

How To Flourish As A Human Being

I read this week where a highly regarded contemporary Bible scholar said the Sermon on the Mount is God's answer to the greatest metaphysical question humanity has ever faced and always faces. He said these beatitudes as they are called, the nine occurrences of the word *blessed* we just read, form the introduction to the whole thing. Jonathan Pennington is the Bible Scholar I'm referencing. He points out that the beatitudes are given in a particular historical setting influenced by two great traditions. One was that of the Biblical prophets. They called people to address their heart and inward life and not just outward religion. The other tradition, also well known in Biblical times, was that of the Greek and Roman philosophers who wrote about virtue and what it meant to live a good life. In the beatitudes Jesus speaks both as a prophet and as a wise sage or philosopher calling us to reorient our lives to a virtuous vision of the good life that begins with the heart. So, he says the Sermon on the Mount is God's answer to the greatest metaphysical question humanity has ever faced and always faces – *How can we experience true human flourishing? What is true happiness, blessedness, shalom, and how we get it and keep it?*¹

Now, as we saw last week, the Sermon on the Mount has to be understood in light of what the whole of the New Testament teaches about the gospel, the death, and resurrection of Jesus, the new birth and faith in him as Savior and Lord. Building on that foundation, what the Sermon on the Mount basically teaches us is that human flourishing comes only through heart-deep, whole-person discipleship. ***To flourish as a human being in this world, you have to become more and more like Jesus.***

The beatitudes hold out the promise of the good life, but they tell you...

I. TO FLOURISH AS A HUMAN BEING, IS TO ACTUALLY LIVE AS JESUS LIVED.

Sometimes that can just feel like an impossible standard can't it? And yet the Scriptures continually call us to this don't they? Why? God knows our imperfection and gives us grace. But God also knows that while the goal of Christ-likeness is an impossible standard to perfectly achieve it is a very meaningful aspiration toward which to strive. How

could a perfect God call us to anything less than the ideal. That's what we have in the beatitudes. A picture of the life as Jesus lived it.

It is challenging to go through all the beatitudes briefly but let's try to follow along and dive in so that we can have all of them in mind at once. The first four seem to lay the foundation for what follows.

1, First, verse 3, blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. In **Isaiah 6** the prophet thought he was fine. The he saw the holy glory of God and said, *Woe is me, I'm coming undone, I'm unraveling like a poorly made sweater.*² That's what it means to be poor in spirit. You've got to realize that you are spiritually busted. You cannot fix yourself, or anyone else. You need pure grace, undeserved mercy. Even your best deeds are degraded by half-heartedness, hypocrisy, and the hope of human recognition. It's against this background that the gospel is such good news. Christ died for very real sins and for all the failed efforts to do better. Christ paid our debt to God for us in his suffering on the cross. There's no boasting for the poor in spirit just humble gratitude. **Ephesians 2:8-9** *For by grace, you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

2. Second, verse 4, blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Sometimes it is healthy to feel sadness. There is so much apathy toward God, indifference and even cruelty toward people. Selfishness and pride. We're all more a part of it then we want to admit. The only way to avoid healthy spiritual sorrow is to be superficial or cynical, dishonest or hard. Jesus says, that is no way to live, as strange as it sounds you have to mourn if you want to flourish.

3. Third, verse 5, blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. The word meek in the Bible doesn't mean weak. In an ancient papyrus manuscript, the term is used to describe a powerful, spirited stallion that is so well trained it responds immediately and submissively to every wish from its master. The third beatitude calls us to deal with the underlying issue of self-will. The meek person is simply not self-willed but responsive and submissive to God.³

4. Fourth, verse 6, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. In the ancient world, people knew hunger and thirst in a way few of us do. Some people today wouldn't mind being righteous; they might even think it sounds nice, but they are fine without it. A man or woman who is truly hungry and thirsty would never say, *I could eat or drink right now, but I'm fine as it is.* When you hunger and thirst for something you want it badly,

you want it now, and you will work for it. To hunger and thirst for righteousness is to want very badly to be like Jesus, the righteous one. *These beatitudes break up to soil of your heart and prepare it so good things can be planted and grow there. What follows is Christlike.*

5. The fifth beatitude, verse 7, is blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Mercy is Christ-like compassion, empathy and kindness. There was a Scottish preacher years ago named Ian Maclaren he was famous for his speaking and writing. In his sermons he often said, *“Be kind. For everyone you meet is fighting a battle, you know nothing about.”* Jesus came to bind up the brokenhearted, to lift up the downcast. He offers you mercy, and he asks you to pass it on.

