**Be the Attitude**

**Text: Luke 6:20-21**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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It was nearly 60 years ago, but I remember the scene as if it was yesterday:

It was a beautiful spring day, a Sunday afternoon; the first nice day after a long and dreary and cold Chicago winter. All the kids in the neighborhood were out riding their bikes. And I…I was tooling around on my tricycle.

I’d tried riding a two-wheeler. The previous fall my brother had made it his mission to teach me how to ride one. But I just couldn’t get my head wrapped around how you can balance yourself on those two skinny tires. I didn’t believe that I could do it. And the more I tried, the more I convinced myself that I couldn’t.

But on this gorgeous Sunday afternoon, with all my friends and neighbors riding their bikes, this sense came over me that said, “I can do that.” It was an undeniable conviction in the pit of my stomach that said, “I can ride a bike.” So I peddled back home on my beat-up old tricycle, and I got on my bike, and off I went!

It has been said that whether you think you can or think you can’t, you’re right. You have to be the attitude.

It’s a play on the word *beatitude*, which means *supreme blessing*. We find the Beatitudes in today’s text from the Gospel of Luke, and the parallel text in Matthew. As we read in Luke: “Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry, blessed are you who weep…” And the beatitude – the supreme blessing – isn’t in the experience of being poor or hungry or grieving, of course, but in the great joy that awaits those folks somewhere down the road, after there has been a great change within them, and a great change all around them.

Matthew’s beatitudes get the better press, but Luke’s may be closer to what Jesus actually said. Here’s the logic: there are many places in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke where Jesus is saying or doing almost the same thing. We call these parallel texts. They may well go back to an event in the life of the historical Jesus, but over 50 years of telling and retelling, of writing and rewriting, some changes and additions have occurred. So Matthew’s and Luke’s Beatitudes are parallel texts. Luke’s Beatitudes are shorter. The assumption is that the shorter text is closer to what Jesus actually said. Because, if you are writing a gospel, and you think you have the actual words of the historical Jesus, you’re not likely to edit out any of them. But, if you believe that you are writing under the inspiration of the Spirit of the Risen Christ, and you hear the Spirit giving you some additional words, you are likely to add those words to the text; because you’re convinced that it’s still Jesus speaking to you. So maybe the Spirit guided Matthew to update the text to better address the present situation; some 50 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. So, the shorter set of beatitudes in Luke is probably closer to what the historical Jesus actually said. Do we ignore the additional words in Matthew? No! They’re still scripture; they’re still the vehicle through which the Word of God can speak to us. But the historian in me is especially intrigued by the prospect of getting close to what Jesus actually said, in Galilee, circa A.D. 30. If we want to know what Jesus would do today, it’s helpful to know what the man Jesus actually said, back then.

And what he said was this:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” And he went on to say, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you” (Luke 6:20-21; 27-28).

In preaching the Beatitudes, Jesus was aiming for a shift in attitude. There was this great crowd. A great multitude had gathered from miles around, Luke says. And Jesus was looking for a shift in attitude on the part of each of them, and all of them. This is not immediately clear in his initial litany of blessings. The poor and hungry and grieving folks who were listening to him might’ve thought that these blessings would come when Messiah Jesus took charge of the revolution, pushed the Romans into the sea, and ushered in God’s Kingdom. But the revolution that Jesus sought was a change in heart. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who persecute you.” These things come from the heart. These things reflect a changed attitude in one’s inner being; an attitude that says, “I’m going to live as if the Kingdom is already here. And by living as if the Kingdom is already here, I’m going to help to bring it here.”

The revolution that Jesus sought was a change in heart. And when the multitudes realized this, they turned on him. Because a change in heart is not easy. Living toward a future blessing by blessing those who persecute you now is not easy. It’s difficult; but not impossible. Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you’re right. You have to be the attitude.

So I’m standing in the checkout line at Kroger’s. And the person in front of me is having problems. She can’t get her food stamps card to work. And the cashier isn’t being much help. And I’m thinking, “Okay, Ervin, be cool.” I’m thinking about Jesus: “Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry.” I’m thinking that the woman on food stamps is trapped in poverty, she’s got a lot on her plate; and the cashier isn’t getting paid much, probably doesn’t have much education, has plenty of her own burdens to bear. So, okay; not a big deal. We can wait.

Well, they’re still fumbling around, and I’ve gone through Luke’s list of blessings, so now I shift to Matthew: “Blessed are the humble, blessed are the merciful. And I’m trying real hard to be merciful. And I ask myself, “What would Jesus do?” And it occurs to me that Jesus would pay for her groceries. So I look at the cash register screen. The woman owes $60.00. And I’m thinking, “Jesus, you’re not really asking me to pay that much, are you?!” Meanwhile, I’m looking at the line that I almost went into, and the person in my spot has long since paid for his groceries and left the store.

Blessed are the merciful. Well, I’m becoming less and less merciful by the moment. I look at the screen again and I realize that I’ve misread it: she doesn’t owe $60, she only owes $4. Her food stamp card has actually covered the rest. Well, asking me to pay $4 seems like a more reasonable request on Jesus’ part. So I pull out my wallet. But the cashier and the people that she’s called over to help her don’t notice. So I pull out some dollar bills. They still don’t notice. I say – several times – “Would it help if I just paid the $4? “Oh no, sir, that won’t be necessary,” says the cashier as she and her colleagues continue to fumble through the groceries. They’re looking for a $4 item that they can take off. Now I’m getting real impatient. And I just want to yell, “Take the stupid money, for crying out loud!” The only thing holding me back is that I’m afraid that as soon as I lose my cool, someone’s going to come along and say, “Hi, Pastor Bruce, how are you?” Way to blow my cover!

The Kroger employees finally decided to just shallow the $4, and everything worked out okay and the poor woman got the blessing of taking home all of her groceries, and I got the blessing of a number of people thanking me, and I swear I’m never going through that cashier’s line again, but the point is that it’s hard to be the attitude.

Hard; but not impossible. I didn’t pass the test that day in Kroger because, you know, if it had been $60, I could’ve paid that. It would not have set me back very much and it would’ve made a huge difference to the woman in front of me. It’s hard to be the attitude, but not impossible.

You see, most things that are worth doing are hard. They become easier with a change of heart. They become easier when it’s not a dictate from beyond that says, “You *ought* to do this,” but a change from within that says, “I *want* to do this; I *can* do this.” As long as it was my big brother telling me, “You ought to be riding a bike,” it wasn’t working. When I realized, deep within, that “I can ride a bike,” it worked.

With a change in heart, we can be the attitude. And that change is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It was the Spirit who told my 8 year old self that I could ride a bike. It was the Spirit who placed that conviction deep within me. I have no doubt about that. That same Spirit who anointed Jesus at his baptism. That same Spirit who empowered Jesus to preach good news to the poor and release to the captives. That same Spirit who sent Christa and David and Jude and Luca to us, and will send the next great choir director to us. That same Spirit who says to us, “I know the plans I have for you…plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope”(Jeremiah 29:11).

Jesus and the disciples and the Early Church and the saints from every age and place: they did what they did in the power of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit can change hearts and minds and attitudes. All we have to do is ask, and wait, and trust.

Be the attitude. Live as if the Kingdom is already here. Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you’re right.