

Old Testament: Amos 5: 18 - 24
New Testament: Matthew 5: 1 - 12

Please pray with me. And now, Lord God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today is Juneteenth. Today is Father's Day. Today we begin our summer series on the first third of the Sermon on the Mount by doing an overview of, what is commonly referred to as, the Beatitudes. The goal is to tie all of these three things together and to show how they are all interconnected and it is my contention that I can do just that, with the assistance of a special guest speaker who will conclude the sermon time today with his comments. So, open your ears; open your hearts and let us listen for what God has to tell us today.

We'll start with Juneteenth (read article). Let's start by briefly reviewing the nature of the so-called "upside down kingdom of God". The concept behind this theological concept is rather simple and therefore, easy to understand. Whomever is deemed "on top" by societal norms and structures of the day in which they are living, will find themselves on the bottom in God's kingdom. This theological concept is based upon the multiple occurrences throughout the gospel accounts in which we see Jesus saying things like, "the first shall be last, and the last shall be first" and, "the Son of Man didn't come to be served, but to serve as a ransom for many". There's Jesus' story of the rich man's interaction with Father Abraham. The rich man ignored Lazarus at his gate while they lived and Father Abraham talks about how the rich man had his nice things in life but Lazarus didn't and so now, roles are reversed. There's the parable of the wedding banquet in which all of the "esteemed" party guests refuse to show, presumably because they are off doing "important" things of the day and time, or at least things that make them *feel* important, and so everyone who is poor and not self-importantly busy gets invited into the great wedding banquet. Now, is this theological concept strictly true and accurate? Is there some kind of hierarchy in the eternal presence of God? I cannot honestly say because I've not died and come back, so I do not know what it looks like on the other side. I do however know that the point that is trying to be made, because another theological concept consistently reiterated throughout *all* of scripture is God's infinite mercy, is that we, humanity, should be a whole lot more merciful towards one another than is currently being practiced around the world today and here in the United States. And I am here referring to all of humanity so if any of you are feeling like I am speaking to you directly about your own lack of mercy, do please note that that is not me. That is the Holy Spirit convicting you of where you still have some growing to do. We, humanity,

are woefully insufficient in the practice of mercy and the theological concept of the “upside down kingdom of God” reveals and lays bare this disturbing insufficiency.

How indeed does the article that I read for you all relate to the Beatitudes, our scripture reading from today? With the unemployment rate nearly twice as high for Black men as it is for white, Jesus says that those who are poor in spirit are blessed for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Luke renders it simply blessed are the poor (Luke 6:20). So, is Jesus talking about spiritually poor people *or* about physically poor people? The answer, of course, is yes; he’s talking about both. When one is poor, or inflation runs rampant, then hunger goes up. So those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Again, Luke renders it blessed are the hungry (Luke 6:21). So, is Jesus talking about spiritual hunger *or* about physical hunger? The answer, of course, is yes; he’s talking about both. Black men have had the highest COVID-19 death rates in the nation. One in three black men can expect to go to prison. Black women and children, I would be *not* bold to say, are in mourning over the plight of black men in this country. Jesus says those who mourn are blessed for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is for those who go without, here on earth. What is the lesson for us who do not go without? Jesus also says those who practice mercy are blessed for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. There’s that word mercy again. Not judgment. Not wrath. Not revenge. Mercy. Practice more mercy. And if you don’t like what I’ve had to say here; if you’re frustrated and roiled up because you don’t like this accountability thing and you’d rather just keep living your life and know that Jesus loves you thank you very much, I’m not going to stop. Why? “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of false evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Fathers are known for our “words of wisdom”. Short, pithy sayings, proverbs if you will, that we repeat over and over and over again and we don’t even realize that we are doing it. Our children recognize them and know them because if asked they will say, “oh yeah, dad says such and such all the time”. By way of example, my children reported to me that some of my more repeated sayings are, “don’t assume”; “finish the conversation”; “is that kind of uplifting?”; “well, the Bible says ...”; “you’re allowed to make messes, just clean them up afterwards”. What do these short, pithy words of fatherly wisdom have to do with the Beatitudes? They too are short, pithy words of fatherly wisdom. God the Son speaks wisdom to us on behalf of God the Father. Practice mercy. Practice humility. Practice self-awareness; understand your underlying motivations, why you do what you do after all, blessed are the pure in heart. Practice peace. Now, I’ve shared a bit of what my children have reported as my wisdom but, wisdom is earned through lived experience. Therefore, those who have

lived longer and experienced more have earned more wisdom. And one such father has graciously agreed to share some of his earned wisdom with us. So, Happy Juneteenth to you all. Happy Father's Day to all. Dale Biehl, will you please come up here and close out our sermon time today?