

MATTHEW 5:1–12. (EHV)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up onto a mountain. When he sat down, his disciples came to him. He opened his mouth and began to teach them. He said these things:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
because they will be comforted.
Blessed are the gentle,
because they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
because they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
because they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
because they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
because they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. In fact, that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

“I think God wants me to be happy.”

Have you ever heard that before? Usually, and unfortunately, people use that sentiment to defend an action, decision, or lifestyle that clearly runs contrary to God’s word. When a well-intentioned Christian confronts a person about his ungodly choices, he dismisses it with a wave of his hand by saying, “God wants me to be happy, doesn’t he?”

There is perhaps no greater lie...and no greater truth. It is a lie when that idea is used in situations like the ones I just described. It is a lie when we start with happiness, as defined by our own ideas and feelings of the moment and the ideas and feelings in vogue in the world around us. But it is a truth when, instead of starting with happiness, we start with God and his word, and proceed from the assumption God is the happiest being there is, and that he knows the key to true, substantial, and lasting happiness.

This section from Scripture is often called the Beatitudes, because the word repeated again and again in the Latin translation of these verses is *Beati*, “Blessed.” There are two main words for “blessed” in both the Old and New Testaments, and the one used here is usually used instructionally. When you hear Jesus say, “Blessed are these” and “Blessed are those,” you could paraphrase it this way: “If you want to be truly happy—happy deep in your bones, happy in a way that doesn’t keep you up at night, happy even beyond the grave—then be this way, or do this.” In other words, God is interested in our happiness, but he wants us to listen to his

instruction on where happiness is found. If we don't, our happiness will always be fleeting and temporary, a mist in the distance that always dissolves when we finally get to it. Let's listen as Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount and instructs us on how to be truly happy.

We should first note some broader details and characteristics of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, as we find it recorded in Matthew, since we'll be continuing through it the next few Sundays. First, if you read through the entire Sermon on the Mount, you will notice that Jesus's preaching dispels common false notions both in the world and in the visible church. We will see a lot of common false notions in the world dispelled in the Beatitudes. For instance, the world assumes that if crying is a regular part of your life, you're not happy, but Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn." We will highlight more of these false notions as we cover the Beatitudes one by one.

We will also see a lot of common false notions dispelled that are held by religious people, and were held by many of the religious leaders in Judea in Jesus's day. For instance, many people associate the keeping of the commandments with outward action, but Jesus points people to their hearts again and again—not just to physical adultery, but to lust; not just to physical murder, but to hatred; not just to whether you're doing what is right, but what your attitude is as you do it, and whether you're trying to draw attention to yourself when you do right.

Because of this character of Jesus's preaching, another thing to notice is how Jesus shows the impossibility of keeping God's law. Everything he says we should do is, of course, good and we should do it. The world would be an amazing place if we lived according to Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. But if you pay attention to what Jesus is demanding of you, you will have to come to the realization that his sermon is much too tall an order. As Jesus points us to our hearts and the motivation behind what we do and say, we see that we are too selfish and self-centered to obey what he demands.

Finally, because all of this is true, perhaps the most important part of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount is the part we'll cover next Sunday, God willing, where Jesus tells us that he did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them, down to the very last detail. In other words, the Sermon on the Mount should help us appreciate all the more the holy life Jesus lived on our behalf and the righteousness he won for us and gives to us through faith in him.

With that said, let's jump into the Beatitudes, with which Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The world does not associate happiness with any sort of poverty, including poverty in spirit. There are two ways we can understand poverty in spirit, both of them biblical. The first way is to understand poverty in spirit as the opposite of richness in spirit, an inflated spirit, a puffed-up spirit—thinking highly of yourself and talking yourself up, thinking you're all that and not letting anyone throw shade at you. None of that is poverty in spirit. Those who are poor in spirit realize that in the presence of God they have absolutely nothing to bring to the table. They have no bargaining power, no leverage to wield against him. They cannot say, "God, if I do this for you, you need to do this for me." They are beggars before God.

Poverty in spirit could also mean being poor even if God has blessed you tremendously with earthly wealth. That is, you are ready to lose it all and would be okay with losing it all,

because there is only one possession you truly treasure—God. As the psalmist says, “If I only have you, O Lord, I ask for nothing else neither in heaven nor on earth” (Psalm 73:25). No matter which way you understand it, Jesus is saying that it’s precisely these people to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs. What they lack in themselves, they more than make up for in the spiritual and heavenly possessions that God gives to them as a gift, for Jesus’s sake.

