

Sermon: 7 Beatitudes & 7 Sins

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

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For those of you who are regulars you know that there's a topic we did as a Lenten series a few years ago that I circle back to occasionally. And here it is again - the 7 Deadly Sins. I just find it an effective schemata for considering what's wrong with our world and how the wrongness of the world is not a problem out there alone but a problem in here, in our own souls and hearts. It's a practice in honesty and humility I find to consider where the 7 Deadly Sins come to play in our own psyches and our own lives and this morning they are interesting counterpoints I believe to Jesus' beatitude teachings as he begins his sermon on the mount with this list of what it means to be blessed in the eyes and heart of God. So we'll consider the 7 beatitudes and what we might call this morning the 7 anti-beatitudes, the 7 blessings and the countervailing 7 curses and then at the risk of oversimplifying a bit we'll have two paths to choose from.

So let's begin by remembering that one of the essential aspects of our being and surviving as human is the fact that we desire. We are not just human beings we are human desirings. Where sin enters the equation is when our desire becomes torqued or as St. Augustine referred to it "incurvatus in se" turned in on oneself. The mythic image of this is in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve desire that which God says don't eat and their desire gets the best of them and they chow down on the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And anyone of us who has been a child or a teenager knows the truth of that story, being told "no" only increases our desire for it. But it's when our desire becomes

turned inward and focused on ourselves rather than outward and towards God, that's where sin enters the equation.

The 7 beatitudes of Jesus are exactly the opposite of that. Blessed are those who either turn outward toward God intentionally or their circumstances have turned them outward toward God. The poor of spirit, the mournful, and the meek, the first 3 beatitudes, are conditions that tend to lead people into a state where they are more dependent upon God's presence and grace. The pursuit of righteousness, merciful actions, maintaining a purity of heart, and peacemaking are intentions or efforts that also turn us outward toward God not so much seeking our own gain as the gain of all that is around us.

They track pretty well, the 7 beatitudes and the 7 sins, so let's dig in one by one and we start with Jesus' teaching: blessed are the poor in spirit. Luke says Jesus says "the poor" and Matthew says Jesus says "the poor in spirit", but whether we are experiencing a poverty outwardly or inwardly the effect can be the same: "blessed are those who are poor and know their need for God." (The New Living Translation of the Bible). Or blessed are those whose poverty drives them towards God. The opposite, the deadly sin is when our natural human desires drives us not towards a greater dependence on God but towards greed, a grabbing and grasping and hoarding where *our gain* comes at the expense of others. It tends to be the name of the game in our economy, but in the God's economy it's different. Jesus says "blessed are those who are poor in spirit", while others are vying for the kingdoms of this world, "theirs is the kingdom of God".

He says all these about as concisely as he could, in these short sentence blasts, and moves onto the next one. "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted." The deadly sin that is the opposite of the way of mourning is the

way of gluttony where the painful empty hole in us due to loss or failure or anxiety or fear we try to fill with whatever we can get our hands on – drugs or alcohol, food, shopping, work, information, social media, entertainment, whatever that thing is that tends to numb us to the emptiness, that helps us avoid the pain and what needs to be mourned in us and in the world. That’s the nature of gluttony. The novelist Peter DeVries says “gluttony is an emotional escape, a sign that something is eating us.” And so Jesus teaches us quite simply blessed are those who mourn, who sit in the emptiness, the sorrow, the grief and wail for the ourselves and the world in all its suffering instead of covering it over with fluff and chemicals and plastics and busy-ness. With all that there is no space, no time, no humility there to allow oneself to be comforted which is what a mourning person and a mourning world needs. They need comfort, not for their problems to be fixed and solved or satiated but simply comforted. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Or as the Message translation of the Bible says – “Blessed are you when you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.”

The third blessing, Jesus teaches - blessed are the meek (or the humble), for they will inherit the earth. Obviously the anti-beatitude which they call the deadliest sin of all is PRIDE, which is essentially the turning away from our Higher Power, our God, cause “we got this”, cause we know better, cause my power is the only power that matters and the self is exalted by way of the diminishment others. It’s probably the one thing that makes Jesus the most furious in the Gospels, not your everyday run of the mill sinner, but the prideful religious people who elevate themselves and denigrate others in the name of God and religion. And all these years later we still haven’t come out from under this one. Blessed

are the humble, is what Jesus teaches. The writer Frederick Buechner says this of humility - "it doesn't consist in thinking ill of yourself but not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you'd be apt to think of anyone else. It is the capacity for being no more and no less pleased when you play your own hand well as when your opponents do." Jesus says blessed are the humble, the meek, and then hands them everything – for they will inherit the earth. The proud, you might say will destroy the earth, while the humble inherit it as an heir and a steward of what is ultimately God's.

