

“Bumper Sticker Religion”  
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First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois  
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**Micah 6:1-8 and Matthew 5:1-12**

*[Note – this sermon included projected images, which can be seen on the video at <http://www.firstpres.church/first-pres-live-2020-02-02/>. However, I believe the sermon is understandable without seeing the images.]*

Do you put bumper stickers on your vehicle, religious ones or otherwise? Bumper stickers are a way of expressing something to people who see your car, whether it’s going down the road, or sitting in a parking lot. I often notice bumper stickers. It can be interesting to see what someone found to be important enough to emblazon on their vehicle for the world to see. It seems to me that most people don’t put any bumper stickers on their cars, at all. Others put a small number, like on this car. I like the one on the left: “Do you follow Jesus this close?” The one on the right is good, too, “Be the person your dog *thinks* you are.” Those of us with dogs can likely relate to that one.

Others put a few more stickers on their vehicle, like this van. This one also has a “Are you following Jesus this close?” sticker, and another one I like: “Faith without works is dead. (James 2:20).” It gets a bit more extreme from there, though. “The road to Hell is bumper to bumper. Make a U-Turn to God” is perhaps one of the tamer ones. “Don’t expect a party in hell. It’s canceled due to fire” is poignant, I suppose. There is, of course, the scripture written on the back window – I hope they can see out of that window. My favorite, though, is right in the middle: “On

Judgment Day, you'll wish your car had Jesus stickers." I must have missed the passage of scripture which indicates that "Jesus stickers" are related to salvation.

And then there are those who go all out, like this one, which hardly has a place left for another sticker. There are many good ones on this vehicle: *Peace be with you. Love one another. Keep the faith.* Those are all there somewhere, and then there are some other ones I like: *God wants spiritual fruits. Not religious nuts* and *Jesus is coming. Look busy.* Then, there are some more conspiratorial ones, like "Humpty Dumpty was PUSHED." Someone *should* look into that.

What about this sticker? "#Blessed" If you aren't familiar with "hashtags," they are a way of identifying a topic, starting with that symbol which used to be more commonly called a "pound sign" or "number sign." They are a shorthand way of getting across a message; in this case, that you feel blessed. If you haven't seen #Blessed on a vehicle, you've likely seen it on social media. I looked through my Facebook feed and found friends putting #Blessed when writing messages such as thanks for birthday wishes, "loving this sunshine," ringing in the new year with friends, a teacher with a new job, a friend starting seminary, a new haircut, and my favorite, "The satisfaction of matching [nail] polish, coffee cup, and blankie with kittie cuddles! #Blessed." I'm glad my friends feel blessed.

However, I wondered about those posts, and that bumper sticker, when reading Jesus' statement on blessings. We read them a bit ago, but you likely know them pretty well. Jesus calls the "poor in spirit," "those who mourn," "the meek," "the persecuted" blessed. I did not see anyone post on social media "Just lost my job due to prejudice. #Blessed." What is it that Jesus is saying about blessings? Should we only associate "blessing" with positive circumstances?

Jesus says that blessedness comes from situations which are quite counter to our way of thinking -- and that's part of the point. As author and bishop N.T. Wright says, "Jesus is not suggesting that these are simply timeless truths about the way the world is, about human behavior. ... This is an upsidedown world, or perhaps a right-way-up world; and Jesus is saying that with his work it's starting to come true. This is an announcement, not a philosophical analysis of the world. It's about something that's starting to happen, not about a general truth of life. It is gospel: good news."<sup>1</sup> Jesus announces blessings on those who wouldn't feel blessed by the world, and that is truly good news.

I think that God's blessing is on us in *all things*. I'm reminded of the traditional wedding vows, which include "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health." In all of those situations, *we are blessed*. A new job – yes, you are blessed. Persecuted for righteousness sake – yes, you too are blessed. We are blessed not in the everyday circumstances of our lives – whether better or worse. We are blessed because we are loved by a loving God. We are blessed because we are created in the image of a holy God. We are blessed because we belong, in life and in death, to a righteous God.

The challenge is in seeing that we are blessed when we are reviled and persecuted, when we are poor in spirit or mourning. Sometimes, it's hard to see our blessings when we are living lives of mercy or being peacemakers in a world which values retribution and violence. And perhaps *that* is why Jesus brings up our state of being blessed in precisely those circumstances.

