

The Normal Christian Life

Series on the Sermon on the Mount

Today we are starting a series of messages looking at what Jesus taught the crowds about the implications of becoming his follower. In this teaching that we call "The Sermon on the Mount", Jesus was defining what life would be like for those who followed him. He was setting the standard. He was saying to them, this is what the normal Christian life looks like. Here is what you measure by. In a world that is changing all the time, these are the unchangeable values of the Kingdom. In a world that wants to redefine North as South, this is what you set your compass by. He was telling people who lived in an upside down world; this is the right way up.

He starts this sermon with what we call the Beatitudes, or what Billy Graham once called the "beautiful attitudes". Jesus tells us that if these attitudes are present in our lives, then we will know God's approval and blessing. So if you want God's blessing, take careful note of what is to come, for out God's blessing will come profound happiness. Jesus is saying that it's normal in the Christian life to want God's approval more than anything else.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". (Matthew 5:3 NIV)

God blesses those who are poor in spirit. It's normal to feel you are not doing too well in the holiness stakes. If you are the sort of person who deep down has this feeling that you are worse than you make yourself out to be, and that you are in constant need of God's forgiveness and grace, God likes that. You are just the sort of person God wants to bless. Spiritual poverty is when we come to the realisation that all of our goodness is about as attractive to God as a pile of a baby's dirty nappies. When you're at the end of your rope, and you are able to say to God "my life stinks – I need you", then you are aware you really need a Saviour. The normal Christian life is a life lived in the realisation that apart from God's amazing grace to us, we are nothing. If you are feeling self sufficient, you're in a bad spiritual state. If you feel you really need God, then Jesus says you're normal.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted". (Matthew 5:4 NIV)

God blesses those who feel a sense of loss. It's called mourning, or grieving in some translations. There is a sense of healthy grief that comes when we understand the heart of God. Jesus did. When he saw the results of sin, Jesus grieved over the damage. When his disciples couldn't heal a demonised boy Jesus said ***"O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me."*** (Matthew 17:17 NIV) He got upset when the Pharisees kept asking for signs. He grieved over the fact that his disciples didn't understand that he was to be a suffering Messiah. He looked out over Jerusalem and wept that they were so unconcerned about their spiritual state. It's a healthy thing to carry a profound sense of grief about our own sin and our pathetic spiritual life. It's normal to grieve over what's happening in an ungodly nation. It's normal to be profoundly disturbed by the violence, the immorality, the erosion of truth, the fact that many of our friends and neighbours are going to a Christ-less eternity. If you are mourning and grieving about what is happening in you and around you, then you are a person God loves to bless. If your heart is like that, it's very much like the heart of Jesus.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth". (Matthew 5:5 NIV)

God blesses those who have a humble opinion of themselves. Not long ago, I read a book about the life of Billy Graham. Billy has been personal friends with every President since Harold Truman. He has been welcomed by virtually every major leader in the world. He has personally preached to more than one billion people and been heard on radio or TV by another billion. Hundreds of thousands of people have become followers of Jesus through his ministry, yet Billy keeps insisting that anything that has been achieved through his life was not his work, but God's work. God has blessed Billy Graham because he has lived a normal Christian life. A normal Christian life is when we know we are not the centre of the universe. God is. John Newton had it right when he wrote "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!" The Apostle Paul, looked back on everything he had achieved in life and then said

"What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him".(Philippians 3:8 and 9)

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."
(Matthew 5:6 NIV)

God blesses those who are hungry for righteousness. Hungering and thirsting after righteousness is like saying our appetite for God is as important to us as food and drink. We can't get along without it. How many of us would say that is true of us? Now that we have five grandchildren, Lyn and I have been reminded again of what little babies are like when they are hungry. When a little baby is hungry, you can walk them round and sing to them to distract them. You can get them to suck your little finger. It might work for a little while, but they are going to cry their little hearts out until they get milk. Jesus is saying its normal to have that sort of hunger after God. When I think about the things that I hunger and thirst after, I have to admit that righteousness is something that seldom gets near the top of my list. When I'm honest with myself, there are lots of things I hunger and thirst for more than living my life in line with what God wants for me. According to Jesus, I would know a whole lot more of Gods blessing, if this was my consuming desire. I've got a long way to go.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy". (Matthew 5:7 NIV)

