

One Sermon That Changed The World

Your Blessed Life Now

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STRANGE TEACHING

I've heard some strange things in my life. In 2005, a Wendy's in Manchester, New Hampshire, was burglarized by a young man by the name of Ronald McDonald. In 1980, a man named Jimmy Carter was arrested in Detroit for burglary. That's not the strange part. The strange part is that the arresting officer was named Richard Nixon.

This reading ranks up there. Students of Scripture have struggled with what to do with the beatitudes. There is a different, shortened version in Luke 6. Are we dealing with one sermon told in two different ways, or two sermons? Are these ethical teachings (with commands to be obeyed), or are they hope for future gifts (or promises to be enjoyed)? Are there 7 (as some philosophers think), 8 (as the octagonal shape of the church of the beatitude would suggest), or 9 (as most contemporary scholars think)? Are they literal, or figurative? Do they describe separate groups of people or do all of them apply to the same person? Here's a deep one: why didn't Jesus use a hashtag every time he used the word "blessed"? Maybe it's because there ain't a thing in this list that looks like what most of us mean when we say, "hashtag blessed!" And how can this be about happiness when most of this sounds so sad? And undesirable! Blessed are the meek? How many of you come home from a date and tell your roommate: "Oh, he is soooo meek!"?

We need to change our shoes. Like a theological Mr. Rogers, we need to take off our contemporary ones, and put on first-century sandals.

LIVING YOUR BLESSED LIFE?

The first word out of Jesus' mouth is *Makarios*. Most of our Bibles translate that word as "blessed." But another word for this is "happy."

John Wesley, the renowned 18th century preacher, told his audience that the whole point of Christ coming into the world was “to bless men; to make men happy.” And for this reason, Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount to begin “his Divine institution, which is **the complete art of happiness**, by laying down before all that have ears to hear, the true and only true method of acquiring it.”

But when you read the list...well...for people interested in the good life, this list looks like anything but.

A few years ago, a popular preacher wrote a book entitled “your best life now,” arguing that if you dream it, you can achieve it. There is a whole movement in contemporary Christianity that says if you want something, just “name it and claim it.” It’s “The Prayer of Jabez” theology, where we cry out to God “expand the borders of my territory” in a purely physical sense. To be blessed by God is to have Rolex watches, miracle cures, and a life of ease. Some call it “health and wealth.”

Too bad Paul didn’t get the memo. Remember Paul. Gifted by the Spirit more than virtually anyone else—yet he finds himself stoned, beaten, and left for dead on the side of the road. Or hanging onto a piece of driftwood for a day and a half after a shipwreck. Or coughing in prison, shackled to a guard on one side and a sick prisoner on the other.

Too bad the rest of the Apostles didn’t get it either. What’s the tradition on them? Some are shot through with arrows. Or thrown off a tower. Or banished to a lonely isle.

Too bad Jesus didn’t know this. Poor Jesus. The Son of God. Crying out with sweat as thick as blood: “Let this cup pass from me.” And the Father won’t do it. If only Jesus could have been blessed.

Read Hebrews 11, the famed “hall of faith.” There is a long list of those tortured, beaten, or even sawn in half...and before dying, living in the most wretched conditions, waiting for a better kingdom.

It was C. S. Lewis who said those making the most of their time in this life were always those who had their eyes set on the next one. I get the impression that Christians in this life long for a better life when Christ makes all things new. Your best life still awaits you.

But if that’s the case, what are we to make of this list Jesus gives us? We may still await our best life; but he seems to think we can, even now, live a blessed life. And it doesn’t look anything like what I would have imagined.

We need to put on our first-century sandals, walk up with him to the mountain, and sit at his feet. When we do that, we begin to see the beatitudes like a well-cut diamond; every time you turn it, the light refracts in a different, yet equally beautiful ways. Different angles, but all light. All true. So I want to lead you through three seemingly different ways to read the Beatitudes, and then show you how the three readings are not so different after all.

PROMISES TO BE ACCEPTED

First, notice that both lists (Luke 6 and Matt 5) present an upside-down kingdom. Don't read this with 2,000 years of church history in our tool bag. Don't think of pious sermons, or best-selling "virtue-driven" business success stories, or "humbler-than-thou" wording we use while living in the comforts of our majority world homes. This list is supposed to look all wrong! These are not the winners, the well-to-do, the highbrow, the elite, the pure-bred, the movers and shakers. This is not how to get ahead in your business. This is looking at those on the lowest rung of the ladder and saying "there you go. That's it." And over in Luke 6, Jesus looks at the winners, the well-to-do, those who have it and have it all (with money, power, fame, might) and says, "wrong. You missed it." It's supposed to be baffling in this upside-down kingdom of His, as he proclaims "blessed" are those no one in this cut-throat dog-eat-dog world seems to truly value!

