

Rev. Dr. Gary Shahinian
Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“How Did They Hear the Beatitudes?”

Scripture Text: Matthew 5:1-12

Dear people of God, well the time had finally arrived. This was Jesus’s first opportunity with a huge audience. He would have center stage now in front of hundreds, maybe even a few thousand. Families and individuals had gathered all over the hilltop to hear him. The crowds had brought their lunches and planned to spend the afternoon listening to this itinerant rabbi they had heard so much about. Jesus would make sure to make the most of this occasion. In the Busby Berkeley musical, *42nd Street*, Broadway show producer Warner Baxter says to the novice Ruby Keeler “You’re going out a youngster but you’ve got to come back a star!” This was the situation Jesus was in. He knew that he had to make a grand impression by the end of the afternoon. Among those in the audience were representatives of the three major factions of the Jewish people: the Zealots, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees.

The Zealots had come from the west of the hillside where they had

made homes in the hundreds of caves rising up the face of Mount Arbel. There was no easy way to get to these caves without climbing straight up the cliff of the mountain. That's the way the Zealots liked it. The caves provided a safe dwelling for them. You see, the Zealots were the militant group within Judaism. They were waging an undeclared war on the hated Romans. Their method was to engage in guerrilla warfare. Today we would call such persons either terrorists, if we don't approve of their violence, or freedom fighters, if we approve of it. Every Zealot carried a dagger under his robe and dreamed of the day when he might stick that dagger into a Roman soldier. Zealots believed that God wanted the Israelites to be free and each took a vow to accept death before becoming a slave to Caesar. The caves of Mount Arbel served as the perfect hideout for them. They would swoop down during the night and carry out their terrorist raids and then climb back into the caves and be invulnerable.

Many of these Zealots had heard about Jesus. And though they didn't share his philosophy of non-violence, they were intrigued by him. And so, they find a place to sit and listen on the left side of the hillside.

Standing on the bottom of the hill toward the center so that they

can see the entire crowd, and they're standing, not sitting, are a group who seem keen to be by themselves, as far away as possible from the crowds as if the crowds contained some contagious disease. This group of men, yes, they are all men, standing off by themselves are the Pharisees. They're wearing long robes with fringes on them, a constant reminder of God's law. They too have come to hear Jesus. Most of them have heard stories about Jesus's healings and teachings and his gathering a flock of disciples. They agree with a lot of what they have heard Jesus say. Like him, they believe in the resurrection of the dead. Like him, they believe in caring for the poor. Like him, they believe that God is able to heal people from diseases. But uppermost in their minds is protecting and obeying the law. The key to all those other good things is to obey the laws of Moses and the huge set of oral laws they have formulated. The Pharisees now want to hear Jesus for themselves so that they can make a fully informed judgment about him, always ready to find fault with him should he say anything against the written or oral law.

There is a third distinct group that day on the hillside, over there on the right. They're dressed ever so nicely. They are the Sadducees who have come from all the way in Jerusalem to this mountain in Galilee.

They have come not so much to hear what Jesus has to say, but rather, to make sure that Jesus doesn't offend them or the temple in Jerusalem by anything he says. The Sadducees, you see, make up the temple priests and the wealthier class of the Jewish people. They couldn't care less about the poor, the sick, or the unemployed. People get what they deserve they believe. If they're poor, sick, or unemployed, then God wants them that way, and who are we to argue with God? Of course, it's better to be rich, powerful, and nicely dressed, even if that means cooperation with the Romans to have those things.

The rest of the crowd is comprised of ordinary Jews. There are fishermen, farmers, tax collectors, laborers, some lame and diseased persons, lots of women and children, and just common folks who have come to hear this new luminary in their midst. Oh, there are also some prostitutes among the crowd, hoping to drum up some business. It isn't often that they get a chance to mingle in such a multitude, and so they're here to make the most of it. They haven't come to hear Jesus, but they'll soon be surprised as their ears will perk up from the message of hope this itinerant preacher will deliver.

The time has come for Jesus to begin. He suddenly appears right at

the top of the center of the mount in a place where all can see and hear him. Right from the beginning of the sermon, many don't like what they're hearing. "Blessed are the poor in spirit?" No, say the Zealots, blessed are those who are bold and fight back and kill their enemies. The Sadducees also vote no. To them, nothing poor is blessed. The Pharisees have no complaint about this first beatitude. They believe that the poor will be blessed, as long as they abide by the law. If they don't, then they fall under God's curse. The common folks are quiet. They had never thought of themselves as blessed while their spirits were downtrodden, which is most of the time as they lead a very difficult life under Roman occupation, the burden of the law, and the heavy taxes to support the Great Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus has made them think, maybe there's hope after all. A few crippled persons and old beggars shout, "Amen!" at this first beatitude.