God blesses those who care for the miserable and helpless. According to Jesus, it's normal in the Christian life to be compassionate and gentle to those who are helpless. That beautiful attitude comes from a sense of gratitude that God has been merciful to us as wretched and helpless sinners, and that's how he wants us to treat others. Ever since I visited Israel, I have been troubled by one question that still bothers me. How can the Jewish people, who were treated so terribly during the Holocaust, be so harsh toward the Palestinian people? How can those who have been oppressed so harshly dish out the same treatment to others? And I look into my own heart and ask how I can be so unforgiving when I have been forgiven so much? How can I be so harsh with others when God has been so incredibly merciful and gracious to me? If Jesus is describing the normal Christian life, I'm still a long way from normal. How are you doing on this spiritual check-up? Are you finding this as uncomfortable as I am?

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God". (Matthew 5:8 NIV)

God blesses those who get their inside world – their mind and hearts – put right. Can you imagine how you would live your life this week if you were able to order your private world in such a way that there was no difference between your private world and your public world? Nicky Gumbell, who teaches the Alpha course, tells the story of a man named Gibbo, who worked for Gordon Selfridge, the owner of the English department store chain. Soon after he started working for Gordon Selfridge the phone rang. It was someone wanting to talk to Mr Selfridge. Selfridge said, "Tell him I'm out." Gibbo handed him the phone and said "You tell him you're out." Well, Selfridge was furious. When he got off the phone he began to tear strips off Gibbo. But Gibbo simply replied, "If I can lie for you, I can lie to you." Needless to say, he ended up being the most trusted person in the firm!

Many people live with a conflict between their private world and their public world. On the outside, they look like very together people, who have got life all sorted out. But on the inside, it's a seething mass of anger, resentment, evil thoughts, self pity, contempt for others, pride, fear, anxieties, doubts and despair. Yet it wasn't that way with Jesus. There was no conflict between his inside life and his outside life. His private world and his public world were one and the same thing. Jesus is saying that it's normal Christianity when there is no difference between our outside world and our inside world.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God". (Matthew 5:9 NIV)

God blesses peacemakers. A peacemaker is not just someone who stands between two people who are fighting and separates them. A peacemaker is someone who changes the whole climate of what is going on. There are two kinds of people - "thermostat" people and "thermometer" people. A thermometer reflects the climate of the room. If the room is cold, it's cold. If the room is hot, it's hot. But a thermostat can change the climate of the room. By its

setting a thermostat can change a cold room into one that is warm, or a hot room into one that is cool. And a peace-maker is a thermostat person. A peacemaker can change the climate of the room when he or she walks in. Have you ever seen that happen? Have you ever been in a room where everybody is negative and complaining, and everything is going wrong? Then a thermostat person enters the room, and soon says something that causes people to say, "We never thought of it like that." And the whole climate changes.

Normal Christians are peacemakers. People who change the temperature in the church for good. People who change the temperature of their workplaces. People who look for the God moments to step in to bring hope and healing. People who concentrate on the positive and see the good things God is doing in His church and in the world. It's normal Christianity to get involved, showing people how to co-operate rather than to compete or to fight.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you". (Matthew 5:10-12 NIV)

God blesses those whose commitment to him provokes persecution. Jesus is saying that if we live a life that pleases God, we are going to be persecuted. Don't confuse this with being persecuted because you are being downright offensive, insensitive, or because you are a raving fanatic. If you live an upright, Godly life in your school, or University, or in your home or business, then you can expect to collect flak. In fact, this final beautiful attitude is the test of how much we are living the normal Christian life. If we are never getting any persecution, then we need to ask ourselves how much of the character of Jesus is actually being seen in our lives. If we are living our lives according to Gods will, the natural result will be persecution. Godliness results in persecution. The greater the Godliness, the greater the persecution.

At the beginning of this talk I said that it's normal in the Christian life to want Gods approval more than anything else. All these beautiful attitudes are the things God approves and blesses. These are the things that make him glad. But how much do you want that? Do you want Gods approval more than the approval of your boss so you can get promoted? Do you want Gods approval more than your peers, so they will think well of you? Do you want Gods approval more than making lots of money in business? More than people thinking you are clever? More than university degrees? More than marrying someone who isn't walking with the Lord? God's approval meant more to Jesus than anything. He lived his whole life wanting to please God. Let's do the same.

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