How to Live Happily Ever After

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 6:17-26

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In the late 1930s, C.S. Lewis tried his hand at writing science fiction novels called *Space Trilogy*. In this series, Lewis reminds us repeatedly that the inhabitants of Mars view the residents of earth as “the bent ones.” The people of Mars are tall and straight, while earthlings are the bent ones. Even when angels appear on planet earth, they stand at an angle. This is not because the angels are off-kilter, but because we are.

Lewis is spot-on. We earthlings are the bent ones. Everything is off-kilter, twisted and distorted, what the Bible calls sin.

I have wrestled this week with Jesus’ woes. I’m good with his beatitudes, but Jesus’ woes do a number on me. If given half a chance, I will take wealth, a healthy diet, happiness and popularity every time.

Jesus challenges everything I have learned about what constitutes the good life. Money has exaggerated importance in my life. It creates a false sense of security in me. I am hungry for the wrong things. My appetite for God is not what it should be. I do not mourn my sins. I slough them off. I avoid persecution like the plague.

Jesus’ beatitudes and corresponding woes show me how far I am from the kingdom of God. My recoil at Jesus’ teaching shows me how indoctrinated I am to the world’s value system.

In fairy tales, people live happily ever after. I titled this sermon, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, *How to Live Happily*
Ever After. The blessed life Jesus offers stands in marked contrast to everything advertisers promote in our day.

If you identify with anything I have said, I urge you to come to these beatitudes with an open mind. Allow Jesus to pop your bubble about what constitutes the good life.

Today, we come to the sixth chapter of Luke’s gospel. Earlier in this same chapter, Jesus retreats to a mountain for prayer. He concludes his prayer summit by calling 12 men to become his disciples. He gives them the designation “apostles” meaning “sent ones.”

A large crowd of disciples and curiosity-seekers assemble at the base of the mountain for two reasons: to hear Jesus and to be healed by him. Jesus complies by healing their diseases and delivering a sermon. Since they gather on a level plain, we call Jesus’ message, the Sermon on the Plain.

Beatitude originates from the Latin beatitudo that commonly translates as bless-ed. Whenever this word appears in verb form, we pronounce it as one syllable, blessed. When it appears in noun or adjectival form, as it does here, we speak of it in two syllables, bless-ed.

These same beatitudes appear in Matthew’s gospel also. They are part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ version of the beatitudes in Matthew’s gospel is longer—nine beatitudes as opposed to four in Luke. The fact that Jesus speaks about these beatitudes in various forms should not
surprise us. As a preacher, I return to the same themes stated in any number of ways.

Jesus elaborates on these beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount. He declares, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (5:3) as opposed to Luke’s version, “Blessed are the poor (6:20). Jesus says in Matthew, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness” (5:6) while Luke’s account reads, “Blessed are you who are hungry” (6:24). I take this to mean there is both a material dimension as well as spiritual component to poverty and hunger. The poor and hungry can refer to destitute people in either body or soul.

Jesus’ beatitudes in Luke are obviously symmetrical. Jesus pairs each blessing with a counterbalancing woe. Allow me to elaborate.

Jesus’ first beatitude contrasts poor with rich: “Blessed are you who are poor” in verse 20 with “Woe to you who are rich” in verse 24. Jesus is not saying there is any inherent virtue in being poor or any sin in being rich. He sets up this stark distinction to prove a point. Our American society, like every other culture, fawns over money and those who acquire it. Jesus takes aim at those for whom making money is all-important. Look at what he says in verse 25, “Woe to you who are rich for you have already received your reward.” If our entire focus is making money, money is all we will ever get. Money has no lasting value. Build your life on it and you will come up empty in the end. Loving and serving God pays big spiritual dividends.
Jesus tells a parable in Luke’s gospel about a rich man who invests all his resources into building bigger barns to store his stuff. Jesus concludes the parable this way, “You fool. This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” (12:20).

The problem with wealth is that money lulls us into a false sense of security. Why do I need God, if I have all this money? The poor, on average, recognize their need of God. I would summarize this first set of contrasts this way: Blessed are you who know your need of God. Woe to you who become self-satisfied.

