

“Turning the World Right Side Up”

Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. Lin Carter

First Baptist Church Raleigh

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Jean Valjean is the lead character in Victor Hugo’s classic novel turned musical “Les Miserables”. Set in nineteenth century France, the story explores themes from war to forgiveness to good and evil. Valjean is imprisoned for twenty years for stealing bread because he and his family were starving. Upon release, he is branded an outcast with little hope of creating a life for himself until he is taken in by Bishop Myriel, a kind and wise clergyman. Out of desperation and in spite of Bishop Myriel’s help, Valjean steals a pair of silver candlesticks from the church and runs away but is soon caught. He fears that he may spend the rest of his life in prison as a result but thinks that he deserves it for stealing from the only person who showed him mercy. The police bring him back to Bishop Myriel. I’ll pause the story there and ask, What should happen to Valjean? What would you do if you were the Bishop? If I were in a similar situation here at First Baptist, what would you have me do and why?

Today’s scripture passages are challenging, to say the least. Really, they are downright impossible to live up to. They are so difficult to follow that it may just take a fictional character to live up to them! At first reading, the passages seem to say that sacrifices are meaningless, that God expects us to be blameless, that the gospel message hinges on a poor Middle Eastern criminal who was brutally and shamefully executed, that being poor and sad and meek and hungry are good things. Put that way it might sound like foolishness. But we keep reading and learn that our best efforts and our wisdom are just foolishness to God. Today’s teachings are so counterintuitive that it can be hard to make sense of them. But they do have a common theme, as lectionary passages usually do: striving to live up to the impossibly high standard of God. So what do we do?

Some say that it's worth striving for the unattainable even when we know we can't reach it because the striving helps us to be our best, most Christ-like selves. Others say that by God's grace and help we can live out these principles in ways that can make a real difference even if we don't live them perfectly. I think there is truth in both but I tend to lean toward reliance on God and the Spirit moving in our lives for God's ways to become reality. However you view them, here they are, plainly laid out to us.

Paul writes to the Corinthians to say that our wisest wisdom is just foolishness to God. Our tendencies, our inclinations, our selfishness, our sinful nature if you want to put it that way, are upside down in God's eyes. In other words, sometimes what makes sense to us might *need* to be turned upside down.

Psalm 15:4 is more specific. It says that we should "stand by our oath even to our hurt." It means that we should keep our word, maintain integrity even under pressure, that we do what we think is the right thing even when it might be to our detriment.

In Micah, humanity asks, "God, what can we offer you? Sacrifices to atone for our transgressions?" God says, "No. Instead of focusing on the past and trying to make up for your mistakes, move forward, live out justice, make kindness your priority, and walk humbly and closely with me." Our world today is not in the habit of forgetting mistakes or forgiving them largely because justice, kindness and humility are too often undervalued. This is what Jesus is preaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

Leading up to this, his first public sermon, Jesus has just been baptized, called his first followers, and established his headquarters. He's been performing miracles and healing people. He's becoming well known and it's time for his first big public event. Matthew clearly intends to parallel Jesus and Moses. Let's consider the similarities. Jesus, like Moses, has a

miraculous birth story. They both come out of Egypt and wander in the wilderness. They both go up to a mountain and share the word of God with the people. Moses and the Ten Commandments and Jesus the Beatitudes. Matthew is not only connecting the two men and the two messages, he's claiming that Jesus and his Way are the fulfilment of Moses and the Law, that Jesus is more than a prophet, that Jesus' teachings go above and beyond the Law, that what follows in the Sermon on the Mount is the pinnacle of God's word to us. So let's take a look at the Beatitudes.

Many of the ideas in the Beatitudes can be found in Psalms and Isaiah, (See Annotated Jewish New Testament p. 10) but Jesus' use of them and his teachings on them are something new.

Blessed are the poor- Poverty doesn't only mean the absence of wealth but can also refer to full acknowledgment of our reliance on God for all things.

Blessed are those who mourn- Mourning isn't simply sadness but it's admission of our need for God's comfort.

Blessed are the meek- Meekness isn't weakness but a powerful attitude of self-sacrifice for the sake of others.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness- There's a difference between righteousness and self-righteousness. The former is about being Christ-like. The latter is just pretending to be.

Blessed are the merciful- Showing mercy isn't weakness, either. Mercy is being strong enough to elevate someone else's position and not be threatened by it or jealous of it.

Blessed are the pure in heart- Purity isn't merely the absence of flaws but it reflects complete devotion to God.