6. The sixth beatitude, verse 8, is blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Purity of heart is not, as it might sound perfection. Jesus, of course, was and is perfect and sinless, but here, for us, it means sincerity as opposed to hypocrisy. It’s not that you are flawless but that you are sincere in your devotion to God and desire for him.

7. The seventh beatitude, verse 9, is blessed are the peacemakers. We are reconciled to God and have peace with God through faith in Jesus. **Roman 5:1** *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* God wants us to know his peace and then to be peacemakers sowing peace where there is conflict. **Romans 14:19** adds this, *So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*

8. The eighth beatitude, verse 10, is Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says, blessed are those who are willing to face and suffer the kinds of things I suffered because they have chosen to live the kind of life that I live. They flourish because they follow me.

The first and eighth beatitude end the same way, *“for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* This is a common technique in ancient literature called *inclusion or an inclusio*. Its purpose is to serve as bookends and so group all the items in a list as part of the same thing. It means these eight beatitudes are not describing eight different kinds of people but the same person and the same blessing from eight perspectives. The first four beatitudes address mind, emotions, will, and desires. With the mind we accept our spiritual poverty, with the emotions we grieve the sin and sorrow in us and the world, with the will we submit to God and his priorities and with our desires we hunger after God and his will.

Then we follow Jesus, we practice and experience the mercy, the purity, the peace-making ministry, and the sufferings of Jesus. Now, we've looked at eight beatitudes, but there is actually one more. There is a ninth time the word "blessed" appears and so a ninth beatitude. Scholars point out that in Hebrew poetry, the author will sometimes bring a list to a dramatic conclusion by repeating the preceding line with a little variation and with a direct address to the listener. Jesus does this in **verses 11-12** *"Blessed, are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* The point of the ninth beatitude is to clearly underscore the stark contrast between this kind of blessedness, or flourishing and what we usually and naturally think of as blessedness or flourishing. Jesus is saying even when you are violently opposed, and suffer unjustly this is the way to flourish in life.

How is that possible? How can he say that? The answer is he can say that because of what he knows and believes. And so...

II. TO FLOURISH AS HUMAN BEINGS, WE HAVE TO BELIEVE AS JESUS BELIEVED.

Every time Jesus gives us a description of the life that flourishes, he also gives a reason for saying this. He uses the little word "for." The word "for" here means "because" or "for this reason." *He says, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. For they shall be comforted. They shall inherit the earth, be satisfied, receive mercy, see God, and be called sons of God.* At the end in **verse 12**, he sums it up: *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Two things form part of Jesus' whole perspective on what it means to flourish in life that we need to believe. First,

A. As followers of Jesus, we can only truly flourish in this life when, with Jesus, we refuse to live as if this life is all there is.

The reasons Jesus gives for blessedness, this view of flourishing, are all based on a horizon for human life that goes beyond the here and now. He says, *you will be comforted, satisfied, will see God, and you will inherit the earth,* in the end, he says, *great is your reward in heaven.* There is something very powerful that is said in **Hebrews 12:1-2**. It says, *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for*

the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews says what motivated Jesus in his humanity, to live the way he lived and to suffer as he suffered, was his assurance that this life is not all there is. We just celebrated Easter and the resurrection of Jesus. You know, **1 Corinthians 15**, says that if there is no resurrection, then Christians are of all people most to be pitied. It's fair to say that if you flip that the opposite is also true. If the resurrection is a reality and there is life after this life, and through Jesus, there is eternal life, then there is no way to live the good life now without living it in light of eternity. This is fundamental to Christianity and to Jesus! He is constantly saying things like don't lay up treasure on earth – lay up treasure in heaven. Whoever loses his life will save it – because this life isn't all there is, it isn't even the greater part of all that is. You cannot concoct a view of the Christian life that is authentic and works without it being based on the promise of eternity. Sure it is a test of faith, but the Christian life is at heart a life of faith.

