

November 3, 2024
Sermon Manuscript



Sirach 25:7-11 (CEB)

- ⁷ In my heart, I would consider
 nine conditions to be happy,
 and I'll name a tenth with my tongue—
 people who are made glad
 by their children,
 and who live to see the downfall
 of their enemies.
- ⁸ Happy are those
 who live with sensible wives,
 who don't slip with their tongue,
 and who haven't been a servant
 to one inferior to themselves.
- ⁹ Happy is the one
 who has gained good sense
 and who is passing this along
 to listening ears.
- ¹⁰ How great is one who finds Wisdom,
 but no one does better
 than the one who fears the Lord.
- ¹¹ Fear of the Lord surpasses everything;
 those who possess it are incomparable.

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 1

This morning, our gospel passage for All Saints is Jesus' Beatitudes. And it is clear that these Beatitudes are very important to Jesus. After all, they're how Jesus chooses to *begin* His Sermon on the Mount, which spans three whole chapters of Matthew's gospel. And yet, I think most typically find the meaning of these nine sayings to be either completely mystifying and inscrutable, or even if we *think* we understand them, our interpretations tend to not be very life-giving or encouraging (which is a hint that our understanding may miss the mark). But since the Beatitudes begin Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which is considered by many to be the single greatest spiritual & ethical teaching in the history of the world and is His manifesto on the way of eternal living He invites us into. Therefore, it seems like it would be of vital importance for us - as His disciples - to get as *clear as we can* about what Jesus is talking about here. So, this is my goal with this sermon today: to illuminate the Beatitudes' true meaning - well, at least the first three today; we'll finish up the last six in a few weeks. On the insert, I've attempted to lay out the best understanding of the first three Beatitudes in today's language, based on the ancient & biblical understandings of the original Greek words, which will probably leads to a much different understanding of these Beatitudes than has come to be commonly accepted or that they might seem to mean when we read them on our own. And to do this I'm going to draw heavily from the scholarship of

the Bible Project,¹ as I did in my sermon a month or so ago on getting to the real meaning of “turn the other cheek”^{2,3}.

Now, to be honest, to really dig deeply into each one of these - and all the linguistic and cultural reasons that these interpretations are likely more faithful to Jesus’ intent - would take far too much time than we have today. Going in-depth would probably require a full sermon on each one. So maybe one summer I’ll do a nine-week series or something. :) But today, I’m instead going to offer a re-interpretation of these first three Beatitudes with a more limited explanation of each. So, my encouragement, rather than wondering about all the ancient linguistic and cultural reasons underneath these re-interpretations would instead be for you to just evaluate whether these re-interpretations *ring more true* than however you’ve understood these Beatitudes previously. See if they *feel* like good news, if they strike you as more consistent with the Jesus you know and as He’s revealed in the rest of the gospels than how you might have been inclined to understand these Beatitudes (otherwise). Because my hope is that this will bring these Beatitudes to life, as I believe many of our previous understandings of them may have robbed us of the gift they are: a stunning revelation that the good life Jesus invites us into is *not* contingent upon ideal life circumstances. #

So, the first thing we need to do is to get at what Jesus is up to with this phrase He repeats to begin each Beatitude: the phrase “Blessed are”. “Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek...” and so on. The way this is often misunderstood is that Jesus is telling us what we can do if we want to be blessed: that if we want to be blessed we will make ourselves poor in spirit - whatever that means - or if we want to be blessed we will mourn, if we want to be blessed we will be meek”. But in reality, Jesus is *not* saying “do this and you will be blessed”, He’s not giving commands here. Instead, He is suggesting that the good life - the best life that He wants to lead all people into - can (surprisingly) come to those whom the world would consider as having a terrible life - which we’ll cover today - or who seek to conduct themselves in some particular ways that the world would deem foolish, which we’ll get to in the second sermon.

Now, I wonder if we could take a minute to consider what we think of when we imagine the “good life”? Consider for a moment what picture of the good life looks *to you*: that you hold in your mind and heart.

- *Perhaps* it’s attaining a life of wealth and luxury,
- Or perhaps it’s just being able to go beyond the education level or spiritual maturity of the generations of our parents,
- Perhaps the good life we imagine is having opportunities for adventure and travel
- Or perhaps it’s having a united family or kids who think we’re great and make us proud

Well, whatever we imagine the good life to be like, I bet it’s nothing like the circumstances Jesus describes in the first three Beatitudes. But Jesus actually didn’t come up with the notion of listing what leads to the good life or what it looks like. In fact, in our passage from Sirach today, the writer Ben-Sira makes one such list of his own. He says, “I would consider nine conditions to be happy, and I’ll name a tenth with my tongue, which include when your children make you glad and having a (quote) “sensible wife” - yikes! It seems like the ignorant trope about women being too emotional goes way back! Needless to say, the worldliness of this passage seems like a good reason we don’t consider Sirach to

