

A different vision of the good life. Matt. 5:1-16

Blessed

Matthew 5: Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

² *And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:*

³ *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Unless we are religious we probably don't use the language of blessing very much, except when people sneeze, and so when Jesus talks about who is blessed it probably doesn't hit us with as much force as it should.

But Jesus is saying to his disciples, those who follow Him, who have believed His preaching of the gospel of the kingdom

This is the person you want to be.

Being blessed is a happy state but it is not the same as being happy.

Happiness is a subjective state, how you feel

It creates a contradiction when you say happy are those who mourn, who grieve,

and few of us feel happy when we are being persecuted

But being declared 'Blessed' is Jesus making an objective judgment, a commendation.

He is not describing how these people feel but declaring how God thinks about them.

The blessed are those approved by the God who runs the universe, those favoured by Him, those who will enjoy His commitment to their flourishing.

And as a consequence these are the people whose place in life is an enviable one, who are doing well and should be congratulated. He is saying in the end these people are the winners, those we should want to be amongst.

And He is also saying here why they are the winners – for theirs, and theirs alone is or will be ...

Yet Jesus' commendation is surprising– Surprising because it is so different to what is generally called the blessed, the enviable life, so different from our lived experience

Those he calls blessed are often regarded as the opposite –as those who miss out – and their experience miserable

Miserable – mourn, to hunger and thirst

These beatitudes - Surprising – because so different

And, yes, surprising because they are so good, as we will see. So good that these people be reckoned as blessed

And surprising because Jesus is so certain in His judgement – so certain that this is and will be the case, that these people are blessed

So the question, as you see both the difference and the goodness, is – can He be believed

Believed – so that we change our thinking and our lives to be amongst those he declares blessed

Goal – see the difference, see the goodness, see the certainty of these blessings so that, trusting Jesus, you will change your thinking to value what Jesus commends, change your life so to become a blessed life.

Hope, as you think about them, you will find it refreshing as I have this week, refreshing to be lifted out of present passing preoccupations, and think about what is valued always, what matters for eternity

So different

Let me help you get a feel of the difference by giving you my take on a matching summary of what is normally thought of as the blessed, enviable, life in our society

It is not in depth sociological research, just thinking about the messages we constantly get from - from everywhere – online, radio, TV, movies

You might be able to create a better summary

But See if in the main it rings true, helps you get a feel for the difference between what Jesus is saying and what society reckons to be the blessed, the enviable, life

Blessed are the rich and powerful, for they enjoy the good life now. – we've seen it when we've been taken through their houses or holidays on all sorts of lifestyle programs, and they even get a better ride in quarantine, or coming back to Australia because they can afford business class

Blessed are the always cheerful and laughing, for they know no pain or cares [and are good to be around, not a pain like the glum]

Blessed are those who insist on their own rights and way, for they get their own way, what they know they deserve – and that is satisfying and empowering

Blessed are the morally flexible who leave God out of the picture and the cynical who know nothing really matters, for they can get on with everyone, they move on much more easily [and often they sleep better at night]

Blessed are those who know charity starts at home and make sure free loaders aren't indulged, for they will always have enough to look after themselves

Blessed are those whose feet are planted firmly on the ground and are not directed in life by anything other than being true to themselves, for they will realise their ambitions

Blessed are those who can live with workable compromises that are not too costly, for it allows us all to get on with our own business

Blessed are those who always live in tune with the spirit of the age for they will always be popular

Blessed are you Christian when you keep a low profile, blend in, and keep your faith in Jesus to yourself. Rejoice, because you will be allowed to participate in society and enjoy all its benefits now in this the best of all possible worlds, just like everyone else.

Not scientific – but some version of that – and you might like to distil your own experience of the world – is not far off the mark

That is the message we get everyday, but Jesus' take is very different

Let's think about it

³ *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [Ps. 70:5, 34:6; Is. 57:15, 61:1, 66:2]*

It's not the rich – but the poor, the poor in spirit who are blessed.

Who are they?

The poor in spirit are the needy, who know they have no hope in themselves and no hope in others. Like the Old Testament poor their only hope for help is in the LORD Himself. To be poor in spirit is to acknowledge that you are a spiritual bankrupt, that you are empty before God with nothing to offer Him, and can only rely on His mercy and grace.

