

Jesus Offers Congratulations

Matthew 5:1-16

Religious Liberty Day Sermon

by Dr. William D. Shiell

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Each year, the Academy Awards rolls out red carpet for the best actors in Hollywood. No one wins "Best Custodian of the Year" or "Best Dining Room Server." The winners are usually those who have produced revenue for the studios and have helped them build a profit.

The opening of the Sermon on the Mount reads like words of congratulations bestowed on award recipients. These "Kingdom of God" awards do not fit the profile of modern success. Jesus says, however, they are just as great as the rich and famous. He even challenges his disciples to live among these people to learn from them.

Congratulating Those in Crisis (verses 3-12)

Each person congratulated has experienced a crisis. As a result, they are now living near the bottom wrung of society. Yet they are blessed because they fit two categories: those in right standing with God and people in right relationship with others.

1. People in Right Relationship With God.

The poor in spirit (v. 3): These are people who know that they need God. Their lives are in such bad shape that they are dependent on the Lord to deliver them.

The mourners (v. 4): They grieve because God is not pleased with the world. They understand that the world is falling apart, and God must intervene.

The meek (v. 5): They are simply powerless to do anything. Not only are they poor in spirit, but they have no power to get out of the condition. They are the doormats of life; they clean offices and sack groceries.

The thirsty (v. 6): These people have an insatiable desire to live rightly; they are perfectionists. They want their homes and society to live with justice, and they take action accordingly. They pray constantly about these matters.

Just as the first four kinds of people are in right relationship with God, the second group is in right standing with others. They love their neighbors as themselves.

2. People in Right Relationship With Others.

The merciful (v. 7): These people will forgive anyone for anything. As Eugene Peterson says, "At the moment of being 'care-full' they are cared for." They do not keep score and can forgive and forget.

The pure in heart (v. 8): With childlike simplicity, they believe whatever people tell them and they see the best in everyone.

The peacemakers (v. 9): Not only do these people have the ability to forgive, but they risk their reputations to reunite others.

The persecuted (v. 10): They are not just the persecuted who will die as a result of Jesus' death in his time period; they are the martyrs of subsequent generations.

Although these are lofty qualities, Jesus is not distributing a spiritual checklist. He does not say, "Blessed are you when you become" In this section, he simply describes the people standing around him who receive no accolades from society but are equally blessed by God.

As Dallas Willard has said, "Blessed are the physically repulsive, Blessed are those who smell bad, the twisted, misshapen, deformed, the too big, too little, too loud, the bald, the fat, and the oldô for they are all riotously celebrated on the part of Jesus."

If we were part of the crowd early in Jesus' ministry, who do you think he would choose for this mission? The wealthy, the loud mouths, the well-respected in society, the upstanding, the cute, the popularô the kind of people we want to have in our churches, right? The kind of people we want to associate with. He opens up his first major speech to thank the important ones; and he says, "Congratulations to the outcasts." He confronts his disciples with an incredible message of God's grace: "I'm going to bring my kingdom not with your kind of people but with my kind of people."

If we were to try to start a church in Jesus' day we would need some prominent people, some wealthy people, some good looking people. Jesus dares to open his first sermon with a whole new perspective. He says, "I'm going to change the list of donors and thank-you note recipients. I'm going to send congratulations to people who have never received a plaque or a certificate."

These are the people that you find today in our nation's public schools. The students, teachers, and administrators who are in public education are the modern list of the mourners, peacemakers, and merciful.

For instance, Lisa Light is the principal at Lonsdale Elementary School in Knoxville, Tenn. She's a faithful believer who serves the community. In the last year, the Latino population at Lonsdale has increased dramatically. Thirty percent of all 1st graders are natives of Guatemala and speak a Mayan dialect. Each semester, Lisa Light goes door-to-door telling kids about the school, encouraging them to get an education, and explaining

the benefits to the parents. She's on Jesus' congratulations list because she willingly serves the poor and needy.

Learning From Those in Crisis (verses 13-16)

Those who are in crisis provide excellent role models for believers today, and Jesus calls his followers to live among them in verses 13-16. After hearing the accolades, the disciples listen to a challenge to live holy lives among them in two ways, as salt and light. This lifestyle requires that they accept, bless, and serve those in crisis just as they are. It means living like salt, different from the other sandy lives around them. The concept also means to shine as lights in dark places. Believers cannot withdraw into isolated communities. Instead we must come out of hiding.

The crisis times for the lowly are laboratory experiences for disciples. We learn from those who have walked through difficulties. A meek person is only meek because he has been walked on; a person is persecuted when someone has ostracized them; a person poor in spirit is only so after being beaten down. When we walk beside these individuals, they teach us how to minister in these situations because they are living in these circumstances. Jesus indicates that people in crisis become teachers for salt and light living. As we walk with them, we learn to live in a holy way.

Unfortunately some believers choose to express their faith by withdrawing from society, remaining isolated from those who are in crisis. Preachers who have not met women like Lisa Light beat the drum that "God has been taken out of the public schools." They ignore Jesus' commission to live among all of God's people. They encourage withdrawal rather than immersion as salt and light believers.

Others want to encourage public educators to impose their version of belief on the public. By forcing nonbelievers to pray nebulous prayers to unknown "gods," they cross the boundaries of religious liberty to appear pseudo-Christian. Neither choice is effective, says Jesus.

When we live like salt, we bless others. We respect and affirm them without imposing our view of the world on them. By living beside them, we develop relationships of trust and friendship. We shine lights in dark places while protecting the liberties of others as they choose. Ironically, religious liberty can be a means through which God can bring peace to the world.

Giving Freedom to Those in Crisis

One area of the world that has seen peace is in Ireland. Tony Campolo was instrumental in many of the movements of spiritual awakening among young people in Northern Ireland where tensions among Protestants and Catholics ran at a fevered pitch. He challenged Protestant students to take Catholic students to pizza, get to know them, build relationships with them, and reach out. The Protestant students flooded the aisles at the

invitation time, desiring to reach out to them. Despairingly, they cried and said, "We don't know any Catholic students."

Campolo told me that none of the students attended schools together; the government gave vouchers to attend a school of their choice. Students chose schools based on religious preferences. When he said, "Go out and take someone to pizza," they did not know anyone to take. The students were in tears, worried that they would never be able to bring peace.

The barriers imposed by the government did not prevent the movement of the spirit. Protestant and Catholic students crossed religious and neighborhood boundaries, and a slow awakening of God's spirit began to emerge to bring not only political peace but also a spiritual renewal of God's peace. They became salt and light.

By advocating religious liberty, we become God's agents of salt and light in the world. We allow people to worship as they choose and prevent the kind of division that can be so dangerous.

By ministering among those in crisis, we share a vision of the kingdom of God. We learn from those Jesus has blessed and develop relationships with his people.

One way I have found to express my faith positively is through school mentoring. My church participates in a mentoring project through KidsHope USA at South Knoxville Elementary School. This school is on the "No Child Left Behind" list. South Knoxville is a school that is in danger of being closed if it does not meet the government's standards. Our church has chosen to equip and empower mentors who will love children, assist them with their educations, and develop friendships. We respect the boundaries of church and state. We know our role. We're not there to proselytize. We're there to be Christians.

Through the experience, we're learning to minister more effectively. (My "little brother's" father is in prison.) Sunday school classes are discussing the needs in public education. The principal and teachers are seeing the presence of Christ every day on their campus, and lives are being touched. We are saying congratulations to those that Jesus blesses.

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