Blessed are the peacemakers- Peace is more than the absence of strife. Peacemaking is the constant effort of fostering peace even in the smallest situations.

Finally, blessed are those who suffer presently but briefly as a result of living out these principles because their reward is and will be great.

Jesus affirms this higher way in other parts of scripture, too. Over and over Jesus said, “You’ve heard it said. . . but I say to you. . . .” He constantly raises the bar. One example is that the Law of Moses says, “An eye for an eye.” Even though the original idea was to put reasonable limits on punishment, the problem with an eye for an eye is that it leads to a cycle of violence and everyone ends up blind. Instead, Jesus says, “Turn the other cheek. . . Go the extra mile. . .Forgive limitlessly.” Still today, so often, eye-for-an-eye seems like justice, doesn’t it? Maybe, but Jesus moves beyond fairness to mercy and grace. Grace so high and deep and absurdly generous that it seems like upside down foolishness. This is the kind of blessedness that breaks cycles of violence, changes us, and changes the world.

I remember my very first mission trip to Pittsburgh when I was in college. I was a freshman at State and my crew was painting the inside of a chapel-turned-men’s shelter. A man saw what we were doing and asked what we were getting paid to do the job. I explained that I was a college student on spring break and that I was volunteering my time, that, in fact, I had paid to come on this trip. I’ll never forget his reaction: he was incredulous and didn’t believe me at first. Only after some of my friends chimed in and backed me up did he believe us. That experience has stayed with me, not that I deserved a lot of credit for it, but I’ll always remember the power, the impact of giving and serving, especially at my own expense. That’s exactly what this church does in a regular basis.

We can also think of it as simple math. Would you rather live in a world where seven billion are out to get all they can at your expense? Or would

you prefer to live in a world where seven billion people are looking out for your best interest even before their own? To bring it closer, wouldn't you rather be in a church where the people in the room are absurdly gracious and forgiving? Wouldn't you rather have a home where those in your house are trying to out-give you? I say this to my children all the time. We'll have to see who listens better- you or them! But in all seriousness, it starts with each one of us understanding that selfishness is the root of many of our problems and that selflessness is the solution to many.

When we left Valjean, he had been captured and the police brought him back to Bishop Myriel to return the silver candlesticks. What did you decide should happen to Valjean? What would you do in the Bishop's place? Myriel does something that you may find surprising, or maybe not. He tells the police that Valjean has done nothing wrong. He tells the police that he gave Valjean the candlesticks and more. He says that that Valjean left in such a hurry that he forgot to take even more silver that Myriel had given him. Then the Bishop places the treasures in stunned Valjean's hands.

Valjean's world is turned upside down. He walks away a free man with enough wealth to start a new life. He struggles to comprehend the vastness of the mercy and generosity the Bishop has shown him. Valjean vows that he is a changed man and that he will spend the rest of his life living up to the incredible blessing that the Bishop has given him. Without giving away too much of the rest of the story, Valjean does a pretty good job of keeping his promise, yes, even to his own hurt. He even changes a few other people's lives in the process through his own acts of lavish generosity and life saving grace.

We don't have to look far to see the results of living God's way instead of our way. With cycles of violence everywhere, not just on a societal level but on a personal level, what if we really applied the principles of the Beatitudes to our family, our co-workers, our neighbors, our fellow Christians? We do it, yes, but we don't *always* do it. I know I don't do it

enough. So let's walk and live and breathe these higher ways of God, possibly to our hurt, certainly to the greater good.

What if we did live up to this? Would the world see us differently? Would the world view the church differently? Too often the world looks at us and sees a stigmatized or caricatured image, one that is not entirely positive. Maybe this is how we can be different in good ways, different in ways that we can be proud of, different in ways that will make the world look at us and want what we have. I believe that God's higher ways of limitless love, strong meekness, fearless peacemaking, outrageously generous grace, and self-sacrifice can change us, change the world, and change how the world looks at us.

Kathryn Cunningham passed away a couple of weeks ago. If you didn't know her then you missed a real blessing. She was a living example of what I've been preaching. When she came into a room she brought peace and kindness and meekness and mercy with her. She was quiet and sweet but she was a strong presence. She was influential in the very best way- just ask those who knew her. She exemplified a Beatitude way of living.

Living this way may seem like it would turn the world upside down and maybe that's what we're called to as Christians. In another way, maybe living this way would be turning the world right side up, changing the world from the way it is to the way God intends it to be, one person, one act of gracious lovingkindness at a time. May it be so with us.