

“Surprises”

Introduction: Tonight, many of us will turn on the Super Bowl, and later in the week, we’ll begin to watch the Winter Olympics. As we watch these competitors do what they do, somewhere along the line we’ll think, “these athletes are truly blessed.” Or, maybe tomorrow we’ll glance over at the mid-term exam a classmate has just received back and as we see yet another “A” at the top of the page we’ll conclude, that girl is truly blessed. Or, maybe on our way home from work we’ll see a hot guy walking down the street and we’ll think that he is truly blessed. Or, sometime during the week we’ll observe a family which consists of parents still together, two healthy kids, a dog, a house, and a functioning car and we’ll conclude, “that family is truly blessed.”

All of these scenarios seem like they present pictures of people who have it all going for them, who are “truly blessed,” but are they? Or, instead, are they pictures of favorable circumstances and when the circumstances change – when the athlete gets injured, when the hot guy begins to lose his hair, when the A student begins to dabble in drugs and doesn’t get into the college of her choice, when the father of that family gets cancer and the mother loses her job – then what? Where’s the blessedness now? What does it mean to live a life that is truly blessed?

At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, in the preamble or introduction known as the Beatitudes (which means “blessing”), Jesus paints a picture of the life that is truly blessed. And it is a surprising picture to us because it has nothing to do with favorable circumstances, which is why the word “happy,” which some translations use to try to modernize the term, can be misleading. In fact, none of these eight circumstances that Jesus highlights seem to be a blessed situation, at least as far as the world usually sees things. So what is Jesus trying to tell us?

Let’s first take a few minutes to explore the overall context of the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with this famous list of blessings. Then we’ll consider how the Beatitudes reveal to us the surprise of what a truly good life, from God’s perspective, looks like.

I. The Context of the Sermon on the Mount – A Training Manual for Disciples

A. As we saw last week, Jesus began his public ministry in the region of Galilee, a place that was considered dark for devout Jews because it was filled with pagan Gentiles. Into this darkness Jesus came to bring light and hope for all, Gentile as well as Jew. Through his declaration, “the kingdom of heaven has drawn near,” and his subsequent preaching and teaching and healing tour, he proclaimed the good news in both word and deed that God’s dimension of reality had begun to break into our earthly dimension. Along the way he invited people to participate in the kingdom life he had come to offer with the call “repent,” and “follow me.” Later on, he would call this life he had come to bring the “life that is truly life,” or the life that is “abundant” (John 10:10b NRSV). What did that life look like? Enter the Sermon on the Mount

B. Some have concluded that this sermon presents an impossible ideal and is therefore meant to help us recognize our sinfulness and drive us to repent and seek God’s grace. For the same reason, others have concluded that what Jesus teaches in this sermon is reserved for the age to come when Jesus will return. Still others, again due to the high ideals the sermon sets, have concluded that its practices are intended for only a select group of highly committed believers. But what does Jesus think? There are two helpful clues.

1. First, from the conclusion of the sermon, we hear Jesus say this: “Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Ma. 7:24). Jesus, is speaking into our present existence. He anticipates, not that we’ll do this all perfectly but that those who hear will seek to put what he has to say into practice. Of course, the doing is always far harder than the hearing, but both are necessary and Jesus obviously didn’t just intend us to listen and then walk away shaking our heads at an impossible ideal.

2. A second clue that helps us understand that this sermon is for the here and now comes from its primary audience. Matthew describes it this way: “Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him and he began to teach them” (5:1-2). It’s helpful to observe that during his earthly ministry, there were three primary groups around Jesus. The religious leaders, who were confrontational toward Jesus. The crowds, who were curious about Jesus. And the disciples, who were committed to Jesus. Within the group known as disciples were the Twelve, but the term as Matthew uses it is not limited to the twelve. A disciple is simply a term used to describe a follower of Jesus, one who has taken Jesus up on his offer to “repent” and “follow me.”

As we have defined it at FCCOE, “A disciple is one who has turned to Jesus in repentance and faith and who intentionally enters into a life-long apprentice relationship with him, for the glory of God, for the abundance of life, and for the sake of others.” A disciple, in other words, is ultimately a learner, one who wants to learn, over a lifetime, to become more and more like Jesus. It is one who enters into the process of spiritual formation. While the crowds would hang around and listen (cf. 7:28-29), and while Jesus would always preach and teach with an eye toward moving folks from the crowd into those who were his disciples, his times of teaching were primarily for disciples. Matthew actually records five “discourses” or blocks of teaching in his gospel account, which is why the early church used this gospel in particular to instruct those both new and old to the faith. So this first block, the Sermon on the Mount, was used by Jesus to teach his disciples, followers, apprentices, how life is to be lived in light of the truth that the kingdom of heaven has come near, has broken into our existence.

