

# They're Blessed! Wait, what?

Texts: Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5: 1-12

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"This above all – to thine own self be true."

This will be the theme of many commencement addresses this year, as it has been for at least the last 60 years, and it is one of the unspoken assumptions of our modern world, the unquestioned wisdom of our age.

The august speaker will urge young people to find out what they really want in life, to look inside themselves for their deepest desires, and then to go after that.

"You must be true to you. Don't conform! Don't live someone else's dream. Don't let anyone tell you what to do! Your life is about you and you must live it to the full. Seek greatness in being yourself. Don't be caught living someone else's life. Let your life be poetry while all about you live their lives in prose! Seek your happiness in personal fulfillment and the world will richly reward you!

"Your most important task in life is to find out who you are, and to be suspicious of anyone who wants to change that. Be free, be yourself, and be great! Now go get'em!"

And everyone will cheer, and then the hats will fly, and the parents will rush forward to hug their newly graduated offspring, and the offspring will, of course, rush off in the other direction to hug their soon to be departing friends, and they'll take smiling selfies together which will appear instantly on Instagram, or for those a little behind the times, a little while later on Facebook, and the world's their oyster.

Most of the people there will assume that this advice comes from the Bible, "to thine own self be true," because it sounds King James Bible-y, and that it is the height of wisdom.

But it actually comes, as most high schoolers know, from one of Shakespeare's tragedies, Hamlet, and it's spoken by the character Polonius, a character who is, according to the great Shakespearean critic William Hazlitt, "generally regarded as wrong in every judgment he makes over the course of the play."<sup>1</sup> Hamlet later calls him a "tedious old fool."

So it looks like the probably wrong advice of a tedious old fool has become the unquestioned wisdom of this world and the philosophy of our age! It sure sounds good, doesn't it? There's a reason that it's the advice that's given so often at commencements. But is there better advice?

Jesus certainly thinks so, but when you first hear it, you're going to think he's insane. Okay, well, you did just hear it in the Bible reading, but it was all dressed up in Bible-ese and it sounded very pious, so you probably just nodded and never gave it a second thought.

But, of course, Jesus never went off after nods, and no one ever nodded off at one of Jesus' sermons. They were electric. They were on fire. The man could preach, but he couldn't do

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polonius>

anything about his translators, so let's try to get a sense of what it might have sounded to hear the Beatitudes the first time around.

Jesus is giving a kind of commencement address to reshape the values of his followers, and to tell them what their life ahead is likely to be like.

Here's Jesus again, translated from Bible-ese, and what he actually says is scandalously shocking!:

"You know who's really looking good? The poor, that's who! They've got it made, right! They might not have much now, but, hey, the kingdom of heaven is going to be theirs!

And you know who else it's looking up for? People who just lost a loved one! They're going to be feeling much better really soon.

And while I'm at it, let's say a good word for the powerless, people who aren't the movers and the shakers, just the ordinary Joes who get stepped on by the people on the way to the top. What a great place to be; how lucky they are! Hurray for the meek! The world is really going to be their oyster in due course!

Also topping the list of blessed folks, why it's people who have been wronged in a big way, like really screwed over by the system, who just want their day in court even if the whole thing is rigged against them. It's good to be you! Justice is coming, and I don't mean Judge Judy style! No way, real justice, yep, satisfaction for that hunger and quenching for that thirst for justice!

Plus, people who are merciful, the kind of people everyone calls pushovers, those people who could take revenge but don't, the kind who could refuse to forgive, but don't, who could extract a pound of flesh, but don't. Mercy is as mercy does, and mercy me, that's a blessing for you!

Did I mention people who tell the truth and don't try to trick other people? People where what you see is what you get? Those people are the pure in heart, and they're getting a blessing from God. What they have is 20-20 vision right there! And God will be in their sights very soon.

Know who else takes the biscuit: the peacemakers! Sure the arms manufacturers hate them, and they put themselves in harm's way to stop people who don't want to be stopped from blowing each other up, but they get to be called children of God. And a good name is worth a lot.

You know what shows you're really doing it right? When people hate your guts, I mean really just revile you! That's good, if it's for the right reason! When they want to torture you, slander you, and tell wicked lies about you, just because you know me, just because you're showing love and compassion, well, then it's time to throw a party. Then you'll know you're right on track!"

When you really think about it, these people that Jesus says are blessed have a pretty tough lot. Poor, grieving people in the middle of a war zone, fighting a corrupt justice system to get their due, getting insulted and persecuted and slandered for showing love and mercy. That is not what I think of first when I hear "blessed are..."

Jesus would probably not be invited to too many modern commencements! But I don't think Jesus is far wrong in showing what a Christian life might be like.

Jesus is laying out a different kind of life for his disciples clearly and plainly. He's demonstrating what it means to be pure in heart by not sugar coating what following him means. No deception, just a straight forward program for living differently, and valuing things differently.

Following Jesus means you're going to change the world all right, but it's not going to be easy, and it won't be all about you.

A lot of the world's values are going to be turned on their head, and Jesus's followers are going to be living a very alternative lifestyle, and we all know how welcome people leading an alternative lifestyle are in society! Usually not very!

Jesus says that the people who are really blessed are those who have set aside every striving for self-interest and have decided to live like he does: loving others, longing for what is right, showing mercy and kindness to everyone who needs it, respecting the poor as made in God's image just as much as the wealthy, often putting other's needs first.

Now, before we go further, let me say one important thing: none of this means that you don't need to take care of yourself. You can't offer yourself for others if there's nothing left of you to give. Jesus shows the way himself, often withdrawing to a quiet place to rest and pray, sometimes taking his friends with him, sometimes going off on his own, but he makes sure he takes time to get strength from God for the journey, and to recharge his own batteries.

And living your life as Jesus did doesn't mean not loving who you are, or working to develop your deepest being.

Jesus once again shows the way pointing to the second great commandment in Scripture, which is to love others *as you love yourself*. Embedded in that summary of the Law is that you have to love yourself first with due measure, so you can love others in that same way. There's no erasure of your self here, but it's no longer the ultimate or only goal of your life. Your love for yourself is the measure of your love for others, so by all means love yourself a lot, but love others a lot, too.

Ok, back to Jesus' commencement address. It's not just the Beatitudes we heard today. They're just the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which is where Jesus explains in greater detail what he means. The Beatitudes are like the bullet points for the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. But they show the way.

Each Beatitude comes in two parts, a kind of call and response. The first and the last frame the others with the same promise: do this, and yours is the kingdom of heaven.

There's a sense of the now and the then in each of the framing beatitudes: now you are poor, but you will be rich in the kingdom of God that's coming. You may be persecuted because you're doing what's right now, but you'll be a hero in the kingdom of God that's coming.

But in reality, all the Beatitudes have this sense of now and then. Why is it good to be meek and humble now? Because people who have shown they can put others first are exactly the type of people God is looking for to lead in the kingdom of God.

Why is it good to be merciful? Because you will be shown mercy yourself when you need it in the future.

Why should you be pure in heart, with good intentions and honest motives? Because anything less will keep you from seeing God as God really is.

In the next few weeks the lectionary will take us through the Sermon on the Mount, and we'll explore what it means to follow Jesus and live that alternative lifestyle more and more, but for now, we have to take the bullet points from Jesus commencement address and live with them. While we live for the moment in the now, Jesus also gives us the promise of the then, and we can see that nowhere more clearly than in the communion which lies before us: now we have a small piece of bread and a sip of juice, then we shall have the banquet of God spread out in magnificent splendor before us.

Let us meet God here and now, in the bread and the wine, for our lives in Christ, just like Jesus' commencement address, have just begun.

Amen