Jesus told a story in Luke that illustrates what it is to be poor in spirit, a story about a pharisee and a tax collector going up to pray

Luke 18: ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

That tax collector, looking only for mercy, was poor in spirit.

And the poor in spirit are blessed because the Kingdom of heaven, the promised reign of God, is theirs - theirs, and theirs alone

Notice that apart from v. 10 which also speaks of present possession of the Kingdom, all the other blessings are in the future

But for the poor in spirit – that reign was theirs now

For they embraced the gospel, they embraced the repentance that both John and Jesus called for in the preaching of the gospel –

Repentance is an acknowledgment that I am in the wrong

My life deserves God's judgment, not His blessing

That as I am I deserve exclusion, not inclusion

The poor in spirit Gratefully embrace the gospel, thankful for an opportunity to be included by believing the gospel and relying on the King who brings the kingdom

And what would have surprised Jesus' first hearers even more was that it was not the Pharisee, confident in his own keeping of God's law, and not the Zealots so confident in their own rightness that they could use violence to establish God's reign on earth

But the poor in Spirit, those who had no confidence in themselves but whose only hope was God, who alone possess the kingdom.

Making this the first beatitude tells us that all that follows, with its call for a righteousness that exceeds the scribes and pharisees, with its instruction on how to live as one of Jesus' followers, is not a self help program or a way of earning your place in the kingdom

It is the life for those who have received God's kingdom as an undeserved gift

The sermon, taken seriously, will foster poverty of spirit, that reliance on God alone, and

Unless you are poor in spirit, receive the Kingdom as a gift, like a little child, the sermon will crush you, or drive you to minimise Jesus' demands on your life

It is So good that There is hope for the poor in spirit

Those whom life has beaten up and forced to face their hopelessness

Good, that it is not the self-righteous who proudly reinforce their sense of spiritual superiority and look down on others

Not those so convinced of their righteousness that they think they can embrace violence to do God's will on earth

But the humble who are given the Kingdom

⁴ *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.* [Isaiah 61:1-4, Ps. 119:136,125:5-6; Luke 19:41, Rom. 9:2]

We have so much trouble thinking those who mourn are blessed.

Mourning is just so exhausting and pre-occupying; it is painful to be enveloped in grief

But Jesus is talking about mourners

Those who grieve for loss, who feel the weight of the horror of death and the misery it brings – who grieve for the not rightness of this sundering of relationships, this ending of love, this denial of the worth of our labours

But also those who grieve for sin, like the Psalmist whose eyes shed streams of tears because people, himself and others, do not keep God's law,

*Psalm 119: ¹³⁶ My eyes shed streams of tears,
because people do not keep your law.*

Those who grieve for the destruction sin brings into people's lives

For the effects of people's foolish choices

Don't you feel that sometimes

Look at people lured into a gambling addiction

Young people making the destructive choice to get involved with drugs

Look at the desolation wrought in Syria by civil war and Isis

Doesn't it break your heart, don't you know sometimes an inconsolable sadness for our world?

But Jesus says 'they those who mourn, not others, who will be comforted

And that is good

Good that followers of Jesus can be realistic about the human condition, about our own condition – we don't have to pretend

And we don't have to think that some stoic, stolid, impassiveness is the ideal

Good, to think there is a hope of comfort

That grief will not in the end crush us

But what kind of comfort can deal with the great weight of human grief?

⁵ *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. [Psalm 37:11, Numbers 12:3, Matt. 11:28; Phil. 2:3-5]*

The word translated meek can also be translated humble or gentle.

Meekness has the sense of controlling your desire or limiting the expression of your power or legal right, to put other’s interests ahead of your own,

It is not insisting on your own way, on always having to be the winner

It is not the same as weakness, or moral indifference, or being nice

Moses is described as ‘very meek, more than all the people on earth’ [Num. 12:3] and he was a person of great strength and authority. Meekness in fact flows from trust in the Lord, the just judge of all, and from being able to entrust your cause to God.

Meekness is so out of fashion

The philosopher Nietzsche especially despised meekness as a feature of ‘slave morality’ that inhibited living life to the full, that frustrated the will to power that you needed to transform your life to a higher plane of humanity.

