

The Most Famous Sermon in the World

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on January 31, 1999.
Scripture Lessons: Matthew 5:1-12.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The confirmation class will meet following the 11:00 worship service. Confirmation classes are designed to lead young people to confirm vows taken by their parents when they were baptized. Or, if the young person wasn't baptized, the classes are meant to teach them what Christians believe but how we are to live in the world. At the end of the confirmation classes in the Spring they will write a confession of faith, meet with the elders, and make promises before God and the congregation. They will renounce sin and evil. They will affirm faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They will promise to be Christ's faithful for the rest of their lives.

Today's Scripture reading from the Gospel of Matthew is the beginning lesson in a confirmation class Jesus *taught* his disciples. Listen. "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, *his disciples came to him*. Then he began to speak, and *taught* them." Turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of Matthew for an overview of the first five chapters. Chapter one and two: the birth and infancy of Jesus. Chapter three: the baptism of Jesus. Chapter four: the temptation of Jesus, the calling of the first disciples, and the beginning of his public ministry. Chapter five: Jesus enrolls his disciples in a confirmation class. He calls his disciples then he teaches them. We too have been called by Jesus to be his disciples. He wants to teach us what to believe and how we're to live. The Sermon on the Mount is the outline of a confirmation class. Even if we've been confirmed we need to go back to these lessons over and over again. A disciple of Jesus must never stop learning.

The first lesson in his confirmation class is the Beatitudes, verse 1-12. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for

they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way the persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Jesus addressed the Beatitudes to disciples, not to everybody. You don't become a Christian by trying real hard to be poor in spirit, to be meek, to be a peacemaker. No. A Christian is one who trusts in Jesus and follows him in baptism and is willing to learn from Jesus who we are to live and what we are to believe about God. The Beatitudes don't tell us how to become a Christian. Rather, the Beatitudes give us a picture of what a mature Christian looks like. That's important to remember. There's a temptation to think that the goal of the Christian life is to get confirmed. People get confirmed, they join the church and we never see them again. Confirmation is viewed by so many people as graduation. Schools out. We don't have to learn anymore. We don't have to go to worship services anymore. We don't have to go to Sunday School anymore. We've got our ticket to heaven. Not true. Confirmation is only the beginning. It's the first step in Christian maturity. The Beatitudes show us what a mature Christian should look like.

So I want you to use your memory. I want you to think, to remember some Christians who have one or more of the qualities Jesus speaks about in the Beatitudes. Only Jesus had all these qualities. A few Christians have many of these qualities. But every Christian will have at least one of these qualities. And every Christian should aim to have them all.

One way we grow in Christian maturity is through mentoring. We find someone who is a mature Christian and we try to learn from them. We spend time with them. We ask them questions. We learn about them. We imitate them. And as we do so, we, hopefully, become more and more like them and more and more like Jesus. It's kind of like an apprenticeship. If you want to be a bricklayer you don't just read a lot of books. You become an apprentice to a brick layer. You find a bricklayer who's willing to take you on as an apprentice. You learn how

to hold a trowel. You learn how to mix the mortar, build scaffolds, spread mortar. In order to learn how to be a bricklayer, you must lay brick. Hour after hour, day after day, lay brick - that's how you become a good bricklayer. Learning how to lay brick also involves learning a language like what "frogging mud" means. The apprentice brick layer learns how to lay brick by learning a new language and by actually laying brick.

You become a mature Christian the same way. Find ^{a mentor} an apprentice, follow them, imitate them and learn their language. Walk their walk and talk their talk. Look around the church. Find someone who exhibits something of the spirit of Jesus Christ. Find someone who is truly blessed with being a Christian, who finds joy and meaning in following Christ. Find someone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. Find someone who is merciful. Find a peacemaker. Find someone who seems to be able to see God where others see only tragedy or sin.

When I was a child we use to play a game, "I'm thinking of someone." The leader would say, "I'm thinking of someone who was in the movie, Titanic." And then people would guess. If the person wasn't guessed right off the bat, more clues would be given. So let's play that game.

Think of someone, either in our congregation or in history, recent or ancient - a Christian, who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. I'm thinking of someone. Sometimes he gets real angry. You know when he's mad. He gets angry when he sees injustice. He gets angry with self righteousness. He gets angry with racism and other ugly-isms. He works to straighten out crooked things. He raises money for the hungry. You may have seen him in a picket line. Some people say, "How can a Christian act like that?" But he hungers and thirsts for righteousness in society.

I'm also thinking of a peacemaker. He doesn't just attend peace conferences, he's a peacemaker. When he sees people fighting, he tries to get them reconciled. He tries to reconcile church members who've stopped speaking to one another. Now, you think of a peacemaker.

I'm thinking of a woman who sees God where most of us can't. She's able to see God in a drunk man staggering down the street. She's able to see God in a drug addict vomiting in an alley. She's able to see God in the gay couple who moved into her apartment complex and who

everybody else shuns. She's able to see God where most of us can't because she's pure in heart. She's blessed.

Jean Baxter - Don

I'm thinking of a person who is poor in spirit and who mourns. If you go to this person and tell her about some terrible thing you have done she won't act shocked. She won't scold. She won't tell you what you did was wrong. She'll listen. She is easily moved to tears when you share your problems with her. You know she cares for you. She prays for you. She weeps for you. She doesn't judge people or look down on others. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Now I want you to start thinking of people who exhibit some of the qualities Jesus spoke of. Think of individuals. Think of people in our congregation. Think of people in Oxford. Write them a letter or approach them after the worship service. Get to know them. Follow them. Learn their language. Find a mentor who will take you on as an apprentice. Get together with them every week for coffee and just to talk. We grow in Christian maturity through following men and women who are following Jesus. **You can not be a solitary Christian. You might learn how to lay brick on your own in a couple hundred years of trial and error. It's a lot easier to apprentice yourself out and learn from a master brick layer. And you must might be able to make some progress in Christian maturity all by yourself, but it's a lot easier if you work with others.** Unfortunately, most Christians believe they can grow in Christian maturity all by themselves. They don't need other people. They don't need Sunday School. They don't need to worship with God's people on a regular basis. They don't need to be baptized. They don't need to receive Holy Communion. They don't need to read the Bible or pray. They don't need to meet with other Christians at all. I suppose it can be done. It's a lot easier, though, if we do it together.

Find a mentor and be a mentor. Being a Christian is not just a matter of receiving Jesus as your personal savior. It's an invitation to follow Jesus and to grow in grace, love and mercy throughout our lives.

Let us pray: