

Good morning, it's great to be with you today. I'm Dan Nelson, as a quick intro for those of you who don't know me, my wife, Melody and I have been married 38 years this August. We have 3 daughters, two sons-in-law, two grandsons, and one cat. I was a pastor in another denomination for 20 years, left and started attending here 10 years ago. We were here two years when Keith's predecessor hired me as the executive pastor, and I served in that capacity three years. When he left, I was the interim until Keith got here, at which point I went to part time. I officially resigned at the end of 2020, now I'm one of the elders, I work with Michael Nelson, our Treasurer - no relation - to oversee all things financial at the church, I'm on the Welcome Team, and I own a bookkeeping business to pay the bills. That's my story in a nutshell.

Would you please stand for the reading of God's word from Matthew 5:1-12, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount?

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Please be seated.

I'm sure you've noticed that all the Beatitudes start out with, "Blessed," and a quick look at social media shows how many people feel #blessed. Your kid got the full ride scholarship? #blessed. Got the promotion? #blessed. Wonderful family? #blessed. Sometimes I think blessed is a humble way to brag.

But while material gain and good times are part of being blessed, it only takes a quick look at the beatitudes to see that there is more to blessed than prosperity and good times. Jesus says the poor in spirit are blessed. People who mourn are blessed, people who are reviled and persecuted and have evil spoken against them are blessed. That's not our usual image of blessed, is it? And not a one of these blessed has anything to do with material prosperity.

If we look at James 1:12, he says, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life..."

Or 1 Pet 4:14. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed...

These are not our typical image of blessed, are they?

Blessed does not mean that life is sunshine and roses. If that's all we see then we don't see it all.

Blessed means that God is present, whether life is good or not so good. So next time life gets painful, when it feels like your world is collapsing and you have lost all control and God is nowhere to be seen - remember that you are in fact blessed because, as a follower of Jesus, God has promised to always be with you.

Over the years it has been my observation and experience that God seldom waves his magic wand to intervene miraculously. Instead, he almost always chooses to use people like you and me to be the agents of his blessings to others. So maybe instead of looking for a blessing, we should go out and be one.

Paul, in Acts 20:35, reminds us of the words of Jesus, that it is more blessed to give than to receive. So, if you consider how blessed you feel when you get - imagine how much more you will feel blessed if you give!

So, the crowds are growing. More and more people are following Jesus, not just on social media, but with their physical presence. And so, Jesus goes up on the mountain and teaches them about the kingdom of God. So, as we go through these verses over the next few weeks and months, be sure you notice that what he teaches is not some mystical/spiritual, ambiguous, esoteric knowledge of what happens after you die which you can therefore file in your mind as just knowledge and not do anything about. He is teaching that the kingdom is here and now and this is how

to live a kingdom life - in the here and now. He begins with the beatitudes, perhaps to remind folks that they are blessed in the good and the not so good times because in the here and now kingdom of God, God is here.

Back at Christmas our three daughters, two sons-in-law, one grandson at the time, and Melody's sister's family all met at a restaurant in Fort Collins. We got there about 6:00pm and it was almost an hour before they took our order. By the time we got our meal, two of us had passed out on the floor from hunger, and I was so hungry I was getting ready to gnaw my brother-in-law's arm off.

Just kidding - no one passed out and I did not bite anyone. But you've been there, right? You've been hungry and thirsty. Blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness.

William Barclay, a theologian and Greek scholar, said that, "The hunger which this beatitude describes is not genteel hunger which could be satisfied with a mid-morning snack; the thirst of which it speaks is no thirst which could be quenched with a cup of coffee or an iced drink. It is the hunger of the man who is starving for food, and of the man who will die unless he drinks."

If you go back a chapter in Matthew, chapter 4 tells the story of Jesus going off into the wilderness to fast for 40 days. Imagine that - 40 days without food. Some of us think we will die if we have to go 40 minutes! When you go 2-3 days without food your body experiences intense hunger pains; some of you may have experienced that. However, after about 3 days those pains will disappear. But then, at around 40 days, hunger pains come back - with a vengeance. Your body screams out if I don't eat, I will die. Your body literally begins to consume itself to survive. At this point the only thing that matters is to eat. Everything else is unnecessary.

That's a little different than missing a meal or slow service at the restaurant, isn't it?

