

#Blessed

Matthew 5:1-12

Define “Blessed”

Last night I was reading an article entitled “Why Facts Don’t Change Our Mind.”¹ In the article they referenced several landmark studies done by Stanford. Reading from the article:

“A few years later, a new set of Stanford students was recruited for a related study. The students were handed packets of information about a pair of firefighters, Frank K.’s ...bio noted that, among other things, he had a baby daughter and he liked to scuba dive....The packets also included the men’s responses on what the researchers called the Risky-Conservative Choice Test. According to one version of the packet, Frank was a successful firefighter who, on the test, almost always went with the safest option. In the other version, Frank also chose the safest option, but he was a lousy firefighter who’d been put “on report” by his supervisors several times. Once again, midway through the study, the students were informed that they’d been misled, and that the information they’d received was entirely fictitious. The students were then asked to describe their own beliefs. What sort of attitude toward risk did they think a successful firefighter would have? The students who’d received the first packet thought that he would avoid it. The students in the second group thought he’d embrace it....

Even after the evidence “for their beliefs has been totally refuted, people fail to make appropriate revisions in those beliefs,” the researchers noted. In this case, the failure was “particularly impressive,” since two data points would never have been enough information to generalize from.

“Once formed,” the researchers observed dryly, “impressions are remarkably perseverant.”²

Today we are going to look at the Beatitudes. Beatitudes is an old-fashioned term, that seemed to imply to *kid-me* an idea that we should *Be-(such-and-such)-attitude*. But actually, Beatitude is a derivative of the latin phrase “*beatus*” which means “blessed”. “More specifically the word means exalted joy, or true

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>

² IBID

happiness. (Joy is calm delight in even the most adverse circumstances. Joy fueled Paul's contentment.)"³

Read Matthew 5:1-12 (HCSB version)

What do we mean when we use the word "blessed"?

Blessed is much more accessible term; one we use often enough in our day to day lives. We use the term to describe the good things in life. Those of us who grew up in a faith-tradition typically use the term to give God credit for the good things we are experiencing in life. In fact, just to illustrate this point, I'm going to ask you to take out your phone and check your social media of choice, Facebook or Twitter, and see how the term #Blessed is being applied. Usually it is accompanied by #LoveMyLife or picture of smiling people celebrating. Earlier this week when I did this, my first hit by a public figure was by MMA superstar Conor McGregor with a video of food at a dinner-table and the caption "Dinner. #Blessed" The term blessed is usually applied to the experiences in our human experience that philosophers call the *Good Life*. In short, how do we live "happy" lives?⁴

And we have a Christian version of what this *good life* looks like, don't we? A healthy marriage, obedient children, a thriving personal ministry to others, various ideas on security, health, career, hobbies, even a desire to be generous with our resources towards those who are less fortunate. But if we are honest, do these ideas of the good life differ that much from the one shared by your non-believing neighbor? Essentially the desires are the same aren't they? Nobody wants a bad romantic relationship? Nobody wants bad kids. Nobody wants bad health, a failed career, or financial ruin. Some would suggest that the difference between the Christian and the non-believer's desires is the morality that we apply to these desires? But we will quickly see in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus makes short work of the self-righteous morality of his day, saying it's not enough that you give to the poor, it's not enough that you don't kill, it's not enough that you don't sleep around...

What does Jesus mean when he uses the word "blessed"?

Clearly we need to define our terms. If blessed isn't referring to the Good Life, how should we define it. One author puts it this way, "Anything that God gives that makes us fully satisfied in Him."⁵

I believe Jesus teaching here is recognizing how hard life is and that in spite of tragedy we can still be satisfied in Him. Are you poor? Good news, you are blessed

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-it-really-mean-to-be-blessed>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-it-really-mean-to-be-blessed>

because you can be satisfied in Him. Are you mourning? Good news, you are blessed because you can be satisfied in Him. In whatever circumstance, and perhaps, especially those were you recognize your own weakness, you are blessed because you can recognize your own frailty and be satisfied in Him.

What Jesus *doesn't* mean when he uses the word “blessed”.

Turn with me really quickly to the sub-titles your Bible has for what is covered in the Sermon on the Mount. My Bible has the following, Anger, Lust, Divorce, Oaths, Retaliation, Giving To the Needy, Fasting, Judging... Jesus is doing something very interesting here. He isn't contrasting obviously right actions with obviously wrong ones. He is contrasting two groups of people who are both TRYING to be righteous, trying to obey the law, and likely appear to be of the same general idea about things like morality.⁶ Jesus teaching assumes you understand the wrong way - Do Not Murder - then blows up the self-righteous religious loophole “But I tell you if you call your brother idiot, you are still guilty as if you were a murderer.” Do you see that it isn't just murder that will get you in trouble, it is also self-righteous religious morality. What is so insidious about this type of sin is that it can look, feel, and appear that you are a good, moral person. So when we read the Sermon on the Mount we have to understand that Jesus is offering a different way. Yes, of course Jesus is calling us to turn from sin, but he is also calling to a type of religious expression that is free of self-righteousness, guilt tactics, and endless moral advice. This is why the Gospel is called Good News, not Good Advice, or the Good Commandments.⁷

Good News, but a hard pill to swallow?