And this is our first take-away, the first angle on the beatitudes that's worth considering. What if we thought of these first, not as actions to take or commands to obey, but as promises to accept? Jesus says blessed are the nobodies! The ones picked last for kickball in the school yard. The people nobody wants. The lowest of the low. "Well how does that give good news to most people?" Simple. Most people are there! The top 10% are the have-it-all-ers. We could expand it further. Since 71% of the global population live on less than \$10 a day, if you have more than that, you are the "have's." The top tier is always a minority; most people in the world, most of the time, are the "have nots."

What we tell ourselves is this: "poor and sad are those picked last for the team, for they will be rejected, dejected, and made fun of." But Jesus says, "blessed are you!" Read each blessing as a promise. For the "have nots"—the losers in the eyes of the world—these are the real winners in the kingdom of God.

Do you remember the story of David? You know him as a shepherd boy with a talent for killing giants; and you know him as a powerful king on his throne. But there were many years in-between, where he is cold and scared, hiding in caves, ostracized and banished. And the text says that when the people heard he was stuck in the cave of

Adullum, all who were sick, all who were dispossessed, all the needy, all the losers came out to him, and he became king over them (1 Sam 22:1-2).

This is an upside-down kingdom. Jesus picks the riff-raff, blesses them, promises them hope, and then empowers them.

PORTRAITS TO BE ADMIRIED

The second thing to notice is that Jesus explains why these people are the blessed ones. He doesn't just leave it to the imagination, he spells it out. They are blessed because they have access to the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you, for when no one else wants you, God does. When you have nothing in your hands, God will fill them. When you are seeking and in need, you will find the fulfillment most people in the world are blind to." The list doesn't just challenge what the world values, it challenges what *we* truly value. So if one angle is to see the beatitudes as promises to be accepted, another angle is to see them as portraits to be admired. Yes—if you happen to be on the bottom rung of the ladder, there is hope for you. Accept and receive that promise. But also—if you are not, do you see those who are as truly valued?

James says imagine a worship service where, 2 minutes before church begins, we find out the Governor is going to attend. What do we do? Find the best seat in the house, and clear out the bench? Quick, go make sure we have our finest greeters, and grab an umbrella in case it is raining. Roll out the red carpet. James says, but why didn't you do that for the homeless couple that also showed up to worship this morning? What are they to you?

Promises to be received, yes; and portraits to be admired. We need to be reminded, that it is not the king in his fine linens sitting on his throne that most resembles Jesus of Nazareth; it's the homeless woman without a dime to her name, who returns insults with blessing. If we want to touch the face of God, we need to go down the up staircase.

PATHWAYS TO BE ATTEMPTED

But there's a third thing we need to notice if we are reading this with first-century glasses. The language is familiar.

Jesus wasn't the first rabbi to make a list of those who are blessed. Blessing is the language of Genesis. The blessed land. The blessed nation. And if you were a child of the blessed Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, living in the blessed land, belonging to the blessed nation, you still wanted to receive the blessing! To be blessed is to be happy, to be

fulfilled, to be well-off! So, it's no wonder you find this language throughout the Old Testament.

But even more interesting is the fact that there are two different Hebrew words for "blessed" in the Old Testament. One is the Hebrew word *baruch*. This something only God does. It's a complete, absolute gift of grace where God shows up and offers something we do not and cannot contribute to. God takes an infertile woman and causes her to have a child. God comes to the homeless and broken and gives them a land and offers them peace and rest. This is the word for Divine favor. It means "gifted" or "granted." The word that most naturally comes to mind when we think of promises to accept. But there is a catch. The Greek word most suited for this idea is the word *eulogetos* (Mk 14:61; Lk 1:68; 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31). We find it in the New Testament, but not here. Not in the Beatitudes.

