Sunday, February 3, 2002
THE BOTTOM LINE
Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 5:1-12

You can hear that question in any number of conversations. It's another way of asking, "What's the conclusion?" or, "What's the heart of the matter?" "What's the final answer?" or "Get to the main point." If you're speaking in financial terms, it's a way of inquiring, "Did your company make a profit or sustain a loss?" If you're talking with your physician after a comprehensive medical examination involving every laboratory test available, and you ask, "What's the bottom line?" you could be inquiring, "Am I going to live for a while or is my death imminent?"

"The Bottom Line" is also the name given to a financial magazine, in addition to the name of a magazine for bass players. Using my favorite search engine on the internet, "Google," I entered the words "Bottom Line" and found 3,180,000 entries.

Most of you probably first became aware of the bottom line in your earliest experiences in school as you learned simple calculations of addition, subtraction, and multiplication. The numbers you were adding, subtracting, or multiplying were in a column with its bottom marked by a line, below which was the answer.

Today, the term "bottom line" has become a metaphor for describing one's basic condition. There is a sense in which all of us are "bottom line" people. Isn't that true for you? When faced with serious issues or questions, you want to get a definite answer as to where you stand. You want to know the bottom line.

This is also true in your spiritual life, and it has been true for generations before you. The prophet Micah quotes the people of his time asking the question: "With what shall I come before the Lord? Will God be pleased if I slaughter calves and sheep and offer them to God? How can I get into a right relationship with God? What do I have to do? What's the bottom line?"

Then Micah answers the question by stating: "God has told you what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." In today's language, Micah would've added, "That's the bottom line."

The answer has a unique twist. It speaks less of what you have to do and more about what kind of person God wants you to be. The question was based on the false assumption that a person could do some "thing" that would restore his or her relationship with God, like a repentant lover bringing flowers to earn the forgiveness of the lover who has been wronged. The answer makes it clear that God doesn't want any "thing" at all. What God wants is you. Instead of finding out what you must do, the bottom line is that God wants you in a deeper relationship that will shape who you are as an individual created in God's image. And the payoff is that once you are in the right relationship with God, it will make you a happier, healthier person. God never wants you for God's sake, but for your sake and the sake of everyone around you. You are the chief beneficiary.

This same kind of bottom line emphasis is found in the life and teachings of Jesus. One day some people asked him, "Which is the most important commandment of all?" In other words, "What's the bottom line?" They expected him to name one of the Ten Commandments.

Instead, he replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Other bottom line teachings are to be found in the Sermon on the Mount, which is in the gospel named Matthew in chapters 5, 6, and 7. The most concise summary of all is found in the first part of the 5th chapter of Matthew, which we call the “Beatitudes.” The Beatitudes are “bottom line” material. When people ask me what parts of the Bible they should memorize, I always suggest three passages: the 23rd Psalm, the verses from the prophet Micah, “God has told you what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God,” and the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes spell out the “bottom line,” the basic foundation and summation of the teachings of Jesus. Like all of his teachings, they are filled with the unexpected. They turn many of our usual assumptions upside down. They offer an alternative way to what the culture in which we live emphasizes. They are subversive.

For example, listen again to the first one of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Some scholars suggest that a more accurate translation from the Greek would be, “Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” I like one paraphrase which goes this way: “Blessed and happy are those who know they need God, for they will find God. The empty space inside of them will be filled.”

If there had been reporters present when he proclaimed the Beatitudes, they would’ve put down their pencils, looked up in puzzlement, and asked if they heard him correctly. “Who did you say was blessed? Did you say, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit? Blessed are the meek? Blessed are those who mourn? Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness? Blessed are the merciful? Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake? Blessed are you when people revile you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account?'”

This picture of God’s way of operating seems out of focus, blurred, not in line with reality. Thoreau often made those kinds of reverse statements. For example, he said, “A person is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” The blessings, the happiness which Jesus offers seem backward, as if he skipped a page in his manuscript.

In fact, other religious leaders of his day came through with more reasonable-sounding proclamations, as do some religious leaders in our time. In that culture, the phrase, “Blessed are the such and such for they will have so and so,” was rather common. One religious group would say, “Blessed are those who follow all the religious rules; they will be especially rewarded by God.” Another group would promise, “Blessed are those who are the most religiously patriotic; they will overthrow the Romans and God will put them in charge.”

