

Blessed

Part 3, Matthew 5:1-12

¹ Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:1-12)

"If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?"

Some years ago I spotted a promo for a lecture entitled; "Quantum mechanics and the mathematical exploration of N-dimensional space". I thought why not, I've got a free night and I'm having trouble sleeping. The speaker was a British physicist who began with this little speech he said; forget everything you know about reality. This turned out to be pretty good advice because the lecture was mind blowing with bizarrely different ways of understanding the universe and I've discovered that "the forget everything you know" is good advice because in order to understand new things it's almost essential to let go of some of the old things.

Now this in a nut shell is what Jesus is saying to his disciples on the occasion of his first big talk, forget everything you think you know about God's blessing; because what you currently think about blessing is getting in the road of actually having God's blessing. Jesus comes at this in today's reading by making nine statements about blessing. Now we remember that in the bible numbers don't just count things they mean things. Nine symbolises divine completeness with a sense of finality. Christ died at the 9th hour of the day (Mark 15:35) and said "it is finished!" (John 19:30). The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the holiest of day of the Jewish calendar begins at sunset on the 9th day (Leviticus 23:32). Nine is also the number of fruits of God's Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22 - 23). So when Jesus talks about nine blessings he is saying this is the final word on blessing. Secondly, Jesus is also saying that human culture really doesn't "get" blessing.

The almost universal assumption about divine blessing is that you prosper materially and personally. So when someone says I've been blessed what they mean is that I

have done well financially, I have done well physically, I have done well personally, things are good for me – I'm blessed. Which is good, I guess, unless you are struggling financially, physically and personally and then this concept of blessing becomes less blessing and more bother. Jesus was pretty much dead against the healthy, wealthy definition of blessing. In John 9, Jesus meets a blind man and the disciples ask Jesus, "*who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" (John 9:2). Now the implication is fairly obvious, the disciples assume that people with good sight are blessed by God but that people who are born blind have lost God's blessing because someone has done something wrong. Jesus is very clear about this, this is not the way God blesses, he says; *neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.* (John 9:3)

Our Australian culture, Christian or otherwise, has exactly the same healthy, wealthy assumption about blessing. Which has often left believers, for whom things have not gone well, who have struggled financially, or with ill health, or with difficult family relationships, with some really difficult feelings like; what is wrong with me? What have I done wrong? Why isn't God blessing me?

To begin with we need to look at expectations, because the wrong expectations can really make a mess of our life.

Some unrealistic expectations

1. Life should be fair
2. I will be rewarded for just tuning up
3. Everyone should like me
4. Everyone should agree with me
5. If you love me you should know what I'm thinking
6. God will bless me with wealth and wealth

For instance

1. Life should be fair. Ding, ding, ding, ding, unrealistic expectation. This just isn't true. There are too many selfish, crooked and evil people running around the world for things to be fair. The bible bangs this unrealistic expectation on the head repeatedly. It was not fair that Cain killed his brother Able. It was not fair that Jacob stole Esau's birthright, that Jacob was deceived by his uncle, that Joseph was sold into slavery, that Israel turned their back on God after he rescued them, that Naomi lost both her sons and her husband or that the Son of God was tried in a kangaroo court by his own people and killed. The bible is clear, life is not intrinsically fair and it's one of the reasons why we need a Saviour.

2. I will be rewarded for just turning up. Ding, ding, ding, ding, unrealistic expectation. This is the one that all the businessmen I know complain about. Young people who were given awards at school for breathing, turn up at a job and are

crushed to discover that they have to work hard and without a cheer squad. In fact if they mess up they will be told so, in a way that school has not fully prepared them for. The biblical equivalent of this is Israel's expectation that just being descendants of Abraham puts them in God's good books. Jesus quickly knocked that expectation on the head:

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. (Luke 3:8)

Other examples of unrealistic expectations might include

3. Everyone should like me

4. Everyone should agree with me

5. If you love me you would know what I'm thinking.

Fellers, do you recognise this? This is an anvil of unrealistic expectations which men have been stretched across for centuries. If you loved me you would know what I am thinking? No I wouldn't, this expectation assumes a much higher level of functionality than is reasonable. Dearest, I have days when I struggle to chew gum and tie my own shoe laces and you expect me to read your mind? That is not realistic.

6. God blesses with health and wealth

So if my expectation is that to be blessed means that God will give me health and wealth and the opposite of that is happening in my life then my relationship with God is going to get a little messed up, which is why Jesus tells his disciples nine times, that is not the way God's blessing works.

When Jesus sits down with his disciples he is aware of what is going to happen to these people in a few years. He sees down the tunnel of time and he knows three things. Firstly, these disciples are going to know God in a way that no one in the history of the world has ever known God. Jesus knows that a day is coming for these people sitting right in front of him when the barriers between them and their God will be torn apart. (Mark 15:38). That the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God will actually begin to dwell in them (1 Corinthians 6:19) because this is what the bible says blessing means, God's life in our life.

