

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Scriptures: Matthew 5:1-12; Philippians 3:7-9

One of the best ways to understand the Beatitudes—the series of blessings that begin the Sermon on the Mount—is to imagine their opposite. So I am going to take you briefly through the eight Beatitudes listed on the back of the bulletin that we read earlier, and for each Beatitude I will suggest its opposite, which you could write in above the Beatitude to give yourself another way of understanding it.

1. “The poor in spirit.” The Greek word translated “poor” does not mean just economically disadvantaged. It means destitute, with no means of support except begging. To be poor in spirit mean to be spiritually bankrupt, to be helpless and in need of God’s grace. So what is the opposite? The opposite is being **self-reliant**, in control of your own destiny.
2. “Those who mourn.” The idea here is not just those who grieve the loss of a loved one but those who grieve for the state of the world, who feel the weight of all the world’s hurts and injustices. So what is the opposite? The opposite is the person who is **serene**, who is unfazed by the tragedy, suffering, or injustice of the world.
3. “The meek.” This sounds like someone who is mousy, but that is not the idea. After all Moses was called meek, and Moses was not someone you would call mousy. Nor was Jesus, who also calls himself meek. To be meek means to be gentle and self-effacing, rather than aggressive or coercive. The opposite of being meek is to be **assertive and imposing**, to exercise power and dominance over others.
4. “Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” This is the positive counterpart to the second Beatitude. Those who mourn over the injustice of the world are those who hunger for a new world, who yearn for God’s kingdom of righteousness and peace. So what is the opposite? The opposite are those who are **satisfied**, those who are content with their lives and world as it is.
5. “The merciful.” This is the positive counterpart to number 1. If the poor in spirit are those who feel spiritually bankrupt, then the merciful are those who see the bankruptcy of others and feel compassion. The opposite? The opposite are the **tough and demanding**, those who set high standards and expect people to meet them, or else.
6. “The pure in heart.” Think about metallurgy. Pure gold is gold that is unmixed with any other substance. So to be pure in heart means that your heart is focused and devoted to one thing; it is not mixed or distracted by other things. The pure in heart is the person devoted to God above all else. So the opposite is what I call **spiritual multitasking**. The person who tries to serve two or more masters at the same time.
7. “The peacemakers.” The peaceful person is the person who does not bother other people, but that is not what we are talking about here. A *peacemaker* is someone who gets in the middle of things, who actively builds bridges of reconciliation between individuals or groups. So the opposite of a peacemaker is someone **independent**, aloof, stays out of things and remains above the fray.
8. “The persecuted.” The persecuted are described more vividly in the last two verses. They are the ones whom people revile, against whom people utter all kinds of malicious things that are not true. So what is the opposite? The opposite are the **popular**, the ones about whom everyone always says nice things.

Now let's take a look at these two lists. Who are you more likely to describe as happy? Those who are needy, grieving, self-effacing, dissatisfied, soft-hearted, single-minded, involved, and disliked? Or those who are self-reliant, serene, assertive, satisfied, tough, diverse, independent, and popular? If *Seventeen* magazine did a survey of the qualities most admired in a person of the opposite sex, which list would most people choose?

You see the problem. Jesus' description of the happy person, the blessed person, does not sound at all like the kind of person we would call happy or blessed. So what is going on?

The key is something Jesus says back in Matthew chapter 4. He says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Why does Jesus consider blessed the people who are needy, grieving, self-effacing, dissatisfied, soft-hearted, and unpopular? Because these are the qualities that make you ready for the kingdom of God.

Think about it. The self-reliant don't need the kingdom of God, or at least they don't think they need it. They can manage quite well on their own, thank you. Neither do the serene, the assertive, or the satisfied. They are not looking for a new king who will turn everything upside down. They like things the way they are. Only those who see themselves as needy, weak, dissatisfied with the world as it is, and yearning for something better—only they will welcome the coming of God's kingdom.

If you notice, most of the blessings promised in the Beatitudes are in the future tense. Even Jesus admits there is nothing blessed about being poor, mournful, meek, hungry, or persecuted. The blessing is in what God will do for those people. Those who are poor in spirit, those who feel inadequate and totally reliant on God, will be joyfully surprised to discover that the kingdom of God is for them. Those who mourn the injustices and suffering of the world will be comforted and even delighted when God does something about it. Those who hunger for a world of righteousness and peace and who even now are trying to make it happen will be filled with joy when it finally comes about in God's kingdom. Those who are invested in the world as it is will not appreciate the end of it. But those who yearn for a better world and are trying to embody it, who are trying to show what a world of mercy, righteousness, and peace might look like—these people will find all their hopes and dreams fulfilled in the kingdom of God.

But there is a blessing to be experienced even now. Did you notice that the first and last blessings are not in the future tense but the *present* tense? The first Beatitude says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven." The same thing is said in the last Beatitude: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven."

William Willimon, a Methodist minister, tells of a man in his church who served in the army during World War II and participated in the D-day invasion of Normandy. One day he was talking to his pastor about the sufferings, deprivation, and horrors of that experience, but then he said, "Still, I look back on those four years as the very best years of my life. For once in my life I had the feeling I was part of something, part of something bigger than myself. ... We had a mission."

Is it possible to be cold, hungry, suffering, and endangered and still feel like those are the best years of your life? Yes, it is, if you are part of something bigger than yourself, if you are on a mission that will affect the course of history.

Is it possible to be blessed if you are poor, sad, weak, hungry, or persecuted? Yes, it is, if you are part of a mission, part of something bigger than yourself, part of God's new kingdom in Jesus.

- Ken Onstot
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