This does not mean you live miserably now and just hope to be happy at some future time in heaven. **Verse 12** says, *rejoice, and be glad!* That means here and now - *for your reward is great in heaven.* The future hope infuses this present life with a source of joy that is deeper than current circumstances.

That's the first thing Jesus knows and believes. Here the second,
**B. We have a Father in heaven who knows us, sees us,
loves us and rewards us, as we seek to live like Jesus.**

Do you believe that? Everything Jesus says is based on that, and it absolutely makes all the difference. As you live like Jesus, who is it that gives you the kingdom? Who comforts you, grants you the earth as an inheritance, satisfies your hunger and thirst, grants you mercy shows you himself, and rewards you in heaven? God does. God, the Father.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, there is an emphasis on the truth that the disciples of Jesus are the children of God. One of the biggest failures of faith in our lives is when we live like orphans instead of children of God. Sixteen times in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of the Fatherhood of God.⁴ Only once in the last section, does he say, "my father." Every other time, fifteen times, he says, "your father." Your father sees in secret, your father is perfect, your father values you dearly much more than the birds of the sky, your father will

reward you, your father knows what you need, your father gives good things to those who ask him. You have a father in heaven. Believe that. You have to believe that because choosing to trust in Jesus and believe in the gracious fatherhood of God is essential to even beginning to embrace, experience, and grow into the kind of life that Jesus describes as blessed.

That makes sense, doesn't it? If there is a God who made us in his image for a relationship with him, then how could we possibly live and flourish as human beings unless we did so as children of God? We wouldn't know our true identity. We wouldn't know the way of life that fits our underlying humanity. The brokenness that has infected us with sin and selfishness would grow to dominate us so that we lived like orphans. To think and live as orphans is both the essence of our sinful condition and the epitome of its sorrowful impact on our hearts.

At Christ Community, we use the analogy of the music and the dance to picture Christian life. It's the biblical truth that the way we live, the Christ-shaped life is the dance, so to speak, but it is always a response to some beautiful truth about God, which we believe and receive and in light of which we live. That truth is like the music that inspires the dance, and faith, believing it is how we listen to the music that inspires the dance. One of the beautiful truths about God that is ours through the gospel is this truth that in Christ, we come to know that God is our father. We, by new birth and adoption, are his beloved children. So we can let down our guard, lay down our weapons, move past our survival mode striving. We can admit our spiritual poverty to feel the sorrow of sin and to mourn, to submit in meekness to a perfect Father, to be merciful, pure, peacemakers, and even to suffer injustice knowing all will be made right and rewarded.

Conclusion

The way to flourish as a man or a woman – it's not something that comes naturally to anyone. It will feel unnatural. It is a way of seeing and a desire that only comes by grace. Jesus once said, *My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me.* If there is nothing in you that wants to live this way of life, perhaps you are not one of his sheep. If Jesus is right about what matters and what doesn't and what comes after this life, then that is tragic. Don't settle for that. Turn to him. Come just as you are, and he will give you grace as you trust in him. Then because you do. Live as Jesus lived and believe as Jesus believed. ***To flourish, you have to follow Jesus.***

Amen.

¹ Jonathon T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, (Grand Rapids, Baker) p. 14

² This image is from a sermon by Mike Breaux, *Which Rung Are You On?* p. 4

(<https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2005/august/2504.html>)

³ <https://www.warriorpriest.net/blog/2018/5/2/blessed-are-the-war-horses-on-christian-meekness>

⁴ Matthew 5:16, 45, 48, 6:1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18, 26, 32, 7:11, 21.