

June 8-12, 2021 Edition

The "BIG Story" Of The Bible #53

Finding Jesus In The Old Testament

The Beatitudes

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;o) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: Well last week we began a mammoth undertaking. A lesson series where we look at the most influential speech ever delivered. We talked about entering into Jesus' preschool for the human life and letting Him teach us what our lives were designed to look like. That's really what the Sermon On The Mount is. A description of what a human life lived in Jesus' Kingdom looks like. How to live a life where God's power is available to flow into and through your life. Have you ever prayed and felt like not much happened? Have you ever looked around at others and felt like God seemed to be pouring a lot more power into their prayers and lives than yours? Why is that?

Well, this isn't necessarily always the problem, but maybe the problem is how seriously you take your life with God. I saw a meme on the internet last week that said, "Is prayer your spare tire or your steering wheel?" Maybe when it comes to God's power flowing through our lives the question might be better stated, "Is God your spare tire or your steering wheel?"

We talk about this a lot here at Riverside, but God only shares His power and knowledge and wisdom and presence with those who are developing the character of His Son. When He finds someone who is serious about that transformation in their lives He will focus so much power and presence into that person... I have to tell you it's miraculous. And that's what the SOTM is. It's a description of what a life devoted to developing the character of Jesus looks like. What it looks like when it comes to influence, integrity, anger, lust, greed, arrogance, superiority and self righteousness, forgiveness, revenge, hate, generosity, connection with God, worry, fear, anxiety, trust, judgment, and relationships.

It is a soaring description of what a life lived the way Jesus lived can look like. And how that life can and will see the power of the Creator of universe flowing into and through it to change your own circumstances and those of the people that God has entrusted into your care. And this is how Jesus begins this amazing speech... we call them the Beatitudes:

God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses those who mourn for they will be comforted. God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth. God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied. God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy. God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God. God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God. God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way. Matthew 5:3-12 (NLT)

Why did those words change the world? They don't make a lot of sense to me... but I guarantee you they did to the people who were listening to Jesus that day. I imagine these words that we have a tough time understanding caused more than a few gasps and exclamations as he was giving them.

These are some of the most radical words ever spoken in the history of the human race. He launched a speech that would launch a movement that is still transforming this world to this very day. But why were they so radical? Why did these words change the world? Well, that's what this week will be all about unpacking. What are the Beatitudes and what are they not?

And why did Jesus begin the Sermon On The Mount with them? Lots of questions... let's see if we have any answers- tomorrow.

Tuesday Reflection: If you were with us last weekend then you know, this speech is all about an invitation to something called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus began His ministry by being baptized in the Jordan river by John The Baptist.

I know I'm getting off track just a little bit but do you know why they called him John the baptist? It wasn't because he was part of the baptist denomination. Denominations don't pop up for many, many years after Jesus' death. It's not like Jesus had other friends or disciples called Peter the Methodist or Bubba the episcopalian. He was the baptist because he baptized people. And when he baptized Jesus it was a signal of a new phase of life for Him.

The Bible says immediately after His baptism Jesus was tempted for 40 days in the wilderness, and then He started to teach and preach about one thing: the Kingdom of God. He talked about it. He demonstrated its power by healing people and casting out demons. He demonstrated its beauty by how He treated people and telling them Who God was and how the Father saw them. It drew people to Him like moths to a flame:

One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them. Matthew 5:1-2 (NLT)

Ok... so there are crowds. Who were these people. Well, it turns out it was kind of strange bunch of people. A ragtag mob of misfits. The poor, the sick, the spiritually oppressed:

Jesus traveled throughout the region... announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. News about him spread as far as Syria, and people soon began bringing to him all who were sick. And whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon-possessed or epileptic or paralyzed-he healed them all. Large crowds followed him wherever he went. Matthew 4:23-25 (NCV)

These are the outcasts. These are the looked down upon of society. These people struggled and the religious leaders of Jesus' day had told them that they were out. That God was angry with them which is why they were struggling. And to these people, Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Can you see why these were radical words? Can you see why the religious leaders and rulers hated Jesus? These words were an explanation of what these people were seeing from Jesus. He explains so they can see what God is up to... so they can respond, join in, become part of His movement, so they can enter the blessed life and then become a blessing to a broken and hurting world themselves. They saw the power of the Kingdom. They saw its beauty. They were drawn to the love, acceptance and forgiveness of the King.

