

I want to begin my sermon this morning with an imagination exercise. I want all of you to press the rewind button and transport yourselves back to Friday afternoon, just minutes before you are done your work for the week. Whether it's work at home or school, the job site or the office, you are minutes away from the finish line.

The radio is on in the background, and you can hear a familiar advertisement--it ends with the following words: *the next Lotto 649 jackpot is worth an estimated \$57 million dollars.* With these words, you drift off into a daydream where you've just won the jackpot--the "good life" awaits you. Can you see it? Can you feel it?

The only question is, *how would you define the "good life"?* Some of us might begin our definition with freedom from work--no more school, no more diapers or housework, no more long hours on the job. For others of us, the "good life" wouldn't be the absence of work, but success and recognition in our work.

Your definition of the "good life" might include might include cars, boats, houses, and art work. It might include vacations, adventures, and seasons tickets to the theatre or to your favourite sports team--personally, I'd begin with seasons tickets to the Whitecaps.

The "good life" might go on to include things like a personal trainer, regular trips to the spa, or an exotic pet like a platypus, or a cheetah--I'd definitely go for the cheetah. Or how about your own helicopter, complete with pilot? I could fly from Blue Ridge to the church and never get stuck in traffic again!

For many, the "good life" comes down to all the things that money can buy--a life in which every desire can be pursued and satisfied. Interestingly, the Bible offers something of a parallel--not the "good life" but the "*blessed life.*" And not surprisingly, the "blessed life" is markedly different; it's the life that God blesses, the life God approves of. This blessed life can't be bought with money, but it can be yours.

Last Sunday, I said that an idea can be a powerful thing--ideas often begin small, like a mustard seed, but an idea can take over a mind, a family, a church, a city, a country. Once an idea takes root, it can change the way the world thinks and behaves. Jesus had such an idea--His idea was for the life of heaven to invade earth. Not a hostile takeover, but rather, an alternative to the pursuit of the "good life"--the "good life" will never satisfy our soul cravings.

In Matthew 5-7, Jesus preached what has come to be known as the Sermon On The Mount--it is greatest sermon ever spoken. G.K. Chesterton once wrote, "The first time you read the *Sermon*, you feel like it turns everything upside down. The second time you read it, you feel like it turns everything right-side-up."

For much of the Summer, I read through Jesus' *Sermon* everyday and experienced two equal but opposite forces--His *Sermon* attracted and repelled me. Like a moth to a flame, I am drawn to the light of Jesus' words--they are both light and life. When we follow Jesus, the blessed life awaits us. But, Jesus' Sermon is both light and flame--His words expose and sometimes they burn.¹

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7*, 11.

Jesus' *Sermon* is neither a rule book to follow, nor a choose-your-own adventure--it's an invitation into life, the life that God blesses. And it's to His *Sermon* that we now turn our attention. Please turn in your Bible with me to Matthew 5:1-12 (page _____ in the Blue Bible).

"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. He said:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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."

This morning I'm going to focus on the first three beatitudes, and we will look at the remaining five over the following two Sundays. But before I begin, I'd like to make five general observations about the beatitudes.

a. Observation #1: When you hear the word beatitude, think of a kingdom-character-quality. These 8 beatitudes do not describe 8 different people--these 8 character qualities describe the person who is being transformed by Jesus.

b. Observation #2: The word beatitude is a rough translation of the Latin word "*beatus*," which itself is a rough translation of the Greek word "*makarios*". These two words communicate the notion of blessing--the blessed life, the one who is blessed. The one who is truly blessed is the one who is approved by God. In the beatitudes, Jesus blesses character qualities that have received God's stamp of approval.

c. Observation #3: The qualities that Jesus blesses are not natural human qualities. We are not asked to produce these qualities. These qualities are not entrance requirements into God's kingdom. The Holy Spirit produces these qualities in the person who actively follows Jesus. As we become rooted in Jesus, and He in us, "new character rises up within us, new behaviours, ambitions, and motives."²

² Darrell Johnson, *Regent Class: The Sermon On The Mount*, 2.

