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“Mixed Blessings”

Matthew 5:1-10

Brett Younger
Senior Pastor

November 26, 2023

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain. And after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

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

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 5:1-10

New Yorkers do not drink a lot of soft drinks. We are health conscious enough to avoid soda, though we do sell 12-ounce cans to tourists for \$4. But in the south, where I grew up, soft drinks were a question of faith. Do you go along with the crowd or do you choose something different?

Coca Cola, for instance, requires no thought. Pepsi is for when there is no Coke available. Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi are pointless. People who drink Mountain Dew mistakenly believe they are free spirits. Most soft drinks are nothing more than sugar and caffeine for the unthinking masses. People of faith do not often drink soft drinks, but when we do, we drink Dr Pepper.

According to the scholars at the Dr Pepper Museum—

which I have visited three times—Dr Pepper was invented in Waco, Texas, in 1885—one year before Coca Cola. Charles Alderton combined 23 flavors. The Brooklyn-born pharmacist's drink was first called a Waco, but later took on the classic moniker of a spicy physician. During the 1920s, Dr. Walter Eddy found that blood sugar fell to its lowest levels around 10:30, 2:30, and 4:30, which left people tired and hungry. This led to the inspiring slogan, "Drink a Bite to Eat at 10, 2, and 4."

Dr Pepper ads promised healing powers, suggesting DP "aids digestion and restores vim, vigor, and vitality," and that the potion cures "fever, scurvy, rheumatism, kidney trouble, and stress." The makers of DP shared a "list of life's troubles that Dr Pepper will help." The list included "alarm clock blues, boredom, dry throats, grouchiness, insomnia, and long faces."

When my father wanted us to get excited about visiting our grandparents he would promise, "We can drink Dr Pepper." Somehow the good doctor had not yet arrived in our small town in Mississippi, but DP ran from the faucets in Texas. Dr Pepper was a mysterious cocktail available only in holy places, champagne for people who drink water. My teetotaling mother suggested that at the wedding in Cana, Jesus should have changed the water into Dr Pepper.

In 1977, still-not-in-the-Rock-and-Rock-Hall-of-Fame singer David Naughton invited young people to "Be a Pepper." David made it clear that drinking Dr Pepper is a statement of independence. As the philosophers at the Dr Pepper Museum put it: "What is a maverick? A maverick is an independent person who does their own thing in their

own way. They are not afraid of breaking new ground.”

Peppers are not afraid of doing their own thing in their own way. No real maverick would drink Coca Cola. People who have tasted God’s goodness share recipes for Dr Pepper cupcakes, Dr Pepper pound cake, Dr Pepper meatballs, Dr Pepper spicy ribs, Dr Pepper chocolate chili, and pulled pork wonton cups with a Dr Pepper glaze. The formula for Dr Pepper is a closely guarded secret. The recipe has been halved and kept in safety deposit boxes in two separate banks.

When Carol and I attended an international dinner at a church in Chile, everyone was asked to bring something from their home country. We took Dr Pepper. People from all over the world agree that Dr Pepper is a little different, a little better, and a little rebellious.

My doctor (not a Pepper) would not be pleased with my appreciation for DP. I understand that at my age a Dr Pepper every day at 10, 2, and 4 would probably kill me in about a week. Dr Pepper is not, as was once claimed, a cure for insomnia and obesity. DP is good for your soul, but for your body, not so much.

But occasionally, I pour Dr Pepper into a wine glass. Swirl it around. Let it breathe. Take a sip. I drink it while eating bread and wonder, “If Dr Pepper had been around in the first century, would communion include this caramel-colored, cherry-flavored nectar of the gods?” We cannot be certain.

Coca Cola is worth \$252 billion, 1.7 billion servings per day. Most find it hard not to go along with the empire. In a hundred different ways, we decide whether we will go along with the empire or go another way. Christians have

to think about how we are not supposed to go along with the crowd, and how God invites us to different values. What is consistently valued in New York is financial success. The empire is about money.

Lewis Lapham is the author of *Money and Class in America*. He was born into the American empire. His great-grandfather was a co-founder of Texaco. His grandfather was the mayor of San Francisco. He went to Yale.

He says he was taught three things:

1. Money ennobles rich people, but it corrupts poor people.
2. Money in sufficient quantity entitles its possessor to reverence and respect.
3. Money is the elephant always in the room, never to be addressed, but whose will is to be done.

In college, Lapham began to feel that wealth is overrated and overpriced, a naked emperor clothed in the magnificence of stupidity and fear. He began to resist the treatment of net worth as a synonym for virtue. He became uncomfortable with the way people measure each other by how much they have.

Plato said, "When wealth and the wealthy are valued, virtue and good people are less valued."

Sometimes you and I treat people on the basis of how much they have.

Lewis Lapham writes, "There's a kind of deep inner sadness and emptiness that exists in the lives of the extremely wealthy. This is partially because, of course, the ceaseless desire for acquisition means that one can never have a satisfied life."

