

## It is Well

Jeff Greenfield is an Author and Journalist from Salisbury, Connecticut - you may or may not know him from his work on CBS or ABC. But I recently read his reflections on his community's Memorial day celebrations and I thought it appropriate to share both for our sermon topic this morning and given the fact that tomorrow is Memorial Day.

He writes this:

"At 10 a.m., the parade begins moving down Main Street. It is a small parade: two vintage cars, bearing the region's oldest war veterans; the men and women who served in the military; the Salisbury Town Band; the Scouts; the Housatonic Day Care Center; the fire trucks from the volunteer fire departments in and around the Northwest Corner. We fall in line behind the fire trucks, and follow the parade to the cemetery. There's a hymn, and a prayer, followed by a Scout who reads the Gettysburg Address, - haltingly, shyly.

Then come the names of the men who died in the World Wars, in Korea, and in Vietnam. A minister recites the 23rd Psalm, a bugler plays taps (with another bugler far away playing the echo), the flag is raised from half-staff, and we all walk the few steps back to the Village Center.

It is as artless, as unaffected a ceremony as can be imagined.

There are no speech writers, no advance men measuring the best angles for TV (there is no TV) and by the end of it, I—along with many other allegedly sophisticated urban types, are in tears.

The men whose names have been read indeed gave what Lincoln called "the last, full measure of devotion"—some in wars whose purpose few could doubt—some in wars whose purpose will never be clear, some for the folly and arrogance of the men in charge. When they fell, their deaths were a small part of a bigger story. But every Memorial Day, the lives they never got to live, and the people they left behind, are the only story that matters. That is why it matters that their names are uttered aloud before people who never knew any of them. That is why it matters that we were there this year—and will be there the next and the next and the next."

Memorial Day is not a Christian holiday, but it is a day that American Christians are reminded of the deep cost of war, and the weight of sin and brokenness in a world that causes it.

It's a day that reminds us of the Christian hope when we will practice war no more, because all will be restored and put right when Jesus returns in Glory.

This is the idea behind the biblical concept of peace - in the Hebrew language it's *shalom* - say SHALOM with me.

Shalom is not just the end of conflict, it's the idea of becoming whole or complete - like putting in the last piece of the puzzle. Have you ever gotten to the end of a puzzle and you can't find the last piece? It drives you bonkers!

But *SHALOM* is that feeling that you get when you find the piece a day later under the couch and FINALLY complete the picture.

Living without SHALOM is that sense that something is just not quite right.

When you hear Jesus' parables about the lost sheep - this is the motivation behind the shepherd leaving the 99 to find the 1 - the flock needs to be made whole again.

Life is complex, when any part breaks down, you lose shalom - it's what makes us feel off kilter and have that sense of longing.

You *bring* shalom by bringing that part back to completion:

- King Solomon brought shalom by completing the Temple that his father David had started;
- In Exodus 22:5, the Israelites are commanded that if someone's animal damages another person's crops, they must *shalom* the offended party by making restitution.
- Proverbs 16:7 speaks of *shalom* as reconciling fractured relationships (Pr 16:7);
- On a grander scale, true *shalom* between rival kingdoms isn't found when they simply stop fighting, but when they start working together for each other's benefit.

*Shalom* is about flourishing in God's Kingdom in every aspect of our lives - physically, emotionally, spiritually, relationally, economically - EVERYTHING.

This morning is the start of a three week series for us to explore what pursuit of that SHALOM - that wholeness in Christ - looks like in our lives - in our relationship with God, in our relationships with others, and in our relationship with the world around us.

My hope is that as we study this concept in God's word, we might better offer ourselves to God so that He can put our puzzle piece in the right place.

Can we do that together? Are you with me?

Let's pray this morning.

This morning, our text comes from Matthew chapter 5. It's a rather familiar text from the Sermon on the Mount - Jesus' famous words to the crowds as they gathered with him on a hillside in Galilee. Matthew 5, starting in verse 1.

## READING

**Matthew 5:**<sup>1</sup> Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,<sup>2</sup> and he began to teach them. He said:

[<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the rich in spirit, for they will never be in want.

<sup>4</sup> Blessed are the happy, for they can be strong for others.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the brave and assertive, for they will succeed in their goals.

<sup>6</sup> Blessed are the righteous, for they will show others how to live.

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are the rigorous, for they will withstand discipline and trial.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed are the keen of mind, for they will understand the mysteries of the universe.

<sup>9</sup> Blessed are the soldiers, for they will be called the heroes of men.

<sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who are honored before men, for the world is theirs.

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when people praise you, award you, and say all sorts of flattering things about you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they honored the prophets who were before you.]