3. To these two contextual clues, which help us understand that the sermon is for the here and now, let me add two more important observations. First, since the sermon is teaching for the disciples on what life lived in the kingdom looks like, it does NOT describe how to enter, or earn our way into, the kingdom. Jesus has earned our way. We enter the kingdom by his work, and by repenting and believing in him. Now that the age of the King has dawned, the sermon shows what life is to be like after repentance and commitment to the King.

4. Finally, and related to this, we will never be able to put this sermon into practice without a relationship with Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Contrary to Marx, or even Gandhi, who tried to view the Sermon on the Mount as a generalized code of ethics that everyone could follow, the Sermon is about the lifestyle of disciples of Jesus, who have come together as the community of the church, which is formed by the cross of Christ and around the truth that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and to show that God really is busily at work redeeming humanity.

II. The Beatitudes – What a Truly Good Life Looks Like

A. If, then, this is the overall context of the Sermon on the Mount, what function do the beatitudes play? Somewhat like the preamble to the Constitution of the United States (“We the people...in order to form a more perfect union . . .”) provides a summary of the articles to follow and the ethos, or character, of the nation that will be formed by these articles, the beatitudes summarize the ethos or character of kingdom life that will flow out of living the principles of Sermon. Like the Sermon itself, they are not “if/then” statements, “if you do this you will be

blessed.” Rather, they present a picture of what the Spirit will be making of us as we put the Sermon into practice.

B. As I hinted at the outset, this picture stands in stark and surprising contrast to what and who the world considers blessed. In fact, the sermon, as we will see, is all about contrasts, “You have heard it said, but I say,” is a phrase we will hear Jesus repeat often.

1. So while the world says you are blessed when you’ve got it all together and filled with self-esteem, Jesus says it is the poor in spirit who are blessed, those who realize that self-help won’t cut it but that you are desperately in need of God’s grace.
2. While the world says you are blessed if you can just move on from, or even ignore what is hard or painful in the world, Jesus says it is those who mourn who are blessed, those who are able to acknowledge and grieve the sin and injustice in both their lives, and in the world.
3. While the world says you will be blessed if you have power and can control others, Jesus says it is the meek who are blessed, those who are willing to put themselves non-assertively at the service of others.
4. While the world says you will be blessed if you would just stop worrying and be happy, Jesus says it is those who hunger and thirst for righteousness who are blessed, those who seek to see relationships with God and others restored.
5. While the world says you will be blessed if you would just take care of yourself and look out for “number one,” Jesus says it is those who are merciful who are blessed, those who find a way to care for their neighbors in need.
6. While the world says you will be blessed if you scheme and do whatever it takes to accomplish your goals, Jesus says it is the pure in heart who will be blessed, those who live sincerely and transparently, without deception.
7. While the world says it is the warrior, those who meet force with force, who will be blessed, Jesus says it is the peacemakers who are blessed, those who pursue reconciliation by non-violent means.
8. While the world says you will be blessed if you make no waves, seek to fit in, and don’t get too serious about your faith in Christ, Jesus says it is those who are persecuted because of righteousness who are blessed, those who aren’t afraid to bring Jesus, who he is and why he’s come, into the discussion of what would make the world a better place.

C. What, then, does it mean to live a life that is truly blessed? The beatitudes present a surprising picture as they describe a state of well-being in relationship to God that exists even when we’re experiencing uncomfortable or unfavorable circumstances. The character of the kingdom of God has a way of turning everything upside-down, or rather, right-side up, from God’s perspective. One final word: Because the presence of the kingdom of God is both present and future, the blessings that come with this state of blessedness are both present and future. We’re citizens of the kingdom of heaven now, as Jesus “bookends” the beatitudes. But the blessings of being comforted, inheriting the earth, being filled, receiving mercy, seeing God, and being called children of God all contain at least some future aspect to them, they are only starting to come true. For their full revelation we will need to wait patiently. But we can do so with confidence, knowing that the Spirit is at work to form within us the life that is truly life.