

The King Who Is Everything We Need

Matthew 5:1-10

Ever since the Declaration of Independence was signed some 237 years ago this summer, affirming what it described as the “inalienable rights” of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” the American populace has been pretty much consumed with number three: the pursuit of happiness. We want to enjoy life, peace, security, stability, luxury, significance. In a word, we want to be *happy*. We look at happiness as something we can buy, something we can drive, something we can earn, or wear, or live in, or look at, or eat, or go to bed with. And yet there’s a cruel irony in the progress this country has made since the Declaration of Independence, an irony that was already observable by sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830’s—what he called a “strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants [of America] in the midst of abundance.”¹ In other words, never have we had so much, yet never have we felt so empty. And it’s all the more amplified today.

Pursuing happiness in a broken world feels a bit like chasing a leprechaun to find the pot of gold (since it’s St. Patrick’s Day, I figured a good Irish analogy was in order). After a while you realize it doesn’t exist. That’s what it feels like in a world where things do not work the way they should, what we call a “fallen world.” A world corrupted by sin, sorrow, and sickness, all stemming from human rebellion against God.

But then you turn to a passage like the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12. And you read the refrain over and over again: “Blessed.” “Blessed are the poor in spirit, . . . Blessed are the meek . . .” Nine times we see the word, “blessed.” In fact, the reason we call this passage the Beatitudes is because of this word, “blessed,” which in the Latin translation is *beatus*. And what that word “blessed” means here is not far from what we’ve been talking about: *happy*! Not in a shallow or temporary emotional sense (like we often use the word), but in an abundantly satisfying and lasting sense. *Uber* happy. Wicked happy. The promise of lasting comfort and joy and delight, much like we read in many of the psalms: “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven” (Ps. 32:1). And we see how these verses in Matthew ascribe this blessing to people *here and now*, in the midst of a fallen world. There is a future aspect to some of these blessings, as we’ll see. But it has invaded the present. It’s “Blessed *are* the poor in spirit . . . Blessed *are* those who mourn . . .” Not “Blessed *will they be* . . .”

But then we immediately notice a sharp difference between those we think of as being happy or blessed in our world today, and those whom Jesus ascribes as truly blessed: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the persecuted. If we

¹ *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York, Harper, 1988), 296. As cited in Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (NY: Dutton, 2009), x.

were to make a list today, it would read more like ‘Blessed are the wise, the energetic, the attractive, the funny, the intelligent, the wealthy, the fit.’²

There is blessing, true happiness, to be found, even in a broken and messed up world. But it doesn’t necessarily take the shape we might expect. So where does it come from? And what does it look like in the midst of a fallen world? What kind of joy is able to withstand the pain and sorrow of life on this earth? The Beatitudes teach us that *true comfort and joy in a fallen world comes from living under God’s reign, which begins by treasuring Jesus.*

A Portrait, Not a Handbook

The passage before us is the first part of what’s called the Sermon on the Mount, which stretches from Matthew 5 – 7. And if you look at the Beatitudes in vv. 3-12, you’ll notice a pretty uniform structure. Each line begins with the word “blessed,” which is ascribed to some *virtue* or *circumstance*, and then a *reason* or *basis* for that blessing is given. So for instance: “Blessed are the poor in spirit [virtue], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [basis]” (5:3). Or v. 10: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness [circumstance], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [basis].” (We’re actually only going to cover vv. 3-10 this morning. Even though v. 11 also begins with the word “Blessed,” it seems to function more as a transition to the next section. So we’ll cover that when we come back after Easter and look at vv. 13-16.)³

But notice there how vv. 3 and 10 kind of frame the beatitudes with the same basis—these are the kind of people to whom God’s kingdom belongs. In other words, the Beatitudes outline *the blessings of life lived under God’s reign, God’s kingdom*—his redemptive rule whereby he is making all things new. Just before the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus went out preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (4:17). The kingdom is near because Jesus the King is near. And now he’s giving a picture of what life under his kingdom, under his authority as King, looks like, wherein we find true joy and comfort in a fallen world.

