

The Blessed Life
Week 1: Poor in Spirit
Matthew 5:3

How would you describe what the blessed life looks like?

Jesus told a story one day about a young man who was blessed. He grew up in a wealthy family, surrounded by comfort and privilege. His father provided him with everything he needed and wanted – a life of luxury, the best education, he showered him with love. This young man never lacked anything and was deeply cared for by both his family and servants.

Most of us would look at him and say, “THIS is the blessed life.”

But, the story continues. Despite his upbringing, the young man had a restless desire for more. He wanted more adventure and independence. He dreamed of escaping the confines of his father’s estate. He wanted to explore and experience the world on his own terms. And confident in his ability to manage life without the restrictions of home, he went to his father one day and said, “Dad, I want my inheritance now. I’m tired of living under your authority. I want to do things my way. Experience all the freedom and pleasure this world has to offer.”

As you can imagine, the dad was hurt by this, but he divided up his estate and gave his son a very large amount of money. And the young man felt a rush of excitement as he left his family’s estate and ventured into the unknown. He walked away thinking, “THIS is the blessed life!”

With his newfound freedom and plenty of cash in hand, the young man soon found himself surrounded by new friends and endless entertainment. He spent lavishly; indulged in every desire. He was free from the burden of responsibilities or limits and he thought to himself, “This is the blessed life!”

But it wasn’t long until his inheritance started to dwindle. And as his fortune dried up his new friends started to disappear. He found himself alone in a foreign land far from home. To make matters worse, a severe famine struck and, without money or anyone to help him out, the young man was forced to take a job feeding pigs. He was humiliated and hungry, and he had nowhere to turn. When he found himself one day longing to eat the food he was feeding to the animals, he realized how far he’d fallen from the life he once knew.

One day, covered in the filth of the pigsty, the young man thought about how the servants at his father’s house had it so much better than he did. He remembered his father’s kindness, and so he devised a plan. He knew he didn’t deserve to be a son again, but maybe he could beg his father to make him a servant. And so, he got up, weak and weary and humbled, and he began his journey back home.

And I think Jesus would point to him and say, “THIS is the blessed life.”

But that’s not the image that comes to my mind of what the blessed life looks like, and I’m guessing it’s not the one that came to your mind, either. We wouldn’t look at this young man who lost everything and say, “THAT’S the blessed life.” We’d probably point to some of the earlier scenes and say the blessed life is when you have everything you want and need. When you’re surrounded by family who loves you. When you and your friends are free to do whatever you want whenever you want to do it. You have no responsibilities or limits. That’s the picture of the blessed life that comes to mind for most of us.

We had a little fun this week and asked ChatGPT to create an image of what the blessed life looks like. And after scouring through everything it knows about us and our desires, this is the image of the blessed life it created...(Image 1).

It’s nice, right?! This is the blessed life! It’s a life of abundance and beauty. A family sharing a meal together with friends coming to join them. A beautiful house overlooking a quiet stream cutting through the meadow. The sun is shining and animals are swooping in to enjoy the feast. But then we asked A.I. to make this image even more blessed...(Image 2)

Clearly A.I. believes if some is good, then more is better! More friends and family to share a meal with. More animals. A bigger house. A rainbow. A random baby (Image 3) sitting by himself that someone ought to be paying attention to...but even he looks blessed and happy! And that’s when I knew this was unrealistic because when our girls were that age, we NEVER ate a meal without one of them crying!

But we wanted to see how far this would go, so we asked A.I. to make the image even MORE blessed...(Image 4)! Now some angels are starting to join the party. There’s a bigger table with more people and more food. There’s not just one house, now there are two homes and a mansion. I’ve heard people pray for God to bless someone’s socks off, but this is some face-melting (Image 5) blessing going on here!

And we kept going (scroll through Image 6-8) and kept going until finally, A.I. gave us this image of the MOST blessed life...(Image 9). And it’s interesting, isn’t it, that when A.I. processes everything it knows about humanity and the billions of pictures uploaded and tagged with #Blessed...this is the image it spits out of what the MOST blessed life looks like.

It’s us, on the throne, being praised. We’re in charge, so we can do things our way. We have no responsibilities, no limits. We are free to do whatever we want, whenever we want to do it. ...It kind of reminds me of a story Jesus once told about a young man looking for the blessed life.

So, what does the blessed life look like? That’s what we’re going to explore over the next 8 weeks as we study a passage of Scripture known as the Beatitudes, this Latin word that

means “Blessed.” So, if you have a Bible or Bible app you like to use, turn with me to Matthew 5.

I think there’s a lot of confusion about what the blessed life looks like and where we find it. And in a year like this, there are a lot of people trying to define what the blessed life is and convince us that we need them to help us find it. They promise to deliver **their** version of the blessed life to us if we vote them into office.

But I’m not interested in a version of the blessed life that any politician promises to provide. As followers of Jesus, we don’t look to them to define what the blessed life is and give it to us; we look to Jesus for that. We want to know how HE defines it and where HE tells us we can find it.

And in the passage that we’re going to be studying over the next couple of months, Jesus shows us a picture of what the blessed life actually is. And his definition is unlike anything anyone has ever imagined. Paul Simon summed up Jesus’ description of the blessed life like this, **“Blessed are the sat upon, spat upon, and ratted on.”**

I think there’s something inside of us that when we hear that, and when we hear Jesus’ description of the blessed life in the Beatitudes, we think...that can’t be it! That’s not what the blessed life looks like. You’ll never hear a politician say, “Vote for me and I’ll give you a blessed life like this!”