There is another Hebrew word for "blessing" which is *ashrei*. It appears 45 times in the Old Testament. But it's not the word that we use when God initiates a blessing on unsuspecting people. It's the word on the lips of a bystander when they notice or observe something about you. Perhaps a good translation is "congratulations." It's the word you say to someone when they seem to have this life thing figured out. When someone is walking down a path that really is rewarding for them, when you sense that happiness and the good life awaits a person because of where they stand and how they are walking. When people tried to follow a set of teachings, when they attempted to walk down certain roads so they could attain and acquire the blessed life, and it was working, people would say "that person is ashre—blessed."

The dominant place where this word appears in the Old Testament is in "wisdom" literature. It's used 26 times in the book of Psalms alone. I invite you to open your Bible to Psalm 1, and I want to camp there for just a minute.

You don't read wisdom literature the same way you read the law books. If the law book said, "don't pick up sticks" and you picked up sticks, you'd be in big trouble. That's the way rules work. But when wisdom literature says, "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he won't depart from it," you don't go around saying "if any person, at any moment, ever does anything wrong in their older years, it is always and entirely their parents' fault." Wisdom literature doesn't work that way. "A soft answer turns away wrath." Usually. But not always. So, what are you saying, Nathan? You can't trust this section of Scripture? Oh, just the opposite. You can take to the bank that this is wisdom talking! If you want your kids to live right, raise em right! If you want to bring down the harshness and wrathful language, fill the conversation with kindness. Yes! Of course. But it's an art, not a science; and people have free will. And you need to take these sayings and apply them to new, unique situations.

We want our children to make their bed. But its because of the principle and values that come from making your bed. The statement points to something bigger and better that lies behind it. We want them to take ownership. We want them to take care of what they have. That one liner conveys a lot more than the rule, and it might even still be true in cases where the rule isn't even kept! A father who looks after his own and drops all to make sure his kids are cared for, and is organized and tidy, has fulfilled what we taught them—even if the only thing in the house not made yet is his bed!

Wisdom literature is like that. And Psalm chapter 1 is the first chapter to introduce us to this kind of literature. And the first word of the first chapter is “blessed.” So read the chapter. “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” (Psalm 1:1-2).

If it's 11:58 PM, and you are not thinking about the law of God, then you have failed the test! Of course not. And the blessed person is the one who never ever ever messes up? Of course not. He's describing a way of life, and a kind of person who chooses a way of life. Someone who can be described in their high school yearbook this way: “When I think of him, I think of a tree planted beside rivers of water; I think of the opposite of a fool.”

And how is the word “blessed” used here? He doesn't mean “you poor thing, you don't have what it takes, but God will be gracious to you anyway!” It's not used that way in this passage. Here, to be blessed means following the way of wisdom, and because you are following in the way of wisdom, you experience a flourishing life as a result.

This is not a *baruch* blessing, the promise of a gift for those who happen to be in terrible circumstances. And it's more than just a portrait about some other people we should learn to admire. No, it's a call: he's calling for you to walk a certain road, to be a certain way in the world; and if you do that, it will allow you to flourish like a tree. Inherent in the word is a call to live a certain way that will lead to a better life.

This is an *ashrei* blessing. Can you guess what the Greek word equivalent to *ashrei* is? Makarios. The word used here in the Beatitudes.

Of all the ways to read the Sermon on the Mount, I am most drawn to the wisdom tradition. Wisdom combines good readings. Wisdom means we don't have to choose! Are these promises to be accepted, or are they portraits to be admired, or are they paths to be attempted? The answer is Yes! We don't have to separate hope and summons, grace and command, eschatology and ethics. Jesus is saying “when the value system of

the kingdom of the world is so wrong, here is the value system that describes the kingdom of God.”

WHY CHOOSE? A COMBINED WISDOM READING

If we like either of the first two readings—promises and portraits, why not just take the one we like? There are at least 4 good reasons to embrace the wisdom reading as well:

First, Christ call us to the abundant life. Being called to a new way of life is more than noticing who seems to already have it.

Second, discipleship involves intentional voluntary choosing to take up your cross. That means choosing costly suffering, not just randomly falling into it.

Third, in Luke’s version, he doesn’t just offer blessings, but woes; the woes are against those who are in a situation or a way of life that does not bring about flourishing. If we are called to choosing to avoid the woes, are we not called to choose the way of blessing?

Fourth, the beatitudes are clearly supposed to bring about a description of the life of Jesus. Jesus was all these things. Did Jesus just happen to find himself in these situations? Or did he choose them, leaving heaven and donning this kind of life for a reason?

