



Dr. James C. Howell
Matthew 5:1-12
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One of the things that we recommend to you constantly, of course, is Bible reading, and we can do this confidently because the Bible is this storehouse of treasures that is never fully tabbed. I finished a novel last night. I'm done with it. I've read it. I'm not likely to pick it up again, but the Bible is one of these books, there's always more there. God can always teach us more when we return to his page. There's even a familiar passage. This passage that Kevin just read, I wrote an entire book on that passage a couple of years ago, but I think there are a couple of things in there that I think are so poignant and important that I did not even think of when I was writing an entire book on the passage. Let me reflect on a couple of those with you. One is the word *seeing*. It says *Seeing the crowds, Jesus spoke to them*. I mean, seeing may just be accidental. Since we think that seeing is whatever happens to come into our field of vision, that is what we see, but I think there's more to it than that. I think it is saying that Jesus saw them. He didn't have to see them. He could have averted his gaze. He didn't have to be there in the first place, but he was there, and a crowd gathered and he saw them. I think he really looked at them. He didn't just see the crowd, he could see each person in the crowd.

G. K. Chesterton once said that St. Francis of Assisi "couldn't see the forest for the trees and he didn't want to." Jesus didn't see a forest of people. He saw individuals who had come together. He saw them. This works well for us because we have a need to be seen. We see it in children. We forget about it as we get older. When my children were little, we would go to the pool and they would do their leap into the pool. It wasn't enough just to leap into the pool, it would be "Daddy, watch me leap into the pool" and then they would leap into the pool and as their head would bob up, they would look over to be sure that I had seen them leap into the pool and I could say "Well done."

Through all of life we wish to be seen – how should we say it? We wish to be seen truly. It is frustrating to be seen, but to be seen falsely. I think I told some of you last Sunday morning I woke up and I thought I had been seen falsely in the newspaper. We want to be seen truly. We want to be seen lovingly. We want to be seen by those who can look at us with mercy, who can see the noble self that God has created in us. Jesus sees each one of us. He sees us with merciful eye. He sees the image of God that is planted in each one of us that others may not notice.

Luke reports this same story, and when Luke tells it he says that Jesus saw the people and then he lifted up his eyes – I like that – he lifted up his eyes. We invite you to come forward for Holy Communion and sometimes we come for Holy Communion humble and being humble is a good thing. It's one of the virtues that we recommend, that we be humble. What can happen sometimes is that we become so humble, we become so humbled by our lives. Gregory the Great – this great theologian from the sixth century – spoke of us becoming like hunchbacks. We're so worn down, we're so way down with the concerns and worries of the world and the darkness in our souls that we become like hunchbacks. And Jesus lifted up his eyes. He invites us to lift up our eyes, not just be stuck on the things of this earth but to lift up our eyes and to

look for God because, with God, there's hope. With God, there's love. With God, there's joy. Jesus lifted up his eyes.

And Matthew tells us something I've never really thought about before. He says that Jesus opened his mouth. He could have just said "Jesus said" but Matthew says that Jesus opened his mouth. It may mean nothing but it may suggest that pregnant pause, when Jesus had just opened his mouth and the people were wondering "What did he say?" Perhaps their mouths fell open as well in awe, in wonder, in expectation, perhaps the way a bird in a nest, a little chick, opens its mouth to receive a worm from the mother. Jesus opened his mouth. Their mouths, no doubt, were open. Jesus opened his mouth and he said his first word in his very first sermon, and what was it? Jesus said *Blessed – blessed*. What a wonderful word – blessed. Jesus came to bless us. Jesus said *Blessed are you* to people who were nobodies. The only messages they ever heard from anybody was "You better work harder. Your lot in life is just what you have. You've got to earn it. You'd got to get it on your own. If you don't have anything, it's just your fault." Whatever the messages are – you've got to pay your taxes – whatever. To those people Jesus said *You are blessed*. Just to hear the words of Jesus.

I dinged Thomas Jefferson one time because Thomas Jefferson said "The only thing about Jesus that mattered are his words." It's not just Jesus' words. It's the things that he did and the people that he touched, his death and his resurrection. But Jesus' words are for us a blessing. When we hear them, when we let them become part of the fabric of our soul, when we let Jesus' words become the way that we think as we go out into the world and perceive whatever it is that we perceive, then we are blessed. And what's amazing in this, if you pay attention to it, is that Jesus says *Blessed are you* and he's not saying "Look at all that you have – you should be grateful for it." No, what Jesus points to when he says *You are blessed* – this is amazing – he points to what they lack. Jesus points to what they lack, and he says *Because of what you lack, you are blessed*. Jesus says *Blessed are you who are poor*. And what the poor lack would be money, things. Jesus says that they are blessed. He's not glorifying poverty, but he's suggesting that maybe we get so much sometimes that we become so independent and our lives are so full. We have accumulated too much that there's really no room left for God. In Luke's version of this, Jesus says "Woe to you who are rich. You've already received all that you're going to get. Woe to you who are full. You're too full." Now let me think, what was Jesus' tone of voice when he said "Woe?" When we hear the word "woe," I think we imagine Jesus saying "Woe to you," but I don't think it's his tone at all. I think Jesus' tone is plaintive, sad, pleading, yearning "Woe to you who are already full. You'll miss out on what I've come to bring you."

Jesus talks about what is lacking. The poor lack. Think. Jesus says *Blessed are the meek*. What the meek lack is a pridefulness. The meek lack that cocky self-assurance that I can get it done. The meek lack that and Jesus says "That's good because then you can know me. You can depend on me. You can be properly humble." Jesus says *Blessed are those who mourn*. What the mourners lack is the one that they loved and lost, and when we love and lose, we feel God's comfort and God's love and hope of God's good future, that death is not the final word.

My favorite of all the Beatitudes, though, is this one. Jesus says *Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness*. That is just pitch-perfect. Jesus does not say, be very clear, Jesus does not say "Blessed are you who are righteous." That would be way too much pressure.

Jesus says "Blessed are you who lack righteousness," and that works really well because most of you in this room could say "I lack the righteousness I wish I had – I lack the relationship with God that I wish I had – I lack the wholeness that I wish I could discover in my soul – I lack the kind of life that I think God is calling to me." And Jesus says "That's good" because when you lack you can be hungry. And the question is, Are we hungry to be close to God? Hungry for righteousness? Jesus, the one who sees us, the one who knows us and sees what is noblest in us, the one who said *Lift up your eyes*, the one who said *You are blessed*. He said that we are blessed when we hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Those people who first heard Jesus probably had not had any food that day yet. Or if they had had any food, they would have had one little crust of bread, and they probably were still hungry. When you come for Holy Communion, we don't give you the whole Thanksgiving feast up here. It's not turkey and dressing and mashed potatoes and all. We just give a little piece of bread and if that's all you ate, you would walk out the door hungry. And if you walk out of this door hungry, Jesus would say "Good. I want you to be hungry because blessed are those who lack." *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*. I see you. Lift up your eyes. Listen to my words. Open your mouth and receive the body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And when we do, we truly will be blessed.

Amen.