And now the King has to explain to them what that Kingdom is all about. And He begins by telling them who's invited. Who this Kingdom is for.

It's for them. The poor in spirit. The people who are mourning. The people who have no power of their own. The knocked down, beat up, broken people of this earth. Jesus says to them with these words, you are broken, but you're still beautiful, and My Kingdom is for you. You My little

band of ragtag misfits will change the world if you stick with Me. That's the first message of the Beatitudes.

Wednesday Reflection: What are the Beatitudes? Growing up I thought the beatitudes were the attitudes that you should be. They were the attitudes that I should be aiming for. That I should be trying to develop these things in my life. After all... look at the word- they're the Be-Attitudes.

Except they're not. They're pronounced that way but they're not spelled that way. The Beatitudes only have two "ts" instead of three like the word "attitude". The word, Beatitude actually is an English transliteration from the latin word for "blessed". You know... like, blessed are the meek? The Beatitudes are simply blessings. But they're very strange blessings which is why if I'm looking at them as attitudes I should be developing in my life then I'm going to have some trouble.

I mean, some of these things, I'm not so sure I'm interested in trying to develop them in my life. I mean poor in spirit? Mourning? Persecuted? Not sure I'm interested. Over in Luke we read a parallel passage where Jesus says it the same thing in a slightly different way:

God blesses you who are poor.... God blesses you who are hungry now... God blesses you who weep now... Luke 6:20-21 (NLT)

Now one thing about Jesus... He can more than one thing at the same time. He's the expert at multi tasking. And while all of the beatitudes are not necessarily things we should be aiming for but rather a description of people who were thought to be left out of God's blessing... the poor, the heart broken, the meek... none of those things were considered virtues in the first century. But Jesus takes these conditions and redeems them. He brings something beautiful out of them. But we are continually misunderstanding Jesus' words. Why? Well, partly because these are strange proverbs that we don't see a lot of in this world.

In the first century there were two kinds of proverbs. Instructional proverbs and surprise proverbs. The first kind we are very familiar with even in the 21st century: Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy wealthy & wise. The early bird gets the worm. Better late than never. Which reminds me of one of my favorite stories that takes that proverb and changes it up quite a bit:

Once upon a time in a far away land there was a valley with two very special attractions. There was an amazing snake named Nate who was world famous. There was also a lever at the bottom of this valley that if pulled would cause the destruction of this wonderful world. People would come from all over to see Nate the snake and this infamous lever. But because of the delicate nature of this one spot nobody could drive into the valley. So people would park their cars and get on a bus which would take them safely to the valley bottom where they could see both Nate the snake and the lever they had all heard so much about. Every morning the bus would leave the parking lot at precisely 8:45 and it always took exactly 15 minutes for the trip from the top of the valley to the bottom where the bus would let the people out.

As it happened, Nate the snake lived directly across the road from this lever, and being that Nate was a very thoughtful snake (not like most snakes at all, really) he would slither across the road every morning at precisely 8:55 so when the bus arrived precisely at 9:00 the people could see

both the lever, and the famous snake. One day the brakes on the bus went out! The bus driver was able to keep from going off the mountainous road but because he was traveling much faster than usual the bus was a couple of minutes early. As the bus roared around the final corner the bus driver saw that Nate, expecting this day to be like every other day he had ever experienced, was directly in the middle of the road not expecting the bus for another 2 minutes. The bus driver had to make a split second decision: swerve to miss Nate the snake (in which case he would hit the lever and bring about the destruction of the entire world) or stay on his course and save the world but sacrifice the beloved snake. The driver ran over Nate (SPLAT!). And do you know what the moral of the story is?

Better Nate than lever.

Now what kind of proverb is that? A very silly one right? One that was changed to bring about a bit of surprise in the midst of what one thought was supposed to be instruction. But there's another wrinkle with this proverb... one that causes even more misunderstanding.