"Blessed are those who mourn?" The Zealots thought, no, blessed are those who cause their enemies to mourn and to be afraid, very afraid. But most in the crowd nod their heads in agreement at this one. That's because most of them miss the point. Jesus isn't talking about just mourning the death of a family member. He's talking about the sadness

people have because they realize they don't live up to the faith they profess. The Pharisees and Sadducees, who believe they have no reason to mourn because God is pleased with them just the way they are, interpret Jesus to be talking exclusively about the others in the crowd who fail to take religion seriously. Except they don't realize that their hypocrisy is the main reason many don't take religion seriously.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” No, say the Zealots, the meek get stepped on. Blessed are the powerful and the aggressors who force their way on others. That's the only way to drive the hated Romans out of our land! The common folks can identify with what Jesus is saying here and find comfort in his words. The Pharisees and Sadducees are beginning to squirm a little bit, because they don't know where Jesus is going with all of this. Not usually characterizing themselves as meek, the Pharisees and Sadducees are wondering if Jesus's sermon is meant to censure them!

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Yes, the Zealots wholeheartedly agree with this one, for they are the loyal Jews who have taken up the cause of Judaism and Jewish nationalism more than any others. They are the righteous and God is on their side!

But the Pharisees feel the same way. They are the true righteous among the Jews! No wait, the Sadducees believe they're the righteous Jews. All three groups fail to realize that Jesus is really talking about being righteous in God's eyes, not being righteous according to Jewish patriotism, the law of Moses, or observance at the Temple in Jerusalem. God wants people who do the right thing, thereby acquiring their righteousness according to the principles of God's realm. The common people approve of this beatitude and continue passionately to believe that someday righteousness will win out over wickedness and they will indeed be satisfied.

“Blessed are the merciful?” Nonsense, think the Zealots. Blessed are those who show no mercy to their enemies is their battle cry! At this point, some of the Zealots are considering getting up and going back to the caves. The Pharisees see little room in the law for mercy, so they're perplexed by this saying. The Sadducees see no need for mercy whatsoever. If God wanted people to be better off, God would make them better off. But many in the crowd smile as they remember the many times that they have received mercy from loved ones and have chosen to show mercy in return.

“Blessed are the pure in heart.” None are more pure in heart than those who fight for a homeland where no Jew needs to bow down to a Roman, say the Zealots. It’s the heart of the warrior that God loves, the heart of David, the greatest warrior and king in Israel’s history, the heart of the Maccabees, the renowned warriors who threw the infidels out of Jerusalem and cleansed the Great Temple. The common people in the crowd also approve of this one. They all hear Jesus to mean, “Blessed are the sincere.” Of course, they’re all sincere in what they believe. But that’s not what Jesus means. They all missed the point on this one. God wants us to have a good heart. Being sincere is not enough, for most of us are sincerely wrong.

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” The only way to make peace is through war and by vanquishing the enemy, believe the Zealots. And so all eyes on the hillside turn toward where they are seated. The Sadducees especially want peace with Rome because they profit from that peace. The High Priest in the Jerusalem Temple is always a Sadducee appointed by Rome, and so, the Sadducees always will retain power as long as the Temple stands. And that’s the way they like it. And so from across the hillside, many of the Sadducees sneer at the Zealots. The Pharisees are

caught in the middle on this one. Sure they want peace. But they dislike the Romans, and so, their hearts are with the Zealots in trying to get rid of the Romans. Yet they must obey the law at all cost, and so, that must come first. They must try to live peaceably within the boundaries of the law. Meanwhile the common folks are thinking about how hard it is simply to be a peacemaker back home in their families, never mind trying to make peace with the Romans.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely.” Everyone liked this one because they all identified with it. They had all been persecuted at one time or another. The Zealots grumbled to themselves, “The common people have no idea what a burden it is to be God’s appointed warriors to free the nation from their enemies.” The Sadducees felt persecuted by the ignorant poor folks who refused to make the appointed sacrifices and offer their scheduled temple taxes. They grumbled to themselves, “The common lot have no idea what a burden it is to be God’s favored children in charge of the religious life of the nation.” The Pharisees also felt persecuted for their being ignored about the importance of keeping the law. They too grumbled to themselves, “The common folks have no idea

what a burden it is to be the caretakers of the law in charge of the religious instruction of the Jewish people.” The common people felt persecuted by, well, just about everybody. They had all been insulted, called evil, and been made to feel that they were crap, all for religious reasons.

At the end of the afternoon, the crowds dispersed. Many thought that they would like to hear more from this Jesus. Some said that they heard enough. The Zealots were disappointed because he didn't talk enough about resisting the Romans. The Pharisees were disappointed because he didn't talk enough about keeping the law. The Sadducees were disappointed because he didn't talk enough about the place of temple worship in the life of the people. The common people were among the most receptive to Jesus's message, but even many of them were disappointed. They were expecting to hear more about feeding the hungry and healing the diseased.

Overall, Jesus received a grade of C. It wasn't a spectacular performance that dazzled the crowd. He certainly didn't come back a star that day. But neither was it a total flop. He would have almost another three more years to get his message across. Unfortunately when

the people finally found out what that message really was, they rejected it. They didn't realize until it was too late that Jesus didn't come to please people. He came to save them. Amen.