

“The Blessed Life” | Matthew 5:1-12

February 2, 2020

Blessed are the rich, for theirs is the good life.

Blessed are those who ignore the dying, for they shall be blissful.

Blessed are the boastful, for they shall look down on the little people.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for respectability, for they shall be praised on social media.

Blessed are those who are those who ignore the needy, for they shall preserve their way of life.

Blessed are those who follow their hearts, for they will live the dream of every Disney movie.

Blessed are those who sow seeds of discord, for they shall rally their followers to their side.

Blessed are you when sneer at and mock others, for the laughter of your friends will be your comfort.

This, of course, is a parody of the real Beatitudes that we just read from in Matthew 5. When we think about what makes up the good life, we all have implicit values that work their way out into the way we live. What makes up the good life?

We all want it. We're constantly told what makes up for such a life . But we're always left wanting.

So we work hard at trying to be happy. In a recent article on [aeon.com](https://www.aeon.com), Cody Delistray writes that happiness is the marketing breakthrough of the past decade.

So think about how many products and books are geared towards things like anti-stress, self-care. There is a relentless focus on the self and self-optimization. What's happening, he says, is that we're in search of "peak happiness." Happiness is something that we perform, track on social media. To be happy we need to accumulate "peak experiences." But it's a fool's errand.

As Don Draper said in the TV series *Madmen*: "What is happiness? It's the moment before you need more happiness." The author says that one way out of this is to embrace our sadness along with our joys as normal parts of life.

How might Jesus address our desire to find the good life? Happiness? All of these questions are about what it means to flourish as a human being.

The Biblical Word for flourishing is "blessed." And Jesus starts his famous sermon in Matthew 5 with a picture and an invitation of the blessed, **flourishing life** (and as we'll see, it's quite surprising).

This morning we come to Jesus' opening of his famous sermon we call The Sermon on the Mount.

And Jesus opens this sermon on the mountain with a series of "blessings." Beatitudes.

**Now, there's a poetic quality to the Beatitudes.**

- Repeated phrase: blessed are x because they possess y. 8+1.
- The first four beatitudes in Greek alliterate with p.

- And the first four are exactly 36 words matched by the last four that are 36 words.

Now, Jesus opens his sermon not by laying impossible demands on us. He opens his sermon singing a poem about what true flourishing looks like.

Poems construct an imaginative worlds and invite us into them. Good poems are not moralistic, but they can be powerful invitations to live differently and see the world differently.

One of the best poems I know is Psalm 1.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.” The Psalmist imagines for us what a flourishing life looks like, the life of true blessing, true happiness. The result? “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does he prospers.”

The background for this word “blessed” in Psalm 1 (אַשְׁרָי) and the matching word in Matthew 5 is the idea of flourishing. Flourishing like a tree planted by streams of water.

Jesus begins this sermon with an invitation to a flourishing life.

And Jesus surprises us as to what true flourishing looks like. We can group the beatitudes into three themes: humility, righteousness and mercy, and peacemaking.

## Beatitudes of Humility

*Jesus tells us the flourishing are actually those who experience suffering. So who are the “poor in Spirit”?*

- This obviously includes those who are materially poor. Lk. 6.
- And in the background of this passage is [Isaiah 61](#): “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...”
- The materially poor are in the best position to know their spiritual need. They become our teachers. And the Messiah comes announcing a blessing on the poor.

Jesus turns things upside down: it’s the poor in spirit—those who know their material and spiritual needs are dependent on God—who are members of Jesus’ kingdom. This promise is for the poor.

*The theme of humility continues with those who mourn.*

- In [Isaiah 61](#), the Good News is also preached to those who mourn. The Messiah will “[grant to those who mourn in Zion...oil of gladness a garment of praise.](#)” The mourning immediately in view is Israel’s state of exile, her ruin. God’s people are “on the bottom” and her enemies are “on top.” This situation of decay and spiritual darkness is cause for great grief.
- So Jesus says to those who mourn they will inherit “the land.” The land evokes the promised land. Jesus certainly has more in view. He’s saying that those who mourn the spiritual decline around them will receive the true inheritance—not God’s enemies who currently occupy the land.

