

## “Signs of the Good Life”

Introduction: In the wake of last weekend’s tragic events in Orlando, FL, many good people are asking many good questions, ranging from how to prevent something like this from happening again, to how in the world can the world’s different people all live together? Among other things, those questions caused me to think about what is sometimes called the “good life.” This term goes back some 350 years before Jesus to a philosopher named Aristotle, who pondered what it would take for humans to flourish. What kind of life would make us truly happy, truly well off? What does a genuinely good human life look like?

Jesus gives his answer in the form of eight blessings, or beatitudes. Importantly, these blessings are not ways to earn rewards from God, nor are they ways to behave once we’ve believed. Instead, like Paul’s fruit of the Spirit, and the new wardrobe that we have seen him sketch out in his letter to the church at Colossae, the Beatitudes picture qualities that emerge—signs of the good life that begin to appear—as the kingdom of God takes increasing hold of us and God, by his Spirit, works his transforming grace within us. Certainly, living this kind of life would go a long way toward improving life on our planet. Significantly, the Beatitudes also picture a life far different from what the world would consider to be “good.”

Let’s look at the context in which Jesus speaks about this good life, and then at its first character trait, poor in spirit.

### I. The Context: The Future Spilling Into the Present

A. Jesus began his public ministry in the northern region of Palestine known as Galilee. It was a region that was considered to be “dark” by devout Jews because it was filled with pagan Gentiles. Into this darkness came Jesus. He came, as Matthew reports, “to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: . . . *the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned.*” And this is what this light began to declare: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:14-17).

B. What was happening? In Jesus, heaven had begun to invade earth. The long awaited Day of the Lord, when God had promised to intervene in human history and bring his plan of redemption to fulfillment, was at hand. It wasn’t happening all at once, but with the arrival of Jesus, this future had begun to spill over into the present. The good news was that Jesus had come to do more than just forgive sin, as important as that is. He had come to enable God’s new order to break into our brokenness. He had come to bring a new way of living, a way pictured in the Beatitudes, a way that was really upside-down from the way the world lived.

Illustration: If you were here last Sunday for Children’s Sunday, you may recall the preschool kids singing a song that helped them to learn the seasons of the church year. The first season in our year is Advent, and the little girl who held up that sign kept holding it up upside-down! But really how brilliant! For the season of advent is the one right before Christmas during which we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord, and his coming really does turn everything, as the world views it, upside-down. Although really we could say that it actually turns our life right-side up from God’s perspective for Jesus has come to bring us, and help us to live, the life that is truly life, the good life, a blessed and flourishing human life..

C. These “blessed are” statements, then, are ways in which Jesus begins to describe the kind of people, the new humanity that emerges when the kingdom of God starts to break into the world, when the future starts to spill over into the present, when we begin to live “right-side up.” They do not describe, let’s be clear, the way to get into the kingdom of God, the way to move from the curiosity of one in the crowd to the commitment of a disciple, or follower of Jesus. Jesus has earned our way. We enter the kingdom by his effort, not our own, appropriated by repenting and believing in him. Now that the age of the king has dawned, Jesus is teaching his disciples, his followers, what their new life will begin to look like as the gift of the Spirit gets to work in them.

## II. Right-Side Up Living: Poor in Spirit

A. The first sign of this good life, then, the first character trait of this new humanity demonstrates this upside-down turned right-side up living. Today, the dominant culture declares something like this: “Blessed are those who’ve got it all together and are rich in self-esteem, for they will be confident and in control.” Jesus turns that upside-down and says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” As one writer puts it (Dale Bruner), the words of Jesus which follow might better be named the Sermon from the Valley, instead of the Sermon on the Mount, because it starts low, with those who feel very unlike mountains!

B. But we don’t like to start low, do we? These days, it seems, virtually every social and psychological problem is blamed on having a low self-esteem. In this line of thinking, the solution to all of our problems, from poor educational performance, to teenage pregnancy, to anorexia, to crime, or to homelessness, is to boost the self-esteem of those who are suffering from such problems. However, in God’s way of thinking, that’s not where we need to begin. True healing, real life, begins when we are able to acknowledge that before God, we are nothing. We have empty hands and pockets. As the old hymn, “Rock of Ages” puts it: “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling. Naked come to Thee for dress, helpless look to Thee for grace.”

Illustration: Jesus told a parable which highlights this. Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee. He, Jesus explains, was confident in his own righteousness. He was overflowing with self-esteem. And so he prayed by thanking God that he was not like those robbers and adulterers, and even those tax collectors. Instead, he boasted of his spiritual disciplines. The other was a tax collector. He knew that we all can look pretty good when we compare ourselves to others, but when God is our standard none of us can measure up. This was reflected in his prayer as he simply prayed, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jesus explained that he, the tax collector, the one who was aware of his spiritual poverty, was the one in whom the reign of God had begun to take hold (Lk. 18:9-14).

This parable played out in real life when Jesus called a man named Peter to be his disciple. When Peter experienced an amazing catch of fish after Jesus had directed him where to cast his nets, he began to realize who Jesus was and who he was by comparison. He said, “Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!” In response, Jesus told him that this poverty of spirit was actually revealing that God was at work within him and that God would use him to do great things within his kingdom (Lk. 5:1-11).

C. Jesus, we need to recognize, is not using the word “poor” in a purely economic sense. In the OT, “poor” did mean to be in material need. But gradually, because the poor had no other refuge but God, it took on spiritual overtones. Like those at the beginning of a twelve-step recovery process, they recognize that they do not have it all together and are simply ready to receive whatever God has for them. What he has for them, what he has for us, is an extravagant love that comes to us while we are still sinners. It is where true self-esteem begins.

### III. Seeing Ourselves Clearly: The Church at Laodicea

A. That said, poverty of spirit is not a state we readily recognize on our own. How can we come to see ourselves clearly, as the tax collector, and Peter, did? Quite often, the Spirit uses the Word of God to open our eyes. In Revelation, we meet an entire church, in Laodicea, that thought it was rich, but was not seeing its actual spiritual poverty clearly. Using the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, Jesus directed John to write to this congregation and prick their hearts to help them realize they were not nearly as well off as they thought, but that they were far more loved by God than they could have imagined.

You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see (Rev. 3:17-18).

B. Let’s break this down a bit. Laodicea was famous for, and took great pride in, three things: Its many banks, all of which were highly solvent; its clothing industry, which exported garments all over the world, and its medical school, which had developed an effective salve to treat failing eyesight. So, there was no lack of self-esteem here. They had everything they needed, so they thought, to live life well on their own. But in reality, Jesus revealed that they were really poor, naked, and blind. They had stacks of gold, but were bankrupt in things of the Spirit. They stood fashionably adorned before the world but God knew their hearts. They could heal eyesight, but couldn’t see the things of God’s kingdom.

C. Significantly, God does not abandon these people! Instead, in Jesus, he moves toward them in compassion and love, as Jesus continues:

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me (Rev. 3:19-20)

Jesus pricks them with his word, he invites them to repent (to get in sync in their thinking with God’s ways), and then offers to come in and enjoy fellowship around the table with them (v. 20). He wants to give us glory of his kingdom: true riches, clothing that covers shame and guilt, and eyes to see him, and themselves, clearly.

What is the good life? We know we’re beginning to see signs of it when we begin to recognize our spiritual poverty clearly and open the door to enjoy the presence of Jesus. Because it is then, and only then, that God can begin to give us all that we need to live a right-side up life, a life that is in sync with his will, a life that can rule and reign rightly over all that he has entrusted to us, a life that is truly life..