Every society in every age has a way of promising, “Blessed are you; you will find happiness if you do this.” “You will find happiness if you drive a Mercedes.” Have you seen the T-shirt that says, “He who dies with the most toys wins — but he still dies"? Blessed are you when you have the most stuff, for only then will you find satisfaction in life.

The full meaning of the Greek word, which we translate into the English word “blessed” or “happy,” also means “congratulations.” Cultures hold up a particular group of people and say, “These are the ones who have made it! These are the ones to be congratulated.” Another way

our culture says it is: “If you use this product, you are to be congratulated. Everyone will know that you have it made, and that will make you happy.”

Publications like People Magazine regularly come out with issues proclaiming, “The 100 Most Beautiful People,” implying that if you are like one of them, you have made it; you will be blessed, happy, and fulfilled. You will be a celebrity. Every time I read the Sunday magazine sections of newspapers and see columns listing the birthdays of so-called celebrities for the coming week, I laugh out loud and say, “Who cares?” But evidently, a lot of people care, otherwise, the birthdays wouldn’t be listed.

You can have a lot of fun coming up with cultural beatitudes that promise blessings and happiness and are quite the opposite of those which Jesus proclaimed. Here’s one I came up with this week while reading the Wall Street Journal: Blessed are you when you can become a member of the board of directors of a corporation or the executive of one that will pay you big fees, salaries, and bonuses no matter how poorly the company is doing.

It’s been very instructive reading the news stories every day in the Wall Street Journal before and after the collapse of Enron and now Global Crossing. Wouldn’t it be fun to be teaching a course in Business Ethics? The newest euphemism is “aggressive accounting.”

One story this week told how the Enron Board of Directors, in their regular board meetings, on at least two occasions voted to waive Enron’s ethical code of conduct so they could approve partnerships between Enron and its chief financial officer. Those partnerships kept significant debt off Enron’s books and masked actual company finances while being very profitable to the chief financial officer. Blessed are you when you can suspend your ethical code to satisfy your greed and then pat yourself on the back because now you can say you haven’t violated the ethical code.

Another story related how Tyco Corp. paid a total of 20 million dollars to one of its outside directors and to a charity he controls in return for his help in brokering a major acquisition last year. The deal he helped broker didn’t last very long. Corporate governance experts questioned the deal as being unethical.

Here are several other cultural beatitudes: Blessed are you when you are thin and beautiful. You have it made. Blessed are you when you are on the internet, for you will get lots of email. Blessed are you when you wear clothing with the preferred brand names, for you will be approved by others.

Now let’s return to the Beatitudes as set forth by Jesus. It is significant that the Beatitudes appear at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, before a single instruction is given, before there has been any talk about obedience or disobedience. If the blessings were only for the deserving, very likely they would be listed at the end of the sermon.

By appearing at the beginning, they tell us that God’s favor, God’s grace, precedes all our endeavors. Sometimes we are so anxious to rush to the Sermon on the Mount’s moral and ethical instructions that we overlook the initial word that God’s blessings are the context for all our behavior and relationships.

Note especially that according to the Beatitudes, God’s favor, God’s blessing, is granted to those whom society regards as the ones left behind, to those you would least expect to be blessed. It’s a complete reversal of what we usually assume. You are accepted. You are

accepted by God. You are embraced by God not for what you have made of yourself, but for what God has made of you.

At first hearing, it sounds backward. That's because Jesus is proclaiming a new vision, a new way of understanding the meaning of life in God's creation. He was saying that in the economy of God, these are the ones who are blessed and happy. And those whom the world blesses and those whom God blesses are not necessarily the same.

It was shocking then. It is shocking now. But it was good news then, and it's good news now. You are free from the judgments of society's definition of success and happiness.

You don't have to accomplish 99 things before breakfast to receive God's acceptance. You are loved by God from the moment you take your first breath.

But it's so easy to forget these blessings of God that Jesus outlined in the Beatitudes. You are tempted to trust more the promises of the blessings of the society in which you live.

The big question is: how do you make the change from trusting in the culture's promises to trusting in God's promises? Does Jesus tell you how to get there? Yes, he did. He said, "Blessed are you!" eight times. Not "Blessed are you... if." Blessed are you because you are created in God's image and loved by God. Believe it, that's all there is to do.

Blessed are you who know God's love, for you will hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are you who accept the love of God, for God's grace will purify your heart. Blessed are you who see the goodness of God, for you will be humble. Amen.