My sister, Connie (who told me this story), was once telling a group of her friends this surprising proverb. But since it was the first time she was telling it, when she got to the part about the lever that would bring about the destruction of the world she mistakenly said it was a button. This button, if pushed, would bring about the unravelling of the world. She didn't give it a second thought until she was to the moral of the story. Somehow better Nate than button just doesn't have the same ring to it ;o)

Ok... now we're all confused. What does all of that have to do with the beatitudes? I think that when Jesus drops these proverbs on the people who are sitting in the audience on the side of that mountain, it was a shock. Everyone was probably thinking that Jesus would have to stop Himself (you know... like Connie did) and say, "oh... you know what? When I said the poor in spirit would have the Kingdom of Heaven what I meant to say was they would be left out. Yeah... sorry... it's the rich in spirit that the Kingdom belongs to... sorry everyone." But He doesn't do that. He sticks with His initial statement. Were they surprising to everyone? Yeah... very. But Jesus doesn't back off these statements at all. These people who are sitting all around Him, they are blessed even though nobody thinks so. We'll spend a few more minutes looking at who these blessed people are tomorrow, but for today spend some time thinking about what surprises you the most in Jesus' Kingdom.

Thursday Reflection: If the Beatitudes are blessings... then who exactly is Jesus saying are the blessed ones?

Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the peace makers. Matthew 5:3-5 (NIV)

The poor in spirit were those who were spiritually bankrupt. Nobody was asking them to teach a Sunday school class. But Jesus takes them and says, you are ripe for a turn around. In fact, you have a head start on people who think they have it all together. They don't realize how much they need God. They'll be tempted to think they can do this life on their own and they will never develop the closeness to the Father that you will be forced to develop just to survive.

That's why I say that sometimes I think addicts have an easier time in their lives with God than those of you who've never had to deal with that. Not that you who've never struggled with

chemical addictions can't develop that kind of closeness with God, but addicts know the dark places that our best thinking can take us. And while I'm not saying it's easy or that we're perfect... there is a sense in which I know how bad my life is without God. Jesus says the poor in spirit will inherit the Kingdom of God. They're in if they want to be.

Those who mourn had suffered loss of some kind. Nobody likes suffering loss but Jesus is saying, if you have, it's not because God is mad at you. Consequences are one thing, that's just good parenting. But never think that God is ticked at you and that's why you're going through whatever it is you're going through. There is a spiritual entity that hates you. That wants to hurt you. That will remind you of all the rotten, crummy, dark things you've ever done or thought but that's not God. In fact, the next time the Spirit of God whispers to someone, "you're worthless, you're disqualified, you have no hope and no future..." will be the first time. Ok? You may have some dark stuff in your past. Some of it you may have brought on yourself. Some of it is just bad luck and nobody's fault. But none of it disqualifies you from Jesus' Kingdom.

The meek were the people who had no control. They had no choice but to do what others told them. Meekness or humility was not a positive virtue in the first century. It was thought to be a weakness, a disgrace. But Jesus changed all that. He invited people to take their powerless lives and regain their dignity and power by turning the direction, the pace and the destination of their lives over to the Father. This is one of those weaknesses that Jesus turns into a strength. A virtue to be cultivated even though that seems counterintuitive. How is it that I find my power by turning my power over to the Father? Just part of that crazy, upside down Kingdom that Jesus is ushering onto this earth.

Blessed are the merciful? First of all, showing mercy was a sign of weakness in the first century. Nobody wanted to be called merciful. If you did show mercy you were weak for showing mercy and for being in a position where you were weak enough to be wronged in the first place and be in a position where mercy was even a possibility.

Blessed are the peacemakers? You might as well have said, blessed are the cheese makers (any Monty Python fans out there???) for all the sense this is making to anyone in the first century. To be a peacemaker would mean your life had turmoil and conflict which was not a desirable place to be. If He had said, blessed are the serene and calm it would have made more sense. All of these beatitudes relate to what looks like weakness. Is Jesus saying His Kingdom is made up of people who are struggling and have tons of weakness in their lives? Surely that kind of Kingdom could never last. Inviting the weak instead of recruiting the strong? Turning everything upside down? Rome thought they had nothing to worry about. The Christian faith could never last with that kind of structure. With that kind of community. But boy were they surprised.

Friday Reflection: The last thing I want to look at this week is that Beatitudes were also a sign of God's faithfulness. Why? Because He promised that His Kingdom would come and He even told everyone what it would look like but along the way everyone seemed to forget. Somewhere along the line God's message got hijacked by the people who claimed to speak for God. Turns out it's not a brand new thing... people hijacking God's message. It's as old as time itself. By the time Jesus had come the religious leaders had created a religion that saw the poor, the brokenhearted, the spiritually oppressed, the slaves as being in that position because God

was unhappy with them. That they would have no part in the Kingdom of God when it finally came.