The 4th blessing. If you count the beatitudes you might notice that there are actually 8 but for our meditation purposes I am combining the 4th and the 8th because they are both about pursuing what is right and just no matter the consequences. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and are even persecuted in that pursuit for they will be satisfied and the kingdom of heaven is theirs! The opposite of this beatitude is considered the second most deadly of the deadly sins, just behind pride, and that is the sin of sloth. It's a doozy of a sin because, especially in our culture it's so easy to think it doesn't apply to us – I work hard so sloth is not my issue. Ask anyone how they are doing and the answer is likely going to be I'm just crazy busy right now. It might be true with how we've designed our lives but it also gives away what is a core sin of our culture and that is that we work ourselves into worthiness. If we are not busy then somehow we are not worth anything we believe. But busy-ness and slothfulness are not opposites. The opposite of the slothful person is the person who hungers and thirsts for what is right and good and true and will pursue it even at the cost to themselves. The sin of sloth is the sin of not caring because we are too tired with our busy lives to care, because someone else will deal with it,

because we are too comfortable to care about the uncomfortable, we are too entertained or numbed out to find within ourselves the energy to get up and fight for justice especially when we are not the victims of it. That's the sin of sloth. Sloth says "eh, whatever" in the face of injustice.

I heard it said during the pandemic that the only reason so many people poured into the streets for the Black Lives Matter protests was because they were bored and sick of being at home. Exactly. When we allow ourselves to be bored, to sit still even for a little while, we are likely going to be a whole lot more apt to care, to get out into the streets and care. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and even are persecuted for it, for they will be filled (God bless the Iranian protestors who aren't numbed out too much to care).

The 5th beatitude teaching of Jesus is "blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." The nature of mercy is such that you necessarily show it to someone who doesn't deserve it. Built into the concept of mercy is guilt. The person is deserving of punishment or strict justice but Jesus teaches that blessed are not those exacting justice or punishment but those who show mercy to the guilty. For they, he says, will be shown mercy. The deadly sins are the great equalizer because we all fall under their spell even if some of us favor certain of the deadly sins in our lives over others, we all are guilty cause we all sin and since we all desire to be shown mercy for the ways we fail we must show mercy to others. The anti-beatitude here that lurks in the background of this one is envy, where we want for ourselves what we see others have. Your gain is somehow my loss. Your loss or misfortune is somehow my gain and fortune and so the curving in on ourselves. Showing mercy and thereby receiving mercy is exactly the opposite of

this where the other's gain is my gain and the others loss is my loss, and we reverse that movement and turn outward to others and God.

The 6th beatitude is blessed are the pure in heart, Jesus teaches, for they will see God. Or as the Message translates it – “blessed are you when you get your inside world – your mind and heart - put right. Then you will be able to see God in the outside world.” And the opposing deadly sin that accompanies purity of heart would be... lust. Notice that the passage does not say blessed are the pure in body – Jesus takes issue time and again with those who maintain a strict purity code externally without tending to the inner realities of pride, greed, lust, that are denied or hidden by the outer presence of a “pure life”. Jesus goes right for the jugular and says no, blessed are the pure in heart, not just those living a pure outward life, but pure inwardly is the key, getting your mind and heart put right, not lusting after what will gain you power and privilege and pleasure but seeking that which brings deeper relationship and union and wholeness. While lust is the devouring or subsuming of the other into my needs and wants which blinds us to the true other and to God, purity of heart is finding the proper relationship to the other which even means at times that I must diminish in order for you to flourish and such right relationship helps us, as Jesus teaches, to see God.

And finally Jesus teaches “blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called children of God.” Not the competitors and fighters and winners are blessed but the peacemakers. The way the Message translates it is like this – “Blessed are those who can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are and your place in God's family.” The anti-beatitude drawing us away from this teaching and this reality is the deadly sin of

wrath, or anger or vengeance. Just as built into the concept of mercy is guilt, built into the concept of being a peacemaker is conflict. We are peace-keepers if we are maintaining the status quo of no conflict, but we are peacemakers when we are taking a conflicted situation and hueing out of it peace often at expense to ourselves. That's where the rubber meets the road. When we are treated unjustly. When we are furious with the other. When we want vengeance for what was done to us or to another. That's when we are called away from the deadly sin of wrath to be a maker of peace. The pathway to flourishing is peacemaking and our wrath or anger that leads to vengeance in however small and subtle a way is the pathway to diminishment.

Jesus' beatitudes – poverty of spirit, mourning, humility, the pursuit of righteousness, merciful actions, maintaining a purity of heart, and peacemaking are the pathway to ours and the world's flourishing and the 7 Deadly Sins are the pathway to ours and the world's diminishment if not destruction.

May God lead us in the way of the beatitudes and may we support one another in following that way, the truth, and life, in the spirit and power of our risen Lord, amen.