

The Good Life

The Beatitudes Matthew 5:1-12

What do you think of when you think of “The Good Life.” You may think of lifestyles of the rich and famous, of beautiful people in beautiful places with beautiful things driving cars you normally only see on *Top Gear*. That’s the Good Life.

For some of a certain age you may think of the British comedy with Richard Briers and Felicity Kendall! Perhaps their model of a simple life, environmentally sensitive, in touch with nature, low carbon footprint existence is the way forward. That is “The Good Life”. But such a good life presents a challenge as it confront our wastefulness and distorted priorities and calls on us to change.

Today, as we listen to very famous words of Jesus, we will have cause to reconsider “The Good Life” and indeed we will have to ponder our own life and how good or otherwise it is.

THE SETTING

As we come to the Beatitudes, the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, it is important that we put this well known part of Scripture in the proper context of Matthew’s Gospel. They were not given to us as a postcard of pious thoughts to put up on the fridge but as part of an ongoing picture of who Jesus is. Jesus has begun his preaching ministry calling on people to repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. He has demonstrated the power of the kingdom by his amazing healing which has drawn people from all over Israel to him. It appears that the good times are coming back to God’s people.

Jesus then pulls to one side to teach his disciples to teach them of the life of the Kingdom. Whilst he is aware that the crowd is listening in he teaches those closest to him what it will be like to be one of his followers. They may be looking for the secrets of spiritual power or a new set of rules that need to be kept in the glorious kingdom that is to come, but Jesus makes it clear that this Kingdom is going to be radically different than they think.

THE BEATITUDES 5:3-10

Jesus then tells his disciples the way of blessing. It is worth us thinking about this word “blessing” for a moment. Some English translations have used the word “Happy” but that is hard to maintain especially when talking about mourning. Something more profound is being said. To bless something is to say yes to it, to commend it. And who is doing the blessing here? All indications are that it is God. So rather than simply pointing the way to be happy more deeply Jesus is describing the kind of life of which God approves, which gets God’s tick of approval, God’s Good Life, the way of his kingdom.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The mood is set by the first beatitude which not only sets the pattern for the seven other statements that follow but also the prime ingredient of receiving all the blessing that is to follow. Jesus describes as blessed, approved of by God, those who are poor in spirit. What does this oft used phrase mean? The best way to understand

what Jesus means here is to remember some words from Isaiah 66:2 “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.”

To be poor in spirit means then to recognise our unworthiness before God, his loftiness, and our lowliness before him. It is not about self induced self humility, or low self esteem but a proper recognition of who God is and our place before him. As Jesus teaches elsewhere it is only when we recognise this that we are ready to repent and so enter the Kingdom. This first aspect of the Good Life then is fundamental. It is when we recognise that we have nothing to give that we can receive the gift of the Kingdom. Unless we recognise our emptiness God cannot fill us.

Poor in spirit, was that high on your list of the Good Life? It should be, it is the way into the Kingdom.

Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

The list continues to challenge us. Blessed are those who mourn. This does not mean simply those who have been bereaved although it includes them. But also those who grieve for the state of the world. Those who see the injustice, the greed, the dehumanising effect of all manner of sin and are deeply moved. This has been true of many great Christians such as William Wilberforce.

I was not a great English student at school but I recognise that grammar can be important, and it certainly is here. We need to notice that the tense of the verb has changed, from “is” to “will”. Those who are poor in spirit are promised the Kingdom of Heaven now, but those who mourn will be comforted in the future. This is a point to which we will have to return. But for now does the world cause you to mourn, or are we too comfortable?

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

My daughter used to wear a T Shirt that says, “Last time I checked the world does revolve around me!” Whilst this may be the way that many think and live this is the exact opposite of meek. To be meek means break out of the illusion that we are the centre of the universe.

Man ruined the earth by grasping for more in thinking too highly of himself, it is only appropriate that those who refuse to think like Adam will inherit the earth they were made for. The language of inheriting the earth should also point us to recognising that that the blessing on view here is not just a pious spiritual hope, but an earthly expectation, just as we pray that God’s will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Whilst again this is in the future is meekness something we treasure and aim for?

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

What about hunger and thirsting for righteousness? The desire to live the way that God call us to, not about following rules but to live in such a way that it pleases God. We look for satisfaction in so many ways, we hunger and thirst for so many things which do not satisfy. Are we looking in the wrong place?

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

A major part of pleasing God is reflecting his merciful nature, as is captured in the Lord’s Prayer. Do we have compassion on the miserable and downtrodden? God has had mercy on us, do we show it, do we seek to show it to others? If we don’t, have we really understood God. It is all too easy to harden our hearts to others.

Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.

It is also all too easy to have a polluted heart. We may be good at outward conformity to religious practices, to social norms but how is our heart. Each week we remind ourselves in prayer that we come before God before whom all hearts are open, all desires known. What does God see? Do we aim to have pure hearts, to clear our lives and minds of so much that pollutes? The promise is great, that of seeing God, could anything be worth more than that?

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

The Bible always has a special place of making peace, in fact the whole Bible is about how peace is established between God and humanity. As God is a peacemaker those who will be known as his children should also be peacemakers, people who are always looking for reconciliation in all areas of life.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

We have seen a sketch of the Good Life as Jesus sees it: poor in spirit, grieved at sin, meek, focused on righteousness, mercy, purity and peace and part and parcel of this life approved by God, Jesus says, will be persecution.

We need to notice that the tense of the verb has returned to the present. The presence of persecution does not threaten membership of the kingdom rather it confirms it.

THE COST OF THE GOOD LIFE: PERSECUTION 5:11-12

Whilst we may want to skip over the idea of persecution Jesus will not let us do that for this is the one element of the beatitudes that he expands on. No longer speaking in generalities he addresses his followers directly and tells them they are blessed if they are persecuted because of their allegiance to him, incidentally linking following him with righteousness. Furthermore they are to rejoice in their suffering because it puts them in the same league as the Old Testament Prophets with a great heavenly reward.

But why is persecution such a given? Surely it is because God's Good Life as Jesus has described it is totally counter cultural both then and now. People do not usually sign up for humility and meekness classes but assertiveness, how to influence people, how to use people. Likewise there are no colleges of discipline, mercy, purity, peacemaking. In general people do not see this as the way to the Good Life, they have other very different ideas. It was true then and it is true now.

How would our world write its beatitudes? I had a go at writing a modern version:

Blessed are the rich in possessions for theirs is the Kingdom of this world.

Blessed are those who are unconcerned for they shall not be troubled.

Blessed are the powerful for they shall take the inheritance of others and get away with it.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for material wealth for there will always be more to get.

Blessed are the hardhearted for they shall obtain whatever they want no matter the cost.

Blessed are the celebrities for they shall be seen by everybody.

Blessed are the entertained for they shall be called children of television.

Blessed are those who are always comfortable for then they are truly at home in the Kingdom of this world.

When Christians live in the world showing a lifestyle that is counter cultural the dominant culture won't like it. In living a way that doesn't want to be comfortable in the Kingdom of this World but rather moves to the tune of a different Kingdom it should not be a surprise if the World doesn't like it. We are whistle blowing on the false values of this world and our world does not like whistle blowers. But as Jesus goes on to say being salt and light are not options for the follower of Jesus, we are to shine even if some will not like the light. If we are never persecuted, is our light shining?

Just in case we doubt the link between persecution and living this blessed way of life we should remember that this is exactly what happened to Jesus. The one who lived the perfect life of humility, meekness, discipline, mercy, purity and peacemaking was certainly persecuted, and more than we shall ever be.

THE PROMISE OF THE GOOD LIFE: LIVED OUT IN JESUS

It does not look like I am making a great case for following this way of blessedness. It is hard, there is suffering and persecution, and if we are honest it often doesn't seem to work. It is easy to say "blessed are those who mourn" but for those those who are truly grieving where is their comfort.

Why on earth then should we seek to live this way? We see the clue in the point we have just made. Jesus lived this out, he lived out the Beatitudes perfectly and yes he suffered, but he was also raised from the dead. In that event we can see the truth of all the promises of Beatitudes.

Here is the comfort for all who mourn, for in the resurrection there is the promise of a world put right and an end to death, mourning, crying and pain for one day they will be done away with. Here is the promise of a new creation with a restored humanity for those who look meekly to Jesus, here will be satisfaction for those who long for righteousness when true judgement will come, here is when we shall all fully see the awesome, graceful mercy of God when we shall see God and be shown and declared to be his children. In the resurrection the King is seen and the Kingdom is shown to ultimately triumph.

This is why it is important to recognise the difference between the present and future promises. In being poor in Spirit, recognising our need of God, of his gift of the Kingdom, and being willing to suffer if necessary for it, we are assured that the Kingdom is ours now, which carries all the promises for the future. Our motivation for living this strange "Good Life" of the Kingdom then is not the hope of future reward, but rather knowing this Kingdom is ours already we are to live God's good life out now and work for it to be a reality here and now.

We need to return to the beatitudes and let them reconfigure, re orient, restructure us as Kingdom people as we await God's kingdom come.