

A Radically Different “Christmas” Narrative

Today’s Sunday School lesson argues that the Incarnation of the Son of God was such a radically transforming event in the history of the cosmos that we can’t possibly honor it in any human way. Certainly not the way Christians in America celebrate Christmas. We only trivialize the event by our attempts to celebrate it. If we grasp all that the Incarnation means, we can’t do better than to fall on our knees in wonder and worship, and stay there until the Spirit has finished glorifying in our hearts the exalted living God.

The holy Creator God, whose Being is so transcendent, so infinitely other than anyone we know that no Scripture author can find adequate words to communicate it (try Ezekiel 1, or Revelation 4), condescended to enter into His creation. In profound humility, He willingly took upon Himself humanity with all its physical limitations, in order to show a totally divine type of love to His creatures. And more, He did it to reconcile to Himself an entire world of lost, rebellious people, people condemned to eternal punishment because of their ugly, corrupt natures, so that they can instead be eternally blessed. And yet more: He did it to bring into existence a wholly new and different world, a new and different era, one characterized by the indwelling Spirit of God with His holiness as an essential attribute.

There’s no better way to understand what God did in the Christmas story than to study the Beatitudes. That’s because these few verses encapsulate the radically new kind of existence the Son brought to earth. The Beatitudes introduce the Sermon on the Mount, which is how Christ Jesus began His ministry. In fact, the entire Sermon on the Mount can be understood as an expansion of the Beatitudes. So the Beatitudes, not the birth narratives, are the most appropriate place to think about the Incarnation, because here the Son begins to speak to us. And His words are life to us. It’s by incorporating into our minds the Beatitudes that we grasp something of the meaning of the Incarnation. The birth narratives are there to document that God fulfilled in history all that He promised in the Old Testament. But those narratives don’t change lives. Christ’s words do.

On the surface, the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) encourage us to look forward to blessing in the future. They’re a vision of the coming Kingdom that the King is proclaiming. These Beatitudes also are virtues we should desire, we should strive to possess. Deeper, these are here to show us where we’re going in life, where we want to be. In other words, they’re here to transform us. We’re not to continue a self-indulgent, self-promoting lifestyle, but instead are to want to be a totally different person, one like Jesus, who perfectly displayed all these virtues. They were given not to serve as tests for who’s saved, nor as something for us to do or to be in order to be saved. They were given to those who were already Jesus’ followers so that they could be changed into being just like Him, to the glory of God. They are for us.

Let’s look now at each one.*

“Poor in spirit” is totally counter-cultural. It’s exactly the opposite of what we’d expect from religion. It’s not intuitive, because we suppose that blessed ones should be those who are rich in spirit. They would be beautiful people, with beautiful words, exuding beautiful religious thoughts. But no. Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” These are people who are empty, and they know it. They need Jesus. Nothing else and no one else will do. The “poor in spirit” are not those who, with false humility, assert their worthlessness yet refuse to accept the forgiveness that God offers in the Gospel. The poor in spirit are people who, if they can’t have Jesus, they are totally lost in despair and guilt and hopelessness. They must have what God offers. They want it more than anything else. They know that acceptance by God cannot possibly be on the basis of anything in themselves.

“Those who mourn” are grieved over everything that’s wrong with the world. They mourn over sin and rebellion, over Satan’s dominion, over all unrighteousness. These people are ready to renounce all that the world puts on offer because they know that it’s all just glitter and puff if not downright evil. They understand that what the world calls happiness, peace, and security is bogus. This blessing is counter-cultural also because one would suppose that it’s those who are happy and at peace whom God has blessed. But no. The blessing is for those “who mourn.” By the way, self-pity isn’t what this beatitude is about. Neither is it despair over what’s happening in politics or in our nation’s civil life.

“The meek” look to God as the giver of everything, without which they cannot go on. They look away from self. In contrast, the proud are looking to themselves as being sufficient for everything. The proud are self-reliant. The meek know they can’t rely on themselves, but must rely on God. Meekness isn’t submission to or being resigned to circumstances and/or to authorities. Nor is meekness being passive in daunting circumstances. No, it’s actively trusting in God because they know only He is sufficient for every circumstance and for every need.

“Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” seek God’s righteousness, not some human counterfeit. They want to act just as righteous God would act. Righteousness has to be our great desire: to act righteously personally and to see God’s righteousness manifest in society. It’s not Christ’s righteousness that’s imputed to us by faith that’s in view here. It’s our actually being righteous in daily life, carrying out God’s holy will that’s revealed in Scripture. This beatitude is in contrast to the massive moral complacency that is painfully evident all around us. People can easily be resigned to accepting how things are and maybe don’t even know how they could be better -- and maybe don’t care. People also can be self-righteous: they’re sure that they know what’s right, but without reference to God or to His righteousness.

“The merciful” express love. These people not only have compassion, not only seek the good of their neighbor, not only forgive those who have offended, they love even their enemies. They don’t merely forgive others, they want those who’ve offended them to be blessed. These people have a sense of God’s extreme and radical kind of love for us, and they want to mimic it. The opposite to being merciful is being judgmental (which stems from self-righteousness); these people have contempt for sinners, contempt for those who offend, and they have no need for God’s mercy.

“The pure of heart” are those who are filled with an insatiable want to know God and His will, and to desire all that God desires. We thoughtlessly suppose that to be “pure in heart” means that there’s no sin there. Or that it’s a heart that has no illicit desires. Wrong! If that were the case, the heart would simply be a vacuum. The pure in heart, rather, have a heart that longs for God and the things of God. The opposite of a pure heart is a heart that’s idolatrous, that seeks to live apart from God and His will, a heart that lives with no gratitude to God for all He’s provided. The pure of heart wants to see God worshipped and glorified.

“Peacemakers” make *shalom*. We assume that “making peace” has to be in the context of conflict of some kind and finding a satisfactory resolution. But Jesus has in mind here *shalom*, a Hebrew word that is usually translated as “peace” but it actually means a whole lot more than that. It means a flourishing of life and being blessed by God, and desiring God’s rule in our nation. And more. So that’s what we’re to be doing with our lives, being a person who mediates God’s blessing to others. The opposite of *shalom*-makers are those who are so full of themselves, all they can do is promote themselves and seek recognition; in fact, they may even induce conflict as they use others for their own purposes.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted” is necessarily the concluding beatitude, and it’s so important that it occurs twice. If we take all the above seriously, and put them into practice in our lives, we’ll necessarily experience persecution. Note that persecution isn’t a virtue, as the others are. It’s a natural hostility to God, to Jesus, and to us if we’re following Jesus as He would have us follow Him. Jesus modeled all the above virtues, and He was persecuted because of it. In other words, these virtues that Jesus commands are costly. Although others curse us, God will bless us. This last beatitude starkly reveals how fiercely counter-cultural all these beatitudes are.

Implicit in these beatitudes are two things: (1) The world is full of people with opinions. But opinions – even good opinions about the Person and work of Christ, which is all that “belief” means to many – are no indication of character. Actions are, what we *do*. What’s in our heart will result in what we do. God’s concern is our character. (2) Those who practice these virtues look to God to vindicate/reward them in the future. Christ expects us to embrace godly values now, even though repudiating worldly values means we suffer loss, trusting God to bless us in the future.

The Beatitudes are the first words of Christ to us. His last words are in the letters to the Churches in Revelation. There, He wants us to be “overcomers.” An overcomer is one who obeys the Word of Christ, as empowered by the Spirit, to overcome worldly desires, the lusts of the flesh and the pull of our sin nature, and the fear of suffering and of dying. An overcomer overcomes idolatry, pride, apathy, greed and a host of other vices, and instead practices the virtues of Christ. Both Christ’s 1st and last words to us have to do with character and with blessing in the otherwise unknowable future.

Conclusion: Jesus didn’t come to earth to be celebrated as a baby in a manger. He came to change us, to transform us, to make us godly. He came to take us to God. What Jesus places on offer in the Gospel isn’t just a spot in heaven while we live conforming to how everybody else all around us is living. No. It’s a totally, radically, new life, *His* life. And this new life doesn’t come to us automatically because if it did, these verses here wouldn’t be necessary. But these beatitudes *are* here because we’re to work at them. We’re to put them into practice as we live out our daily life – a life that’s completely different from that of others. And what’s in it for us? God’s richest blessings, offered in love.

** This exposition of the Beatitudes comes from the work of Jeff Dryden, who teaches at Covenant College, presented at the 2018 Annual ETS meeting.*