But then one day, more than likely before the SOTM Jesus is in His hometown of Nazareth. He goes to the synagogue on Saturday for their version of church and He is asked to speak to the congregation. The synagogues didn't necessarily have a calendar they followed for what would be talked about when, but instead they would read through the entire Bible over the course of the year and that way everyone who came to synagogue got to hear the whole Bible since most people couldn't afford to own their own copy. Jesus just happens to be set to preach when this verse from Isaiah is next to be read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted and to announce that captives shall be released and the blind shall see, that the downtrodden shall be freed from their oppressors, and that God is ready to give blessings to all who come to him. Luke 4:18-19 (TLB)

There it is, plain as day. The Kingdom would be for the very people that the religious leaders claimed would be left out. Everyone was waiting for the coming of the messiah Who would usher in God's Kingdom and this was one of those messianic prophecies that everyone was waiting to happen. When would this come true? Jesus read this, closed the book and looked around at everyone He would have grown up with. They knew Him well. He was Joseph and Mary's kid. He was becoming a famous Rabbi but the rest of the country didn't know about the shady stuff surrounding His birth. What's He going to say about this passage? You know what Jesus says? He says, "today, in your hearing, this scripture has been fulfilled."

Huh? What'd He say? Did He say this scripture has just been fulfilled? He leaves that place and continues to explain the Kingdom. The power of the Kingdom revealed in His miracles, healing the sick, the crippled, casting demons out of the spiritually oppressed. He reveals the beauty of the Kingdom in how He treats people and His amazing description of the Father. And He teaches about what a life lived in this Kingdom could look like. Crowds flock to Him... and then one day... this scripture, also from Isaiah comes true:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to (God's people), "Your God reigns!"
Isaiah 52:7 (NIV)

One day Jesus' feet walked on a mountain. As the people gathered He sat down and fulfilled this scripture. He told this ragtag mob of misfits that there was good news, that peace with God was available even to them, that they were blessed. That God hadn't forgotten about His promises to lift up the downtrodden. That the Kingdom was available to them. To them. And He starts out by telling them all how blessed they are. No matter how badly things had gone. No matter where they were, what they had done, what had been done to them. They were blessed. Not because of the dark stuff that some people will convince us separates us from God, but in spite of it. That God can take the darkest, crummiest things that have happened to us and make something blessed and beautiful out of our future if we let Him. These ragtag misfits were poster children for the blessed life.

And you know who else is a poster child for the blessed life? I am. Not because of what I've done or how impressive I am or am not. But because 30 years ago Jesus came to me when I was at my

darkest place and said, "Ed, you're blessed. My Kingdom is for you. And we can't rewrite your past, but we can change how the story of your future is written. We can change your destination just by changing your direction today." Yeah, that's me. I'm the poster child for the blessed life. Does that mean I'll never have any problems or pain or suffering? Nope (obviously not based on the last couple years of my life). But I'm still the poster child for the blessed life? Why? Because all the pain and struggling with human frailty in this world can never define the life of a citizen of the Kingdom. Because even when the pain and brokenness of this world one day leads me to death's door I know that death is not the end- it will not have the last say in my existence. That's me- the poster kid for the blessed life.

But do you know who else is blessed? You are. Not because of how impressive you are or anything you've done or can do... but because today Jesus comes to you and says, "You're blessed. And we can't rewrite your past, what's done is done. But we can change how the story of the rest of your life is written. We can change your destination in this world just by changing your direction today." Yeah, that's you. The poster child for the blessed life.

Blessed are the losers. Blessed are the lonely. Blessed are the anxious, the guilty, the messed up. Blessed are you, even if everyone else including you has tried to tell you that the blessed life isn't for you. Who are you gonna listen to? You? Someone else who claims to speak for God? Or the King?

We're not on a mountain today, and I'm not Jesus. But I want you to hear Him clearly as He tells you:

your God reigns ! ! !

And He wants you to live the blessed life. What will that look like? Well, I'm not sure... that's what the rest of the SOTM will be about. Time enough for the uncomfortable stuff in the coming weeks and months. For today just rest in the introduction to the most influential speech ever delivered. He started it out not with guilt trips or pressure tactics but with a blessing.

Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you.