

He Taught With Authority: “Blessings”

Matthew 5:1-12

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Jesus went up on a mountainside, sat down, and began to teach his disciples. The words that follow make up perhaps the most well-known sermon ever preached, mainly because the sermon is preached by Jesus. It is known as the Sermon on the Mount. The beginning of the sermon is what we are looking at today, the pronouncements of blessing that Jesus gives. The very first blessing catches our attention. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Immediately we recognize this is a sermon that poses a huge problem. Blessed...and the poor in spirit...do not go together. At least not as we understand blessed. At least not as the world understands blessed.

So this morning, as we have before us the first words of the Sermon on the Mount, I want to share with you the last words of the Sermon on the Mount. We are no longer in Matthew 5 and verse three; we are in Matthew 7 and verses 24-27. Jesus is finishing a sermon in which he says many words about many things. Here are the words he uses to bring his sermon to a close.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Those are powerful words. Jesus speaks words about blessing to begin the Sermon on the Mount. His words clash with what we observe and what we understand and what we are largely taught to believe about blessings. But the ones who hear his words, who obey his words, who listen to his words, who follow his words, indeed, who trust in his words, are trusting in words that will stand in spite of all manner of effort to knock them down. The response of those who first heard his words, the first listeners to the Sermon on the Mount, is telling. “When Jesus finished saying these things (the sermon), the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority.”

Did Jesus have authority? Oh, yes. When he calmed the storms on the sea his disciples asked, “Who is this that even the winds and waves obey him?” He had authority over the storms on the sea. When he faced the ultimate storm, when he was crucified, when he was dead, and when he was buried, God raised him from the dead. As the risen Christ he stood once again on a mountain. He spoke once again on that mountain to his disciples. Now as the victor over death and all that is destructive in this world, he said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Now this Jesus, this one with all authority on heaven and on earth is speaking. His words might not align with what we have come to understand about blessing. But his words are true. His words are the word of God. His words will last. His words have authority.

I love what Earl Palmer writes about Jesus. “The one thing we must see is that the Beatitudes, by which Jesus begins this sermon, are not a mild and sentimental collection of platitudes. They are a frontal challenge to almost everything we assume about ‘the way it is’ in the world. The only way they make sense is if Jesus Christ himself is able to sustain the blessings he pronounces. Then that fact becomes our fact, and when we become convinced that Jesus Christ has the authority to support his promises, then the word *blessed* not only invites us to find the right path, but also to welcome the path we find.”¹

Yes, what Jesus says about blessing flies in the face of what the world, and very likely what we think in terms of what is blessing. But Jesus says it. His word stands against the storm. His word endures forever. His word overcomes the darkness of death and the dominion of the devil. So if what Jesus says doesn’t match our perception of what blessing is, what a wonderful opportunity to change our perception.

Tony Campolo grew up as a Sunday school attending Baptist in the Philadelphia. By and large he and his friends obeyed the rules. But he says that October 30, the night before Halloween, was set apart as “Mischief Night”. On that night the adults would brace for acts of mischief by the young teens, pranks and things like letting the air out of tires. Tony and his friends devised a plan to break into the basement of the local five-and-dime store. They did not break in to rob the store (Sunday school boys would never do that sort of thing).”Instead, we planned to do something that, as far as the owner of the store was concerned, would have been far worse. Our plan was to get into that five-and-dime store and change the price tags on everything.”² The boys wanted to see how people would react to see expensive items now listed for just pennies on the dollar, and things like bobby pins for five or ten dollars. I’m not sure from the story whether Tony Campolo and his friends ever carried out this prank. What I do know is this idea of switching the price tags allows him to make a powerful observation.

¹ Earl Palmer, *The Enormous Exception*, p. 26.

² Tony Campolo, “Who Switched the Price Tags?”, p.14.

“Sometimes I think that Satan has played the same kind of trick on all of us. Sometimes I think that he has broken into our lives and changed the price tags on things. Too often, under the influences of his malicious ploy, we treat what deserves to be treated with loving care as though it were of little worth. On the other hand, we find ourselves tempted to make great sacrifices for that which, in the long run of life, has no lasting value and delivers very little gratification. Sometimes I think that one of the worst consequences...is our failure to understand what really is important in life.”³

When we hear Jesus say, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek...”, it catches us off guard because we have come to think blessed means the powerful, the rich, the satisfied, the ones who have it all together, the ones who are safe and secure from life’s troubles. We have even boiled blessed down to things, possessions, cars, houses, clothes, gadgets, phones, watches and jewelry. Could it be the price tags have been switched? The things we have come to value as blessed are not the things our creator values. Could it be that the things that are near and dear to the heart of God, the things God desires to be the foundation and the substance and essence of life we have devalued, neglected, and even rejected?