Many in practice follow him, embracing self assertion and aggression to get their own way.

Meekness, we are sure, is for losers, by its nature ensuring you will miss out on what is rightfully yours.

But Jesus says they will inherit the earth, that God will ensure they come to what is rightfully theirs in the new heaven and earth,

⁶ *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

Hunger and thirst are so uncomfortable and so distracting

And righteousness, here acting rightly, living in right relationship with God by living in conformity with His covenant and the law within it,

– so difficult to attain, not only for yourself but for the world

So this is a kind of unquenchable hunger

An insatiable longing that God be honoured by His law being kept in your life and the world

It is a hunger that a pragmatic society, one that seeks to keep people of very diverse world views living in harmony on a lowest common denominator moral commitment, has little tolerance of

But Jesus says that those with this disturbing hunger are blessed, for they, and they alone, will be satisfied, their longings met

⁷ *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. [Luke 10:37, Matt. 9:27; Prov. 19:17, 24:11-12; Matt. 18:21-35].*

With the fifth beatitude we move in a sense to one, like the seventh, that is generally admired

Mercy is close to grace but can be distinguished from it. Grace is oriented to dealing with sin, mercy to need, to being compassionate towards those who are in pain, misery and distress. The good Samaritan [Luke 10:37] showed mercy to the wounded man. Mercy and grace are very close, for often the distress and need arises because people have done the wrong thing, are suffering the consequences of wrong choices. But mercy is still to be shown

While mercy is admired in principle it is often neglected in practice – for mercy costs

Costs time and money

The cost of involving yourself in another’s misery, of not being able to live your life just looking after yourself and pursuing your own plans

Jesus says the merciful are blessed, for they will receive mercy

They receive what we all need – for we all become needy in the end

Through frailty and sickness

Through the sinful actions of others – assault or theft

But Jesus is especially speaking of our need for God's mercy

Our need not to be left helpless and dying in our sin

The merciful, and only the merciful, receive that mercy

⁸ *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. [Deut. 6:5, Psalm 15, 24]*

To be pure in heart is to be single-minded

It is like the purity of refined sugar [before someone sticks their wet teaspoon back in it] – Pure sugar means all you find is sugar. No matter how deep you dig – it is just sugar

A pure heart is one where all you find is a desire to honour God, a heart free from double mindedness and hypocrisy

It is a heart freed from all idolatry, given wholly to the great commandment – love of God with all we are and have

We think people lose themselves where they open themselves up to such a love, or that others around lose them

And yet that single mindedness makes them people of integrity, trustworthy and reliable

And losing themselves to pursue what please God alone, they and they alone will achieve what they desire

They will see God

They will know Him, be able to live in His presence

⁹ *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. [Isaiah 48:22, 57:14-21; Col. 1:20, Eph. 2:11-22]*

Our world praises peacemakers – for peace is good.

But their understanding of peace is limited – we call people who stop conflict peacemakers, even where there is no reconciliation, and the focus is always on horizontal relationships, person to person.

Jesus is speaking of a bigger peace

He is speaking of shalom – the peace that is freedom from fear of the hostility of others, freedom from fear of want, freedom from fear of death – secure and lasting peace and prosperity, at peace with God

The Peace that will embrace the world

Peace after peace has been lost

In Isaiah God had said ‘There is no peace for the wicked’ [Isaiah 48:22, 57:21] but he prophesied a day when peace would be proclaimed to those under judgment.

The peacemakers Jesus is talking about are those who can bring peace by bringing peace with God, who bring people back to God by preaching a gospel of repentance and forgiveness

Jesus will go on and speak of the cost of this peacemaking in Matthew 10 and 25, the cost of being rejected and abused, of being poor and homeless

Yet they will be called ‘sons of God’, those identified as God’s because they share His character and desire.

¹⁰ *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Righteousness – is faithfulness to the covenant, to the covenant God. Holding fast to His standards – can generate hostility

Being exclusively loyal to Him, worshipping Him alone, can bring persecution

Those faithful to Him, says Jesus, are blessed even as they experience rejection and abuse in the world for that loyalty.

Theirs already is the reign of God, for they live in repentance and faith, with all their hope in Him.