d. Observation #4: The first and last beatitudes, #'s 1 and 8, are bracketed by the words, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus’ language is not “theirs will be,” but “theirs is” the kingdom. Jamie Arpin-Ricci writes, “the people described in the Beatitudes are fortunate in the here-and-now because they live in the assurance that God’s promises are being fulfilled, in part in the present and in fullness in the future.”³

Those who follow Jesus in the present can expect to experience His life, His will, His power, and His blessing in the present--the kingdom is available now.

e. Observation #5: Note also the position of the words “their” and “they” in each of the beatitudes. The implication of these words is “theirs and only theirs,” “they and only they”. God’s kingdom is available to all, but, only those who follow Jesus reap the blessing of God’s kingdom. Membership has its privileges.

For example, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for *they* [and only they] will be filled.” Last week I quoted Thomas Merton, who writes, “Life is shaped by the end you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire.”⁴ Those who make God their pursuit, who prioritize time spent with Him, who seek His face, they and only they will be filled. Those who don’t, likely won’t. Jeremiah 29:13 says, “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*”

The beauty of Jesus’ *Sermon* is found in its simplicity--one doesn’t need to be particularly old or educated in order to grasp what Jesus is saying. But intellectual knowledge and experiential knowledge are two very different things--one takes but a moment, the other will span our entire lifetime. Jesus’ promise is that it is worth it--the life Jesus’ blesses is the only life worth living.

With these observations behind us, let’s turn our attention to the first beatitude:

1. “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs [and only theirs] is the kingdom of heaven.*”

In the mid 90’s, I went to a college, nearly 2000 kilometers from home. Back then I referred to myself as a “poor student”. I had enough money for tuition, books, and two square meals a day. When I was hungry at night, I would cook up a batch of no-name-ichiban-noodles--back then you could buy five packages for a dollar--they didn’t taste great but they kept my stomach full.

But even at my hungriest, I didn’t really know hunger--I was eating two and half meals a day. I’m a white, Canadian, male--I’m a part of the most privileged 10% of people on the entire planet. Not only did I have food in my stomach and a roof over my head, I had money for tuition, access to health care, and a warm shower every day.

³ Jamie Arpin-Ricci, *The Cost Of Community: Jesus, St. Francis and Life in the Kingdom*, 37.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts In Solitude*, 55.

Poverty--real economic poverty is devastating; there is very little blessing in this kind of poverty. There are some in our own community who live on the edge of poverty; they feel its razor thin edge every day.

So what is it that Jesus calls blessed? *Who are the "poor in spirit" and why is this a kingdom-character-quality?*

The Greek word that is translated here as "poor," refers to someone who is destitute and forced to beg--this person doesn't have the bare essentials and they know it. The one who is poor in spirit recognizes that they need God--utterly and completely--and they have let go of the illusion that they stand on equal footing before God.

All of us stand before God in moral and spiritual bankruptcy--we are empty-handed, cleaned out, down to our last penny, unable to save ourselves. *Blessed are you, Jesus says, when you declare spiritual bankruptcy.* But let's not misunderstand what Jesus is saying to us. The blessing doesn't lie in the poverty itself, the blessing is a life surrendered to God.

Blessed are you when you recognize your need. Blessed are you when you come humbly, asking for, and expecting to receive God's grace and mercy. Blessed are you when you turn to God, knowing that He is generous, kind, and loving. Blessed are you when you delight to surrender and submit to Jesus, for yours and only yours is the kingdom.

illus: when I think about this kingdom-character-quality, a certain friend comes to mind--his name is Ray. Ray is bright, capable, and extremely well-connected. Ray is one of the most gifted individuals I

have ever met, but he hardly seems aware it. I am not being dramatic when I say that to listen to him pray, or to interact with him, is to be in the presence of the Lord Jesus Himself.

Ray wasn't born with this poverty of spirit--it isn't a natural human quality--but he has cultivated a life with Jesus, He has surrendered and submitted to the Holy Spirit's influence and that has made all the difference.

One of the signs of a poverty of spirit is the ability to laugh at oneself--Ray can laugh at himself because he's fixated on Jesus, not his own reputation. He knows who he is: bankrupt before Jesus **and** loved beyond measure. I wonder, do we know these same truths?