Now when you read a line like “Blessed are those who *are* or *do* such and such, for they will be rewarded in some sort of way,” the temptation is to turn this passage into a handbook for manipulating God’s blessing. A “how-to” book: the things you must do if you want to be blessed by God, not unlike any other self-help book off the shelf at Barnes and Noble.

Some of us might not think so crassly about manipulating God’s blessing, but we still see this primarily as a list of *things to go and do*. A how-to manual for living in God’s kingdom. A handbook for living under God’s reign.

But I don’t think that analogy fits this passage. The Sermon on the Mount *is* about kingdom living, life lived under God’s reign, under the authority of Jesus. And the Beatitudes in particular do give us a picture of what that life should look like. But they’re not so much a handbook as they are a *family portrait*. In other words, Jesus doesn’t say here, “Go do this, then go do that, then go do that.” Instead he shows us a picture. “This is what life looks like when you’re part of

² See Doug O’Donnell, *The Gospel of Matthew* (PTW; Crossway, 2013; pre-published manuscript), 76; and Dan Doriani, *Matthew*, vol. 1 (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 105.

³ For instance, vv. 11-12 cover the same blessing as in v. 10 (persecution), and the language shifts here from talking about people in God’s kingdom to talking to *you*. Instead of “Blessed are those,” it’s “Blessed are *you*,” which carries on in vv. 13-16: “*You* are the salt of the earth . . . *You* are the light of the world.” See O’Donnell, 78.

my family, when you belong to my kingdom, when you live under my reign. This is what loyalty looks like. This is what true joy and comfort look like amid a fallen world.’

That doesn’t mean we aren’t supposed to do these things. We are. If we’re part of the kingdom, we will. What it means is that our first line of application here is not, “What must I now go do?”, but rather to ask ourselves, “*Is this what my life looks like?*” Is this what our church looks like? Is there a family resemblance? Jesus is saying, “If you belong to the Kingdom—if you know me as Savior and King, then this is what your life will look like.” So is this true of us? If not, and there’s no evidence that we belong to Jesus, we have no claim on the blessings he’s talking about here. If there is, then what we’re likely to experience is a strange mixture of comfort and conviction. A comfort of the joy of family membership, and a conviction of how far we still fall short. As Don Carson notes it, “The more I read these chapters . . . the more I am both drawn to them and shamed by them. Their brilliant light draws me like a moth to a spotlight; but the light is so bright that it sears and burns.”⁴

The Contours of Kingdom Living

So what does this picture look like? What kind of virtues or situations are being described as happy or blessed, and what kind of result or basis is given for that?

As we look at the eight blessings in vv. 3-10, we can actually trace a connection, a flow as one leads to the other. But the fountainhead is the first one in v. 3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

What does it mean to be *poor in spirit*? If you think about it in its simplest terms, it means you don’t have very much spirit. And we’re not talking about pep. We’re talking about *you*—self. It’s a poverty of self. A spiritual poverty.

Again, this is the opposite of what we generally think. We tend to think that those who are blessed are the spiritually strong, those who have spiritual muscle, the really religious. But true spiritual strength is not depending on one’s own spirit, one’s self, but depending on God’s Spirit through faith in Christ.

The ‘rich in spirit’ are those who take inventory of all that they are and have in this world, and then go forward depending on all that they are and have. Their money, their intelligence, their charisma. They are rich in self, and that is what they draw on—their own spiritual bank account—in life. But if you’re rich in self, that means you’re *poor in Jesus*. Because you don’t really need him, so you don’t trust and treasure him. You trust and treasure self.

Members of God’s family, subjects of God’s kingdom, know that they’re poor in self. They are the ones who look at the majesty, the holiness, and the beauty of God, the perfection of his character, the unmeasurable scope of his love, and then look in the mirror and say “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa. 6:5).

