

Peace That Provokes, Righteousness That Costs
Rose Patterson-Veira | Matthew 5:1-12 | 31st August 2025

So, we're in the third and final week of our mini-series on the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) – in the first week Emma reflected on her time at Taizé as she explored the theme of surprising joy in the first four Beatitudes. Last week, Tom spoke on blessed are the merciful. And today we're going to be looking at the final two:

- 1) **5:9** - Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- 2) **5:10** - Blessed are, those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Now before I start, I just want to say that I have felt really challenged in my preparation for this. A lot of the things I'm going to be touching on are things that I often fail to do myself – there are no high-horses up here! In a sense all I'm doing this morning is passing on to you the challenge that this passage has presented to me in my own life. So please don't feel that I'm preaching at you – I'm speaking to myself as much as I am to any of you.

With that said, I want to just start by reading you this passage from **Isaiah 9:6-7**:

*⁶For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*⁷Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.*

In the opening chapters of his Gospel, Matthew is basically pointing to Jesus and saying – this is him. This is who the Old Testament prophecies were pointing to. He is the promised King and he is Emmanuel, God with us. And then further on in Matthew, we see Jesus beginning his ministry, announcing the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near – the kingdom that is characterised by peace and justice and righteousness.

The book of Matthew is structured around five big blocks of teaching by Jesus, in which he teaches about and demonstrates what life in the kingdom of God looks like. The Beatitudes form the opening lines of the very first block of teaching. Jesus has announced that the coming of God's kingdom is good news...and in the beatitudes, he starts by answering the question – good news for who?

“Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Two short and probably very familiar verses. But the more I reflected on them, the more questions emerged. OK, peace is good. But what do we *actually mean* by peace? What is righteousness? And why should people expect to be persecuted because of it? Surely righteousness is a good thing? It's a short passage, but many of the words within it are heavy with meaning that we need to try to unpack if we are to understand what it means.

So, what do we mean by peace? Let's think for a moment about the ways we use the word... We pray for peace in war zones, we speak of peaceful protest, we hope for peace in our communities and families...it all seems to relate primarily to an absence of conflict. Even when we say we want a sense of peace about a decision we have to make, we're talking about conflicting thoughts. But although a lack of conflict is a characteristic of peace, the two are not the same, and it's an important distinction to make. A violent dictator can use violence and fear-mongering to bring about something that on the surface might look a bit like peace, but actually just masks a complete lack of it. In our own lives, we can probably all think of relationships or situations that appear peaceful, but where we know there's an awful lot bubbling away under the surface. The biblical vision of peace is so much more than the absence of conflict.

When we read the word ‘peace’ in our Bibles, we should think of it in terms of the Hebrew concept of shalom, which is an incredibly rich and layered word. One scholar describes it like this:

“Shalom is not merely the absence of conflict. It is the presence of wholeness. It is not just a ceasefire between enemies. It is the restoration of harmony between all things—within ourselves, with one another, with creation, and with God. To encounter the word shalom in Hebrew Scripture is to step into a vision of the world as it was meant to be.”

And so, this idea of peace is much more holistic than we tend to think – it encompasses every sphere of our lives – our relationships with others, with our environment, with God, our social and economic situation, our physical, mental and spiritual health. And when things are not right in any one of these spheres, it impacts our overall sense of peace.

In the Beatitudes we hear Jesus saying, blessed are the peace-makers. This is a calling on Jesus’ followers that requires active participation – a calling to become people who work for the wholeness and well-being that God wills for a broken world, for broken lives and for broken relationships. And this is a tough calling – it requires us to put others before ourselves and to make their problems our own, it requires us to act as care-takers and not merely consumers of the natural world, it requires humility and gentleness and patience and forgiveness, it requires us to bear with one another in love and to overcome evil with good. It’s something we are to work for in our own lives and in the lives of others.

But the reality is that things won’t be completely whole, or as they should be, this side of eternity. Some of us may enjoy relative ‘wholeness’, while millions around the world likely never will – those living in abject poverty, those facing terminal illness, victims of injustice... Does that mean that these people can never know peace? If peace is dependent on wholeness in terms of our circumstances, then it is nothing but a pipe-dream for the vast majority of the global population.

But then we read in **Philippians 4:6-7** –

‘...in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.’

What an incredible display of God's grace – that the peace he gives transcends the realities of our circumstances.

We mustn't forget that peace is not something we can simply conjure up – it is God who brings peace. In **Judges 6:24**, Gideon builds an altar to the Lord and calls it YHWH SHALOM – “God is peace”. He is not just ‘peaceful’, or ‘the bringer of peace’, *he IS peace*. And in Jesus, that peace takes human form. In **John 14:27** Jesus says to his disciples –

‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.’

We have access to true peace through Jesus and by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and we are invited to become agents of that peace in the lives of others and in the world around us.

So, there are two truths that we need to hold in tension. God is the ultimate peacemaker, who brings peace which transcends understanding, which is not dependent on circumstance. At the same time, followers of Jesus hear the call to be peacemakers, to join God in working for the wholeness that he longs for in a broken world. It's not an either or, it's both.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God” – they will be instantly recognisable as members of God's family and as followers of Jesus.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Righteousness is another of those Biblical words that we're all familiar with, but I wonder how many of us could actually explain what we mean by it?

Unlike peace, it's not a word we use very much. In the Bible, righteousness and justice are closely linked and they are central to the heart of God. The word righteousness takes on slightly different meanings in different contexts. Here the emphasis seems to be on our relationships, on our attitudes toward others. Specifically, it seems to be about social justice, about doing right by others. It's a posture, if you like, towards those who society has failed or rejected – the poor, the powerless, the vulnerable, the marginalised.

