
Dwelling in the Comma

Matthew 5.1-12

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 30, 2011 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

“If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” It’s an old question, but it’s still a good one. Of course the answer rather depends on what you think being a Christian means. Let’s look at three kinds of answers.

One answer says, “God comes to visit us when we’re on our last dime, when we have nothing and no one to turn to.” So being a Christian means saying, “I am naked before God. But I spend my life pretending otherwise. I want to be at home with those whose nakedness, fragility and pain is no secret.” Jesus’ life is shaped around people whose tears have flowed so long they’ve run dry, around those who’d scream out loud if they could any longer find the voice or the words, around all whose prayer is simply, “Lord, give me strength to get through today.”

It’s a good answer. It speaks of the compassion of God. But what about the goodness of God?

And so a second answer says, “God wants us to be holy, and being a Christian means letting the Holy Spirit craft us in ways of righteousness and paths of purity.” It tends to ask questions like, “Have you kept the Ten Commandments? Have you made room in your life for personal devotion, public worship, charitable giving, and civic service?”

It’s a good answer. It speaks of the goodness of God. But what about the justice of God?

A third answer says, “God wants us to stand up for justice, to advocate for the disadvantaged, to witness for our faith, to turn words into actions and to put ourselves in places of danger.” Being a Christian is about actively seeking to mirror and bring about the kingdom of God on earth. It asks, “Have you let your faith propel you into courageous deeds? Or have you let your inhibitions make you hesitate on grounds of fear or propriety or politeness?”

I wonder if you recognize yourself in any of these three answers. I wonder if you were profoundly shaped as a child or later in life to believe that one of these was right and the others were dubious or wrong. The church is more or less split around these different answers to the basic question, “What does it look like to be a Christian?”

So... which is it? Which one is right? Can we really settle for just one of the three?

The place to go for an answer to this question is to chapter 5 of Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus, like Moses before him, goes up on a mountain and utters the most significant words of his life. The Beatitudes are the most succinct account of what it means to be a Christian we have. One theologian calls them the most important words ever written. How do these precious words answer our question? What, according to the Beatitudes, does it look like to be a Christian?

There are nine beatitudes, and I want to read them with you as three groups of three. Let’s start with the first group of three. Blessed are the poor in spirit, Blessed are those who mourn, and Blessed are the meek. Jesus is saying, “Christianity begins with the desperate. Are you miserable? Is your life in pieces, are your plans for your career, your marriage, your degree, your health, or your very survival ruined? If so, here’s the good news: you’re right where the gospel takes root.” But there’s also a message here for you if you’re bored, disillusioned, paralysed by choice, jaded, or non-committal, and you want to see what Christianity is really about. The message is, “Go hang out with someone whose stomach is empty, whose head is hurting, whose spirit is crushed, whose heart is heavy. Because that’s where Jesus starts.”

But it's more subtle than just that. Look at the way Jesus gives us three kind of misery. The first is poor in spirit. What does that mean? It means to know we've done something wrong, maybe a lot of things wrong, maybe something very wrong, perhaps something really terrible. And then we lose confidence, and our pride makes us ashamed to show our face, frightened to reveal our true selves to anyone, resentful of people's harsh standards and judgmental attitudes. We may not regret what we did, or what we're currently doing, but we know it puts us outside the camp. And so we self-segregate ourselves from regular company, regular church, regular friendships, a regular relationship with God. We're poor in spirit.

Then there's those who mourn. Those who grieve because mortality and fragility and maybe sheer bad luck have deprived them of something or more probably someone who was their reason for living, who made their heart sing. Mourning means suffering through no fault other than allowing our lives to be deeply invested in the life of someone else. It means loving and losing. Those who mourn are those who suffer because they have loved.

And then there's the meek. The meek are those who suffer through the fault of somebody else. The meek are the oppressed, the disadvantaged, the discriminated against, the voiceless, the faceless statistic, the dispossessed. In these first three beatitudes Jesus is saying that the gospel begins in the gutter, the ditch, regardless of whether someone put you there, bad luck put you there, or you put yourself there. Here Jesus echoes the first of our three answers. Being a Christian means dwelling in the naked place of tears.

But we've still got 6 beatitudes to go. This is what the next three beatitudes say. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart."

Imagine having such a longing, such an ache and yearning to imitate God, that it felt like hunger and thirst. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who are so focused on God, so conscious of their shortcomings before God, but so active in their steps to walk in God's ways and share God's heart, that this desire becomes their meat and drink, their daily sustenance. I once asked a young woman, "Why are you a Christian? What's it all about for you?" She replied, "I just want to be like Jesus – to think like him, act like him, love like him, live like him." That's what it means to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Then there's the merciful. This is the central beatitude of the nine. If righteousness is our regard for God, mercy is our attitude to one another. Later Jesus says "Treat others the way you want them to treat you." Here Jesus says, "Treat others the way God has already treated you." How would you like God to treat you on judgment day? Treat others that way today. Demonstrate to others the mercy you beg God for. Recognize God in others, and God will recognize himself in you.

