

“The Good Life”
Series: Kingdom Culture ~ The Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 5:1-12
June 7, 2009

It has become a tradition around here that during the summer, we preach through a book of the Bible. This year, we won't be working through an *entire* book of the Bible, but rather a mere three chapters from the gospel of Matthew. But what three chapters they are! Chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew are popularly known as The Sermon on the Mount [SOM]. These mere 107 verses contain some of the best-known Scripture in the New Testament, maybe the whole Bible.

We've included a reading plan in the Connection, and I encourage you to read and study along with us. And our Library includes many commentaries on the gospel of Matthew in case you want to check up on what Pastor Doug and I tell you this summer!

In his wonderful book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard says that the teachings of Jesus found in the SOM have been called “the most influential teachings ever to emerge on the face of this weary planet.”¹ Willard also says that, in the Sermon, Jesus deals with two major questions humanity has been asking since the beginning: The first is this: What is a good life? You know, it seems to me that almost every time I attend the funeral of a person who has lived into their 80s or 90s, somebody says, “Well, they had a *good life*.” What does that mean, exactly? A *long* life? A *comfortable* life? What is a good life? Willard says that this is what the first 20 verses of the Sermon attempt to answer: Matthew 5:1-20.

And the second question Jesus deals with in the Sermon is this: What is a good person? That's another thing you often hear said about the dear departed: “He/she was a good person.” Following Matthew 5:20, Jesus spends the rest of the Sermon describing the *person* who lives a *good life*.

Now, the SOM may be the best-known part of Jesus' teaching, but it is also probably the least understood and least obeyed. In fact, the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount is so high, so idealistic, so demanding, that many have wondered if Jesus really meant it to be attainable in this life. “Turn the other cheek.” “Love your enemies.” “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Was He kidding? Did Jesus really mean for us to live like this? Well, I want to say right up front that I believe that if Jesus taught it, He meant us to live it. This will be challenging for us this summer as we study the SOM.

Today we are going to focus on Matthew 5:1-12, known as the Beatitudes. Many of you memorized these verses at one time, I bet. “Blessed are...” They describe a blessed life. Now, to be honest, we could probably take just these 12 verses as the basis for our whole summer series. We could easily preach an entire message on each one of these nine beatitudes. In fact, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a minister in London in the 20th century, took *60 weeks* to preach through the SOM, and each of his messages was about 40 minutes long. He spent *11 weeks* on the Beatitudes alone. We have only 13 weeks to cover the entire Sermon. And usually not more

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 98. I am indebted to Willard for his masterful exposition of the Beatitudes in this book.

than about 25 minutes each week. So we will have to be concise. Brief. Terse. Pithy. Can I get an “Amen”?

If you have your Bibles, open them to Matthew 5: context. As chapter 5 of the gospel of Matthew begins, Jesus has just begun his public ministry. His primary message is short, simple, and provocative [Matt. 4:17]: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.* He calls his first disciples, fishermen Peter and Andrew, James and John, and He proceeds to travel around Galilee doing three things: preaching, teaching, and healing [4:23]. We’re told that large crowds followed Jesus wherever He went. And so Jesus seeing the crowds, sensing their great need and also the need of His disciples to learn what it means that “the kingdom of heaven is near,” goes up the mountain a bit, gathers His disciples around Him, sits down – the usual posture for a Jewish rabbi – and He begins to teach them.

He begins with what we have come to call ‘the Beatitudes.’ Now, the dictionary definition of beatitude is this: “supreme blessedness or happiness; consummate bliss.” Wow – that sounds great! Who wouldn’t want to live in consummate bliss??! These nine beatitudes are statements by Jesus of what supreme happiness – consummate bliss, the happiest of happy lives – looks like – from a *spiritual* point of view. From *Jesus’* point of view. From a *kingdom of heaven* point of view. They describe those who are truly blessed. Those who enjoy a blessed life, the good life. Who is it - according to Jesus – who has the good life?

How would we answer that question? Who is blessed from our point of view? How would you describe ‘the good life?’ We would probably say it is those who have enough, have all they need, maybe with a little to spare so they can put something away, save for retirement, put their kids through college. Maybe a beach house. A nice car, nice clothes, able to go out to eat once in a while. All the techno gadgets. Health, peace of mind. Kids who succeed and thrive. A good job and a nice house in a good neighborhood. Happiness. That’s all we want. We just want to be *happy*. We just want our kids to be – HAPPY. Happiness is important to us, for sure. Certainly part of the good life. Can’t have the good life without happiness.

And so here are these statements of Jesus about just that: happiness, blessing, the good life. How do we get it? Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...Blessed are the merciful. blessed are the pure in heart and the peacemakers and those who are persecuted because of righteousness...And as if *that* weren’t enough, Jesus gets personal: “Blessed are *you* when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”

Can you imagine the looks they must have given Him? Those to whom Jesus was speaking believed that the sign of the blessing of God was material prosperity and well-being in every shape and form. But Jesus said “Blessed are you for the exact *opposite*.” I don’t know about you, but these “beatitudes” don’t sound much like supreme blessing or consummate bliss to me. I mean, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”? What does that even mean?

Willard interprets this way: “Blessed are the spiritual zeros – the spiritually bankrupt, deprived and deficient, the spiritual beggars, those without a wisp of ‘religion’ – when the kingdom of the heavens comes upon them.”

