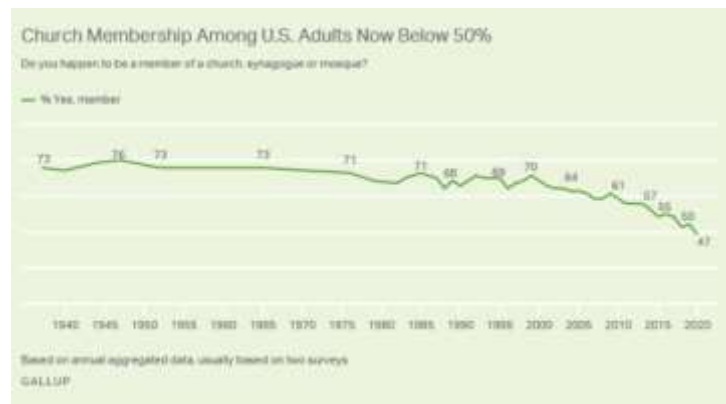




Matthew 5:1-12
What If Jesus Was Serious?
 (A Series on The Sermon On The Mount)
 “Who Is Really Blessed?”

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A recent Gallup poll shows the continuation of a trend that for many is a little alarming. I know many of you have seen the headlines in various news publications, including locally with the Seattle Times. This particular Gallup poll was about belonging to a local congregation here in America. Church membership has been tracked since at least the mid-1930’s, and for the first time in history, less than half of Americans say they are affiliated with a local church or religious organization. **Graph Here** From 1937 to 1999, the figure was pretty consistently 70% or more. But since 1999, the number has dropped from 70% to 47% today. It’s a pretty stunning decline.



Now, the survey was not exclusively about Christianity – the question asked participants if they were a member of a church, synagogue, or mosque. But it certainly applies to Christianity. And while there is more religious diversity now than there was 30 or 60 years ago, Christianity is still largest here in America by a wide margin. Additionally, an article in the Religion News Service says, **“Gallup’s data finds that church membership is strongly correlated with age: 66% of American adults born before 1946 [75 and older] belong to a church, compared with 58% of baby boomers [57-75 years old], 50% of those in Generation X [41-56] and 36% of millennials [25-40].”**¹ In other words, churches are getting older, as well as smaller. All of this is a concern for many Christians.

If you’re here or watching online and you’re *not* a Jesus follower, this trend ought to concern you as well. In a Washington Post article that ran in the Seattle Times where I read it, one college professor says, “How do we feed the hungry, [and] clothe the naked when Christians are half of what it was. Who picks up the slack?”² This is the kind of thing that Christians have done – and taken the lead on – for generations here in America, and around the

world. So, this reduction of Christian presence in America ought to be a significant concern even if you're not a Christ-follower, but you care at all about the marginalized.

You may wonder what any of this has to do with the Sermon on the Mount and our question of “what if Jesus is serious?”, since that’s what we’re diving into today after an introductory message last week on Easter Sunday. Well, here’s what Skye Jethani writes in his book on the Sermon on the Mount, **“Following Jesus has never been easy, but some believe it’s becoming even more difficult as Western Cultures become increasingly post-Christian. Today, fewer people identify as ‘Christian,’ fewer attend church with any regularity, and the fastest growing religious group in the United States is the so-called Nones—those with no religious affiliation.”**³ That is the opening two sentences of his book, and the most recent Gallup poll says the exact same thing.

For many Christians, the response to this trend of the last 20 years or so has been, “Well, clearly we’re taking Jesus too seriously. We’re turning people away from Jesus by following too closely.” So, in many churches and denominations: theology has gotten more worldly, Jesus has been de-emphasized, the cross minimized, and the empty tomb trivialized – reduced to a symbol of hope and new life and nothing more, and not the resurrected Savior of the world who gives hope for eternity. But Skye Jethani proposes another viewpoint in his book that registers with me and will essentially be what drives this series: **What if the problem is that we actually haven’t taken Jesus seriously enough?** What if the problem is that we worship a crucified and risen Savior on Sunday, but then on Monday and the rest of the week we live as though Jesus’ teaching and his life don’t actually matter? What if we aren’t really being his disciples all the time? What if we aren’t really taking Jesus seriously?

