

## Blessed



I Corinthians 1:18-31  
Matthew 5:1-12

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February 16, 2025 GRCC

Paul E. Miller writes this in his book, *Love Walked Among Us: Learning to Love Like Jesus*, "You're late getting out of work, so you call ahead and ask your husband to start the laundry, your son to do his homework, and your daughter to throw the casserole in the oven. When you walk in the door, your husband is plopped on the sofa watching TV, your son is glued to the computer as his bookbag sits in the corner, unopened; and your daughter is on the phone as the frozen casserole sits on the counter. No one looks up as you come in. You want to scream. Love is the farthest thing from your mind. You think, 'When is someone going to love me and anticipate my needs?'"

*"The hardest part of love is not, 'how do I love?'; it's wanting to love in the first place, and then having the energy to do it. It takes energy to love, energy that we don't often have."*

So, a question for us on this Valentine's weekend is how do we find the energy, the strength, and the courage to love? How do we reveal the light of Christ in our lives and live the teachings that he taught us? If Jesus is so clear about this, why don't we live it? The problem is that it takes discipline, selflessness, and thoughtfulness to uncover this kind of love that brings harmony and peace.

Jesus teaches this love in his sayings in the Beatitudes, his great formula for peace and harmony among people. If we could live this way, our families, our communities, our nation, our world would be a very different place.

*"Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*"Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.*

*"Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.*

*Kurt Vonnegut, writes: "For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. 'Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon? Give me a break!"*

In the Beatitudes we hear that we are loved just for being God's children, even poor, hungry, meek or mourning. God does not bless us just because of our fabulous good looks, or our wealth or education or achievement or ability to do gymnastics. God loves us and those around us because God knows us and holds us in God's heart. And the more that we live this way and freely give this love away, the happier we are, blessed by God's abundant grace, even if the world doesn't bother.

Here are Jesus' words in the beatitudes as translated by Eugene Peterson in The Message:

*"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 food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.*

*"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.*

*"You're blessed when you get your inside world— your mind and heart— put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.*

*"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight.*

*"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom."*

This is very different from the "prosperity gospel" that many churches in our nation are presently preaching and teaching – that says that people are blessed when they experience affluence, that God has rewarded them with wealth because they are somehow better than others, they have found favor in God's eyes and are a cut above those who don't have what they have. The poor have earned their poverty by not living up to God's standards and work ethic – and deserve their lower standard of living. This is certainly not what we hear Jesus teaching today.

Jesus refused to give in to the values of the world that says that money, power, beauty, and fame are the center of all value. In the Beatitudes Jesus challenges the social order of his day turning its values on its head. To be valued in Roman society was first to be a free male; women were invisible, as were children, and slaves, of which there were very many. Society was broken down into well-defined classes, with a wealthy male Roman citizen at the top. Slaves were taken for granted and were considered not to have a soul. A laurel wreath placed on the brow of a general or famous poet was the height of status. It was clear in those days those who were blessed and who were not: those with wealth, power, fame, and followers.

If we listen with fresh ears, we discover that in our day Jesus' sayings are equally explosive. Who is blessed in our times more than a billionaire, a C.E.O., a movie or rock star or an athlete with an eight-figure salary? A winner is one with the largest mansion, fanciest car, or even the best pension or health insurance. The famous receive adulation and awe. Last week we celebrated athletes who won the Super Bowl and soon we'll cheer for winners of the Oscars. Power is found in one who dominates the news cycle, who gives orders even if against the law, who can shut down the opposition, and who has the final say.

Jesus turns all of this upside-down. Who are those blessed by God? Everyday people. Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, those who are meek, peacemakers, and

those who suffer persecution. The blessed in Jesus' book are common folk, ones with kind hearts, with loving eyes, with a passion for justice and equality, mediators and the ones who give their lives for others. And who receives woe's in Jesus' eyes?... Woe to the greedy, the self-satisfied – those who seek popularity by people-pleasing and gaslighting. Jesus turns the values of this world on its head, and reminds us that we can be blessed simply by being ourselves...our best selves. And we are blessed when we have empathy for others who are suffering or in crisis.

The writer, Sue Monk Kidd, said this in an interview about her book, The Invention of Wings: *"Empathy is the most mysterious transaction that the human soul can have and it's accessible to all of us, but we have to give ourselves the opportunity to identify, to plunge ourselves in a story where we see the world from the bottom up or through another's eyes or heart."*

Sue Monk Kidd's book is about the Grimke sisters in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who grew up on a slave owning plantation, and had a change of heart. Ironically, these slave-owning women became leading voices in the Abolitionist movement. In the midst of their decades-long battle of seeking liberation for slaves, these sisters realized that women at the time were also treated as innately inferior. Women had no vote, nor the ability to hold leadership positions, or to work outside of the home. The sisters became leaders in the Suffragette movement. Kidd went on to say: *"It was through fighting for the rights of others that these women discovered they were oppressed."*

Jesus expresses in the Beatitudes: to bless those who are struggling or in pain: the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the persecuted – not limited to members of your family or circle. It is fostering the kind of genuine love Jesus lived and died for.

How are the poor and hungry doing right now in our nation, with food stamps, along with free school lunches and meals on wheels for seniors being cut dramatically? Do we hear people weeping because aid programs have been cut, or funding slashed for science or medical grants, or those who are being laid off? Blessed are the persecuted including the LGBTQ+ community, those being squeezed to be quiet in the face of laws broken and people's lives upended.

I've heard from many people who are no longer watching the news or reading newspapers; it's too stressful or depressing, too much. But compassion is about suffering with those who are hurting – being with those who are in pain. Elie Wiesel, writing from the same tradition as Jesus, put it this way: *"In the face of suffering, one has no right to turn away, not to see. In the face of injustice, one may not look the other way. When someone suffers, and it is not you, that person comes first. Their very suffering allows him or her priority....To watch over a person who grieves is a more urgent duty than to think of God."*

It's a bit like the real St. Valentine. The story goes that St. Valentine refused to deny Christ before the Emperor Claudius in the year 280. Before his head was cut off, Valentine restored the sight and hearing to his jailer's daughter. The early Christian, Jacobus, makes a play on words by connecting 'Valentine' to the definition 'as containing valor,' a description of someone willing to love even those who were about to take his life. That's the kind of courageous love we celebrate in our Savior, and the light of love that has illuminated the world ever since. So, the next time you receive a candy heart or a Valentine card – think of this kind of love – this love that is self-giving, that is true and brave.

We rest in the assurance that we are blessed by God for having hearts of compassion. Yes, it takes sacrifice. Yes, this takes discipline and thinking less of ourselves and our own needs and wants. But it also brings untold riches of inner peace, spiritual radiance and joy. We are not cherished by God for our gold, trophies, our followers or our ability to dominate others; but for our hearts turned toward love. Just love. Just help. Just heal. Just care. Amen.