

Sermon: Hear What the LORD Says

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12**

They say that ‘the most dangerous passages in the Bible are the familiar ones, because we do not really listen to them.’¹ Or, we’ve heard them so often, we no longer feel the need to delve into their meaning. They’ve become ‘spiritual bonbons.’

Jesus’ Beatitudes and Micah’s courtroom scene are good examples. If we read the Beatitudes with only our 21st century English word meanings, we miss what Jesus actually said. And in Micah, if we skip to the end, we might not realize that we’re in a courtroom with God.

The LORD had a ‘controversy’ with those who had broken the covenant, and now they are on trial in the same way Job once brought a lawsuit against God. The Bible is clear: there is always room to push back against God as long as you don’t mind God pushing back at you.

Rise, says the LORD, and plead your case before a jury of mountains and hills, a jury of peers, no doubt. Mountains and hills have been around a long time, and they know stuff. They were there when God made the covenant; and they saw how the people broke it. They have witnessed the evil that people have done. They may or may not be impartial, but there it is.

Nevertheless, God asks the people to remember certain events from the past, because if they did, they would never stray from God. King Balak, for one, once hired Balaam to speak a curse against Israel (Numbers 22), and God saved the day. Or, even earlier, when God brought the people up out of slavery in Egypt. That was big; let’s hope no one forgot about that one.

And so, the people ask, how do we make things right? God, through Micah, tells them.

Do what is good. This simply means to live according to the covenant.

Do justice. Justice means getting what we deserve. Micah tells us that it is something we must do. It’s not something to wish for or to complain about if it is lacking; we have to *do* it.

Love kindness. The Hebrew word is *hesed*, which has to do with love, loyalty, and faithfulness, all key elements in human relationships and also in our relationship with God.

Walk humbly. In our walk with God, Micah tells us to be careful that we put God first and to conform to God’s will. Most importantly, walk *with* God.

These are about lifestyle, and our outlook on life, and on our ethical values. That's what living into the covenant is all about. There is no one thing we can do to make things right with God; living up to our individual responsibilities and obligations is cumulative.

Which brings us to Jesus and the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes signify the new reality of God's kingdom on earth arriving in the person of Jesus. He went up the mountain; not very far up, just enough to get away from the crowds. His disciples came to him, and he spoke, and he had a lot to say, three chapters worth. He taught them, Matthew wrote, 'as one having authority' (7:29).

Last week, we mentioned that Jesus left us a road map. Well, this is it.

These nine sayings are a prelude to the Sermon on the Mount. The format of 'if you do this, then that will follow,' makes them easy to remember, and we can include them in our private prayers, like this: "Dear Lord, hear my prayer. Remember my friends and loved ones this day. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Amen."

'Blessed,' by the way, is one of those words with a 21st century meaning we spoke of earlier. The original Greek word can have many meanings, including blessed, fortunate, or happy, especially when applied to a 'privileged recipient of divine favor.'²

By necessity, translators must choose one meaning and *blessed* was it, but *fortunate* would be a better choice in Matthew's context.

The Beatitudes reflect teachings in first-century Judaism so it makes sense that Jesus would teach the same things. Each blessing has a deeper meaning if we look hard enough.

The *poor in spirit*, for example, are those humble or afflicted ones who are conscious of their need for God. Those who *mourn* are not those who are grieving a personal loss but those who lament our disobedience to God. Whoever has *pity* on people will obtain pity from heaven, and *peacemakers* are those who love peace and will pursue it.

In the Sermon itself, Jesus explains to the disciples about their place in the world, his role in fulfilling the Law, about justice and prayer, and what it means to follow him.

It may be that all the violence and trauma in the world has drowned out Jesus' teachings. He may as well have said, "Blessed are the cheesemakers" for all the lasting impact these sayings seem to have had on the world in the past two thousand years.

Yes, they are familiar; yes, some of us have memorized them. But, as a percentage of the world's population, how many people have mercy on others?

How many love peace and will pursue it to its logical conclusion?

How many people fast as a form of prayer for righteousness and doing the will of God?

Do we embody Jesus' teachings in daily life? Have we broken the cycle, or are we as a species too preoccupied with perpetuating our failings?

Salvation comes from God alone and every first-century Jew knew that it comes from the way we live our lives and not in how we try to please God with empty gestures and empty words.

When Jesus spoke the Beatitudes to the disciples – and we were fortunate to be listening in – he taught them that God speaks to those deemed to be worthy. He taught them that God chooses sides. God chooses to be on the side of the weak and vulnerable, the forgotten, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who seek justice.

Jesus calls us to live into the blessings of the Beatitudes, and to pursue righteousness grounded in God's steadfast love, generosity, goodness, and mercy.

As we tend to remember the noblest parts of our imperfect American history, God calls us to remember what God has done for us in the past and to forget those things we've done poorly or have not done at all when we should have, and which might have caused a *controversy* with God. We are daily called to do what God requires of us in the present and in the future, and to do what is good, for the world's sake.

Amen.

¹ Meier, John P. "Matthew 5:3-12." *Interpretation* 44, no. 3 (July 1990): 281–85.

² Bauer, Walter. Essay. In *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 486. University of Chicago Press, 1979.