

Let me start by sharing a few thoughts about Happiness:

- Author Oscar Wilde said – “Some cause happiness wherever they go; some whenever they go.
- Actress Ingrid Bergman said Happiness is good health and a bad memory.
- Irish comedian Spike Milligan said – all I ask for is the chance to prove that money can’t buy happiness.
- Finally, from 20th century cartoonist Kin Hubbard – It’s pretty hard to know what does bring happiness: poverty and wealth have both failed.

Today, we are going to begin an 8-week deep dive into Jesus’ most famous discourse, the Sermon on the Mount. Note that Matthew never called it by this name. Matthew dedicates 3 whole chapters to this discourse.

By the end of this discourse, we will know more about goodness. Jesus makes goodness attractive. We will understand the shame of shabby performance. “You’ve heard it said...but I say.” Hence the series title, you don’t say. Finally, we will have insight into Jesus’ dreams for a better world.

Dr. Amy Jill-Levine, unapologetically Jewish and professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University calls this discourse “The Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven.” She also calls this sermon the template for reading the rest of Matthew. I can tell you’re all itching to leave here and read the rest of Matthew to see if she’s right!

We read that Jesus took his 4 disciples up a mountain, away from the crowds. Yes, he had twelve disciples, but as of this discourse, only 4 had been named. As we work our way through this discourse I want to remind you of one other thing. This is a Jewish rabbi teaching fellow Jews.

With that, let’s begin. This discourse starts with one of the most beloved and most quoted passages of the Gospels, the Beatitudes. We just heard these words in our scripture today.

Here, Jesus skips the parables and gives us an unfiltered ‘philosophy of life,’ a platform of sorts. And, what a platform...

Church family, I may never be able to declare to anyone, “This is exactly what the Beatitudes mean!” But, gradually my walk with God, has shown me something. These Beatitudes are eternally important truths.

As we would read in the book *The Jesus I never Knew* by Phil Yancey, the Beatitudes are THE TRUTH OF DANGLED PROMISES. Early in my biblical understanding, I looked at the Beatitudes as a bit like Jesus throwing a pacifier to ‘the unfortunates.’ “Since you aren’t rich, and your health is failing, and your face is tear-stained ... I’m gonna toss out a few nice phrases to make you feel better!” As my faith matured, I came to see the Beatitudes as ‘genuine promises central to Jesus’ message.

What is that promise? Honoring, not pitying, those who seem to be less fortunate in this life: the poor, the mourners, the meek, the hungry, the persecuted, the poor in heart? Jesus offers these the assurance that service will not go unrecognized. Will not go unrewarded.

C.S. Lewis in “The Weight of Glory” says this: “Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around ...when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.” ‘we dare not discount the value of future rewards.’

Think about the downtrodden ... and what these promises did for their lives:

People like Terry Waite who needed desperately to believe that he would not spend the rest of his life chained to a door in a filthy apartment in Beirut...

The Christians kept in cages, awaiting their turn with the wild beasts in the arenas of Rome...

For all of these—all through the ages—the promise of future reward was not a source of shame ... but of HOPE! I'm convinced that for these neglected saints, who have learned to anticipate and enjoy God in spite of their difficulties, heaven will seem more like a long-awaited homecoming, instead of just a visit to a new place.

Jesus' promise of rewards proclaims that no matter how things appear, evil does not have the last word, God wins in the end!

The Beatitudes unveil THE TRUTH OF GREAT REVERSAL. Over time, I've learned to respect, and even long for, these rewards that Jesus promises... The truth is though, that these rewards lay somewhere in the future. Dangled promises don't satisfy immediate needs. So perhaps these Beatitudes describe both the present as well as the future

The Beatitudes are a contrast of how to succeed in the kingdom of heaven. While modern society claims survival of the fittest, Jesus claims the opposite. The kingdom of God is the 'Upside Down Kingdom.' If you're poor, you're going to be blessed; 'lucky are the unlucky'

Why would God prefer the poor? Catholic scholars coined the phrase: "God's preferential option for the poor" to describe this phenomenon that appears in both the Old and New Testaments. Again, why would God single out 'the poor' for special attention over any other group? Author Monika Hellwig offers some insights with her list of the 'advantages' to being poor:

- The poor know they are in urgent need of redemption...
- The poor know not only their dependence on God and on powerful people but also their interdependence with one another ...
- The poor rest their security not on things, but on people...
- The poor expect little from competition and much from cooperation...
- The poor have an uncanny ability to distinguish between necessities and luxuries
- When the poor hear the Gospel preached to them, it sounds like GOOD NEWS and not like a threat or a scolding...

- The poor can respond to the call of the Gospel with a certain abandonment and uncomplicated totality because they have so little to lose and are ready for anything...

It's never sounded so great to be poor! Through no choice of their own—and they most certainly wish otherwise—poor people find themselves in a posture that befits the grace of God. This is Jesus' upside-down kingdom! It is the truth of the great reversal.

The Beatitudes reveal THE TRUTH OF PSYCHOLOGICAL REALITY. Consider this thought. Didn't Jesus offer us both an ideal to strive, and rewards in view? Did he not turn the tables on a success-addicted society? Jesus gave us a plain formula of psychological truth—the deepest level of truth that we can know on earth! The Blesseds. The Beatitudes reveal to us that what succeeds in the kingdom of heaven, actually benefits us most—more than anything else could—in this life here and now.

Blessed are the poor in spirit ... Blessed are the meek:

Think about those we look up to in life—those who've really made it (in the kingdom of this world) in wealth, popularity, and stardom ... are they not some of the most miserable people on the planet?

Blessed are the pure in heart. French Catholic writer, François Mauriac, in his old age wrote about his struggle with the sin of lust. He explained, "Old age risks being a period of redoubled testing because the imagination in an old man is substituted in a horrible way for what nature refuses him." Most of the Church's arguments in favor of sexual purity did not work for him. He found only one reason to be pure. What Jesus presented in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. The love that God holds out to us requires that our faculties be cleansed and purified before we can receive a higher love, one attainable in no other way. That, folks, is the motive to stay pure. By harboring any sin, we limit our own intimacy with God...

Blessed are the peacemakers ... blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness: Ghandi learned from the Sermon on the Mount and said this, “Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precede the crown we wear.” Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his very life knowing that the peacemakers ... those who are persecuted for Jesus ... will be blessed...

Blessed are those who mourn: There is no more effective healer than what Henri Nouwen calls ‘a wounded healer.’

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness: This describes all who I’ve mentioned today, doesn’t it—François Mauriac, Henri Nouwen, Martin Luther King, Jr.? I can now understand why the Bible constantly repeats this one saying of Jesus more than any other: “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Jesus starts his ministry with this vivid message. Jesus came not to destroy life, but that we might have life more abundantly, “life ... to the full.” The sacrifices that Jesus mentions. To me it makes them more fully alive, not less. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ... get filled...

Church family, when we come to better understand Jesus’ teaching—through the Beatitudes in particular, we will then come to know who Jesus really is and why he came. Today’s You Don’t Say. The Blessings say over and over and over again. “Lucky are the unlucky.” That’s the truth ... according to Jesus. Are you beginning to understand now ... why Jesus came ... and who Jesus is? Jesus is the one who loves us so much that he came for us to have an abundant life. Not a mediocre life ... an abundant life. And I for one think that’s a treasure worth pursuing?