Listen again to the blessings Jesus proclaims. As you listen, imagine him rearranging the price tags. Imagine him doing this not randomly and certainly not maliciously. This is not a prank or an act of mischief. Imagine Jesus putting the price tags back in the right order, giving value and worth to those things in life that truly are blessed. Imagine Jesus giving value and worth to those people that truly are blessed.

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 be shown 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 because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

³ Campolo, p. 14.

The Beatitudes have a message for us, a message about what is true and right in life, about how God sees our world, the price tag God puts on people and attitudes and values. Someone phrased the beatitudes like this:

“You’re in the right place if
...you are in a place where you can be poor in spirit
...you are a mourner seeking comfort,
...you walk with the meek, if you look around, and you are surrounded by folks
 who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
...you are merciful, if you are pure in heart.
...you are a peacemaker, even if you get persecuted for it.”⁴

It is often pointed out by those who study the Beatitudes that there is a movement within the beatitudes, the words of blessing. Jesus begins by proclaiming that those who have absolutely nothing, the poor in spirit, the ones who are brokenhearted and mourning, the ones who are not the powerful and assertive and influential but instead are meek, to these ones who have really nothing to lean on, the words of Jesus proclaim that God is with them. Because Jesus is speaking these words Jesus is with them. And because Jesus is the one with all authority on heaven and earth, if Jesus is with them, they are blessed. We are blessed, even in our lowest moments, if we have Jesus, if we have the peace, the presence, and the power of Jesus. He is with those who are helpless. And yet there is a movement from having literally nothing to lean on except Jesus, to being ones who find that with Jesus we can bring hope and help to others. From the poor in spirit we find the beatitudes move to proclaiming that those are blessed who are merciful to others, who are pure in heart, and who are ones who make peace in our world. The beatitudes move from helplessness to helpfulness.

Today Jesus has a word that moves us from helplessness to helpfulness. It is a word that begins with helplessness, with being low and being lowly, finding ourselves without the means to make it on our own, finding ourselves disappointed by a world that has switched the price tags, often leaving people on the discount rack, set aside as having little or no value. Today Jesus has a word for us that switches the price tags back, to the right order, to the right value, to the right meaning, and to the right dignity. In the same book that Tony Campolo told of switching the price tags he tells a story of a little boy. To me it is a beautiful example of switching the price tags back and restoring dignity to a little child who might easily have been counted as being worth very little.

⁴ Mark Ramsey, “Geography”, Journal for Preachers, Lent 2017, p.24.

The story is of a school teacher named Miss Thompson.

Every year, when she met her new students, she would say, "Boys and girls, I love you all the same. I have no favorites." Of course, she wasn't being completely truthful. Teachers do have favorites and, what is worse, most teachers have students that they just don't like.

Teddy Stallard was a boy that Miss Thompson just didn't like, and for good reason. He just didn't seem interested in school. There was a dead-pan, blank expression on his face and his eyes had a glassy, unfocused appearance. When she spoke to Teddy, he always answered in monosyllables. His clothes were musty and his hair was unkempt. He wasn't an attractive boy and he certainly wasn't likable.

Whenever she marked Teddy's papers, she got a certain perverse pleasure out of putting X's next to the wrong answers and when she put the Fs at the top of the papers, she always did it with a flair. She should have known better; she had Teddy's records and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit. The records read:

- 1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but poor home situation.
- 2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.
- 3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.
- 4th Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest.

Christmas came and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her Christmas presents. They piled their presents on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents, there was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had brought her a gift, but he had. Teddy's gift was wrapped in brown paper and was held together with Scotch tape. On the paper were written the simple words, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy." When she opened Teddy's present, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume.

The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddys gifts, but Miss Thompson at least had enough sense to silence them by immediately putting on the bracelet and putting some of the perfume on her wrist. Holding her wrist up for the other children to smell, she said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?" And the children, taking their cue from the teacher, readily agreed with "oo's" and "ah's."

At the end of the day, when school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson...Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother . . . and her bracelet looks real pretty on you too. I'm glad you liked my presents." When Teddy left. Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her.

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person. She was no longer just a teacher; she had become an agent of God. She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. She helped all the children, but especially the slow ones, and especially Teddy Stallard. By the end of that school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He had caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

She didn't hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day, she received a note that read:

Dear Miss Thompson:

I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class.

Love, Teddy Stallard

Four years later, another note came:

Dear Miss Thompson:

They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it.

Love, Teddy Stallard

And, four years later:

Dear Miss Thompson:

As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year.

Love, Teddy Stallard

Miss Thompson went to that wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat. She deserved to sit there; she had done something for Teddy that he could never forget.⁵

Who switched the price tags? When did things and possessions and power become more important than people, and kindness, and compassion and concern? I don't know who switched them, but I know who is switching them back, declaring true blessing and true value and true purpose and true importance. Jesus switches the price tags and puts all things right. He is wrapping his arms around the little Teddy Stallards and saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

⁵ Tony Campolo, *Who Switched the Price Tags*, 69-72.