Then we come to "Blessed are the pure in heart." The thirsting for righteousness is about God, being merciful is about others, and being pure in heart is about ourselves. One great theologian said, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." I'm sure you've all been told many times that to hold down a responsible job you need to distinguish between the urgent and the important, and to judge which things are urgent but not important, which things are important but not urgent, and which things are neither urgent nor important. Well, purity of heart is about knowing as a matter of habit and uncomplicated clarity which things are important. Not fashionable, not popular, not effective, not lucrative, not eye-catching, not relaxing, not clever, not witty, not dramatic, not necessarily urgent: but important. And then, in a crisis, when everyone else has lost their sense of perspective, you'll be able to see the one thing that no one else is able to see. Because you never stopped looking at it.

Here Jesus echoes the second of our three answers. It's not about you changing the world, it's about letting God change you.

But there's more. The last three beatitudes are about what happens to us when we follow the logic of Jesus' life and teaching – when we put feet on the gospel. We start with "Blessed are the peacemakers." To be a peacemaker you need understand the first group of beatitudes – how sin and unfairness and oppression and

suffering lead to conflicts. But you also need to embody the second group of beatitudes, because peacemaking needs mercy, needs a healthy sense of perspective, and needs God. How do you become a peacemaker? Well, here's a question you can ask yourself when you get out of bed each morning: "How am I going to be a reconciling presence in the life of my neighbor?"

Then there's the last two. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake... Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." In both of these final two beatitudes, Jesus is talking about those who love God so much they don't care who knows, how much it costs, how unpopular it makes them, and how much it endangers their lives. This is a faith that follows through the implications of Christ's love to the very end, a faith that doesn't duck the logic of the gospel, a faith that never tires, even in the face of hostility, even in the face of hatred, even in the face of danger. Even in the face of death.

Jesus doesn't seem able to choose between our three answers. So why do we? Is it because we want Jesus but we don't want the cross?

Because, you see, Jesus doesn't just speak the gospel. He lives it. It turns out the beatitudes are nothing less than the story of Jesus. Every single one of them anticipates a moment on Jesus' journey to and death on the cross. He's poor in spirit when he's taken on the sin of the whole world. He mourns when his heart is heavy in Gethsemane. He's meek when he's falsely accused and yet never says a mumblin' word. He thirsts on the cross. He's merciful when he says "Father, forgive them..." He's pure in heart when he says "Not my will but your will." He's a peacemaker when he tells Peter to put down his sword. He's persecuted and reviled by the priests, scribes, soldiers and bystanders at every moment in the passion story. This is Jesus' autobiography. The beatitudes are Jesus saying, "This is who I am – and this is how to be like me – *this is how to be me, to be my body in the world.*"

To be a Christian is to live the beatitudes. Let's look a bit more closely at what that means.

Every beatitude comes in three parts. There's the first part, which is really a description of the cross. It's poor, it's thirsty, it's meek, it's merciful, it's persecuted. Then there's the last part, which is a description of the resurrection. Each beatitude has a resurrection promise. "They will be comforted... they will inherit the earth... they will be filled... they will receive mercy... they will be called children of God... theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The beatitudes are a description of Jesus in his cross and in his resurrection. To be a Christian is to live in Jesus' cross and in his resurrection.

But wait. Between the cross and the resurrection lies a comma. Every beatitude has a comma in the middle. That comma is a kind of valley between the horror of the cross and the wonder of the resurrection. I want you to think about that comma for a moment. That pause – that place where the cross and the resurrection meet. *That comma is your life as a Christian.* To be a Christian is to *dwell in that comma* that lies between the first and second half of each beatitude. That comma is your home on earth. That comma represents the pathos and the joy of the Christian life. That comma is where you find Jesus.

What does it look like to be a Christian? Jesus is saying, the people who know are those who are closest to my cross. The closer you get to my cross, the closer you get to resurrection. If you're one of those people, happy are you. If you're not one of those people, start hanging around with those who are. That's what it means to dwell in the comma. Jesus is the place where cross and resurrection meet. So are you.

It's time to stop limiting ourselves to just one third of the gospel. It's time to live the whole thing. It's time to dwell in the comma, where the cross meets the resurrection. This is where we meet Jesus. This is what Christianity is. This is where to find it. This is how to live it. This is blessedness. Blessed, blessed are you.