If you’re already a Jesus follower and you want to take Jesus seriously, or if you’re not a follower but you’re curious about Jesus and you want to know what he’s about, then the Sermon on the Mount is arguably *the* place to begin. It is filled with practical ways to live a life that is modeled after Jesus Christ. So that’s what we are diving into this morning. The Sermon on the

Mount begins in Matthew 5, and today we're in the first 12 verses. (**Read Matthew 5:1-12.**)

Now, Matthew tells us that Jesus went up on a hillside to teach. He sat down, which was the customary position of a Jewish rabbi or teacher. It's backwards to us, but normal for them. **The word that Matthew uses to say that Jesus spoke to them is written in a way that it tells us Jesus taught this stuff routinely.** The word is "edidasken" and it's in the past-tense, but it has a sense that it's on-going. We don't really have this in our language, at least not in one word. For instance, Gwen and I have been married just about 23 years, 7 months and 5 days. That's rounding up just a bit. ☺ And in talking about our marriage I might say, "I took my wife out for dinner," or "I have taken my wife out to dinner" ...and we can't know just from that whether that's a one-time thing, or if it has been an on-going thing that I have done many times all those years. I have to make it clear with other words that I took her out more than once over the course of many years.

So, I might say, "In the course of our 23-plus years of marriage, I took Gwen out to dinner at McDonald's many times." ☺ Without extra words, we don't always know whether something that happened in the past happened just once, or if it was an on-going occurrence. The verb itself isn't enough.

Not so with the Greek. And the past-tense that Matthew used tells us that this is on-going. It's the imperfect tense and conveys a sense of repetition or ongoing nature of the verb. It couldn't be clearer in the Greek. Jesus taught this stuff more than once. Regularly. Routinely. On a continual basis. So, this should probably be translated something like, "This is what Jesus used to teach them."

So: What we have here in this Sermon on the Mount was something that Jesus taught multiple times – maybe not these exact words over and over (as if he had a sermon manuscript that he kept with him), but the same principles, the same meaning of the teachings. In fact, we get a similar sermon in Luke, but the setting is different, and the teaching has some differences...and is probably one of those other times Jesus taught this stuff.

So, this is weighty, important teaching that Jesus impressed upon them multiple times, and we need to hear this and take it seriously.

Now, Jesus begins with what has come to be known as “the Beatitudes.” “Blessed are those who...” and then it’s finished off with some character trait or life experience, or something similar. **“Blessed” comes from the Greek word, “makarios” which has a meaning of deep, abiding joy and peace.** It’s not a fickle feeling that comes and goes with the seasons of life. Rather, it’s a deep, immovable, rock-solid sense of peace, contentment, and joy...the very presence of God...that is there through thick and thin.

And so: who is it that can presently experience this immovable blessing, or joy? It’s the people who are poor in spirit (down and out), who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so forth. **Some of these are situations that come upon us – a loved one dies and we mourn – while others are things we intentionally step into – like being a peacemaker.** By the way, peacemaker is maybe the most misunderstood one here. It is not a negative trait. It does not mean a person who “sweeps things under the rug” and maintains peace by avoiding conflict – which is how the word is often used. Rather, a peacemaker is one who does the hard work necessary to bring peace. Jesus, for example, is a peacemaker, the NT says that he is our peace, and he brings us peace with God through his death on the cross. That ain’t easy.

Anyway, people described by these things are “blessed.” Kind of backwards from what the world tends to say, don’t you think? **The kind of people we tend to associate with God’s blessing are those who seem to have everything “made in the shade.”** Even we Christians tend to this.

