

Matthew 5:1-12 (NIV)

¹ Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them.

He said: ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Illuminating the Beatitudes, Part 2

The last time I was here, two Sundays ago, we began looking at Jesus’ Beatitudes, which are so commonly misunderstood. And the goal was to re-interpret these nine sayings -to get at their *true* meaning - relying heavily on the scholarship of the Bible Project.¹ And you can begin to see a review of this on the first chart.

In that first sermon, we began by unpacking what is meant by this phrase “Blessed are” that begins each of the nine beatitudes. So often this phrase is taken to be a command, so that the first beatitude is taken to mean if you make yourself a ‘poor in spirit’, *then* God will bless you. But, instead, with this phrase “Blessed are” Jesus is not commanding anything; rather, He is revealing *who* the good life is available to; that is, the good life that He has for us, as opposed to what the world - or we in our sin - tend to imagine as the good life.

And we then saw that in those first three beatitudes Jesus is revealing the stunning reality that the truly good life is available to anyone, including - if not especially - those whose life circumstances are undesirable from a worldly perspective, such as those who are economically or spiritually powerless, those who grieve, and those whom society deems as unimportant or whom the powerful exploit.

Well, today, as we turn our attention to the middle three beatitudes, we’re going to see that Jesus follows this by teaching how we enter into the truly good life: that it comes through learning from Jesus how to engage with our fellow, fallen human beings as He did, which none of us come by naturally or have the capacity to do apart from Him. And while, similar to Beatitudes 1 to 3, I am going to cover a *little bit* of the ancient cultural & linguistic support for these re-interpretations, my encouragement to you is the same as it was then: to really evaluate the legitimacy of these re-interpretations based on whether they *ring more true* than however you’ve understood these Beatitudes previously: to see if they *feel* like

Beatitudes 1-3: In Christ, the good life is surprisingly available to those who are without.		
ONE	³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	The (truly) good life belongs to those who are powerless, economically or spiritually, because they will more easily grasp their need for God’s reign in their lives.
TWO	⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.	The (truly) good life belongs to those who grieve, because the failure to grieve loss will leave our souls disquieted.
THREE	⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.	The (truly) good life belongs to those on margins, the unimportant & afflicted, for they will inherit earthly community as God intended.

¹ <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/type-people-god-forming-beatitudes-pt-3/>

good news, if they strike you as more consistent with the Jesus you know and that we see in the rest of the gospels. #

So, where the first three beatitudes were about the truly good life being surprisingly available to those living in less-than-ideal circumstances, with these middle three beatitudes - 4, 5, & 6 - Jesus is teaching the way we receive - or begin to receive - that truly good life. And, as we'll see, this path to the truly good life is one of learning to engage others - despite *their* sinfulness and *our own* sinfulness - learning to engage others in the way that Jesus did, which we absolutely need His (spiritual) help to do (to have any chance of doing).

Beatitude Four: Those who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness (verse 6)

So, the fourth beatitude is translated “⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Now, what makes this beatitude so easy to misunderstand is that most Christians - whenever we see the word ‘righteousness’ in scripture, - we tend to think of personal *moral purity*. However, Tim Mackie shows how the Greek word for righteousness,² at its root,³ really refers to being in right relationship with someone: to doing right by them.⁴ At risk of getting a little in the weeds for the moment, Mackie explains that in the famous passage we read today from Genesis 15, which says that Abraham “believed the Lord, and (God) credited it to him as righteousness”, it’s not that God was saying Abraham was morally pure, but rather that Abraham was *doing right by God* in by believing in Him - by trusting Him - God, because of being God, is worthy of our trust. Likewise, when we trust in God through His son Jesus Christ rather than - rather than coming to him with our works, our moral purity - God credits this to us as righteousness: as rightly relating to Him based on the reality of our sin.⁵

Okay, well take that into our relationship with fellow humans, we aren’t called to fully trust them like we trust God,⁶ but what we are called to do is relate to them with love and respect as creatures made in the *image* of God. And so - tuning back in, if you got lost in the weeds there of Genesis & Romans - tuning back in here: to “hunger and thirst for righteousness” is not about hungering for a life of greater moral purity, as valuable as that may be. Instead, it is about hungering to relate more rightly - and healthily, as God would have us - to those close to us. And what does this look like, to do right by others we are in relationship with?