Jesus seems to be tearing down all of our conceptions of success, security, and the Good Life even what it means to be righteous and replacing them with a different picture. Why would Jesus go against conventional wisdom, or as one preacher put it “none of the Beatitude tendencies refer to what may be called a *natural tendency*”.⁸

Our natural tendency would create a list of Beatitudes that have obvious tangible rewards. Our tendency is to imagine the best possible reward scenario, while downplaying the actual state we are called to live in... If I were to rewrite the Beatitudes with this in mind, it would go something like this.

Blessed those who choose poverty, like Abraham who allowed Lot the first choice of the land, and yet God blessed him beyond his nephew.

Blessed are those who mourn, like Job, who God restored wealth and family too.

⁶ Hat-tip to Tim Keller's sermon the Inside Out Kingdom from April 2015.

⁷ <https://twitter.com/timkellernyc/status/571716513671077888?lang=en>

⁸ Martin Lloyd-Jones

Blessed are the meek, like David who did not slay Saul when he had the opportunity, and yet God established his kingdom in due time.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, like Solomon whom God gave wisdom and riches and fame.

Blessed are the merciful, like Joshua who granted mercy upon the Gibeonites who's deceit God condemned by placing them into slavery.

Blessed are the pure of heart, like Abel whose sacrifice was honored and whose blood calls out until this day for justice.

Blessed are the peacemakers, like Ehud, and Deborah, and Gideon who led Israel to war and brought peace to the land.

Blessed are those who are persecuted, like Samson who was shaved, bound, and had his eyes gouged out, and yet God granted him strength again so that he might have revenge upon his enemies.

Blessed are you when others revile you, like Moses who was denied 10 times by Pharaoh, but God had the final word and humbled the greatest ruler of the world through 10 plagues.

But this just isn't how the Beatitudes read. Notice I put more emphasis on the "happy-ending" or at least the "expected" or "natural" conclusion. While all these stories are TRUE, they cannot be the basis of our contentment, our happiness, our sense of "blessing".

The old hymn writers seemed at peace with this reality. Listen to these words from the hymn Dear Refuge for My Weary Soul.

*Dear refuge of my weary soul,
On Thee, when sorrows rise
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll,
My fainting hope relies
To Thee I tell each rising grief,
For Thou alone canst heal
Thy Word can bring a sweet relief,
For every pain I feel*

Christianity doesn't shy away from the reality that life is tough. And Christianity isn't just for those who have "got it together" and are #Blessed. That is the Good News about Christianity. You don't have to have a perfect life. You don't even have to fake it on your

Facebook profile. Christianity promise is satisfaction found in every circumstance in God and God alone.

Move the Cheese

In marketing, when you move the cheese you keep your customer wanting something that is just out of reach. But here Jesus does the anthesis, he moves the cheese right into the middle of all our laps as we currently are. He says, blessed are the poor (verses the rich), the merciful (verses the justified), those who hunger for righteousness (versus those who have attained righteousness, Romans 3:10). Jesus is saying, each of us common broken *lowercase* people⁹ is in a place where we are #Blessed.

Even in what Jesus is offering there is a departure from what is typically expected from the Good Life self-help culture we have built. Those with pure hearts will see God. In our culture, we are all about understanding our self. Understanding God is nice, but self-actualization is the goal. Peacemakers are promised a type of eternal security as sons of God, but if you have watched two minutes of nightly news, you will note there isn't significant peace on earth. Those who give mercy, can expect "mercy" but I've watched enough movies and read enough novels to know that what my heart desires at the end of a thriller is for the bad guy to git what is coming to him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it this way, "**Blessed are the merciful...these without possessions or power, these strangers on earth, these sinners, these followers of Jesus, have in their life with Him renounced their own dignity for they are merciful.**"

Let's unpack that statement a little bit. To allow someone who has wronged you mercy it means they forgo the just punishment that they deserve. That in means you are willingly laying aside your own rights, your own dignity, to demand that justice be done. (Whistle)

Let's finish with a passage Paul wrote to his protege Timothy, "**But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.**" 1 Timothy 6:-7

⁹ Hat-tip to Lyrics by Switchfoot