"Blessed are the poor in spirit"--why did Jesus start His Sermon with these words? Is it not because His entire Sermon rests on this truth? We ignore this first beatitude to our own peril. It reminds us that we are incapable of living out Jesus' sermon on our own. It reminds us that the character qualities Jesus speaks of are not natural qualities. It reminds us that our inclusion in God's kingdom is pure gift. Blessed is the person that knows they need God, they and only they find entry into the blessed life.

Let's turn our attention to the second beatitude:

2. *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they [and only they will] will be comforted.*

Ecclesiastes 3 reminds us that there is *"a time to be born and a time to die, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance"*. I've been to many funerals, too many. Some were

funerals for friends and others for family: a nephew, uncles, grandparents, a brother-in-law, my own mom. I've sat and cried my way through verbal and video tributes. I've been to other funerals where I've stood on this stage, or one like it, and I've looked out over a sea of faces that were crying their way through verbal and video tributes. I've offered words of comfort, pointing to the hope that can be found in Jesus.

Most of you know what it is to mourn the death of someone you loved. The Greek word that we translate "mourn," conveys a range of meanings including sadness, grief, and sorrow, and weeping, but the mourning Jesus talks about here, is not kind we associate with the death of a loved one. Jesus is talking about mourning over sin, rebellion, and oppression.

The question is, *why is this kind of mourning a kingdom-character-quality?*

Let's go back to the first beatitude. Those who are poor in spirit recognize that they stand before God empty-handed--they need what God possesses. But standing before God is about more than recognizing our need. In Jesus, we see God's glory; in Jesus we see God's intention for humanity.

We mourn the fact that our sin, our rebellion, is an affront to God--we have fallen short of God's glory and His intention for our lives. The only appropriate response is to grieve what's been lost--God's honour, His glory, and our own dignity.

I want to distinguish here between feeling bad--which we typically get over--and mourning what has been lost. What good is it, to feel

badly about our anger, pride, or our greed? Does feeling badly change anything? Does it help us, God, or others?

Grief can be redemptive, at times it is a precursor to repentance, to action, to transformation. Those who mourn for what has been lost, have the capacity to see what could be. One author writes, "Those who mourn are aching visionaries".

When we mourn over our sin, the Holy Spirit reminds us that if we are in Christ, there is no longer any condemnation--the death Jesus died, He died for us, that we might know God's forgiveness and mercy. When we inwardly groan over the state of the world, the Holy Spirit groans within us, reminding us that God is not finished with this world--He is at work to save, heal, and restore; one day, all will be well.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they [and only they] will be comforted." There can be no deep, lasting, comfort apart from a restored, reconciled relationship with God. Lasting comfort doesn't flow from a promotion, a new relationship, a success, or from winning the jackpot.

I want to ask you to read something out loud with me, words that Dallas Willard penned about the nature of joy. Let's read them together, *"Joy is not pleasure, a mere sensation, but a pervasive and constant sense of well-being."*

John Ortberg writes, "Joy is not pleasure. Not a mere sensation. Not just feeling happy in the moment because of something that's going on. It is a pervasive and constant knowledge of well-being that

ultimately, all is well with me and not just with me, but with all things. That's joy. [That's comfort.]

Question. Can you get joy from alcohol? A Baptist church would know the correct answer to this question. I'll put it another way. Could massive, daily amounts of alcohol reliably provide pervasive and constant well-being for the human race? No. Neither can applause. Neither can achievement. Neither can human approval. Neither can the right title. Neither can technology. Neither can education. Neither can money. What in the world could provide pervasive and constant well-being for the entire human race and all of creation?"⁵ Ortberg continues, "Only God. Only God could do that."⁶

When we turn to Jesus, we are promised the comfort that comes through divine exchange: we receive a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.⁷ We may be empty handed, but God's hands are full. Let's now turn our attention to the third beatitude:

3. *"Blessed are the meek, for they [and only they will] will inherit the earth.*

Let's play a little word association game. When you hear the word "meek" what's the first word that comes to mind? For many, meek equals weak, spineless, gutless. Most aspire to be leaders, not

followers; the centre of attention, not wall-flowers. Nice guys finish last.