- It looks like not seeking to control what others do (not seeking to play God in their life). When we relate rightly and healthily with others, we seek to not hide our perspectives - where it is safe to share them - but also seek (God’s help) to accept where the other person disagrees with us.
- Relating rightly to others looks like seeking to see and hear them - to connect and empathize with *their* human experience, while also exercising healthy boundaries to keep ourselves safe from emotional or physical or other types of abuse where that’s a concern. Even the fourth commandment of honoring one’s parents is not about complying with everything they want;

² *Dikaiousuné*

³ So *dikaiousuné* is from a group of words that comes from a root *tzedekah*, which refers to being in right relationship with someone,

⁴ Mackie explains that even Abraham (Abram), whom Genesis 15 famously says, “believed the Lord, and (God) credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6, also echoed by Paul in Romans 4:3) - this ‘righteousness’ credited by God is about Abram doing right by God, by trusting God, which God of course is worthy of. Likewise, when we trust in God through His son Jesus Christ, we relate rightly to Him. But similarly, when we treat people with the dignity of being made in the image of God!!!!

⁵ See Paul get into this in Romans 4.

⁶ John 2:23-25 - ²³ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. ²⁵ He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.”

whenever we allow someone to sin against us - and fail to put in boundaries of protection - we are not honoring them, we are dishonoring them and ourselves.

- Relating rightly to others looks like not being overly dependent on people for responsibilities God wants us to handle for ourselves, but also being willing to humble ourselves to receive help for the things that are too much for us to bear alone. So, having a *mutual* relationship, where we not only give but are willing to receive.

So, I've summarized the reinterpretation of this fourth Beatitude as: The (truly) good life comes to those who hunger and thirst for right & healthier relationships with those close to us, for God will guide us into them. And as I look around, I know of so many here who hunger and thirst for this. And I know of so many instances where the Lord *has guided* and helped you into them, even though this is of course a lifelong process/venture. But keep going in it. And if this isn't a focus for you, I can't encourage it enough, because engaging relationships dysfunctionally is truly one of the biggest hindrances to living the good life (that) Christ intends for us, and it's never too late to start.

Beatitude Five: The Merciful (verse 7)

Okay, so if that fourth beatitude is about seeking to engage our personal and close relationships more healthily, the fifth beatitude - "Blessed are the merciful" - is about treating others who we *aren't* necessarily in close relationship - those we might call not family but "our neighbors" - with the generous and sacrificial love that we - or those in the world - might typically reserve for family alone.

Now, it may be surprising that this is what this beatitude could be about, because when we hear the word "mercy", we tend to think of forgiveness, of someone forgiving a person who has sinned against them. Indeed, just the structure of this beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy," *sounds like* it echoes that line of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

But Mackie shows that in scripture the word (for) mercy here⁷ *really* refers to treating others with generous love.⁸ And we see this, for example, in the episode we looked at a few weeks back from Mark 10 about blind Bartimaeus (v46-52). There, you'll recall that when Bartimaeus heard Jesus passing by, Bartimaeus called out to Him, saying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Have *mercy* on me. But, I think you'll agree that when Bartimaeus asks Jesus to have mercy upon him, he is not asking Jesus to forgive his sins. No, Bartimaeus is asking Jesus to show him generous love by using his supernatural powers to heal Him. Bartimaeus is saying (to Jesus), "You don't know me, and you don't owe me, but would you use your powers (?) to love me generously like someone you do know? Like you would your mother or brother (or disciple)?"

And the same thing is happening in Matthew 15 when the Canaanite woman approaches Jesus and says, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." In asking for mercy, she's not asking for Jesus to forgive her sins, but to mercifully free her daughter from oppression: to treat her with generous love even though she is not even part of His people; she is not a Jew, but a Gentile.

Then, a final example comes from the Old Testament, when God says through Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice(s)." God is saying Israel should not make their sacrifices, but that comparatively He cares much more about His people loving others generously.

And this is because this is how God is to all of humankind. He loves us generously. As Psalm 136, that we read from today, says at the end of every verse: "His mercy⁹ endures forever." We do not

⁷ *Eleos*

⁸ "Generous love is the best definition for this Greek word *eleos* and its Hebrew / Old Testament counterpart: *hesed*

⁹ Hebrew: *hesed*

deserve this love - God doesn't have to do it - but He has and does. And so, for (Jesus to help) us to take a similar posture toward all people of being generously loving, is to reflect the love of God, who always shows generous love toward us. In fact, for us to have any chance at loving others so generously requires that we first receive God's generous love for us. And so, in a round-about way, our desire to be obedient - to fulfill this vision - of loving our neighbors generously with any sort of consistency, requires that we first open our own hearts to grasping more and more God's mercy toward us.¹⁰ And so, the re-interpretation of this fifth beatitude that I'm offering is: The (truly) good life comes to those who treat their neighbors with the generous love most might only reserve for (their) family, since¹¹ this requires us to open our hearts to the generous love of God, who always loves us this way. And God can help our hearts to grasp this through all sorts of experiences or spiritual practices, but our prayer can be "God, however you want to do it, help me to know more deeply how generous your love is for me, that I might beginning loving others - even those whom I don't owe a thing - with the love you have for them."