¹ Podcasts and transcripts available here:

<https://bibleproject.com/podcast/what-does-blessed-mean-beatitudes-pt-1/>

<https://bibleproject.com/podcast/what-does-it-mean-make-peace-beatitudes-pt-4/>

² A teaching from later on in the Sermon on the Mount

³ 8/25/24 "Godly Resistance to Being Victimized" (Mt 5:38-45a, Lev 24:17-22) <https://youtu.be/J-0ByRUFi2U>
 Manuscript: https://www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/files/ugd/8c239b_9638aa1f4e914331a223a53723c5fc81.pdf

be holy scripture. So these are the sort of worldly misconceptions of the good life that Jesus intends to turn upside-down.

Indeed, in these the first three Beatitudes Jesus is teaching that the (truly) good life is surprisingly available to people who, from a worldly perspective, are completely without; whose life circumstances would be coveted by no one.

Beatitude One: The Poor In Spirit (verse 3)

So, with the first one (in verse 3) - "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" - a very common interpretation of what it means to be "poor in spirit" is to be humble. And so, when people have mistakenly interpreted the Beatitudes to be commands - something we should do - they've taken this to mean "Be humble - or make yourself humble - and God will bless you with the kingdom life." So then people are left to figure out how to do this: how to be humble, and how much humility is enough?

But Jesus is instead describing people who are without, and yet who can surprisingly experience the good life. And so, the "poor in spirit" refers to the downtrodden - to those who lack power - either economically (so they're materially poor/impoverished) or spiritually powerless (such as struggling to live a godly life or struggling to believe in God at all or struggling with depression). These are all different ways someone can be (downtrodden) powerless to live the life they want, and certainly what the world views as "the good life".

And so, it is shocking then that Jesus is teaching in the first half of this Beatitude that the good life belongs to those who are powerless - who are downtrodden - economically or spiritually. And the reason the good life is available to them - perhaps even more *easily* received by them - is because their (difficult) circumstance will allow them to easily grasp their need for God's reign in their lives, which is the path to the actual good life. So, I've summarized this reinterpretation as: The 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. And, on the flipside, to the extent that we *may have* some of the things the world would see as marks of the good life, while those things are good and we can be grateful, Jesus is calling us out of clinging too tightly to them or pursuing them with much gusto, because at the end of the day: they can't

<p style="text-align: center;">Beatitudes 1-3:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">In Christ, the good life is surprisingly available to those who are without.</p>		
ONE	<p>³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.</p>	<p>The 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.</p>
TWO	<p>⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.</p>	<p>The good life belongs to those who grieve, because the failure to grieve loss will leave our souls disquieted.</p>
THREE	<p>⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.</p>	<p>The good life belongs to those on the margins, the unimportant and afflicted, for in Christ they will inherit community as God intended.</p>

deliver the better life he has for us. Jesus' Beatitudes reveal the stunning truth that the good life He invites us into - the best life - is *not* dependent upon ideal life circumstances.

Beatitude Two: Those Who Mourn (verse 4)

Then, the second Beatitude is "Blessed are those who mourn", or probably better than 'mourn' is those who 'grieve'. Now, the reason *this* is an unenviable circumstance is because who the heck wants to grieve? I mean, grieving is not fun. If we had a choice between going to the movies or buying something new for ourselves *or grieving*, what would we choose? And yet, the reality is that our lives are filled with reasons to grieve, with losses that absolutely *need* to be grieved. And yet, so many avoid grieving at all costs; many of us were never really taught how to grieve. Indeed, glancing back at the first Beatitude, those who *have power* are more likely to *skip over (or avoid)* grieving, because they have better things that can turn their attention to or can distract themselves with. The downtrodden can't avoid their grief because it consumes their lives. And yet, the good life belongs to those who grieve, because the failure or inability to grieve loss will leave our souls *disquieted*, will leave us without comfort. A capacity to grieve and a willingness to do it when we experience losses in our lives - not just to death.

In my sermon this past June about how being able to grieve is so important to our spiritual growth,⁴ I contended that there are many other sorts of losses we can face in life that *merit grieving*, such as...

- Changes in life where no one has done anything wrong but are just part of life - like the kids going to school, or growing up and moving out;
- people dear to us moving far away;
- Grieving that we can't control the decisions loved ones make that may seem unwise to us;
- or grieving some of the capacities we lose as we age or when health issues arise

...just to name a few.