But Jesus expands this last blessing to focus now on his hearers' response to Him

On their commitment to Jesus.

¹¹ *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Jesus is the covenant God come amongst His people, He brings the reign of God in Himself, so now loyalty to the covenant, righteousness, is persevering in following Him.

Those who are His have embraced the reign of God and should rejoice – now, in the present, when abused for His sake, for they are now in the camp of the prophets, those who spoke of Jesus coming, those who have been shown to be in the right, shown to be truly God's people, as Jesus fulfills their words

Each of these beatitudes deserves more time,

But I want you to get a sense of the whole

To glimpse their goodness.

So Good

Step back and think – what would a person who embodies these characteristics be like?

What would a society, a world, a universe where those who lived this way were the winners, be like?

Where the Humble – not the self-confident and proud – were welcomed

Where A moral seriousness that made you more compassionate, more merciful, more prepared to put others first, was admired

Where we didn't have to pretend about the horror of sin and death, didn't have to relate on the basis of a superficial cheerfulness that could not acknowledge the grief

Where people would look to the interests of others, not aggressively promote their own

Where people had a passion to do what is right, and were willing to pay a cost to do what was right – don't we long for that, someone who will just stand up for what is right, stop the rot of corruption

Where need would be met by compassionate help, not critical condescension and condemnation

And You could trust others because of their Integrity, could live free of the deceptions and disappointments of hypocrisy

And we would know and treasure peace

People who embraced this life would be good to be around

That kind of person – good to be

And The society where they were recognised and rewarded

So Good

But how could that happen?

There are reasons people don't pursue this way of living

Uncomfortable to mourn, disturbing to hunger and thirst for righteousness

Genuinely costly to practice mercy

Often painful to be persecuted, to be pursued and bullied for doing what is right

To Always be the odd one out by taking living God's way seriously in a world that wants to keep God at a distance.

How could Jesus really say they are blessed?

How could he be so sure that there will be comfort for mourners, satisfaction for the hungry

That the pure in heart will See God, peacemakers be called sons of God

That those who embraced the repentance he called for would be welcome in God's kingdom, to live under God's reign

It seems so unlikely

How can Jesus be so confident?

So Certain

And He is confident

As he speaks both of the present and the future

How?

It is because Jesus lived this blessed life, in Himself vindicated it, and brought the blessing He declares

Jesus lived, embodied the blessed life he taught – references are in the outline

He wept tears over Jerusalem as He considered its stubborn unbelief and the judgement that would follow Luke 19:41-44

He described Himself as meek and lowly of heart [Matthew 11:28-29] and He was. He was patient with those who made demands on Him, and rather than form his followers into a powerful political and military force to get His own way, rather than use His power to destroy those who opposed Him, He humbly pursued our good, going to the cross

He pursued and taught righteousness. He could say that His food was to do the will of Him who sent Him and to accomplish His work [John 4:34]. That is what sustained Him.

He was merciful, turning away none who came to Him, relieving their suffering even if it meant he had no time to rest or eat [Mark 3:20]. And He was merciful to us, giving His own life to free us from the misery of death.

Pure in heart – HE lived to do His Father's will, to please Him alone [John 6:38]

And He is the one who makes peace with God through His death for our sin, and comes and preaches peace to us [Ephesians 2:14-18] through the gospel he entrusted to His apostles

On the cross, suffering for righteousness – he was that poor man who cried out to the Lord [Luke 23:4] – quoting psalm 31:5 as he died

*Psalm 31: ⁵ Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.*

And being the man who embodied the blessed life - He Died –

Died a shameful death on the cross, and in that death he could have become the great contradiction of all He claimed and taught

The one who showed by the outcome of his life that it really is the rich and powerful, the personally ambitious and ruthless – who are the blessed

On Easter Saturday you could have thought that

Spoken these blessings and laughed at the naivete of Jesus and his followers – said to your friend believe that, live like that – end up like Jesus

But then, the next day, his shattered followers came to His tomb and found it empty

And in their bewilderment and grief were met by the risen Jesus

God, the God of Israel, the true and living almighty Creator, had raised Him from the dead

Embodying in Himself this life, He has vindicated it in Himself – shown that this is the life the almighty Father reckons the right life, the life He looks on with favour, the life He will cause to flourish in His kingdom