Beatitude Six: The Pure in Heart (verse 8)

And so this leads directly into the final beatitude we'll look at today - the sixth one - "⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." One commonality between these beatitudes 4 & 5 is that they are ways of living that we can *recognize* are good, but still we can't just decide to do them and pull it off with any consistency. In other words, we can *know* in our minds that relating to others (rightly) like Jesus does or generously loving those we don't owe a thing to - we can know that's what God calls us to do - but if our hearts (still) desire something else - when our heart doesn't trust God will care for us in the ways that we need; that we've gotta grasp it for ourselves - then we're not going to be able to fake these things for long. So, the reality this highlights is that the root of sin is in our hearts, in our disordered desires and our failures to believe God really is who He says He is. And this is not only what James is starting to get at in our second reading today. After the Beatitudes, Jesus will turn much of His focus in this Sermon on the Mount to highlighting how sin is rooted in our hearts, and how we need His transforming grace to change those disordered desires. But the good news is that God is on a mission to do this: to purify our hearts and heal our desires to match His.

And this is where we come to the second half of the beatitude: "⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." What would've been startling to many of those listening to Jesus on that mountainside in the first century is that they probably would've imagined "seeing God" as a terrifying thing. You may know that in their scriptures - our Old Testament - God had famously said to Moses, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." But what made seeing God problematic for God problematic for humans then

Beatitudes 4-6: Learning to engage with others the way Jesus did is the path to the truly good life		
FOUR	⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.	The (truly) good life comes to those who hunger and thirst for right & healthier relationships with those close to us, for God will guide us into them.
FIVE	⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.	The (truly) good life comes to those who treat their neighbors with the generous love most might only reserve for (their) family, since this requires us to open our hearts to the generous love of God, who always loves us this way.
SIX	⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.	The (truly) good life comes to those who open our hearts for God to heal our disordered desires, for this will lead us (more fully) into the wholeness and partnership with God that He intended for us all along.

¹⁰ We can't give away what we do not first receive. And so, the capacity to generously love those beyond our close circle comes not from merely deciding to or trying really hard, but from having our own hearts grasp more deeply God's persistent, generous love toward us

¹¹ The Greek word here, *(h)oti*, can be translated as "that", "because", or "since".

was that we are sinners and He is not. However, if we go back further, to before humanity's fall into sin, in the Garden of Eden Adam & Eve hung out with God and it was no big deal; and God even appointed them to do things on God's behalf - as priests who would tend the Garden and represent His love to humankind. And so, what this "seeing God" line in the sixth beatitude represents is that as God purifies our hearts, we will live more fully into the wholeness that God intended for humankind, that we initially got a glimpse of with Adam & Eve. And so, the re-interpretation I'm offering for this sixth beatitude is that The (truly) good life comes to those who open our hearts for God to heal our disordered desires, for this will lead us (more fully) into the wholeness and partnership with God that He intended for us all along. #

But as I close today, would we take a moment to consider the invitations Jesus extends to us with these middle three Beatitudes... {Would you just bow your heads with me as I guide us through a few ways we might respond?}

- If we hunger for right and healthier relationships with those close to us, would you name that desire before God and ask Him to lead you into how to take a step = or a next step - toward that? {I want to give us a few moments of space to speak to the Lord about that.}
- Or do we recognize in ourselves a lack of mercy - of generous love - toward those from whom we can expect nothing in return? The fifth Beatitude reveals that this indicates that our own hearts need some more convincing - some deeper experiences - of God's generous love toward us. And there is nothing wrong with asking God for that! {again, I'll give a few moments of space}
- And finally, if we recognize how our lives are being overrun in many harmful ways by our own disordered desires or if we are overcome with the reality of not being able to live out the faithfulness we so desire. This is surely the case for all of us: so would we be willing to name some of those things - those character flaws before God - so that He might reveal what lie we've come to believe in our bones and replace it with belief and trust in Him? {}

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.