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5–10* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978, 1987), 11.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that poverty of spirit “means a complete absence of pride, a complete absence of self-assurance and of self-reliance. It means a consciousness that we are nothing in the presence of God.”⁵ Sinclair Ferguson says “They are the bankrupt of this world, who know themselves to be so, and who therefore trust in the Lord as their only hope of protection and deliverance.”⁶ Only when you are poor in spirit can you be rich in Jesus Christ. Only when you stop treasuring what you have and what you are, are you able to treasure Jesus.

Another way to think about this first beatitude is this: “Blessed are the broken.” Blessed are the broken, the spiritually bankrupt. Those who have messed up, can never measure up, or make it up. Blessed are those who have come to the end of themselves and have nothing else but to turn to King Jesus. Those, Jesus says, are the kind of people to whom the kingdom belongs. Not the ones who try in their own strength to pull it all together and impress God. It’s the broken and weak that enjoy the blessings of God’s reign. Which is another reminder that the Beatitudes are not primarily about what we should go do to live like a good member of God’s kingdom. There’s nothing we can do in and of ourselves. Everything must flow from our union with Christ and the power of his Spirit. The comfort and joy of living under God’s reign in a fallen world begins with treasuring Jesus.

But from that poverty of spirit flows a *mourning*, a grieving. When our eyes are opened to how broken we are and how broken and messed up this world is, our hearts are moved to grief. We mourn as we look around us and say, “This is not how it’s supposed to be.” Friends aren’t supposed to betray one another. Parents aren’t supposed to get divorced. Companies aren’t supposed to lay off their employees. Death isn’t supposed to cut off life. We look in our hearts and we grieve the sin that we see there in our brokenness. The lustful thoughts. The selfishness and greed and jealousy. We think of God’s holiness and love, we think of all Christ has done for us, and we see that we still do this, and we weep. Our hearts are broken.

But Jesus’ words say, “*Blessed* are those who mourn, *for they will be comforted*” (5:4). Though we mourn now over the ugliness of our sin and the brokenness of this world, there is a joy that comes from knowing we will be comforted. God comforts us through his presence now by the Spirit. He comforts us through his Word and through his people who love us and minister that Word to us. And he will comfort us in the end when his own hand will wipe away from our eyes, “and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away (Rev. 21:4).

We mourn in our brokenness and poverty of spirit, which puts this world into context. It shows us that we are not in control, that we cannot take things into our own hands; we are completely dependent on God. In other words, it makes us *meek*. Gentle. Not wimpy, but meek, after the pattern of our Lord Jesus. That’s the third blessing in v. 5.

So often we think that the strong and powerful, those who use force and violence and coercion, are the ones who will get what they want out of life. That’s how it works on the playground. The big kids bully their way around to get the swings they want, the tunnels they want, to defend their territory. It’s amazing how much seems to be at stake when two toddlers battle over a

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 50.

⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 15.

teeter-totter; it's as if the whole world was hanging in the balance. And when life spirals out of control, that's sometimes what it feels like for us. And so we seize control, and we get pushy and use force to try and protect our little corner of life, our teeter-totter. But Jesus says "Blessed are the meek"—"not the strong, aggressive, harsh, tyrannical"⁷—"for they will inherit the earth" (5:5). That's God's promise to his children—not a teeter-totter, but a new creation. Not just the land of Canaan, but Canaan as it fills the whole earth (Rev. 21).

God's children recognize in their brokenness and grief that God is the one who is in control, and so they trust him and live with gentleness and meekness. And yet they also long for righteousness. That's v. 6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

A lot of people have debated what exactly Jesus is referring to by "righteousness" here. It seems to me that he is using it very generally, to encompass a longing for all things to be made right in the world. A longing for right relationship with God—the most important thing, which requires being declared *in the right* with him—something that only comes through faith in Jesus. Beyond that, it is a longing for everything to be made right. For God to put this broken world back together. The meek look to and long for God to do it. And Jesus promises them the blessing that their longing will be satisfied. It will be filled. In part now, through Jesus' cross and resurrection, and in glorious completion in the end when Christ returns.

