The smile of God’s favor is ours when, through the bond of faith, Christ becomes ours and we become his. Being “in Christ” brings us into an entirely new position before God, in which God cleanses us from sin, removing our sins so completely that they cannot be charged against us either now or in the future (Rom. 5:1; 8:1; Eph. 1:3-7). This changes our relationship with God from a sinner facing judgment, to a beloved child anticipating a glorious inheritance. God also breathes the Holy Spirit into us, filling us with the power and presence of God. That changes our nature, and this is where the Christian life begins. Being justified by faith in Jesus, we have “peace with God” and “access by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Rom. 5:1-2).

Standing in grace is really good news. Grace is not just a stepping stone on which we rest for a moment in order to move on to something else. Grace is where we stand at the beginning of the Christian life and where we remain until its end. A Christian is a person who stands in grace; but standing in grace and striving for growth belong together. The distinguishing mark of a person who is saved by Christ’s death is that he or she seeks to imitate Christ’s life.

God offers multiple blessings to us in the gospel. There’s forgiveness, reconciliation, holiness, and heaven (to name a few), but God does not offer any of those gifts in isolation. God offers all of them to us “in Christ.” Christ is the mega-gift, and Christ contains all the other gifts in himself. With Jesus we have them all, and without Jesus we have none of them. God offers us one gift: Jesus. He is all that we need, and in him we are blessed with every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3).

When Jesus takes command of our life, He forgives our sin, changes our heart, reconciles us to God, adopts us into the family, and gives us the Holy Spirit. His work is indivisible, and it is for this reason that a person who stands in grace has a heart for holiness. So here’s how you know that you are standing in grace: you start pursuing holiness. Your will is realigned with God’s will, and your great desire, mirroring God’s, is that you will fully reflect the beauty of Jesus, who now lives in you. This is the beginning of a holy life.

“Holiness” can be a troubling word. None of us would walk around bragging about our holiness. And those who do, are not those with whom we would choose to associate! But, in every Christian, there really is a beginning of holiness, a beginning of purity, a beginning of contentment, a beginning of peace. Love of God and love for others, though far from complete, is truly begun in the life of every believer, and what God begins in you, God will surely complete.

Having begun, you will want to move forward, and it is here that the Beatitudes help, not only by telling us what a blessed life looks like, but by showing us how to make progress. Remember, the Beatitudes are a progress, not a process. The distinction is subtle, so let’s be clear: a *progress* is a continuous movement forward; a *process* is a series of steps to attain a goal. The Beatitudes are a *progress*, moving us forward in our walk with Christ; they are not a *process* showing us step-by-step how to be holy.

There is a definite order in the progress of the Beatitudes: each one flows from the ones that went before. This order can be summed up in three words: roots, shoot, and fruits. The first three beatitudes deal with our need. We are poor in spirit (5:3) because we do not have what it takes to live as God commands. We mourn (5:4) because our sins are many. We become meek, rather than self-willed and defiant (5:5), because we do not have the ability to direct our own lives wisely. These are the *roots* of a blessed and Godly life.

Out of these roots come the *shoots* of the fourth beatitude, a hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6). God uses the root of seeing our own need to produce the shoot of a deep longing to grow in righteousness. When the roots of the first three beatitudes are nourished, a great desire for righteousness will spring up in our life. Continuing the metaphor, the roots produce the shoots, and the shoots bear *fruit*. The fruit of this blessed and Godly life is, first, mercy or forgiveness (5:7), then purity (5:8), and finally peace (5:9).

Jesus also gave us an eighth beatitude, “Blessed are those who are persecuted (5:10). This one is different from the rest because the others all reflect qualities that God’s people are actively to pursue. Persecution is different. We are not to pursue it. But we are to understand that when we go after the blessed and Godly life that Jesus lays out for us in the Beatitudes, persecution will pursue us. Those who seek the blessings of God’s Kingdom will be persecuted in this world.

Roots produce shoots, and shoots bear fruit. The fruit is beautiful – forgiveness, purity, and peace – but the question, always, is how to get there. Simply put: you get to the blessings of the last three beatitudes by means of the first four. Nourish the roots and you get shoots; water the shoots and you will get the fruits.

There is a forward momentum to the Beatitudes. Picture a series of seven rings, each suspended on a rope from a high ceiling, the kind of rings a gymnast or a kid on the playground uses. At either end of these rings there is a high platform, and your goal is to get from one platform to the other by swinging from ring to ring. You climb the platform, and the first ring is within your reach. If you pull back and swing on it, your *momentum* will bring you within reach of the second ring, and swinging on the second will bring you within reach of the third.

Think of the Beatitudes as this series of rings. Purity of heart is the sixth ring, but the only way to get there is to climb the platform and swing through the first five rings. To move from one ring to the next, you must grasp each ring in order. The only way to get to the fifth, sixth, or seventh ring is to swing through the first, second, third, and fourth rings first. You can’t start in the middle. Each ring is reached by swinging through the previous rings, and your momentum helps to get you there.

The good news is that the first ring is easily within your reach. As we’ll explore more next week, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” means that God’s blessing begins when we realize that we don’t have what it takes to be blessed without God. So, welcome to spiritual Phys. Ed. 101! The rings are suspended above you. Climb the platform with me, take a firm hold on the first ring, and get ready to swing. Let your momentum carry you to each new ring as you work your way into a blessed life with God.

Prayer: Lord, Thank you for blessing us with scripture that tells us the truth and provides hope for tomorrow. With your Spirit’s help, may we work our way ever toward the blessed life you offer us in Christ. Amen

Source: Colin S. Smith, *Momentum: Pursuing God’s Blessings Through the Beatitudes*. Moody Publishers: Chicago, IL. 2016.

**Roots, Shoots and Fruits**

**Rally Sunday, September 10, 2017**

**Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

**Matthew 5:1-12**

“Beatitude” is a funny word. In Latin it means “abundant happiness or blessedness.” What does a blessed life look like? Is it having a happy marriage? Gifted children? Good health? Fulfilling work? Financial stability? Opportunities to travel? Belonging to a healthy church? All of these are rich blessings indeed, and you could probably add to the list. But, before you do, think about this: not one of these gifts is included in Jesus’ description of the life that is blessed. Not one!

Jesus does not say, “Blessed are the happily married”; he says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” He does not say, “Blessed are those who enjoy good health”; he says, “Blessed are those who mourn.” According to Jesus, the greatest blessings are not found in the places where we normally look, but rather in places that, at first, we may not be inclined to explore.

The Beatitudes are counterintuitive. Being poor usually means that you don’t have resources, but Jesus speaks of a kind of poverty that makes you rich. Mourning means you have great sorrow, but Jesus speaks of a kind of mourning that leads to joy. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus gives us eight beatitudes – blessings – which provide a way of life that promises salvation and peace in the midst and trials of everyday life.

The Beatitudes are a kind of “pilgrim’s progress” toward the blessed life. The Beatitudes tell us what a true Christian looks like, but they do not describe the process by which a person becomes a Christian. It’s an important distinction. A Christian is known by the distinguishing marks set out by Jesus. These marks are the evidence of new life in Christ, not its cause. The message of Jesus is not, “If you humble yourself and mourn over your sins and submit yourself meekly to God and get an appetite for righteousness, God will smile on you and you will get into heaven.” That would be salvation by works and that is not the teaching of Scripture.