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"Change of Heart"  
Micah 6:1-8 Matthew 5:1-12 I Corinthians 1:18-31

**INTRODUCTION TO MICAH 6:1-8**

In Micah 6:1-8 God calls unfaithful Israel to court and all of creation serves as witnesses against them. God questions their offerings and tells them what God really desires from them.

**INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 5:1-12**

Throughout the gospels Jesus teaches in parables. This morning we begin to take a look at one of two full blown sermons of Jesus that the gospel records. His sermon in Luke chapter 6 is called the Sermon on the Plain. His sermon that begins in Matthew 5 is called the Sermon on the Mount. Will you please stand as we hear Jesus' opening introduction to his sermon from verses 1-12.

Let us pray. Lord we are humbled by these words of yours. They set a standard to which we aspire, but often fall short. Help us to take these words of yours to heart and through the power of the Holy Spirit make them more and more our attitudes and reflected in our actions. Amen.

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A friend once came to Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of the book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, and said to him:

"Two weeks ago, for the first time in my life I went to the funeral of a man my own age. I didn't know him well, but we worked together, talked to each other from time to time, and had kids about the same age. He died suddenly over the weekend. A bunch of us went to the funeral, each of us thinking, "It could just as easily have been me."

That was two weeks ago. They have already replaced him at the office. I hear his wife is moving out of state to live with her parents. Two weeks ago he was working fifty feet away from me, and now it's as if he never existed.

It's like a rock falling into a pool of water. For a few seconds, it makes ripples in the water, and then the water is the same as it was before, but the rock isn't there anymore.

Rabbi, I've hardly slept at all since then. I can't stop thinking that it could happen to me, that one day it will happen to me, and a few days later I will be forgotten as if I had never lived. Shouldn't a man's life be more than that?"

This man had just experienced a wake-up call! For all of us, there are times like that when we are brought up short, and we are left thinking disturbing questions

like, "Shouldn't a man's life be more than that?" His wake-up call brought about a change of heart.

I think we get that kind of feeling when we contrast the reality of our lives against character portrayed in the Beatitudes. Sometimes we want to pass by them quickly on our way to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. We assume that Jesus was simply a Nazarene stumbling along the dusty roads of Palestine mumbling so many platitudes.

But there is that haunting feeling in our gut that Jesus may be right and we just might be wrong. And that's when we need to stop and take another long look at these Beatitudes. 1

This transfers over into our faith far more than we are aware, and it becomes apparent in how these Beatitudes are taught. Often one will hear, "The message of the Beatitudes is that, if I do these things well enough, then I will be blessed. If I am good enough at these things, then I will be happy."

Doesn't it seem to you that our whole culture is devoted to reminding us that our chief goal in life is to be "happy." Our constitution guarantees Life, Liberty and the PURSUIT of happiness. It doesn't guarantee that we will attain happiness, only that we have the right to pursue it.

The Westminster Catechism says our chief purpose in life is to glorify and enjoy God forever! If I can be happy doing that, and that's my goal, great. In fact, that's what keeps me going. It really makes me happy to glorify God and I really do enjoy it! Obviously I do or I would have dedicated the bulk of my adult years doing something else. It gives me joy to do it but my chief end, my greatest purpose is not to be happy. It is to rejoice that I am blessed.

But each one of the Beatitudes is in the present tense. It is not a prescription for how to reach happiness or blessedness. Each of the beatitudes congratulates the believer on the blessedness he or she is already experiencing as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

For us today, 2000 years removed from the time when the Word of God became flesh and walked among us, this kind of talk sounds bizarre, out of step with the times, just plain upside-down. Or maybe we're the ones who are upside-down. Maybe it's us that need a change of heart.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The reverse of that is true as well. How could I say it? "Cursed are the rich in spirit who feel they have no need for the kingdom of God?"

William Barclay says this verse means, "Blessed is the man who has realized his own utter helplessness, and who has put his whole trust in God. If a man has

realized his own utter helplessness, and has put his whole trust in God, there will enter into his life two things....

He will become completely detached from things, for he will know that things have not got it in them to bring happiness or security; and he will become completely attached to God, for he will know that God alone can bring him help, and hope, and strength.

The man who is poor in spirit is the man who has realized that things mean nothing, and that God means everything." 2

In the original Aramaic which Jesus spoke, the word "merciful" means literally "to get under someone's skin." It means to wear his skin, as it were; to see life from his perspective, to stand in his shoes. It means more than sympathy; it means active empathy or merciful understanding.

Let me illustrate. A prominent minister was holding a weekend seminar at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, several years ago. He kept noticing a man in the front row nodding sleepily. This aggravated the speaker. Preachers don't like for folks to go to sleep on them. The speaker at Junaluska thought to himself: Wonder why the man didn't stay home if he couldn't stay awake? During the lunch break, a woman approached the speaker and said, "Sir, let me apologize for my husband's drowsiness. He is undergoing chemotherapy. The doctors have given him a medication to control the side-effects, but it makes him very sleepy. I tried to persuade him to stay home today, but he said, "I must go as long as I'm able. I never know when I will no longer be able to gather with God's people."

Suddenly that speaker's attitude toward the drowsy man was transformed. Why? The wife had enabled him to get under the skin of her husband and really understand him. That is the quality of mercy.3

Maybe we've looked at what the world offers us – high mortgages, a break-neck pace just to keep up with the folks next door, doubts about our future in a business world filled with people just like us – and found ourselves wallowing in emptiness. Or maybe we have believed that, all by ourselves, we could solve any problem that came our way. But now we have reluctantly realized that we don't have all the answers. We've realized that we did not create ourselves and we cannot save ourselves.

The date was June 11, 1963; the place- The University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. The person--Vivian Malone, a young black woman, who enrolled that day as a freshman. Federal troops ensured her entrance, but the doorway was blocked by Governor George Wallace. Holding out for segregation, the governor ultimately failed, and Ms. Malone became the first African-American to graduate from the University of Alabama.

Years later, after an assassination attempt and a deep change of heart, Wallace was rolled in his wheelchair into the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in

Montgomery, and there asked forgiveness. More particularly, the former governor regretted how he had treated Vivian and sought her forgiveness face to face. He wanted to make amends before he died.

At their meeting, Vivian told him that she had forgiven him years earlier. Interviewed in 2003, she was asked about the meeting: "You said you'd forgiven him many years earlier?"

"Oh yes."

"And why did you do that?"

Her reply: "This may sound weird. I'm a Christian, and I grew up in the church. And I was taught that- just as I was taught that no other person was better than I- that we were all equal in the eyes of God. I was also taught that you forgive people, no matter what. And that was why I had to do it. I didn't feel as if I had a choice."

That is what we are after! That is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. This is what it means to have the Lord's wisdom go deeper in your soul than any of the meanness of this world. Our goal is not to seek forgiveness and reconciliation as an occasional choice but as a settled habit of character. As Vivian Malone said, "I didn't feel as if I had a choice." She had lived so long in the faith that forgiveness had become a reflex. 4

Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.

If we take the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and turn it into a new law, another burden we must carry to earn the title of disciple or bear the name Christian, we will have misread his intent. This teaching is a gift. It is a description of what life looks like from inside the kingdom of God. In Jesus as its visible ambassador, and through the Holy Spirit as its invisible power, we have access to the kingdom rule of God the Father.

In the midst of this fallen world, shot through with evil and conflict at every level, Jesus invites us to be a new kind of people, a people who deal with God at the heart level, not just at the level of outward obedience but at the deeper level of imagination where desires and habits are transformed. We live out of a new center with a new companion. We become peace-seekers, peace-keepers and peace-makers. We come as more than people who "pass the peace" in church on Sunday mornings. We come as people who "make the peace" in the world. We become people who see possibilities others ignore and exploit them for the kingdom of God. It is only in Christ's presence and in his service that we have the chance to become a new brand of people who offer hope to this angry, bitter, hurting, conflicted, litigious, resentful world, and to do it one relationship at a time. Unless the church is a place of honest peace, and genuine forgiveness, we have nothing to export.

If you want to change the world, ask Christ to change you first. Change MY heart O God! Deal with the sinful component of your angry responses. Take time for self-examination and prayer. Put away slander, gossip and name-calling. Control your tongue. Monitor your prejudices. Be quick to confess mistakes and seek reconciliation. Camp out in these verses until you have a story to tell about how you obeyed and how God came through with healing.