The Greek meaning of the word "meek" was drawn from the world of domestic animals--it referred to animals that had learned to accept the direction of their master. Interestingly enough, only two people in the entire Bible are ever described as being meek--one was Moses, and the other was Jesus. Was Jesus weak, spineless, or gutless? Far from it, but He was utterly committed to listening to the Father, and following His lead.

Being meek doesn't mean being passive, those one who is meek actively responds to what God is saying and doing. Jesus did what He saw the Father doing, He said what He heard the Father saying, He went where the Father was going. Jesus' meekness was anything but weakness--He trusted the Father in difficulty, He did good in the face of evil, He voluntarily chose death on a cross that we might receive life.

The question is, why is meekness a *kingdom-character-quality*?

I suspect it's because it's so much easier for God to use those who are meek--they cooperate when God gives them directions. They, and only they, can participate in God's kingdom without clutching, grabbing, and stockpiling for themselves--they can do this because they're fundamentally committed to living for God, not themselves.

⁵ John Ortberg, *The Cycle Of Grace*, 2.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Isaiah 61:

illus: In Bible school, I got to know a guy by the name of Trevor--he was a farm kid from small-town-Alberta. If I had a use a word to describe Trevor, it would be this word, *meek*. Trevor was kind, gentle, humble, content with second place, happy to serve, willing to put others' needs ahead of his own. But Trevor was no pushover, we all came to discover that in an unexpected way.

If you've never attended Bible school, and never lived in one of the dorms, you likely have a warped view what life at Bible school is really like. Yes, there are lots of Bibles, but in my dorm there were just as many body slams. Our dorm loved to wrestle--we would drag our mattresses down to the common area, lay them on the floor and then watch people square off, "mano et mano".

Trevor was about my height but as strong as an ox. My hands were made for keyboards, his hands were made for cattle and bales of hay--his fingers were twice as thick as mine. Though all of us were in our late teens and early twenties, Trevor had what most of us didn't have--man-strength.

One night, one of the guys had a few too many cans of Jolt and started challenging everyone in sight--none of us wanted a piece of him, none that is but Trevor. With a big smile on his face, Trevor said something like, *I can wrestle with you if you'd like?* This other guy had about 6 inches and at least 50 pounds on Trevor, but that didn't stop Trevor from throwing him right through a glass window. What's most impressive is that Trevor's kind smile remained on his face the entire time.

Meekness requires a strength of character: it was present in Moses, present in Jesus, and I've seen it in many others, Trevor included. It's

not the proud, the demanding, the aggressive, or the powerful that will inherit the earth. *Blessed are the meek*, says Jesus, *for they [and only they] will inherit the earth.*

The question is when? When will the meek inherit the earth? One day, when Jesus, when Jesus returns, there will be a great reversal--but already it has begun. Have you ever noticed that those who push, grab, and demand, seldom enjoy what they've taken? It doesn't satisfy them, they need more, and the more they take the less they are satisfied.

The meek content themselves with what Jesus has given, after all, they've set their feet on following Jesus, and they already have what they desire most--they have Him.

Conclusion: We may never live the "good life" but all of us can live the "blessed life"--Jesus invites us into a way of living that can truly satisfy.

There seems to be a flow to these first three beatitudes: those who recognize they are bankrupt before God, are those who mourn over their sin, and this allows them to be meek, they've to look to Jesus and follow His lead, knowing that the way of Jesus leads to life.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, some of you will be going home to enjoy a feast with friends or family--this morning we celebrate the greatest feast of all: the Lord's Supper.

On the night He was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "*This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.*" In the same way, after

supper Jesus took the cup, saying, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.*"

Those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn over their sin, the meek, they are welcome at Jesus' table--for they and only they can receive what Jesus gives: grace, mercy, forgiveness, love. If you know you are spiritually bankrupt, if you are hungry and thirsty for God, if you desire to live the life that is blessed by God, then come to the table this morning and receive God's blessing and favour.