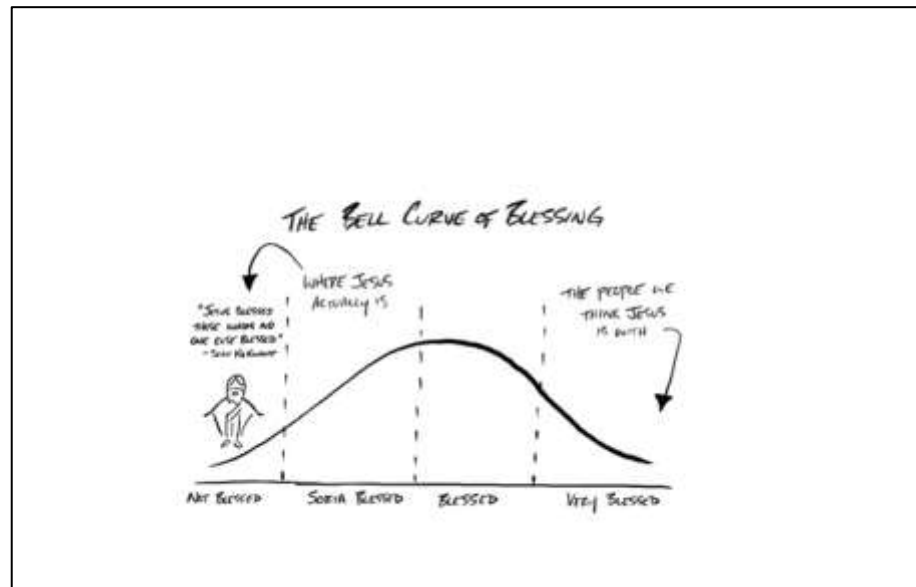


One of the most popular and best performing hashtags on Twitter is #blessed.⁴ I searched Twitter (I have an account but really shouldn’t...rarely use it) for #blessed and most of what people shared just in the first 40 or 50 Tweets was about great experiences they’ve had – one guy was #blessed to have just bought a \$100,000 Mercedes; others got college athletic scholarship offers; one gal was at the NCAA Final Four Tournament; and then there was **this guy** who was “#blessed to be drinking Donald Duck Orange Juice with my breakfast.” I didn’t even know there was such a thing as Donald Duck Orange Juice and now I kind of feel like my life isn’t complete and I’m not blessed! 😊

But...Is this what being blessed is about? The fact is, we tend to gravitate toward these kinds of things. And truthfully: I’ve been guilty of this kind of thinking, too. Maybe not in regards to \$100,000 cars and not even Donald Duck orange juice...but other material things, or experiences, for sure. In Jesus’ day, the attitude was even worse. **It wasn’t just that the well-off were blessed, but that those who weren’t well-off/happy/sailing smoothly in life were *not* blessed.** Jesus’ teaching is completely countercultural for them...and maybe it is for us, as well.

So, who is blessed? One of the coolest things about Skye Jethani’s book is the pictures. I haven’t read a picture book for myself since I was probably in 1st or 2nd grade. Since then, it’s only been for my kids. But now, at age 48, it’s my turn! 😊 And I want to share one of those pictures that really summarizes these verses.

This is what he calls “the bell curve of blessing.” It shows how the world – including us Christians – tends to view people who are blessed. On the left side are people who don’t seem to be blessed at all; then “sorta blessed,”



“blessed,” and on the right are those who seem to be exceedingly blessed, and whom we presume Jesus is with. But Jesus is actually with those on the left side. It’s a great picture illustration of what Jesus teaches here: that “blessed are those on the left side of the bell curve.” *It’s not that others aren’t*, but it corrects a wrong belief that people on the left side are not blessed. And Jesus helps us remember that God’s blessing is much less about how the world tends to view what it means to be blessed, and much more about true peace, joy, experiencing the presence of God, and so forth.

In other words: Success and happiness aren’t what being blessed is all about. And if you are on the right-hand side of that picture, then guess what: God wants to work *through* you to be a blessing to others. If you’ve got joy, talent, finances, love, peace, material stuff, time... **Whatever it is that you have in spades, God is going to work through you to bless someone who is on the other end of the spectrum.** (Or anywhere on it. “Mourning” for instance, knows no financial boundaries.)