We all want our way; we resent frustration; we feel angry and lash out. What shall we do with these thoughts and feelings and actions? Only one answer has promise: we take them to Christ over and over again; we ask him to deal with us on the inside so that we can be new on the outside. He can do for us what no counselor can, which is give us grace to change, often in remarkable ways, and to become a people skilled in the ways of peace.

It is the response of those who seek the upside-down kingdom of God, because we have learned that no one has to face the challenges of life alone. The people of God have experienced life in a household of faith, which brings peace and forgiveness and acceptance, where mercy and compassion are the rule and not the exception, where grace is freely given and freely accepted.

One of our main tasks as a church is to pass on to others an alternative way of looking at life, a view they won't get from society. Our task is to pass on values will be the values of Jesus and their vision of what life is about will be his vision. We need to help them recognize the marks of the church that Jesus lays out. We need to help our children and grandchildren grow up to be uncomfortable when society tells them that the best blessings are money, good looks, possessions and power.

As they deal with the need to be popular, we need to show our children how to take stands for the right thing, even when they know that they will catch some grief from their peers about it. They, too, must understand that life in the upside-down kingdom of God is not easy, but it IS worth everything that has to be endured

So it is our joyous but risky task as a congregation to create a community where forgiveness is real, where peace is genuine and healing happens, where dependence upon God and one another is seen as a good thing, where people are not afraid to be who they are because they know that the arms of the people of God will surround them and embrace them and accept them.

Can you imagine what would happen if the church really believed it was called to be a kingdom community, a place where people love one another, warts and all? Can you imagine a community where nobody really minds who goes first and who goes last because they know there is more than enough of every-thing to go around? Can you imagine a place where the mourners are comforted and the losers are accepted when they DON'T win....where they are accepted especially because they have lost or are or have been lost.

Know what I think? I think it just might feel like the kingdom of God. It might be a place where WE can DO Justice –where WE can LOVE Mercy- And we can walk HUMBLY with our God. Then we will be living, walking, and talking beatitudes who have had a ... change of heart.

Let's pray. Lord, teach us the difference between being happy and experiencing joy. Adjust our attitudes to realize we have nothing without you in our lives, and that we are blessed when we're on top of the world and when we're down in the dumps because you are with us in both places and everywhere in between. Teach us to work for peace among our brothers and sisters and our neighbor nations. Teach us to accept the fact that when we do that we will be persecuted for it, as were you even to the point of death on a cross for our sakes. Adjust our attitudes to seek first your kingdom and your righteousness.

May we live in such a way that others will see that God's people really are *poor in spirit* because we've learned to trust in God and not in our own wisdom or power. May we live in such a way that others will see that we can feel the empty places in our lives and can let others know when we are hurting and share the grief of others without embarrassment.

May we live in such a way that others will see that we have come to the place where we don't have to be the strong one all the time and we can be tender and gentle with others and have given control of our lives to God and don't have to "win" all the time.

May we live in such a way that others will see that God's people do *hunger and thirst after righteousness* because they, too, dream of a day when God's justice will prevail for all people everywhere.

May we live in such a way that others will see in the way we live that God's people are *merciful* because we have received God's mercy and know how wonderful that is.

May we live in such a way see that others will see that we have come to the place where we can be completely open and honest with God and others.

May we live in such a way that others will see that God's people are *peacemakers* because we do more than Pass the Peace on Sunday mornings but we Make the Peace in our world because we have received the peace of God in our hearts.

May we live in such a way that others will see that we have come to the place where we know what we are living for and are not afraid to suffer for it and are willing to "take the heat" and stand alone for what its right.

Lord help us to live in such a way because we have had a change of heart..  
Amen.

1. Adapted from Rabbi Harold Kushner, When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough, p. 20. Mickey Anders, The Beatitudes Are Not Platitudes
2. Mickey Anders, The Beatitudes Are Not Platitudes!
3. Bill Bouknight, Collected Sermons, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com)
4. Peacemaking and self-control Phil Thraikill