I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them." (John 17:26)

The second thing that Jesus knows is that this same group of disciples are going to have trouble. Because they follow Jesus, their Jewish neighbours will consider them traitors and boycott their businesses and most of them will struggle financially for the rest of their lives. Most of them will be harassed and arrested, many of them will go to prison and die violently and other people will wonder why God has not blessed them. But the third thing that Jesus knows is that despite all these difficulties, these

disciples will go to their graves feeling overwhelmingly blessed for knowing God, his love and salvation. This is how their Leader Peter wrote about it, summing up the feelings of the followers of Jesus:

⁶In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6-9)

So when Jesus sits down on the mountain to teach his disciples he gives them nine ways in which they will be blessed not just despite their difficulties, but because of them.

So Jesus teaches his disciples about blessing for those days when they are tired and discouraged, wondering if they are doing any good in the world. Then they will come together and they will pray and the Spirit of God will flow through them and between them and they will know that they are in the presence of the creator of the world, they will feel Him, and they will see the world in a very different way, for those days Jesus says:

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:3)*

It will be for those days when they hear that another of their companions has died in prison. And in ones and two's they will find a quiet place to gather and remember, and the belief will rise up in them that while their companion has died, death has been defeated, that their companion now lives with Jesus, the one who faced death and defeated death, for those days Jesus says:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (Matthew 5:4)

It will be for those days, when an angry mob has decided that followers of Jesus are bad, mad or just sad and they have thrown rocks at them, and said all kinds of unkind things about them, and pushed and shoved them and in return the followers of Jesus have simply wished their enemies well and inexplicably been filled with the sense that everything is ok and in God's hands and that Justice will be done. For those days Jesus says:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:5)

It will be for those days, when the Jerusalem church has run out of money and the families are down to one small meal a day, eaten carefully and reverently. On those days they will gather together and urgently speak about all that Jesus said and did and his words will enter into their being and it will fill their souls, for those days Jesus says:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matthew 5:6)

It will be for those days when Jesus followers meet one of the woman, who only a few days ago was part of the angry mob shouting curses and threats but now she has been thrown out of her house by her husband and she has no place to go, and in the hearts of the believers their rises up this bizarre love for this person. So they embrace her and lead her to one of their homes where they will share with her their small amount of food. For those days Jesus says:

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. (Matthew 5:7)

It will be for those days when the full moon festival is at its peak and the streets are full of drunken revellers and the believers have decided to meet together and pray and worship and as they worship, the faces of their friends take on this other worldly quality, a reflection of the presence of love that is amongst them. For those days Jesus says:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (Matthew 5:8)

It will be for those days when one of the disciples has brought a gift of food to a neighbour who is just really angry that he became a follower of the Nazarene. It will be the third gift and the third visit he has made, praying each time for the right words and finally, his neighbour's heart softens and they share a cup of wine discussing long into the night this strange teaching about God's love. For those days Jesus says:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. (Matthew 5:9)

It will be for those days when the mob breaks all restraint and they take your friend Stephen, one of the kindest men you have ever known and they pound his body to death with hate and rocks. And during those final terrible moments you will forever remember the look of peace on Stephen's face and him crying out; *"I see heaven and I see Jesus"*. For those days Jesus says:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:10)

It will be for those days when the disciples find themselves before a magistrate and it will not matter what they say because the judgement will already have been made and they will end up in prisons built for thief's and murders, when they neither stole nor hurt a fly. But in prison they will remind each other of a night not so long ago when the son of God was taken from such a prison and crucified and whose death meant that where-ever they were they were forever free, and they will sing and be glad in that prison. For those days Jesus says:

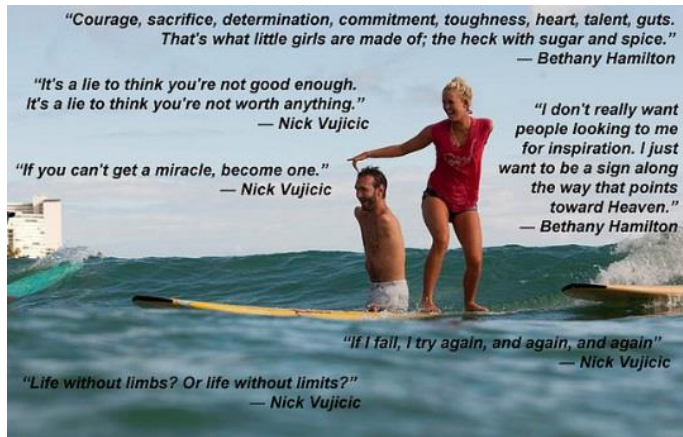
"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is

your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12)

Whenever I find the worlds definition of blessing beginning to infect my mind and my spirit I remember the lives of two people who grasp perfectly what Jesus meant by blessing.

Nick Vujicic and Bethany Hamilton, one was born without arms and legs and the other had her arm bitten off by a shark, but both of them know the deep blessing of God and demonstrate that blessing is not health and wealthy, but deeply knowing God.

Nick says, the victory is not when I stand up. The victory is when I realize that I can't do it on my own.



This is what the beatitudes, Jesus teaching about blessing teach us, that when we reach out to God in our need he blesses us with his presence and saving grace – how is this for a picture of blessing?



Let's pray