Nadia Bolz-Webber writes: "Maybe the sermon on the mount is all about Jesus' seemingly lavish blessing of the world around him, especially that which society doesn't seem to have much time for: people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy

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<sup>1</sup> *Matthew for Everyone*, pg. 34

instead of vengeance. So maybe Jesus is actually just blessing people, especially the people who never seem to receive blessings otherwise.”<sup>2</sup>

We are blessed. We are blessed! Not because of the possessions that we have. Not because of the degrees we hold, the jobs we have, or the power that we wield. Earthly success is not the same thing as being blessed. The winners of the Super Bowl tonight will be no more blessed than their opponent. Those who drive home from here in a luxury car are no more blessed than those who walk home. Those who will arrive at a great job tomorrow are no more blessed than those who will wait in line at the unemployment office.

Notice two of the most quoted Biblical blessings: “The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.” and “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” We are blessed by God’s face shining upon us. We are blessed by God granting us grace and peace – and that peace can be found in the midst of a wide variety of circumstances.

It is paradoxically true that our blessings can sometimes be easier to see when we feel we are stumbling in the dark. Laura Story wrote a beautiful song, called “Blessings.” In it she sings to God, “what if your blessings come through raindrops, What if Your healing comes through tears, What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near, What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise.” Later, she sings, “What if my greatest disappointments / Or the aching of this life / Is the revealing of a greater thirst this world can't satisfy / What if trials of this life / The rain, the storms, the hardest nights / Are your mercies in disguise.”

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/11/some-modern-beatitudes-a-sermon-for-all-saints-sunday/>

When we are blessed in the definition of the world around us, it is all too easy to lose sight of the true blessings of God. Author Vaneetha Risner says “blessing is anything God gives that makes us fully satisfied in him. Anything that draws us closer to Jesus. Anything that helps us relinquish the temporal and hold on more tightly to the eternal. And often it is the struggles and trials, the aching disappointments and the unfulfilled longings that best enable us to do that.”<sup>3</sup>

Blessed are the poor in spirit? Yeah, they – we – are, because, as Professor Stephen Westerholm puts it, “the One whose word creates and shapes reality”<sup>4</sup> says so. The One whose word creates and shapes reality says that blessed are the peacemakers, not the warmongers. That One says blessed are the pure in heart, not the ones whose motives are corrupt. That One says blessed are the meek, not the arrogant. That One says blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, not those who trample on the oppressed.

Jesus pronounces these blessings on the meek, the impoverished, the oppressed, but that’s not all. He empowers the meek, cares for the poor, and demands justice for the oppressed, *and sends us out to do the same.*

I read this in a blog online: “My blessing is this. I know a God who gives hope to the hopeless. I know a God who loves the unlovable. I know a God who comforts the sorrowful. And I know a God who has planted this same power within me. Within all of us.”<sup>5</sup>

We are *all* blessed, because Jesus said so. And through us, God is working justice and righteousness. Through us, God will work in this Black History Month to right wrongs, lift the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-it-really-mean-to-be-blessed>

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Westerholm, *The New Interpreter's Bible One-Volume Commentary*, p. 535.

<sup>5</sup> <https://theaccidentalmissionary.wordpress.com/2014/02/20/the-one-things-christians-should-stop-saying/>

oppressed, and build a more just society. God will use our efforts as we stand together against prejudice. God will use us to turn people back toward God.

The prophet Micah writes of a time when the people were turning away from God, and reminds them of God's gracious history with them. They responded with sarcasm, wondering what God demanded of them. They ask what does it take to *please* this God – will God be pleased with thousands of rams or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Should they give their firstborn as a sacrifice to God? Even though God is rightfully angry with Israel, He has spoken to them as "*my people,*" and they respond with sarcasm, with no acceptance of their guilt.

Micah replies that God is not that interested in their sacrifices. Sacrifices in Old Testament times were not a way of *appeasing* God – they were a *response* to the grace of God. The people, however, want to know just what they have to sacrifice to make God happy. They receive no answer to their sarcastic questions, but instead receive the answer that they need. Micah responds with what God wants from God's people. And the response is simple, and so very complex that it takes our whole time on this earth to live it out.

Micah says we are called to a life of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God.

Sounds like a pretty good bumper sticker to me. May we live into our calling as people blessed by God, and blessed to be a blessing. Amen.