If we honour the Bible as a revelation of God's character and will and wisdom, then we have to face up to the extraordinary emphasis that it places on precisely these people. You only have to look at the people Jesus chose to spend time with to realise the truth of this – lepers, tax collectors, Samaritans, the sick, the demon-possessed, the women ignored or shamed by others – he consistently sought out those who were on the fringes of society.

We know that engaging with these issues in our own society is challenging on so many levels – there are so many demands on our time, energy and resources. The realities of working life, care responsibilities for young children or elderly parents or sick family members, struggles with our own physical or mental health. And even when we do have the capacity to engage, the scale and complexity of the problems we're faced with is so overwhelming that it's difficult not to just withdraw. When we do feel compelled to act in some way, we quickly discover that it is really complicated – these are complex issues without easy solutions and sometimes our efforts to help can actually do more harm than good. It can be really difficult to know how to help.

But as real and valid as these things are, we can't let them lead us into a state of apathy about the problems of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. When our own needs are met, it's too easy to forget about, or sideline, the needs of others, and we need to be on guard against that. If we are to call ourselves followers of Jesus, we need to allow ourselves to be moved and affected by the problems of others – we need to pray, as one worship song puts it – 'break my heart for what breaks yours'. And we need to offer ourselves as part of God's solution and allow him to use us, to use our influence, privilege and resources, in whatever way, for the good of those who lack those things.

What this looks like in practice will vary from person to person and that is not for me to tell you – it is for each of us to reflect on and work out with God within the context of our own lives. Some of us may feel called to be set apart for this kind of work – but that doesn't mean that the rest of us are exempt. Some of us may think actually, I have capacity at the moment to offer a few hours of my time, skills and experience in one way or another and if so, that's great – there are plenty of charities and organisations crying out for volunteers. For others, our response may primarily involve prayer and financial support. We are sometimes guilty of thinking of prayer as a last resort – as the thing you do if you can't do anything else.

Prayer is the most powerful tool we have in our box, and praying about the problems of the world and for those who are working at the coal face of those problems is hugely valuable and makes a real difference. Similarly, it is easy to underestimate the value of supporting and enabling others financially – often these are the people who are most qualified, experienced and knowledgeable about the most complex issues in our societies, and yet they are also often the most under-funded. But I think we miss the point if we simply set up a direct debit and then forget about it. This kind of righteousness is a posture – an orientation towards those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

And righteousness is not just about how we treat the poorest and most vulnerable, it's also about how we treat that colleague at work who tends to get over-looked and dismissed, or who is the subject of everyone's gossip. It means thinking about who we're showing hospitality to – is it just the people we like, who are easy to get on with, or is it the people who never get invited to anything? It means being mindful of how we treat those whose job involves serving us – sales assistants, waiting staff – treating them with respect and dignity and kindness. This kind of righteousness, like peace-making, is a whole life posture, it isn't selective, and it isn't something we switch on and off.

There are a couple of things that I think it's helpful for us to remember in all this: firstly, this call is on all of us as members of one body – this is a team effort. We all bring something different to the table according to our unique gifts, skills and experience and what we bring may vary in different seasons of life.

Secondly, as we've already said about peace, this righteousness belongs to God and it is his to bring about – if we take on the problems of the world and take it upon ourselves to solve them one by one, we will burn out and may well do more harm than good along the way. This is about recognising God's will for, and action in, the world and offering ourselves to be used in whatever way he chooses.

So, we've talked about righteousness, but the verse doesn't just say blessed are the righteous, it says blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. And we might rightly ask, well why would righteousness attract persecution? Isn't seeking to do right by others a good thing? And at least part of the answer seems to be that it draws opposition because it disrupts the status quo – it challenges systems and ways of being in society which favour those with wealth and power and influence.

If we look at the Beatitudes – in fact if we look at everything Jesus teaches and demonstrates about life in the kingdom of God, we see that he turns everything on its head – and so although the coming of God's kingdom is good news for all – those with wealth and power and influence may struggle to receive it as such, because they have the most to lose in this new kingdom. And so, seeking to do right by those who society has failed or rejected may attract opposition. But blessed are they who are so deeply committed to doing right by those people that they are willing to suffer for it – theirs is the kingdom of heaven-

Did you notice that all the Beatitudes are in 3rd person – blessed are they or those – but then we get to verses 11 and 12, and Jesus switches to second person – blessed are YOU?-Jesus is driving the message home in his disciples. They are to devote themselves to justice and mercy and peace and righteousness, but the irony is that as they do, they may well find themselves among those who are deprived of exactly those things. And the same is true for Jesus' followers today. But blessed are you, Jesus says, if you find yourself in this situation – you're in good company, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The kingdom of God has come near, and it is a kingdom in which peace and righteousness are not passive ideals, but active callings. Friends, when we pray 'your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven', we are praying a prayer of petition, of submission and of participation. Jesus is king and this is his kingdom. It is God who brings mercy and peace, justice and righteousness, but as his children, as followers of Jesus, we are called to join in. And it will be costly – it will at times feel overwhelming, messy, even painful. Sometimes it may lead to misunderstanding or even opposition. But Jesus is clear: blessed are you, for this is the kingdom-shaped life. And we are not alone. The book of Matthew closes with these final words from Jesus to his disciples: 'surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' Amen