And if God is that merciful on broken sinners, to comfort us in our mourning, provide for us a lasting inheritance, and satisfy our longing for all things to be made new, then his children become agents of *mercy* as well. Verse 7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

This verse is not saying that it's through our own mercy that we earn God's mercy. Rather, it shows us, as Sinclair Ferguson puts it, that "unless we forgive others, there is no evidence that we ourselves have been forgiven. . . . and therefore [we] cannot look forward to receiving his mercy in the last judgment."⁸

Again, this is a matter of family resemblance. Our Father is merciful—he reaches down to help those in need. He has compassion on the weak and grace on sinners. Those who belong to his family will do likewise, because they are like their Father. And as family members, they will enjoy the mercy of their Father both now and forevermore.

And when we come to God in brokenness, such that we see our sin clearly, with sorrow and meekness, a longing for things to be made right, we long for a *pure heart*. A heart that is uncluttered and unstained by the things of this world—all the counterfeit happinesses that tempt us to trust in them. As we trust and treasure Jesus, the Spirit purifies us to see God clearly, *in the mess*, and so to savor and trust him even more. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (5:8).

And when we can see God clearly—his beauty and glory, and his purpose and mission—then those who belong to his family will join in that mission, just like Dad. Verse 9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."

⁷ Carson, *Matthew* (EBC 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 133.

⁸ Ferguson, 30.

God is a God of peace, of *shalom*, wholeness. He is binding up the wounded, restoring what is broken, putting his fallen world back together again. And he's doing it through the gospel of his Son, who made *peace* by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:20). Through the cross sinners can be reconciled to the Father, because Christ paid the penalty of their sin in full. Through the cross sinners can be reconciled to each other, because Christ bore the sins committed against us as well, so that we can extend peace and forgiveness to one another. Therefore, if you belong to God's kingdom, you too will be a peacemaker, not fueling conflict and bitterness, but pointing people to the gospel of Jesus. You'll be called "sons of God" because you look and live like your Father, who made peace through Jesus.

But if you live and look like Jesus, then you can expect to be treated like Jesus. To be opposed, mocked, distrusted, marginalized, perhaps even physically harmed. The world has a problem with Jesus' claim of absolute authority over creation—his authority to say what is right and what is wrong, and his authority to make all things new. And if you are loyal to him and his righteousness, then at some point the world will have a problem with you too. And so Jesus says in v. 10: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Again, it makes no sense to associate persecution with blessing. Unless that persecution is a mark of belonging to Jesus and his kingdom. There's great blessing in belonging to God's kingdom. And now we're back to where we began: "for theirs is the kingdom of God." This is what it looks like to live as a member of God's kingdom, a part of his family. It's not what most people think about when they think about happiness. But the blessing of knowing the Lord and belonging to him, the satisfaction and security that provides in a fallen world—there's nothing more beautiful. It's in living under his reign that we find true happiness—a comfort and joy able to withstand the pain and chaos of this fallen world.

When you're sitting at the bedside watching someone you love labor for every breath, when someone you love turns their back on you, when you're caught in the consequences of your sin and you know life will never be the same, when you stand with your friend over the grave of their child, or when it's your own child, you're not thinking, "Wow. I am so glad I own that car. Now I can get through this." You're not thinking, "I am so glad I got a 4.0 in that class. Now I can face this cancer." When you are at the bottom and you have nothing left, the only blessing that can sustain you, the only happiness that has any hope of lasting, is comfort and joy of knowing Jesus and our inheritance in him.

"I am so glad I have a Savior who is stronger than this, who is present with me in it, who loves me with an indescribable love, who promises me an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. A Savior and King who is in control despite this chaos, who is faithful to every promise. I am so glad I have a Savior who has dealt decisively with my sin and ugliness, who took on my brokenness, and vanquished them on the cross. And who will be faithful to make all things new in the end by the power of his resurrection. What would I do without my Savior?"