In fact, a need to grieve is likely coming up for many of us - if not all of us, in some way - this week. When the results of Tuesday's election come in, whatever result any of us as individuals hope will happen, if it doesn't come to pass, there are going to be a lot of different options for how we could respond. But what if we try grief? What if we try sitting in those difficult feelings, turning to God in them, and receive His comfort that it's gonna be okay: that He's got us. But, really, as Christians, there is reason for all of us to grieve, because none of these candidates or parties really have much capacity to make many changes for the biggest problems facing society, let alone the world, that Jesus calls us as Christians to care about. And so, whatever the outcome or whoever our horse is in the race, we can lament that incapacity of worldly political power and grieve for the masses who fail to recognize how the power plays of donkeys or elephants *will* fail them and have yet to recognize seize the alternative of pursuing Jesus' way of loving sacrifice instead.

But for anything that comes up for us where the best and healthiest response *is* to grieve, the tough reality is that we can only learn how to grieve *by doing it*. And yet, if we balk at grieving at the losses that come our way, then God's peace will prove difficult to hang onto. In a little bit, when we go through the names of the dead, and some names that are dear to us come up, maybe we can ask the Lord to show us if we've really grieved losing them or if perhaps there is more grief to do? So, I've summarized the reinterpretation of this second Beatitude as: The good life belongs to those who grieve, because the failure to grieve loss will leave our souls disquieted.

Beatitude Three: The Meek (verse 5)

⁴ From 6/30/24

Then, the final circumstance the good life is surprisingly accessible to is that of the meek. But again, this word 'meek' sorta misses the mark. The way we tend to imagine someone being 'meek' - our understanding of that English word - is someone who's sorta passive and unassertive. But that isn't how Jesus acts; so that can't be correct. However, a hint at how the Greek here is *better understood* is in the second half: "for they will inherit the earth." That Greek word translated earth can equally be translated as "land". And this is significant, because in Jesus' day - and really still today - owning land was not only the primary way to generate wealth; in addition to that, landowners sorta ran things in the society. And it was even common for them to use their land ownership to *oppress* those who were without, with unjust rents and so forth. And so, the 'meek' here refers to those who were not landowners and therefore were on the margins, who were unimportant in society.

But here, Jesus is saying that these unimportant will inherit the the land - that the truly "good life" is available to them - because He will lead them into a new community - of the church - where there is not inequality - or at least there is not meant to be - where there isn't inequality based upon class or wealth or land ownership, but where - as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 that we looked at a month ago - where everyone plays an equally important part.⁵ As Tim Mackie says, if we "could be a part of a community of people centered around Jesus, who are learning to share generously, and who are learning to forgive and to love, and no matter what social rank we come from, we all sit at the same table, and gather ... Jesus is saying, that's beginning to participate and experience Heaven coming to Earth. And in that sense, your life circumstances, no matter what you're in, can be said to be called the good life."

Then, beyond this, of course, those who are in Christ *will* reign with Him in the new heavens and new *earth*: we will quite literally inherit the earth. And so, the reinterpretation of this third Beatitude is that the good life belongs to those on the margins, the unimportant and (even) afflicted, for in Christ they will inherit community as God intended. Jesus' Beatitudes reveal the stunning truth that the good life He invites us into - the best life - is *not* dependent upon ideal life circumstances.

Conclusion & Response

Now, as we move into the subsequent beatitudes of four and beyond, they're going to move away from circumstances of being without, to followers of Jesus conducting themselves in some particular ways that the world would deem foolish, which we'll get to in the second sermon. But *for today*, in these first three Jesus is shocking His audience here on the hillside that the truly good life can be had - perhaps is even more easily received - by those whom the world would consider as being without or who have life circumstances no one would envy. And this is appropriate - and absolutely great news for His audience on that hillside - because that would've been the identity of the the overwhelming majority of them, in a society where jews lived under Roman occupation and 85% lived under the poverty line and religious leaders had distorted God's teachings to exploit and exclude so many.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

And, if we relate to any of that today - if we find ourselves feeling spiritually or economically downtrodden, if our lives are rife with grief or cause for grief, if we feel that we have been marginalized by society or find ourselves on the margins socially - Jesus wants us to catch the vision for how the path for the good life remains in the midst of all these challenges. And perhaps we can ask him to show us what a next step would look like toward living in that reality, in the midst of our circumstances. And I have a hunch it will look something like a step toward greater vulnerability about our experience with God or other trustworthy believers.

But for any ways we *don't* relate to the plights laid out in these first three Beatitudes, perhaps Jesus is calling us away from having our hope for the good life wrapped up in those worldly images of the good life - such as luxury or fulfilled ambitions, or kids who fulfill our ideals, or getting to travel the world - because these cannot bear the weight of or desire for the truly good life. Perhaps Jesus' call to us is away from living like any of the plights described in these first three beatitudes would *be* the absolute worst thing in the world, because God promises to meet us in our messy realities and the truly good life is only attained as we find our rest in Him.

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