**Hopefully by now you’ve realized I’m reading something different than what you’ve got in front of you.** I don’t have a weird translation. I’m just reading WHAT WE WISH JESUS HAD SAID.

What he actually said was pretty much the polar opposite.

<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

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

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

For those of us who grew up in the church, we can tend to become so familiar with Jesus’ teachings that we miss how revolutionary they are.

Teachings like the beatitudes becomes SO familiar that the words almost lose meaning to us. We over-spiritualize them so that they don’t have to actually mean what they say.

How could Jesus *actually* mean that we’re blessed when these things are true about our lives? I can maybe understand the bit about being merciful and pure of heart - but poor in spirit? Mourning? Persecuted? How is that blessed?

What I want to suggest this morning is that we ought to read these beatitudes in light of the Good News of God's Kingdom. To read them as DESCRIPTIVE of the redemptive life for us rather than a PRESCRIPTION of statuses we have to obtain in order to receive blessing.

The word for "blessed" here is *markurioi* - more literally "It's fortunate for you, or it's going well for you."

It is well for you when you're poor, mourning, meek, desperate for righteousness, merciful, pure, set on making peace, and persecuted for following Jesus.

These are blessings because they draw us to the heart of God, the place of perfect Peace.

So let's break down this list a little more:

### I. IT GOES WELL FOR YOU WHEN YOU LACK (V 3, 4, 6, 10-11).

Jesus begins by saying, IT IS WELL FOR YOU WHEN YOU LACK

It is well for the poor in spirit, for the mourning, for those who are desperate for righteousness even though they haven't attained it yet.

Many of you are familiar with the hymn "It is Well with My Soul" by Horatio Spafford - and some of you may even be familiar with the story behind the song:

- Spafford was a successful lawyer and businessman in Chicago. He was a family man - he and his wife had five children - a son and four daughters.
- In 1871, things got bad when his son died of pneumonia and they lost their business in the great Chicago fire.
- Disaster struck again in 1873 when his wife and daughters were caught aboard a French ocean liner on the way to Europe when it collided with a Scottish ship and sank soon after. Spafford had been stuck back in Chicago dealing with a business problem and planned to join them days later. His wife Anna survived, but all four daughters were lost.
- Spafford soon boarded another ship to meet up with his wife in Wales. It was aboard this ship, travelling over the same waters where his daughters were lost, that he wrote this famous hymn.

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll  
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say  
It is well, it is well, with my soul*

How in the world can this man sit in a ship cabin, reflecting on the loss of his children, and say "It is well"?

It's because in the depths of our pain, grief, loss, and brokenness, we discover that God is near.

Because... in your empty hands you will grasp the Kingdom, in your mourning you will find comfort, in your desperation for God's righteousness you will obtain it.

Jesus isn't telling us to wish for loss. And He's not telling us to spurn pleasure and joy in life.

What He IS saying is that we don't have to fear loss. Because God has proven time and time again that He has a preferential option for the poor and hurting. That's where He spends His time - close to the brokenhearted.

He's come to save the sick, not the healthy.

If you're tired and worn out this morning, if you're grieving loss, if you're desperate for help and can't do it on your own, if you're lonely or broken-hearted - You're blessed. Because God's Kingdom is near to you, and salvation is at hand.

IT'S GOING WELL FOR YOU WHEN YOU LACK because it drives you to Jesus.

When we lack, it pushes us to reevaluate our priorities, and that leads to the next set of blessing statements.

## II. IT GOES WELL FOR YOU WHEN YOU SEEK GOD FIRST (V 5-9).

IT IS WELL FOR YOU WHEN YOU SEEK GOD FIRST.

Blessed are the merciful, the pure, and the peacemakers. - they experience God's presence in fullness because they seek the ways of God above all else.

Most of the ugliness of humanity comes from our distorted quest to possess beauty.

That's what's so dangerous about ideas like FREEDOM, PEACE and JUSTICE. They're all beautiful and seductive qualities, close to the heart of God.

- COVETING begins with appreciating the value of God's gifts
- MURDER begins with a hunger for justice
- LUST begins with recognition of beauty
- GLUTTONY begins when our enjoyment of God's gifts consume us
- IDOLATRY begins when we regard God's image in creation so highly that we end up worshiping the created rather than the Creator.

It's the beautiful things we kill and die for.

And it's the beautiful things that we market, exploit, brand and counterfeit.

This is what Augustine, a famous church leader and thinker, was talking about when he described “rightly ordered love”. Anytime we love anything over God, our value system gets messed up.

Sin creeps in and destroys life when we value the gift above the gift-giver.