You know the song that says, "As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs for you." It's from Psalm 42:1. Usually we have this image of a cute little fawn in a beautiful green meadow next to a stream. But think of the geography of the middle east, and Israel in particular. Most of it is dry, hot desert. The deer the Psalmist is talking about is out in the dry, hot wilderness and is seriously thirsty, and unless it gets some water, its life will end.

Have you ever been that thirsty? I would bet not. In chapter 19 of his gospel, John tells of a time Jesus was thirsty. He had spent hours in prayer, gotten arrested, gone through a mock trial, and was up all night. He had a crown of thorns jammed on his head, been whipped literally within an inch of his life and was bleeding to death. He had to carry a cross up a hill, got nailed to it, and left to die on it.

And then in verse 28 he says, "I am thirsty." I bet. He was thirsty with a thirst unlike any of us have ever come close to experiencing.

The hunger and thirst Jesus describes in this beatitude is not a casual desire, or momentary feeling, or emotional whim. It is a deep and continuous, all encompassing, passionate longing - for righteousness.

You know what righteousness is, right? Somewhat oversimplified, we tend to think righteous means following God's rules so God will smile on us. And the more and better we follow the rules, the bigger God's smile will be.

But simply following the rules misses the mark of biblical righteousness. Biblical righteousness includes good behavior, but it starts with the idea that God is righteousness. Check out Psalm 119:137, and 145:17. And there are more!

Now, being the good, humble Christians we are, I think we would all admit that we all fall short of perfectly following all of God's rules, right? In fact, I think there are some bible verses somewhere that say exactly that.

But when you dig deeper into it, there is way more to being righteous than following the rules.

Biblical righteousness starts with God, it is God-centered, and it's God-sourced. Righteousness is about being right in the eyes of God, not because of what we have done or not, but because of what God has done in and through Jesus. Huge point!

That's why it's so important to be aware of the many other false standards of righteousness we often use.

One of them is what I call political righteousness. There is a lot of that going around, isn't there? I think we can further slice political righteousness into Republican righteousness and Democrat Righteousness. Both of which may or may

not be related to Constitutional Righteousness. And let's not get started on second amendment righteousness.

But wait - there's more! What about gender righteousness, and economic righteousness, and environmental righteousness, and ethnic righteousness?

And here's a big one for us evangelicals: evangelical righteousness, which is just a slice of a larger standard called religious righteousness. Some related standards are denominational or conservative or liberal or mainline righteousness. We look at all those other so-called Christians who aren't like us, that other church or denomination, and we think, "Too bad they aren't as righteous as we are." We think they are wrong about what the Bible is or how to interpret it, or about baptism, or end times, or how you get saved or even what music you play in church. We look down on them. We distance ourselves from them. We judge them. In Christian love of course, but that's what we do, don't we?

About 15 years ago now I was with a friend, driving through a particularly upscale area of southwest Denver, surrounded by multi-million-dollar homes. We "Oohed" and "Aahed" appropriately, and then I made the comment that some people just have too much money and why do they need such a huge house. My friend chuckled and told me about an article he had read in which a group of pastors was asked, "How much of a house is too much house?" It took a while but finally a guy in the back (it's always a guy in the back, isn't it?) said, "A house bigger than mine."

I think this illustrates the standard that encompasses all of the other standards I just mentioned. It's called self-righteous. Does that sound reasonable?

Self-righteous is "a confidence in one's own righteousness, especially when smugly moralistic and intolerant of the opinions and behavior of others." I'm glad none of us is like that! Well, for full disclosure, I can be.

Jesus tells a parable in Luke 18:9-14, about the Pharisee and the tax collector, to illustrate self-righteousness. "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

He sounds like a pretty righteous dude, doesn't he? At least from outward appearances. I'm glad none of us is like that! Well, for full disclosure, I can be.

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified.”

The Pharisee thought God was smiling broadly on him because he followed all the rules; the tax collector recognized that there was nothing in himself that would cause God to approve of him. And yet Jesus says the tax collector is the righteous one.

So, what do we do about that? How do we become righteous when there seems to be no way we can become righteous? Well, for starters, we can't do anything.

In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul wrote, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This takes us back to what I said earlier that righteousness starts with God, that it is God centered and God sourced. We can be righteous, but not because of anything we do or don't do; we become righteous because of what God has done in and through Jesus. Any righteousness we have as followers of Jesus, is because of Jesus. Jesus is the source of our righteousness.