As Gregory of Nyssa (4th century) once said, you may find yourself in one position by birth; but you find yourself in the beatitudes by virtue.

If you read with wisdom and virtue in mind, then four things follow:

First, it still speaks a word of hope to the down and out; but even more than that, these are character traits, not just unfortunate circumstances. They describe a way to be in the world.

Second, these are not “a la carte.” You don’t pick the beatitude that sound good to you and leave the others. They each describe a different facet of the kind of person who chooses the path of wisdom.

Third, it is possible that each one is progressive. Many contemporary commentaries say the order doesn’t matter. And maybe they are right. But some of the early church fathers—Augustine, Gregory and John Chrysostom, for starters—saw these as steps to virtue, and in this way, says Chrysostom, the Lord provides us a “golden chain.”

Finally, there is no difficult call without an unbelievable promise. Look at our nine beatitudes and notice that each one has placed right smack dab in the middle: a comma. We miss the point if we only dwell on the words before the comma; the reason to seek a life before the comma, and the power to live before the comma can only be found in the life promised after the comma.

BLESSED ARE...

Let's try all this on for size and read the beatitudes this way.

Blessed are the poor (records Luke), or the poor in Spirit (records Matthew). When we lack financial resources, people say we are “needy” and “broke.” When we lack spiritual resources, people says we are “needy” and “broken.” Being poor means I have little to no things of this world; being poor in spirit means I am not attached to the things of this world. We can either be *attached* to the things of this world or we can be *detached* from the things of this world. Those are really our two options, which might explain why being “poor in spirit” and just being “poor” are not that different in the ancient world. If we say no to the kingdoms of the world, we probably will not “win” money, fame, or power in this life. And woe to you who did seek after those things—woe to you who got rich by pursuing what the world has to offer—because your hands are full of worldliness, which means now you are way too busy and way too stuffed and way too satisfied to realize you are spiritually starving. It's hard to be blessed in that scenario. No, blessed are the unattached. We don't seek the kingdoms of the world, for ours (says the promise) is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the ones who mourn, those who weep now. Focusing on stuff leads to envy, not sympathy. Being attached to the things of this world makes us too busy or too numb to grieve. The less we are distracted by worldly things, the more we can see the plight of those who have-not...and the more we can share in their sadness. Wisdom calls for us to really sympathize with the suffering (or have a “burden” like the prophets say). Worldliness and self-consumption blind us, while being poor in spirit allows us to share with the suffering of others and mourn with them. And by sharing, we find comfort for ourselves and others. Sharing in other's sorrow leads to them sharing with you in your blessings. Those who weep now will laugh later. But woe to you who laugh now (says Jesus in Luke's account). Why? Because laughing is wrong? No—he means in a world full of sadness, those who are so unaware that they laugh while their neighbor cries in pain is in no position for a blessing. There is no blessing for those who see no needs, but when you do find yourself in need, there will be no one to help. Woe to you who laugh now, says Jesus, because you will mourn and weep. Some think this in afterlife omen, but its true in our experience here and now, isn't it? Those who

constantly stuff themselves numb themselves, but they are never comforted for long or ever satisfied.

Blessed are the meek. Those who give up worldly ambition and mourn with the suffering won't seek things that often get us into trouble. The "one-ups-man-ship." Or fighting with others over worldly goods. Or seeking power over others. None of that matters to us if we are unattached to worldliness and sit in solidarity with the hurting, rather than seeking to advance ourselves. This makes us look weak, when really, we're not weak; we're meek...and we avoid the kill-or-be-killed end that comes from living the rat race. It is not only true in the future-life sense but even now it is literally true...those who play the kill or be killed game will get killed. But the meek will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger now (says Luke), or blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (records Matthew). This could refer to my right-standing and my right-living. Those who live this way and seek righteousness often go without things of this world; but since the things of this world don't satisfy, we can focus on what actually *does* satisfy us. This is one reason why Christians fast...to remind us that righteousness and the kingdom of God provides real satisfaction (love, joy, peace, patience...), while fighting and clawing for power, money, and fame never satisfies. Woe to those who are full now—full of all the empty calories the world has to offer, for you shall find yourself spiritually starving.