There's a blessing for those who do have heavy hearts for the spiritual darkness around them.

*Blessed are the meek.*

- Meek does not mean weak. It refers to those who have suffered at the hands of persecutors but have not responded in the same way.
- Meekness is “power under godly control.” Jesus will unpack this theme more when he talks about non-retaliation.

**Beatitudes of Righteousness and Mercy**

*Righteousness in the Bible is the same word for justice.* “Hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

- Righteousness is to be sought with a hunger and thirst. Not blessed are those who are already righteous! But who zealously seek after it.

*Blessed are the merciful.*

- Jesus gives a stinging rebuke of those who refuse to show mercy (9:13; 12:17; 23:23).
- Are you the sort of person who has to lord things over people? Often we let ourselves off the hook easily (merciful with ourselves), but not other people. The sort of person who is consistently merciful, even to those who have wronged them—Jesus pronounces a blessing for these.

*Pure in heart.*

- It's not enough to bring yourself into external purity. The heart in the Hebrew mind is the center of the person. It's the command center.
- To be pure in heart is to live with integrity: it's aligning outward action and

inward thoughts. Only God can give this of course! And Jesus promises a spiritual vision for the pure in heart: they will see God.

## **Beatitudes of Peace**

There are blessings for those who create peace.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

- Jesus is taking revolution off the table for his disciples.
- There were many vigilante movements that wanted to start a war and bring about the kingdom. Jesus’ kingdom is a peaceable kingdom.
- Being a peacemaker is not just being nice person. In fact, seeking peace, pursuing peace, trying to bring reconciliation in your family, among friends—this can get you in a lot of trouble.

The last beatitude breaks down into two and deals with persecution: “Blessed are the persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...

Blessed are you when other revile you...and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

- Jesus is ushering in his kingdom and inviting people to live under his kingdom charter. He prepares his disciples and us for conflict. Being faithful to Jesus’ teachings will often mean we are at odds with those around us.
- In 2019, it’s estimated that an average of 11 Christians were killed every day for their faith in Christ. Jesus promises the persecuted that they belong to his kingdom now.
- There are softer forms of persecution—being publicly shamed, called names, slandered, marginalized. Increasingly, in our context for Christians to believe what Christians have always believed, for example, concerning marriage and sexuality is to be considered a bigot. Are you prepared to be misunderstood,

slandered for being faithful to Jesus?

- Jesus says that if you are persecuted for righteousness sake, you should throw a party. “Rejoice and be glad...” You’re in good company. It’s a sign that you are flourishing as a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus says that a life of humility, a life that pursues righteousness and shows mercy, a life committed to peacemaking—this is what flourishing looks like.

## Conclusion

The Gospel works in upside down ways. Our lesson from 1 Corinthians emphasizes this point: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”

Jesus opens his sermon with a blessing on those who do not look very blessed.

But a blessed life in the present is oriented to Jesus’ promises for the future.

Jesus can say that the poor, the mourners, the meek, the persecuted are truly flourishing BECAUSE those very states reveal that they belong to the kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted, they will inherit the land, they will receive a great reward.

The Beatitudes are invitations for us to consider and to live into the counter-cultural ways of flourishing as followers of Jesus.

But the Beatitudes give us another invitation.

When you look at these attitudes? Who do you see?

Our Lord Jesus Christ was poor in spirit, mourned, was meek and of pure heart, he hungered and thirst, showed mercy, sought peace, was reviled and didn't respond to insult with insult. And he first receives all of the blessings he promises to give!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The faith-community of the blessed is the community of the Crucified. With him they lost everything, and with him they found everything."

May Holy Cross be such a faith community. May Church of the Holy Cross be a blessed people—who are humble, seek righteousness and mercy, and work for Christ's peace.

Let's pray. Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

**Amen.**