

The First Steps

Menno Mennonite Church
February 1, 2026

Purpose: To explore the beatitudes as a foundational element of discipleship.

Message: Discipleship invites us into the new logic of the kingdom that changes everything.

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12 (I will read); 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Synopsis: Jesus invites us, always, into discipleship. He brings us together to be something new. From the very beginning this involves a re-orientation from the values with which we live in the world and the values that we know in the kingdom. The foolish values re-frame the world as we know it and bring us time and again to the way of the cross that Jesus taught as the path of discipleship. Doing so, we are invited, always, into what God is doing as we are taught the way of the kingdom. We follow in this way because when we are following Jesus we can do no other.

Matthew 5:1-12

¹ Now when Jesus saw the crowds,
he went up a mountain.

He sat down and his disciples came to him.

² He taught them, saying:

³ “Happy are people who are hopeless,
because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

⁴ “Happy are people who grieve,
because they will be made glad.

⁵ “Happy are people who are humble,
because they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness,
because they will be fed until they are full.

⁷ “Happy are people who show mercy,
because they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Happy are people who have pure hearts,
because they will see God.

⁹ “Happy are people who make peace,
because they will be called God’s children.

¹⁰ “Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous,
because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

¹¹ “Happy are you when people insult you and harass you
and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you,
all because of me.

¹² Be full of joy and be glad,
because you have a great reward in heaven.

In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

'We need a place to start. From there we can go and get into the details, the whys and where fore's and all the rest. But there has to be a place to start. This is where Jesus starts. This picks up the story that we sat with last week—the calling of the disciples, to come and follow, and to set into the wilderness. But now Jesus is sitting down with the disciples at some high place and beginning to teach them one to one. These are the first words Matthew records of Jesus that were not dialog about what was going on around him or the things he was trying to do. This is where we begin the teaching of making those following disciples and those with them into the disciples they are being called to be. Jesus' first words of teaching are ones of comforting blessing given to those who were gathered around him at the same level.

To some degree we treat the beatitudes as a bit of a faith-based meme. We know them, we recognize them, we might even thrill a bit to them, but they don't really carry a whole lot of force in our way of being. A bit like the encouraging cat poster sort of message, encouraging us to hang in there, or shoot for the stars so that is our aim is not good we end up some place good anyway. I mean they are good, they are encouraging and they have their place, but are not up to much in the way of heavy use in the life of the disciple. We are given the advice to take these notions and live them in anticipation of blessing, all about getting us into the right attitude for following. meek because the meek will be blessed; be merciful because it is in your self interest to find mercy and so forth. It is the narrative of how one lives a Christian life. To be sure, finding the best in the situations of life and living is important and all, but it is a hard place to start with as it is just some rather pat answers to the way to find the best outcome in the world for us and ours. We try so hard to make these litany of blessings make sense so they fit within our concept of what it means and how we are as good Christian people. They are nice and all but don't make sense within the world as it is.

Which I think is our first mistake. We think that these values are being offered to describe what might be our ideal. But when we give that up and lean into the fact of the discipleship that Jesus teaches here is the discipleship of the Cross, the way that Paul later describes to the Corinthian church as foolishness and madness from the perspective of the world, then we know why we need to start here. These weren't hypothetical notions of what could come in rare circumstances. These were diagnoses of the way that the way of discipleship that they were embarking on, the way that we are each being invited into will be a way marked by the qualities of the kingdom of God being at odds with the kingdoms of this world. I think Jesus is

not so much trying to suggest that the way will perhaps have people who encounter these things and will find their home in the Kingdom. He is declaring straight up that this is the way things are when you are a disciple. The first thing that Jesus teaches about life in the kingdom of God is that it is for people who are in need. It is also significant that the kingdom of God is built on promises. And, let us not miss the detail that Jesus sits down to teach. To sit is to join with those you teach, and to sit is to proclaim authority. To sit and discuss these hard things is to be calm, purposeful, not afraid of the challenges ahead.

So, Jesus's first words of teaching are a word of comforting blessing filled with promises, made from a position of joining those he teaches. He joins the disciples and diagnoses the reality of the world from the very beginning. Discipleship will be mis understood. The foolishness of the cross will not make sense. There will be consequences for following the way of Christ, sometimes severe. But such is the way of the kingdom. Such is the way of being a disciple.