Yesterday was my birthday. Thank you to everyone who sent kind birthday wishes in cards. In particular, my wife went the extra mile to surprise me for my gift yesterday. I’d actually guessed what she had purchased for me the day prior - felt so accomplished with myself because she’s unusually good at surprises.

That’s where I went wrong. I should NOT have told her. Because then, in order to keep some element of surprise, she set up this whole elaborate scavenger hunt throughout the house with clues to make me find the gift.

Here’s the thing. I don’t actually love surprises, and I’m not a particularly big fan of puzzles or scavenger hunts. So the whole time I’m grumbling about having to go through this just to get my gift. I got to the last clue and was stumped and slightly annoyed, and by that point I wasn’t even sure I wanted the present anymore. But I finally figured it out, and I did really appreciate the gift - I’m even wearing some of the items from the gift box this morning.

This is the part where you might think I’m going to say I learned how patience and suspense makes it even better when you receive the gift.

I’m not going to say that. Because I don’t believe it. I really wish she would have just given it to me without making me wait.

The real lesson is that it really wasn’t about the gift or the surprise. It was about my wife. My wonderful wife loved me enough that she wanted to make the gift even more special when I’d ruined her surprise by guessing the gift.

The joy is in the life with the gift-giver, not in the gifts received.

We experience true peace, SHALOM and blessing when we are transformed by God.

In your mercy you will receive from the Merciful One, in your purity you will glimpse God’s face, in your pursuit of peace you will learn what it is to be part of God’s family.

It goes well for you when you put God first, because you begin to live into God’s image within.

### III. IT GOES WELL FOR YOU WHEN YOU SUFFER WITH JESUS (V 10-11).

Finally, the most curious blessing statement of all the beatitudes is Jesus’ claim that we’re blessed - it’s going well for us - when we’re persecuted and reviled on account of our righteousness and our identification with him.

## IT IS WELL FOR YOU WHEN YOU SUFFER WITH JESUS

It's very common for us to give thanks in our prayers that God has allowed us to live in a country where we can gather together in His name without fear of persecution. We can worship and share the Gospel freely without fear of any retaliation from the government or otherwise because of our faith.

Honestly the worst that we Christians experience in the US right now is that our voice is less of a dominant influence it used to be - but still, I know many of you who have told me you're hard pressed to find anyone in your life who isn't at least Christian by name.

And yet, if we're to take Jesus' statements seriously, we might more rightly picture Christians in persecuted nations praying,

"Jesus, thank you for placing me in a country that is hostile to your name, because now we feel an intimacy with you we never could have experienced otherwise, and we see the joy of your Gospel is spreading because of our suffering witness."

Again, I'm not saying - and I don't believe Jesus is saying - that we should seek out persecution.

You don't have to be persecuted to be blessed in God's Kingdom - BUT Jesus IS saying that we don't have to fear persecution. In fact, there is redeeming value to it.

I remember one summer spending time with a church in India. We were about to gather for morning worship, but the service was delayed for several hours because someone had tried to set fire to the church building the night before and had managed to do substantial damage to one of the main support beams. We ended up worshipping together with the tin roof building propped up by some rocks and scrapwood.

For some, that danger and hostility turned them away from the church, but for most of them it only fueled their devotion. They were devoted to a God who loved them more than any others hated them, and to a cause larger than any small-minded hostilities from neighbors.

IT IS WELL FOR YOU WHEN YOU SUFFER FOR YOUR FAITH, because you're in good company.

He says, remember, you're not alone.

If the world rejects you, remember that they rejected me too, and every one of God's prophets.

You are NOT alone.

THIS is the Good News of the Kingdom - the poor, the weak, the desperate for God, and the suffering faithful are NEAR TO THE HEART OF GOD.

If you'd like to find SHALOM with the Lord this morning - there's no amount of striving you need to accomplish to get there. It's simply a surrender into the One who already loves you and wants to bring resurrection power into every aspect of your life.

## CONCLUSION

As we conclude this morning, I want to give you the opportunity to make this personal. This will require a little bit of vulnerability on your part.

But if you're here this morning, and you are feeling that need for SHALOM, for wholeness, for restoration and peace, in any of those areas, we want to pray for you:

- If you're hurting emotionally, spiritually, financially, or even physically
- If you're in a place where you know that something is out of sync with God - it may not be outright idolatry, but you know that somehow you've been letting other things take precedence over your relationship with him.
- Finally, if you've been doing everything you can to live faithfully and you've been experiencing rejection and denial - either in direct or even in passive ways: name calling and threats or maybe just exclusion and suspicion from friends family or coworkers.

May we all find peace and wholeness in the hands of the Perfect One - our Lord.