The comfort and joy of living under God's reign in a fallen world begins by treasuring Jesus. The whole portrait flows out of it.

Looking for Yourself in the Portrait

And so I ask again, when you look at this picture, these Beatitudes, do you see a family resemblance? Is this, by God's grace, true of you?

It's not something you can fake or manufacture. You can try to imitate it. Someone could try to photo bomb the picture, if you will, or sneak into the family as an imposter. You might dress like a family member, speak like one. You might fool outsiders looking in, and maybe even some of the children for a while (though at some point you'll do or say something to blow your cover). But you know who you'll never fool? The Father. He knows his children. And God the Father is not fooled by our exterior or our show. He sees the heart. So how's your heart?

Are you grieved by your sin or the brokenness of this world? Or are you numb and indifferent? Is your life marked by meekness, or a longing for righteousness? Do you show mercy to others? Is your heart clean and clear of the clutter and contamination of this the world? Do you make peace rather than you feed conflict? We're not talking about perfection, or being good enough, or measuring up. We're not talking about being rich in self. We're asking honest questions of faith and loyalty: *Is my hope anchored in Christ? Does my life reflect a loyalty to his kingdom?*

If not, and your hope is in this world instead of Jesus, then there is no blessing or happiness that you can hold onto that will withstand the course of this fallen world. Life will end in disappointment and judgment. If this is your heart and you're asking, *what then should I do?* The answer is not go try harder to be meek or thirst for righteousness. The answer is to *go back to the first beatitude*, from which all others flow—"blessed are the poor in spirit." Acknowledge your sin and brokenness before a holy God, your poverty of self and your need for him, and then take hold of Jesus in faith. Put your trust in him—that he is King and Savior, he is God in the flesh, and he is *enough*—his blood was enough to cover your sin and reconcile you to God; his resurrection is enough give you new life. And become part of the family.

If, when you look at this portrait, you see a resemblance, but at the same time realize that you fall so miserably short—you find that mixture of comfort and conviction—then what do you do? And just so you know, if the first beatitude is true of you, then all of us in some way should be experiencing that—a fresh mourning of our sin and longing for God's righteousness. If that's your heart right now—maybe you're convicted that you're not very merciful, you tend to hold grudges; or you're not doing a good job at peacemaking—the solution is not "Go try harder to be merciful." "Go read a book about peacemaking." Not that those are bad things. The answer is, once again, go back to the beginning, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Look again at your poverty of self, the ugliness of your sin, and then see and savor the richness of Christ's *mercy* toward *you*. Let that wash over your heart and your life. And if you taste in a real and deep way the mercy that God has had on you, then you will be merciful. You won't be able to help it, because your heart will be so overwhelmed with his mercy.

If you're not cultivating peace in your relationships, or helping others move toward each other in peace, the way you grow in that is to come back to the beginning, to your own sinfulness before the Father. To remember how "you who were once far off have now been brought near *by the blood of Christ*. For *he himself is our peace*" (Eph. 2:13-14). And then you bring the gospel of peace to your situation, to your friends, and you work for peace.

There is blessing in living under God's reign—a blessing able to withstand the pain of this broken world. And it all begins with a poverty of spirit that treasures Jesus Christ.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

The way to become poor in spirit is to look at God. Read this Book about Him, read His law, look at what He expects from us, contemplate standing before Him. It is also to look at the Lord Jesus Christ and to view Him as we see Him in the Gospels. . . . And the more we look at Him, the more hopeless we shall feel by ourselves, and in and of ourselves, and the more shall we become 'poor in spirit.' . . . You cannot truly look at Him without feeling your absolute poverty, and emptiness. Then you say to Him,

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.

Empty, hopeless, naked, vile. But He is the all-sufficient One—

Yea, all I need, in Thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come.⁹

⁹ Lloyd-Jones, 52.