“Blessed are those who mourn, because they will be comforted.” Jesus says something similar in Luke: “Blessed are you who weep now, because you will laugh” (Luke 6:21). This is closely related to the first Beatitude. If we are trying to find nothing but smiles and laughter on earth, then we are missing the truth about how deeply flawed and fallen the world is, and how deeply flawed and fallen we are. It’s okay to take an honest look at the world and at ourselves, and to be grieved and to cry. In fact, it’s not only okay; we *should* do that. Look at how many people go about their daily business and chase after the world’s pleasures without a thought for God! Look at how many people go about their daily business only thinking about themselves! Look at how much poverty, misery, violence, fraud, perversion, injustice, rebellion, and greed there is! Look at how much of this evil lies lurking within me! This isn’t the way things were meant to be. James writes, “Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:9–10). Jesus says the same thing here. If we mourn in a godly way here, we will one day be completely comforted and will laugh.

“Blessed are the gentle, because they will inherit the earth.” Again, note the contradiction to worldly wisdom. Worldly wisdom says happiness comes to those who are aggressive and tough, who look out for number one. If you’re gentle, people will only step on you and take advantage of you. Not so, says Jesus. Or rather, that may be so, but the gentle will still be truly happy and will inherit the earth. Jesus is talking here about eternal life, when the current heavens and earth are renovated into the new heavens and new earth, the home of righteousness.

Speaking of righteousness, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they will be filled.” How many commercials and ads do we see on a daily basis appealing to our hunger and thirst? How many of them are aimed at a hunger and thirst for righteousness? But Jesus says this is the most important hunger and thirst—the hunger and thirst for the state of righteousness, the hunger and thirst for living in righteousness. In other words, you’re not content to grow up in and take over the religion of your ancestors, simply because that’s how you were raised, or because you’re from this or that country or this is that city, and that’s the local religion. Rather, you have a desire to dig and examine and research to make sure that what your religious leaders are telling you is true and to secure the greatest treasure anyone can secure—the certainty of the possession of righteousness and the sure hope of eternal life. Jesus says that if that is your primary hunger and thirst, that hunger and thirst will be richly satisfied in him.

“Blessed are the merciful, because they will receive mercy.” Again, that’s not conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom says that if people are down and out, it’s because they didn’t try hard enough and had it coming. Plus, if you show mercy and kindness to one person, then everyone is going to want it from you. But Jesus reminds us that we all are in need of God’s mercy, and so it is deeply hypocritical not to show mercy to others.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, because they will see God.” The world wants to be pure, but in the eyes of the world, in appearance. Jesus says only those who are pure in heart are truly blessed. Here Jesus is anticipating what he will be preaching in the rest of his sermon, that God doesn’t just want purity of words and actions, but of the heart. Only such people as are spotless in heart can see God. Here too, it should be obvious to us that this is not something we can obtain by willpower or effort. We can only receive such purity not by working for it, but as a gift from God through faith in Christ.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called sons of God.” Christians are sometimes known as some of the most argumentative people on earth. That’s not necessarily all bad. There are certainly other places in Scripture where Jesus tells us to stand up for and defend the truth. But we should never have a desire to argue, a desire for conflict, a desire for hostility and being at odds with people. Our desire should always be for peace, and as far as it depends on us, we ought to live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:18).

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus immediately goes on to explain this Beatitude: “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” In other words, just because you suffer and are made fun of doesn’t make you blessed. That happens to everyone. And if you are persecuted because you are living an ungodly life, a life even many unbelievers recognize as evil, you cannot claim to be blessed. But when you suffer and are made fun of for doing what is right according to God’s word and for spreading the truth of God’s word, you are blessed and great is your reward in heaven. So yes, we should seek peace, but we also should not keep our mouths shut when we ought to speak up, just so that we can avoid someone’s anger or harsh words or worse. That isn’t the truly happy life. The truly happy life is living for Christ and speaking up for him and his saving word.

After all, Jesus and his saving word are the only way we can have poverty in spirit, a healthy grief and sadness, gentleness, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, a merciful character, pureness in heart, a love for peace, and a willingness to defend what is true and right at all costs. In other words, blessed and happy are we when we know and believe in Jesus Christ, for ours is life eternal. Amen.