

# Blessed: God's Favor and the Work of Justice

Matthew 5:1-12  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
February 1, 2026

Let me ask you this morning—and I want you to really sit with this question: **What does it mean to be blessed?** When you hear that word—*blessed*—what images come to mind? Is it financial security? Good health? A sense of ease or stability? A life where things mostly go according to plan? Our culture has trained us to associate blessing with success. With comfort. With abundance. With being insulated from hardship. And yet, Jesus begins one of his most important teachings by disrupting that entire way of thinking.

Today we turn to a familiar passage from the Gospel of Matthew—what we often call **The Beatitudes**. These words are so familiar that they can begin to sound gentle, even sentimental. But when Jesus first spoke them, they were anything but gentle.

The word *beatitude* comes from the Latin, translating the Greek word *makarios*—the word Matthew uses to begin each line of this passage in Matthew 5. *Makarios* does not mean "happy" in the shallow sense. It does not mean "lucky." It does not mean "things are going well." In this context, *makarios* is a **public declaration of God's favor**. It is God standing up, pointing, and saying: "These are the ones I am with." "These are the ones I stand beside." "These are the ones I defend." So when Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," what he is really saying is: *God's favor rests upon them. God champions them. God is not neutral about their suffering.* And once we understand that, the list becomes deeply unsettling. Because **this is not a list of people we would normally call "blessed."**

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Those who mourn.

The meek.

Those who hunger and thirst—not for comfort—but for righteousness, for justice.

The merciful.

The pure in heart.

The peacemakers.

Those who are persecuted for doing what is right.

Those who are reviled and rejected because they follow Jesus.

Something about this just feels... wrong. Take the first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." That almost sounds like Jesus is saying, "Blessed are those who are worn down or depressed." "Blessed are those who are exhausted." "Blessed are those who have run out of answers." And when we place Matthew's words alongside Luke's version—where Jesus simply says, "Blessed are the poor"—the discomfort deepens. Because now we are talking not only about spiritual humility, but about **real economic vulnerability**. About people who live one missed paycheck away from crisis. About people whose lives are shaped by scarcity, precarity, and exclusion.

To Jesus' original audience—most of whom lived under Roman occupation, heavy taxation, and daily uncertainty—this would have sounded shocking. And it should still sound shocking to us. Because everything we observe about how the world works tells us the opposite. We are taught that the blessed are the rich. The secure. The confident. The powerful. The admired. We are taught that those who mourn should “move on.” That the meek should toughen up. That peacemakers are naïve. That those who challenge injustice are troublemakers. But Jesus stands on a hillside and says: **No. God's favor rests elsewhere.**

The Beatitudes reveal what Scripture often names as **the great reversal**—the turning upside down of the world as we know it in the kingdom of God. **Those the world pushes to the margins? God draws close.** Those the world ignores or silences? God amplifies. Those the world tells to be quiet, patient, grateful? God calls blessed. And that raises a hard question—especially for those of us who are relatively comfortable. What kind of good news is this if we're doing just fine? **This is where the Beatitudes are so often misunderstood. We sometimes hear them as a set of expectations.** As if Jesus is saying, “If you want God's blessing, here's what you must become.” Become poor in spirit. Become meek. Become persecuted. Suffer quietly. Endure injustice faithfully. But that is not what Jesus is doing.

Jesus is not giving instructions. He is not issuing commands. He is not laying out a moral entrance exam for God's grace. Instead, Jesus is naming reality. He is speaking **directly to people who already find themselves here.**

To those already grieving.

To those already exhausted by injustice.

To those already hungry for a world that looks more like God's reign.

To those already paying a price for refusing to cooperate with cruelty, like so many now in Minneapolis.

Jesus is offering consolation. Encouragement. Hope. He is saying: **God sees you. God knows your name. God has not turned away.** And that matters—because when life is hard, we are quick to blame ourselves. Or worse, to blame God. We start to wonder if suffering is punishment. If struggle means failure. If hardship is a sign that we've somehow fallen out of God's favor. But Jesus says plainly: **That is not how God works. Life is hard because life is hard. Because the world is broken. Because systems exploit. Because violence persists. Because grief is real. And yet—even there—God's favor remains.**

That's why we must hear the **Beatitudes not as an ethical checklist, but as a pastoral gift.** And that gift could not be more needed right now. We live in a moment when cruelty is often rewarded. When truth is distorted. When peacemakers are mocked. When justice-seekers are labeled dangerous or divisive or as domestic terrorists. In such a moment, the Beatitudes refuse to let us confuse blessing with success. Biblical scholar **M. Eugene Boring** puts it this way:

Christianity is not a scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance in one's career, or preserve one from illness. Christian faith, instead, is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, and that God's future will be a time of mercy and not cruelty.

That's a needed word. Because the gospel does not promise ease. It promises meaning. It promises hope. It promises that mercy—not domination—will have the final word. And once we understand that, the Beatitudes begin to do something else. **They don't just comfort us. They locate us. They help us see where God stands—and then invite us to decide where we will stand.** Because while the Beatitudes are not commands, they are not neutral either. If God's favor rests with the poor, what does that mean for how we view wealth? If God blesses those who hunger for justice, what does that mean for our silence? If God calls peacemakers blessed, what does that say about violence disguised as security? Theologian **Marcia Riggs** names it clearly:

The Beatitudes are spoken to those whom God deems worthy—not by virtue of their achievements or status—but because God chooses to be on the side of the weak, the forgotten, the despised, the justice-seekers, the peacemakers, and those persecuted because of their beliefs.

God's favor is not random. It is purposeful. And that truth both comforts us and challenges us. Because Jesus makes clear: Blessing comes **before** instruction. Grace comes **before** obedience. Belonging comes **before** transformation. **You are blessed—not because you have earned it—but because God has chosen to be for you.** And then, only then, Jesus invites us to live differently—to practice mercy, to hunger for justice, to make peace, to stand with those the world would rather forget.

So hear this as you leave this sanctuary today: You are blessed. Not because life is easy. Not because the future is guaranteed. Not because you are immune to loss or grief or doubt. **You are blessed because God's favor rests upon you. Especially when you are tired. Especially when you are discouraged. Especially when you long for a world more aligned with love and justice.** We have not been abandoned. We will not be abandoned. And by God's grace, may we learn to recognize blessing—not as privilege, but as hope that refuses to let injustice have the final word.

**Be blessed.**

Amen.

Resources:  
Chatgpt