In his second beatitude, Jesus contrasts hunger with plenty: “Blessed are you who are hungry now” in verse 21 with “Woe to you who are well fed now” in verse 25. The same principle in this first beatitude holds for the second one also. Those who are well fed, who give no thought as to where their next meal will come from, can be duped into thinking they don’t need God. Jesus’ comeback to the devil who tempted him to turn stones into bread after his extended fast in the desert is classic: “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

I would summarize this second set of contrasts this way: Blessed are you who are hungry for God. Woe to you who have lost your appetite for God.

Jesus’ third beatitude contrasts weeping with laughter: “Blessed are you who weep now” in verse 21 with “Woe to
you who laugh now” in verse 25. Those who demonstrate a genuine capacity to mourn sin and decry social evil have a decided advantage at the end. They will have the last laugh when Jesus returns to inaugurate his kingdom, as reflected in these beatitudes. I would summarize this third set of contrasts this way: Blessed are you who mourn your sin. Woe to you who laugh it off.

Jesus’ fourth beatitude contrasts hatred with praise, “Blessed are you when people hate you” in verse 22 with “Woe to you who when everyone speaks well of you” in verse 26. Jesus accentuates hate with three related verbs: “Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, insult you and reject your name as evil.” Last Sunday in Luke 5, we read about disciples who left everything to follow Jesus (5:11, 28). Jesus prepares his disciples in this beatitude for resistance and outright persecution that is coming in the not too distant future. False prophets were adept at winning people’s favor by telling them what they wanted to hear. It is far better to tell the truth and risk unpopularity than to tell lies so that everyone will like you.

I would summarize this fourth set of contrasts this way: Blessed are you who are willing to suffer ridicule for what you believe. Woe to those who go along with the crowd.

There you have it, four sets of contrasts. Four blessings contrasted with four accompanying warnings. So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

Let me return to this business of living happily ever after. For starters, let me say from the outset, you do not need a Disney prince or princess to live happily ever after. Jesus’
prescription for happiness does require another person to make you happy.

The Jesus way is not the world’s way. The world’s way is all about money, fame and fortune. Eat, drink and be merry. The one with the most toys wins.

Jesus tells a much different story. Blessed are you who know their need of God. Blessed are you who hunger for God. Blessed are you who mourn your sins. Blessed are you when you risk ridicule in following in the way of Jesus.

Our focus this year in Luke’s gospel centers on three central ambitions or core commitments: commitment to the person of Christ, commitment to the body of Christ and commitment to the work of Christ.

First, we commit to the person of Christ. The central declaration of the Christian faith is a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

We acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Savior from sin. Sin—call it moral failing, trespass, debt, any name you want—is anything that separates us from God. We are unable by any amount of human striving to heal the breach caused by sin. God takes the initiative through Jesus Christ to stand in the gap. Christ’s death on the cross pays the penalty for our sins and extends to us the unconditional gift of forgiveness.
Our commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord is a lifelong pursuit. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus as Lord and Sovereign.

Second, we commit to the body of Christ. As followers of Jesus, we grow best in union with other believers. We prioritize worship and talk so much about having spiritual friends to share life because God created us to grow together in community.

Let me forewarn you. People, Christians included, will annoy you sometimes. Believers will disappoint you, intentionally or not. It just goes with the territory of being flawed people. The title of John Ortberg’s book says it all, Everybody’s Normal Till you Get to Know Them. Precisely!

Third, we commit to the work of Christ. A 4th grader, who will be baptized later this morning, has written in her statement of faith, “Jesus needs us to do his ‘earth work’ so we can enjoy heaven someday. He uses us to answer other people’s prayers and I want him to use me!"

I particularly enjoyed this line in her creed: “I know that God forgives me and hears me, even if I do not get an answer now. He will give me an answer someday, but it might be when I’m 45!”

Jesus has real work for us to do. It is not busy work; it is God’s kingdom work. The reason we read Luke’s gospel is to learn what Jesus does and then do it. Feed the poor—those with material need as well as those with spiritual impoverishment. Feed the hungry—those who hunger for food as well as those hungry for God. Comfort the mourning—those who mourn evil in their lives as well as those who mourn peoples’ passing. Tell the truth about God—love the Lord and love the people, serve the Lord and serve the people.