. Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 19-23.

She writes “bless the garbage days.” She also writes the prayer “God, fear is taking up too much space and I have little bandwidth left.” Her books became popular because her insight resonates with how difficult life can be. I recommend them.

Maybe beef up your fantasy wisdom team with some secular ideas from Wharton psychologist Adam Grant. He advises, “hiding your weakness doesn’t project strength. It reflects insecurity. No matter what you do, people who know you will find you a flaw.”

Again, clear-eyed advice.

You can add more to your list of writers who offer wisdom to guide your days. In doing so, you might create an anthology of ideas that sooth your hurts ... but beware that as you shape what feels good, you don’t get caught up in some publisher’s or publicist’s prophet motive, luring you away from Jesus’ good news.

What matters most about these blessings is the one who said them: Jesus. Jesus speaks the heart of God.

Now that we considered what he said and why it matters that Jesus offers these, then the question remains, why? Why would he tell everyone at the beginning of his ministry what they would receive? The only reason you tell someone at the

beginning of the story how it will end is if it will become very scary in the middle.²

This inaugural sermon continues for three chapters as Jesus dispenses these revolutionary blessings. As his Sermon on the Mount concludes the writer of Matthew's gospel described the people's reaction: "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, not as one of the scribes." (7:28)

When he comes down off the mountain, he spends every waking moment he has on earth alleviating suffering.

He blesses the poor and teaches us to work so that people do not remain poor. He doesn't ignore the cruelty of the religious elite and the politically powerful. He confronts prejudice and injustice. After he notices the incarcerated and the demonized, he doesn't look away, he seeks to free them. He doesn't leave the sick to die, he doesn't abandon the dead to their graves.

Why would Jesus speak these divine blessings at the onset of his ministry?

When the authorities begin to suspect him, threaten him, and threaten his followers, they remember. His first words bless

² Mary Hinkle Shore, "Preaching the Beatitudes in the Age of Trump, *The Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2019.

them so that when the going gets tough, they remember before anything else: he blesses them.

After his death and God makes good on the promise to raise him to new life, they are prepared to receive Jesus' last words. His final words in the Gospel of Matthew commission them and us: "All authority on has been given to me. Go and make disciples of all nations. Teaching them everything. I am with you to the end of the age."

His words from beginning to end matter: blessed you, and you, and you.



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