As Paul tells us in Colossians 1:15, Jesus is, "the image of the invisible God" If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. If you want to know what righteousness looks like, look at Jesus. Look at Acts 3:14, 7:52, 22:14, 1 John 2:1 - Jesus is given the title the righteous one. He is the God in human flesh example of righteousness. As followers of Jesus, it's part of our job to let that righteousness shine out of our lives.

Rodney Stark is a modern historian and sociologist of religion who wrote a book called "The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries." He describes himself as a ‘cultural’ Christian and says, "I was never an atheist, but I probably could have been best described as an agnostic."

In his book he wrote that, "Christianity revitalized life in the Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many

urgent urban problems. To cities filled with homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded family. To cities torn by violent strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services." That's righteousness in our history. What does righteousness look like in our world today?

See, when the hungry get fed and the homeless get housed and the uninsured get medical treatment, that's righteousness. Some of us say that's the social gospel, what they really need is Jesus. Well, ya, they need Jesus; AND they need to be fed and housed and treated. That's the full gospel. For example, read your Old Testament, you'll see that God has a soft place in his heart for the foreigner. What I'm about to say is not to tell you what to do or not do, or how I think things should be done - this is my struggle: I struggle over building walls and setting up obstacles that keep people out and refusing to help them. I get all the reasons why people want to keep people out, OK. But I struggle when I set constitutional righteousness next to biblical righteousness, because they are not the same, and I'm not always sure how I should respond.

A few months ago, Steve Burgess, one of our elders, connected us with Samaritan's Purse to help an Afghan family get settled in the US. However, that fell through, so now we're working with them to help a family from Ukraine. They live in Germany now, but want to live in the US, so we are working to get them to Cheyenne so they can make a home here. Part of our budget is missions, and this is where we are spending some of it. So, when you give you are helping righteousness to happen.

Some of your giving also goes to support the ministry of the Pregnancy Care Center. That's what the baby bottles are for. Perhaps the obvious thing they do is help parents with unexpected pregnancies choose not to have an abortion. But they work with the parents before and after the birth to help them learn how to feed them and clothe the child, how to make a resume and get a job, how to communicate with each other so they have a good marriage, or at least a good relationship. They work with the mom and the dad to help them become a good a mother and father. That's righteousness in the world.

Righteousness is when you and I forgive the people who have hurt us, and pray for the people that are our enemies. So - When is the last time you prayed for your political enemy? When is the last time you prayed for that person who just doesn't see the 2nd amendment thing, or the wall thing, or the other thing - the same way as you see it? When is the last time you asked God for forgiveness because you were practicing self-righteousness rather than Jesus' righteousness?

JD Greear, a pastor in Bloomington, Indiana, makes a huge point when it comes to following Jesus in the USA in 2022 and beyond. He says, "As kingdom citizens we are not the party of the donkey or the elephant; we are the party of the lamb."

You get that, right? So, if your political jersey says Democrat then be a kingdom Democrat and pursue kingdom righteousness. If your political jersey says Republican then be a kingdom Republican and pursue kingdom righteousness. And when you see unrighteousness, call it out – in their party and in yours.

When you see how Jesus treated people, he didn't take cheap shots or insult or demean. He didn't make fun of or criticize. He didn't condemn. His mission was not to tell people how bad they were or how deserving of hell they were. His mission was to preach the gospel, which literally means good news. It is the good news of a great God who loves his creation in general and people in particular, and rather than rubbing their face in their shortcomings and sins, he wants them to come to him so he can forgive them and cleanse them and have them spend eternity with him in paradise. That's righteousness.

Righteousness should show up in our relationships. It should produce reconciliation with others. Sure, we have differences and disagreements. But if we are not careful about how we relate to folks on the other side of the issue, we will damage those relationships, and bring brokenness to the church. And that is not righteousness.

What would happen if we took some time this week to confess to God that we are, in fact, all too often self-righteous, and would God please point out where we need to get started changing that. And when he does, thank him, repent, and ask forgiveness. What difference would that make?

What would it look like if, this week, we were intentional about looking for a place where we can express Jesus centered righteousness in our world - through forgiveness or humility or service or giving, or some other way? In a relationship, at

work, at church, at home, with the neighbors. What would have to happen for us to become vessels of God's righteous blessing to the folks around us?

Let's pray.