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson interprets it this way: “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and His rule.” You see, Jesus is not saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit *because* they are poor in spirit.” He is saying they are blessed *in spite of, even though*, they are poor in spirit. *Even though* they are ‘spiritual zeros.’ *Even though* they are at the end of their rope. How can this be? Because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven comes upon the spiritual zeros. When you are at the end of your rope, God is there, too.

So is Jesus saying we should strive to be ‘poor in spirit’ – spiritual zeros, to live at the end of our rope? No. The Beatitudes are not teachings on *what to do* to be blessed, *how* to achieve the good life. They are not instructions about anything. The Beatitudes are descriptive, not prescriptive. They are descriptions of the way things are in the kingdom of God. Life lived in relationship with God: a life *under* God’s rule, *loved* as God’s child, *lived* as a brother or sister of Jesus. The good life. “Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, Blessed *are* those who mourn...” It’s present tense. This is theologically significant. The blessing is *now*. *Right in the midst* of the most difficult and painful circumstances of human life, the follower of the ways of Jesus is blessed: supremely happy.

When you recognize that you are a spiritual zero, you are blessed, you experience supreme happiness. Because God comes to you. Why? Why does God hang out with spiritual zeros? Because that’s what God does. That’s who God is. You are blessed because the kingdom of heaven has come near to you, because the King of the heavens touches your life. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,” Jesus said. The kingdom of heaven – God Himself – had come near in Jesus. And so they are blessed. Not because they had attained some saintly, super-spiritual condition that made them worthy of being blessed by God. Precisely because that hadn’t and couldn’t.

In fact, this and the other beatitudes describe the exact opposite of what the world thinks is blessed or deserves blessing. We would expect the spiritual zeros, the spiritually destitute, to be the ones who are *not* worthy to experience God’s blessing. We think it’s folks like us, the spiritual achievers who are the blessed ones. This is the surprising, even unbelievable nature of the kingdom of God, of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who seem to us to be unworthy, unacceptable, hopeless even, are actually those who are blessed in the economy of the kingdom.

“Blessed are those who mourn”? This isn’t so much mourning the loss of a loved one as it is mourning the lack of love in the world. Mourning the lack of loveliness, the lack of caring, the lack of hope. Mourning your own sin and all the many ways you fail to live God’s way in God’s world. Mourning the loss of innocence in the child molested by her father. Mourning the loss of dignity for those who are homeless. Mourning the loss of security and sanity for those who experience mental illness.

If you are mourning today, grieving over all the pain you see in the world today – whether the world around you or the world within you – I bet you don’t feel very “blessed.” Yet Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn.” Was Jesus telling the truth, or not? Was Jesus just living in some kind of super-spiritual la-la land? Was He out of touch with reality?

No. Jesus was, in fact, in touch with the *ultimate* reality. *Real* reality, if you will. And when He touches you by the Holy Spirit, you experience ultimate reality. When you mourn your sin and the sins of humanity, when you grieve your inability to trust and obey God for even 5 minutes sometimes, you are blessed. Because it is precisely then that God comes to you and comforts you by the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. Why? Because that's what God does. He is the Comforter.

We do not have time this morning, unfortunately, to unpack and examine every one of these treasures. I hope you will take some time on your own, each of you, to read and reflect on what these well-known but so often ignored statements mean. The good life as Jesus describes it doesn't look *anything* like the way the world describes the good life: poor, grieving, hungry. Gentle and meek rather than strong and self-assertive. Merciful rather than demanding restitution, demanding an apology.

Everything is upside-down in the kingdom of God. The last shall be first and the first, last. This isn't how the world works. In this world, the last are, well, last. And it's good being first, just ask any Delawarean, right? In *this* world, those who are meek get stepped on and stepped over. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness starve to death because there's not much righteousness around in our world today to satisfy them. Those who are merciful just get taken advantage of. Those who are pure in heart – well, really, is there *anybody* who is truly pure in heart?

This is the good life. This is the life you were meant to enjoy: a life of blessing *in spite of, in the midst of*, that which does not feel like blessing or look like blessing at all. Life in the kingdom. Life touched by Jesus. Life nourished by a relationship with Jesus who comes near and brings the kingdom: life and blessing. The good life.

Oswald Chambers wrote that Jesus “came to make us what He teaches we should be.” You cannot make yourself these things: poor in spirit, pure in heart, hungry for righteousness. In fact, mostly you won't even want to. Only Jesus can make us what He teaches us to be. Except that Jesus saves us from ourselves – from our desire to be comfortable and popular and powerful – we can never experience the good life He describes. Except that Jesus makes us what He teaches: humble, merciful, starving for righteousness, pure in heart – we will never achieve it on our own.

He is not only Teacher and Lord, but Savior. And it is here, at this Table, that we remember not only what Jesus taught, but most especially how Jesus saves. Jesus was in trouble a lot with the spiritual leaders of His day because He often had dinner with the spiritual zeros. With those who were anything but pure in heart. Jesus invites us all to come to His Table today: the spiritual losers and the spiritual winners, the pure in heart and the filthy in heart, the merciful and those who hold grudges. He invites you and me to come and experience blessing: not because we have achieved it, but because we have believed *Him* and therefore can receive it.

Here at Jesus' Kingdom Table will you find blessing, supreme happiness, the good life. Because Jesus is here.