He promises that even this will yield good in the end though, but I don't think that this means that this is merely about the state of setting things up for the here-after. To a great extent all of Christian discipleship is a reality that is here and now but whose final status is that of the future tense. It is a product of that which we live: the kingdom now that is coming still. But that does not mean that they lack power for now. When we cannot change the circumstance of the situations we find ourselves in, those that make our Spirits poor and cause us to mourn, dealing with the demands that ask of us meek responses and those of a peace maker, we are given a frame around which we can understand these values as those of the kingdom and of ultimate good. The Beatitudes are not meant to make us sanguine about suffering, nor to deny the realities that we face. They look at the way things are full in the face and declare that even here the Kingdom is coming. Being a disciple does not ask us to deny the difficulties and injustices that are part of our world and our life, but it does equip us to understand that even here God sees, knows, and will comfort. Jesus does not want us to pretend that the world is other than it is. Which is why he begins by giving us hope. The first step is understanding that the hope required to take all the steps that will follow this cannot be found in the normal material ways and means of this world, but must have the far sterner stuff of finding its home in a place that is not here.

We know that it is rare that these values hold up to a rough and tumble world. We are living days where the world seems even less inclined to be governed by the valuation of the qualities of meekness, peacemaking, and purity of heart and intent than even the low levels we

are generally accustomed to. We are seeing the increasing cynicism of the way of the world which blesses power at all costs as the way to subdue the world, peace as a function of military might and not costly compromise and loving response; that sees those who struggle in their poverty whether material or spiritual as those who can be discarded, mocked, and run over. Those that show mercy are weak. Those that the hungry after righteousness are suckers to exploited. If we think ourselves persecuted, reviled, or put upon in any way is more a cause for a law suit and restraining order than it is any recognition of patient blessing. All this and more has been long the values of the wanting world, but the edge of these forces has seeming become more and more sharp, and the values with which we begin are that much more out of fashion.

Right up front, Jesus is offering and understanding of what it means to be a disciple and to follow him by laying out the defining circumstances of the Kingdom for them. When you take on the characteristics of Christ, placing yourself at the service of those who God loves (the world) in the way that God loves—gently, openly, without bluff or guile, maintaining your willingness to turn and look at the insults when all you want to do is just turn away and hide, you may need some guidance to understand the world in which you now live. Anyone who has made major change in their life can attest to this—when you change, it often the people who are closest to you that are most resistant, and there are consequences. When you live in contrast to the way things are and follow a different way there will be moments that will cause your grief. It's almost like a pharmaceutical ad; “possible side effects of following Christ include mourning, rejection by the powers that be, persecution, rumor mongering, and dry mouth.”

Our blessing is not dependent on that which we do, or how we are assessed by the world around us but by who you follow in faith and the faithful, resilient hope that defines the kingdom of God. Jesus is telling these people who had left their homes, livelihoods, families, friends and all the things that make up life as we know it that they are blessed because they were kingdom citizens, following Christ above all else. He telling us that too. The world as we know it is not the world as it ultimately, fully is. The grief, pain and anxieties of life and living will not have the final word, as powerful as they may be. The petty meanness and disregard for human decency will not stand. God's kingdom works beyond the ways of the world or any swoon of present fortunes, no matter how dizzying.

God's love cares about those who mourn for a life they wish they had, or all that they lost. The risks of stepping out to meet an enemy not in the field of battle but at the table of peace

will be rewarded. That when people do not understand why we would want to retain hope and resist the powers and principalities of this world, we do not do so out of personal conviction or internal strength; we do so because we follow Jesus into the world the God loves. It is Jesus' way and in following that way we are blessed because we get to live the kingdom now. We are not because we have achieved, behaved, gained, or comprehended the deep truths about Jesus (if you need confirmation of this, keep reading in Matthew and note how dim witted the disciples really are). But simply because we have stepped out on the road and followed faithfully where Jesus leads. That is our blessing because we start from knowing that God's way is that which holds the final sway.

Do we feel our blessing frequently, readily, or easily? Of course not. We are living in the in between times—with one foot in our world and one foot in the next being our only recourse. We feel the oddity of the meek and the pain of loss just as keenly as anyone else. It is not fun to be “the other” no matter what the season. It is not always clear where the path of discipleship leads, what it demands of us and when. We may not always wish to be characterized by the foolishness of the cross.

But we start here all the same. The same place Jesus started with the first disciples. In the fact that we are loved in God no matter what. And so too is everyone else. This does not change.

May we find blessing, however we know ourselves, in the promise that God is with us, no matter what. And in being blessed, may we follow on the one who leads us into every new thing. Amen.