None of us would look at that and say, “That’s the blessed life!” And at face value, you’re right. But as we begin to peel back the surface of each of these beatitudes, we’ll see a picture of the truly blessed life start to emerge. And what we’ll find is that **the blessing of the Beatitudes is in the promise, not the position.**

In fact, the position that Jesus points to might be quite unenviable, but the blessing that flows out of the position is what makes Jesus point to people who are sat upon, spat upon, and ratted on and say, “You are the blessed ones!” So, let’s set the scene for this text that we’ll be looking at for the next several weeks. Back up to Matthew 4:23...(READ Matt. 4:23-5:2)

So, you have Jesus sitting down on this mountainside, taking the position of a teacher. And when he looks at his students, he doesn’t see the best and the brightest looking back at him. He sees people with no spiritual qualifications or abilities. He sees people that the rest of the world has looked over, pushed aside, ignored.

These are people who have been verbally insulted and mocked. They’re people carrying the emotional wounds of physical ailments and poverty. There’s nothing about them that would make others take a second glance. In fact, they’d probably turn their heads and walk the other way. And yet, it’s this group of people that Jesus points to and says, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.”**

Jesus looks at this crowd of misfits and rejects, people who probably barely had enough sense of self-worth to look back up to him, he looks at them and says, “YOU are the blessed ones...the ones who are poor in spirit...because you are open to receiving the Kingdom of Heaven!” To be poor in spirit is to recognize your spiritual poverty. Your spiritual bankruptcy. It’s knowing that you have nothing to offer the Lord except your need for Him.

Jesus had already had run-ins with people who thought they were spiritually affluent. Religious people who thought they deserved God’s love because they’d somehow earned it. And they walked around with a sense of pride and arrogance, looking down on others. In their minds, they didn’t need anything from God because they had already found the blessed life on their own terms.

But Jesus is saying the blessed life does not belong to them. It belongs to the poor in spirit who confess their unworthiness before God and utter dependency upon Him, because when you find yourself in that place, you’re ready to receive the Kingdom of Heaven. Your Heavenly Father wraps His arms of love and grace around you and calls you His own.

And I think that’s why Jesus would point to the young man on his way back home and say, “This is what the blessed life looks like.” It’s not because he was poor and broken and in need. It’s because his poverty and brokenness and need had put him in a position to receive the love of his father.

We pick up the story in Luke 15. The son is on his way back home. He has squandered his wealth and found himself in utter desperation. He has nothing to his name. His pride and self-sufficiency have been stripped away. And he’s been walking with his head down for so long, rehearsing what he was going to say to his father, that he didn’t realize where he was. And when he looked up, he saw a man running towards him. He couldn’t quite make out who it was, but it was clear, he was coming for him.

And as the figure got closer he realized it was his father running to meet him. They both almost fell to the ground as the father wrapped his arms around his son and kissed him. Jesus says...(READ Luke 15:21-24)

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who know that they are needy and nothing before the Lord. Blessed are those who come face to face with their pain. Blessed are those who find themselves powerless to do anything about the condition of their heart. Blessed are those who surrender all their pain and disappointment to the Father and go running into His arms...for they will receive the riches of God’s grace and be welcomed into His family.

I don’t know where you are today, or where your search for the blessed life has taken you. Where your longing to find meaning and purpose and love has led you. If you’re like me, you’ve looked up at times and found yourself in some places you didn’t want to be.

And it's tempting to think that we can just fight and claw our way back. That we have it in us to find the peace and joy that our hearts desire, but we don't. And when we finally let go, and turn our hearts to the Lord, that is the moment we start to discover what the blessed life truly looks like. When we begin to open our hearts and our hands to Him, that is the moment we are ready to receive the riches of His mercy and grace and the power of His presence in our lives.

If Jesus were looking at us today, I think he'd want us to know that **we find the blessed life when we run to the Father, knowing we have nothing to offer, and He graciously gives us more than we can imagine.** He gives us Himself and we discover that He is all we truly need.

In studying for this series, I've found it's kind of difficult to come up with points of application for the Beatitudes. It's not like I can say, "Okay, here are three easy ways for you to be poor in spirit and receive the Kingdom of Heaven." I don't think that's the way the Beatitudes work, and I think it's actually the exact opposite of what Jesus is teaching in this first one.

Instead, the Beatitudes invite us to be open to things that we may typically be closed off to. We can't manufacture that. It's Holy Spirit territory. All we can do is put our hearts in a posture of openness and honesty with ourselves and the Lord. So, we've asked our prayer team to write out prayers for each week of this series that we can use to open us up to receive the blessed life that God desires for us.

I want to invite you to put yourself in a receiving posture. And I often find that it helps me if I do something physically that reflects the spiritual posture of my heart, and so I'm going to sit and open up my palms in this receiving position. And I'm going to read a prayer written by Claire Roth based on today's passage.

"Lord, bless me as I seek to understand and acknowledge my need for You. I am poor in spirit because I have such great need for You; my spirit is impoverished without your provision of love, grace, and peace.

Help me not to think more highly of myself than I ought to, but instead, to settle into my place in your great and beautiful Kingdom. Holy Spirit, teach me to value the ways of your Kingdom over the ways of my culture. Every good thing, every blessing, in my life comes from You. Thank you, God! Amen."

When we confess our spiritual poverty and turn to Christ, we are blessed with the riches of His grace and mercy and we are welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus' sacrifice makes this transformation possible. (Response)

