

Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount with eight Beatitudes. These beatitudes look and sound nice, but I'm not sure anyone takes them seriously anymore. The meek don't inherit the earth. Nobody who is awash in grief or persecuted for what they believe would dare call themselves blessed.

I watched my fair share of college football over the holidays. I'll watch more of it tomorrow night when Clemson plays Alabama for the national championship. There are so many commercials in a TV football game; 10 commercial breaks each half adding up to a whopping 37 minutes of commercials in a three hour game. So, I came up with my own list of beatitudes based on the messages communicated by advertisers:

Blessed are those who gather in their man caves drinking Bud Lite beer with their football-watching buddy boys, arrayed in their colorful jerseys to root for their favorite team and play Madden 16 at halftime, for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are those who own the latest smartphones, who can pull up all sorts of data in a nanosecond and can keep up appearances on Facebook, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the rich and famous who vacation at tropical islands, who, for reasons unknown to me, have credibility to tell us what laundry soap to buy and what toothpaste to use, for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the beautiful people, thanks to Photoshop, of course, some of whom like the Kardashians are famous strictly for being famous, for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are those who drive luxury automobiles to exotic locations, who, for some inexplicable reason, end up as the only two people on a deserted stretch of white sandy beach, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are those who play Assassin's Creed or Transformers 5 on their Xbox or PlayStation, for they shall be satisfied.

You get the point. Jesus' beatitudes don't square with worldly values.

We've entitled this sermon series on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount "The Good Life." Advertisers portray the good life as looking good, feeling good and having lots of stuff. But the good life, according to Jesus, has nothing to do with things like appearance and material possessions. Who offers the good life? The beatitudes are Jesus' answer to what constitutes the good life and it's not what you think it is.

Don't be lulled to sleep with these nice-sounding, familiar words. Jesus' beatitudes are antithetical to what the world values.

Beatitude originates from the Latin word *beatitudo*, meaning happy, fortunate or blessed. When blessed appears in verbal form, it's pronounced as a single syllable. People speak of being blessed by any number of reasons. But when this word functions as a noun or adjective, such as it does here in Matthew, it's pronounced as two syllables, bless-ed.

These beatitudes all begin with the identical adjective. Blessed functions in adjectival relationship to the noun described in each beatitude, so blessed serves to modify the poor in spirit, those who mourn and so on. (Some of our students ought to receive extra credit from your English teachers on listening to this sermon!)

Make no mistake about it. Jesus challenges the prevailing wisdom of his day about what constitutes the good life. No one in their right mind would associate the good life with being

poor or mourning or meek. Jesus' beatitudes are upside down and countercultural to most everything the world considers important.

These beatitudes fit together into a well-constructed pattern. They are assembled like beads on a string to create an overall effect upon Jesus' listeners. Together, they bear witness to the good life God intends for people.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3). The poor in spirit, spiritually speaking, are those who know they don't have it all together. The poor in spirit recognize themselves to be spiritually impoverished. Blessed are those who know their need for God.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (5:4). This beatitude may seem incomprehensible to you, but remember what I said about how Jesus strings these beatitudes together to emphasize Jesus' main point. So, this beatitude on mourning naturally follows Jesus' earlier one about being poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn their sins; who grieve what they have done against God.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (5:5). Don't confuse meekness with weakness. There's nothing weak about Jesus' form of meekness. Jesus associates meekness with things like humility and gentleness, the antithesis of being aggressive. Blessed are those who are humble enough to know their need of God and mourn their sins.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled" (5:6). I'm helped by Eugene Peterson's translation of this verse in the *Message*, "Blessed are people who have worked up big appetites for God." Blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for God.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (5:7). Mercy is a word often associated with God in Scripture. Mercy is what God shows undeserving people like us. Jesus invites us to extend the same mercy shown to us to other people. Blessed are the merciful. Don't give people what they deserve. Give them more than they deserve.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (5:8). This beatitude stops me dead in my tracks. How can I possibly ever become pure in heart? This beatitude is not advocating personal purity, there are plenty of Jesus' teachings that do just that. Rather, Jesus is calling his followers to single-minded devotion. The Psalmist prays, "Give me an undivided heart that I may honor your name" (86:11). Blessed are those who seek God with wholehearted devotion.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (5:9). We could use more peacemakers in our day. We have an overabundance of people who like to stir up trouble and sow seeds of discord. Blessed are those who seek to resolve conflict, instead of escalating it.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:10). This is the only one of the eight beatitudes for which Jesus provides additional commentary. He goes on to say, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (5:11-12). Jesus seeks here to amplify and personalize what he has said in his 8<sup>th</sup> beatitude about persecution. His words are addressed specifically to Jesus' core disciples, as indicated by his shift to second person pronoun "you." Jesus' followers will be maligned for what they believe. Every single one of these original 12 apostles of Jesus likely died a martyr's death.

There are many places in the world today where Christians are persecuted for what they believe. My fear is not that my faith will cost me something, but rather that it will cost me nothing at all.

It would be a mistake to turn these beatitudes into a list of virtues, as though I am blessed if I am, say, merciful and peaceable. Rather, the first prerogative for entering the kingdom of God is acknowledging our need for God. Blessed are those who are humble and hungry, who are contrite and sorry for their sins. Blessed are those who are able to receive God's mercy and peace and can appropriate it to others.

I spent the last two days with elders from our church and members of our staff in future planning. Together, we are sensing that God is calling our church into a season of renewal. I'll say more about this renewal on the last Sunday of this month. Suffice it to say that we are asking for your help in discerning the kind of church God wants us to increasingly become.

Why not lean into God's renewal this morning? I've reframed these eight beatitudes as a series of questions for your consideration. Which of these eight questions are relevant to your situation right now? This might be called the so-what portion of today's sermon.

Am I willing to admit my need for God or have I become self-reliant?

Do I grieve my sin or do I secretly enjoy my pet sins?

Am I humble before God or defiant?

Am I hungry for God or have I lost my spiritual appetite?

Have I shown God's mercy to others or harbored resentment?

Am I single-minded or half-hearted in my devotion for God?

Am I peaceable or an agitator?

Am I willing to be persecuted or have I capitulated to secular culture?

Let me suggest, during the next few minutes, as you hear this song of reflection, that you identify one or two questions that need your attention. Ask God for desire and courage to make the necessary changes in your life.