Those who cannot experience real happiness put their

whole hearts on money. People at a certain level of wealth come to imagine that their money is who they are. The empire tells us to measure success by how much we have (Interviews, 2021).

Jesus offers a different way. On my one trip to Israel, we spent several hours on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee where, according to tradition, Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. A small church was built in the 1930s to mark the spot. The Church of the Beatitudes is an octagon. The eight sides correspond to the eight beatitudes, the “Blessed are” with which Jesus begins the Sermon of the Mount. Each of the eight sayings are posted on signs scattered throughout the gardens that surround the church. The gardens are incredibly peaceful and incredibly misleading.

The Beatitudes were not sweet sayings offered to peaceful people who were doing just fine. The Romans had been occupying Israel for a hundred years. For the most part, the Jews and Romans hated one another. Some Israelites resisted, but most of the time they kept their heads down. By the time Matthew writes his Gospel 50 years after Jesus, all hell has broken loose. A Jewish revolt ended in bitter defeat. The Romans destroyed the Temple.

Mike Graves writes, “When Matthew wrote these eight sayings down, there were no painted signs in gorgeous gardens, only rubble and ruins.”

The Roman Empire dominated the lives of the people to whom Jesus preached. In the verses just before the beatitudes, Matthew describes the people following Jesus: “Those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, people possessed by demons or having epilepsy or afflicted

with paralysis.”

They were the abject poor living under the occupation of a frightening empire. Jesus looks at these oppressed people, climbs the hillside, and offers these stunning blessings:

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you, there’s more of God’s hope.

“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what’s most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the one most dear to you.

“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. God is what you most need.

“You’re blessed when you care. When you care for others, you find yourselves cared for.

“You’re blessed when you get your mind and heart right. Then you can see God is with you.

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover your place in God’s family.

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes opposition. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s love.” (Peterson, *The Message*)

Christ has different ideas about what the good life looks like.

Tony Campolo writes, “If we were to set out to establish a religion in polar opposition to the Beatitudes Jesus taught, it would look strikingly similar to the pop Christianity that has taken over North America.”

Some of the loudest Christian leaders do not talk much about the Beatitudes. They demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. Of course, that is Moses, not Jesus. No one demands that the Beatitudes be posted anywhere. “Blessed are the merciful” is not on the wall of our courtrooms. “Blessed are the peacemakers” is not printed on the Pentagon.

Going along with the Empire is simpler, but God invites us to more interesting lives. The Empire thinks we should long to be rich. Jesus says the poor are blessed. The Empire thinks we should want to be important. Jesus says the meek are blessed. The Empire thinks we should do whatever it takes to be liked. Jesus says the ones who are persecuted are blessed. Christ’s message was countercultural in the first century and it is countercultural in the twenty-first.

Jesus does not say: “Blessed are those born into wealthy families. They will enjoy countless advantages.” Or, “Blessed are those who know how to shop. They will always look fashionable. Jesus does not say, “Blessed are the good-looking. They will have lots of friends.” Jesus challenges the view that “the rich are blessed and the poor forsaken.”

God invites those who are hurting to know God’s comfort, those who are comfortable to care for those who are hurting, and for all of us to live differently.

Steven Bartlett is the creator of the social media marketing firm Social Chain. He started it in his house and developed one of the most prominent firms in the world when he was 21. He took it public when he was 27. Social Chain was valued at \$600 million.

Steven was living alone in a mansion. He realized he was not only miserable but confused. He had no idea what he

was doing. What was the point, if not to live in a big house and have more than enough money? If that was not the point, then what was?

He had a friend who was even richer, but it was clear that his friend was also more miserable. Steven saw the gorgeous cars, clothes, and houses that his friend owned, and came to the conclusion that he had to stop believing money could make him happy. He decided that the community service parts of his firm were more important than the marketing. He wondered why he gave up on serving others for nothing more than a big house.

He began looking for fulfillment beyond the empire. He decided that helping others was the way to real joy. He is headed the right direction.

The research is clear that helping others is a key to happiness. Studies suggest that when we care for others, it promotes physiological changes in the brain that are linked with happiness. Kindness is the prescription many are missing.

Kindness has been linked to satisfaction, purpose, and self-esteem. Kindness improves our ability to manage stress and fight off disease. Kindness helps us make friends and connect with our community. Kindness makes us more optimistic and positive. Kindness makes us feel rewarded, fulfilled, and empowered. Kindness literally helps us live longer.

We need to go against the empire, stop longing for the wrong things, and care for one another. We need to be strong in ways that are not self-serving, and hunger for better things. We need to become the same person on the inside and outside. Make peace. Tell the truth. Push for justice. We need to do what is right even if we feel like we

are the only one.

Leonard Cohen said, "Blessed are the cracked, for they shall let in the light."

We need to be a little different, a little out of step, and a little cracked. We need to be a little kinder than seems practical, for the good of the world and for our own good.

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