But the Greek word here for "righteousness" is also the Greek word for "justice" (NCB, NCV, NLT, NTE). Consider that translation for a moment. I'm not interested in the things of the world. I'm interested in people who are hurting. And I don't choose the way of retaliation, to get back at those who hurt other people; instead, I prayerfully long for God to bring about justice. And in the meantime, this is a second reason why Christians fast...in solidarity with those who are being unjustly treated. And in the place of food, we fill our hearts with God's promise of abundant provision. Blessed are those who hunger now—hungering and thirsting for righteousness and justice; for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Wisdom calls for us to be healers, bridge-builders, a positive force for good in the world. We can see the good in others, and bring out the good in others, because we aren't trying to beat them, to overtake them, to overthrow them...but to serve them. And it's true...merciful people are shown mercy; those who seek for peace are considered "heavenly" as opposed to those who only fight.

Blessed are the persecuted, the hated, the reviled, the excluded. If it's not clear by now, he is describing the path Jesus willingly chose. No one lived the beatitude life better than Jesus...Jesus, who was *violently* persecuted. Can you believe it? The kingdoms of the world find this way of living—meekness, mercy, peacemaking, and prayer—to be a gigantic threat. And it IS a threat: it's a direct challenge to their value system and their power system. Don't expect to be appreciated by the world for choosing the life nobody wants. Is it Dave Ramsey who says “live like no one else so you can live like no one else?” Well that's what Jesus is saying here, but he doesn't mean so you can buy an island in your retirement. Choosing the path no one wants to take leads to the life that everyone is actually searching for. But since they don't know that, you will be the butt of their jokes, and you might meet the tip of their spear. But wisdom says there is a much better way of life that doesn't end in this life. So that means persecution may be necessary, but the ultimate end is better than what the world is willing to offer you in order to *avoid* persecution. They'll accept you, recognize you, claim you as part of their community. But woe to you when all people speak well of you—when you bend over backwards trying to be a people-pleaser when the people you are pleasing do not know the way to true peace and happiness. Following them is the blind leading the blind. But being willing to stand alone is lonely, painful, and—says Jesus—something to leap for joy. Because in this—in persecution and suffering—you are never more in touch with what really matters. Never more in touch with the hurting world with which God identifies. Never more like Jesus Christ. It is why Paul says his goal was to enjoy “the fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil 3:10) and told the Philippian church they were granted an amazing gift: to suffer for His sake (Phil 1:29). That there is a secret: one will only fully know the thrill of victory if they first undergo the agony of defeat.

Step back and see the whole picture. Jesus' idea of the blessed life and our idea of the blessed life have almost nothing in common. Christ connects the words “blessed”, “fortunate”, and “happy” not with the rich, powerful, satisfied, and well-fed, but with the poor and humble, the mourning and the hungry. And he's just getting started. Read on. Against the Hollywood trend of “love 'em and leave 'em”, Jesus calls for fidelity in marriage. Contrary to what many consider advertising genius and “good business sense,” Christ tells us to never engage in verbal manipulation or make grand claims about mundane things in order to get people to do, buy, or believe something. Instead of offering “good political sense” about protecting yourself against one's dreaded enemies, Christ calls the good life one in which anger, hatred, defensiveness, and retaliation gives way to love, service, and generosity.

In short, we are called to love the person more than the product, more than performance, and more than profitability. It seems so absurd.

Unless, of course, it's true.

MEET CHRIST AT THE BOTTOM

The Sermon forces us to come face to face with the character of Jesus—who shows us what it looks like to receive blessed happiness in the presence of Almighty God. Nine places of catastrophic loss, followed by nine promises of unimaginable joy. It’s almost as if Jesus is saying “do you want true happiness? Choose a cross, then experience a resurrection.”

So many of us join our culture in the rat race to find true happiness. We work very hard, and very long, toward this goal. As the words of Jesus stare us in the face—declaring “blessed, fortunate, and happy are these”—and the Spirit-directed life of Jesus provides a living image of the happy-infused life of God, we continue to walk on by, asking ourselves, “when will I ever find happiness?”

“In the olden days,” said the Rabbi, “there were men who saw the face of God.”
 “Why don’t they any more?” asked the young student.
 “Because,” said the Rabbi, “nowadays no one stoops so low.”

We’ll find it...when we find Him. We will find it in the manger. We will find it at the bottom of the ladder. We will find it in persecution, in trouble, and in pain. We will find happiness when we find Christ. Do you know where to find Him? I’ll give you a hint. There he is, doing something you think is beneath you. Look down, for he stoops to conquer.

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