Shown that when HE speaks so confidently He speaks the truth

Hear these blessings

And you are hearing the pronouncements of the risen King, the one who brings God's reign, the one whose judgments will be established for ever, the one who can forgive

Those who give themselves to be these people – the poor in Spirit, the meek, the mourners - will be seen as the winners when the Son is revealed in glory

So this is the life you should want for yourself

For Jesus brings what HE declares

He Guarantees the Kingdom is for those who repent and believe the gospel

And who will persevere – despite the opposition

For He and He alone through His obedient death for sin can fit them to live in God's presence

Bring them to live in the presence of God now through giving them the Holy Spirit, bring them to live in His kingdom forever.

And Jesus brings the comfort, the inheritance, the satisfaction, the mercy, the vision of God, the adoption into God's family that He promises

He brings it now in part, and assures us that believers will know its fulness at the resurrection

That is true – now already we know the beginning of fulfilment. For example

In grief – we can now mourn as those who have hope, who know our fellow believers have fallen asleep and will rise with Christ

And the resurrection of Christ that gives us that hope also guarantees to us that wonderful day when every tear will be wiped from our eyes.

Our hunger for righteousness now is beginning to be satisfied as we know the power of the Spirit to put sin to death, but one day we will be like our Lord, doing God's will perfectly

We know mercy now – forgiveness and grace to help us in our need, but one day we will know the mercy that has freed us from all grief and pain, all want and weakness as we rise with Christ

And trusting Jesus, embracing the gospel, sharing the gospel, we are already adopted as God's children and one day that will be revealed to all [1 John 3:1-2].

Jesus lived this life, embodied the blessed life

He vindicated that life – it is blessed, the life kept by God

He brings the blessing He declares. Now the kingdom, the reign of God, does belong to all who are poor in spirit, who know the only hope they have is to turn back from relying on themselves and directing their lives to do their will, and to instead trust Jesus and follow Him by doing His will, and persevere in that no matter what the cost.

Now we have the down-payment in our adoption as God's children and the gift of the Spirit of the Son of all that is promised, and know the fullness is sure

The meek will inherit the earth, the pure in heart will see God, the mourners will be comforted

Pursue and embrace the good life

So pursue and embrace the good, the blessed life

And that starts in your thinking

Ask yourself - Who do I really believe is blessed – because that is what you will pursue, what you will want to be

There is the ever present vision of the good life promoted by the world, the world that wants nothing to do with the rule of the living God

Promoted powerfully on our TV's, facebook pages, in newspapers and on radio, and sometimes in our schools and families – that focuses on self, and living true to your own desires and ambitions

And then there is the vision of the good life taught by the risen Jesus in His gospel

Do I trust Him – crucified and risen, that He has the authority to establish the Word He teaches

The blessed life starts with changing your mind about Jesus, and then letting Him change your mind about the good life.

If you trust Him, confess Him Lord, then you will actively resist the lies we are told about the good life

That Money solves everything

You are a good person, so God should take you on your terms

Taking Jesus seriously will only make you a pain

Resist the lies And actively pursue the life Jesus teaches is blessed

Practicing the humility that confesses that unless Jesus saves you, you are lost

Living convicted of the destructiveness of sin – so you shun it

Putting the needs of others above your own

Being sustained by doing His will

Showing Generosity to those in need

Longing to love the true God only and not sharing your devotion with anyone or anything else,

Sharing the gospel that brings peace

Pursuing this life Daily

Daily letting your life be changed by His word and Spirit

You will only do it if you keep Jesus big in your thinking – His love, His power [Eph. 1 and 3] – and how good it is to know His mercy, to be at peace with Him

But where Jesus has the honour and trust His greatness deserves you will live this life confidently and count yourself blessed when you suffer abuse for His sake, you will rejoice to be slandered for His sake

For the Lord Jesus gives you the Kingdom

Reckon with the beatitudes, give yourself time to see their goodness, to measure your life against them and change what needs to be changed by God's grace

for it is only those who live this way who are blessed now and forever

So change and thank the Lord Jesus that He lived this good life, He has vindicated this life, and He calls us to live this good life

And trusting Him be reckoned amongst those who in the end are the winners, whose lives will flourish in the new heaven and earth