Let me give you an example that happened just this week. You need to know that when I visit people at their homes or wherever, I’m not looking for sermon illustrations. That would be an abuse of my position. But this was shared with me with the idea it would bless others. So I’ve been given permission by the people in this to share. A few days ago, I visited Paula Lanum, who, as many of you know, is on Hospice, and her husband, Clay, is

struggling with Parkinson's and in a different retirement home than she is where they can care for him well. So, you would expect someone in her situation to be at least a little down and out, questioning God, filled with grief and angst and so forth. But her words to me, almost verbatim, were "I am so blessed. I am filled with incredible peace." Her countenance was upbeat and filled with hope and joy. Why? The short answer is: because God has blessed her, even in the midst of her situation, and she recognizes that. Two specific things stand out.

First, God gave her a vision. It was of her in a garden. A really beautiful garden, and represented this life. Next to the garden was a fairly fast-moving river that couldn't be crossed except for a beautiful, arched, one-way bridge that crossed to the other side. On the other side was another garden, beautiful beyond description, she said. More beautiful than the one she was in. And in that garden were her friends and family. It was a picture of heaven, and where she was going when it was time. I asked her if there were mountains with snow and chairlifts beyond the garden and she said not in this vision, which was highly disappointing. But this vision has given her incredible peace: that God is with her and will be leading her into that garden, into eternity when it's time.

The second thing that has completely blessed her has been that every day for the last ten days or two weeks or so, Barb Norfleet has called her and sung a couple of hymns to her over the phone. If you've been a part of our church for the last few years, you probably have heard Barb sing at some point, whether you know her by name or not. She has an incredible talent. And she has shared it in a way that completely blessed Paula. In fact, Barb happened to call and sing during my visit with Paula.

Because of that, and because of Paula's long relationship with Jesus, she is filled with incredible peace and joy. There are so many examples like that from this church I could share, and stories people have shared with me about how God has blessed them and given them peace, or joy, or comfort in the midst of challenging times.

So...Barb has a gift and uses it to bless Paula. Paula is blessed by that, and by the vision God gave her, and she shared that with me. That blessed me in the middle of the challenges and difficulties that I'm facing. And by them allowing me to share it with you, hopefully you are blessed and encouraged in the midst of whatever you're facing to know God is with you, and maybe you would be inspired to be a blessing to others and remind them that they are blessed.

If Jesus were walking the earth today here in America, and sat here near the top of Rose Hill in Kirkland to a crowd of people, he'd probably say,

“Blessed are the anxious.

Blessed are the unemployed.

Blessed are the homeless.

Blessed are the drop-outs.

Blessed are the mentally ill.

Blessed are the depressed.

Blessed are the minorities.

Blessed are those who struggle with their weight.

Blessed are the Mariners fans. 😊

Blessed are the addicts and the junkies.

Blessed are the oppressed.

Blessed are the dysfunctional families.

Blessed are the untalented, the wimpy, and the weak... **To all these people**

Jesus would add: for God is with you, God's kingdom is not far from

you, you will be comforted by God, you will see God, and so forth. Some

of us are in a position to come alongside others and give them assurance that God is with them. That they are blessed by the presence of Jesus.

But others of us here and online today are going through some really tough situations – at home, school, work, wherever it may be: either something has happened to you that's more or less out of your control, or you've intentionally stood up for what is right and it has become more difficult than you thought it would be. Jesus is telling us here that He is with you in those situations. And to be in God's presence *is* to be blessed. Say this after me, “God is with me/I am blessed.” Let's pray...Amen.

¹ <https://religionnews.com/2021/03/29/gallup-fewer-than-half-of-americans-belong-to-a-church-or-other-house-of-worship/>

² <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/religious-membership-in-the-u-s-falls-below-the-majority/>

³ Skye Jethani, "What If Jesus Was Serious?", p. 9.

⁴ <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/best-hashtags-twitter>