

Blessed are the Slackers?/The Kingdom of Yes

Chris Currie

Matthew 5:1-12

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What does it mean to be blessed by God? We think we have a pretty good grasp of this, and use our inner gut or bearings to confirm it in our lives. To be blest by God is that feeling you have when things are going well in life, when something happens that gives us the big feels, when we are winning at life, when the sea parts and we are standing in the end zone or whatever we are doing we just feel like we are in the zone, that is when we are blessed, feel blessed, and are recipients of God's blessings. We are really blessed when we are living good, feeling good, or doing good. Being blessed is its own cottage industry. From #Blessed to t-shirts, bumper stickers, and coffee mugs declaring 'too blessed to be stressed,' to those wall sized Joana Gaines Magnolia letters on the wall in what some might call Tex-tacular sized lettering, B-L-E-S-S-E-D. We know what it means to be blessed by God. It is to win it all, to hit the lottery, to have it all, to get it all. To be blessed is to be rewarded and favored and to do a better job at thanking God for it than anyone else. 'I am so thankful for all of God's blessings, way more thankful than any of you. You may think you've been blessed by God, but I have been way more blessed than you have been blessed. You may be #blessed, but I'm # ALL CAPS blessed. I win. I'm most blessed, way more blessed than thou. I think we all see where this is going.... the weaponization of being blessed.

Today's passage is probably a familiar one to most of us; the Sermon on the Mount. The disciples have already left their conventional lives behind to follow Jesus, even before they knew what they were getting into. Now, like any good Rabbi, Jesus takes the disciples and his followers to the hillside to teach, to have conversation, to expound on what kind of community he is calling them into, and what it means to live with and under God's blessings. This type of teaching was deep in Israel's roots and deep in the Jewish community's sinews. In some ways, Eugene Peterson reminds us, the entire Old Testament is one long exposition of what it means to be blessed by God, what it means to live the good life, receive the good life, and to pursue the good life. Psalm 1 begins with its own beatitude, 'happy' is the one who 'delights in the law of the Lord,' happy is the one who stands strong like a tree in streams of water, happy is the one who bears fruit and offers shade and raises one's life and branches toward heaven in praise to God. Blessed is the one who lives this way...happy is the person of faith who finds themselves in these kind of circumstances and lives with these kind of qualities.¹

¹ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 116.

What are the qualities Jesus lists off? Overachiever, perfectionist, winner, brilliant, go-getter, best all around, most likely to succeed? Those would work with our conventional understanding of blessing...but Jesus outlines some traits that, truth be told, are a little bit disappointing. None of these qualities are going to get us ahead of the competition in the game of life, none of these qualities are going to give us a leg up or set us apart or make us better than everyone else. I mean 'poor in spirit,' what a terrible phrase for a church marketing campaign, brochure, and website centerfold. Research just about any article about what makes a good brand identity and what traits are important to a community's identity and marketing 101 puts forward characteristics like 'uniqueness' 'passion,' 'competitiveness,' 'bold,' 'confident,' 'strong in spirit,' but not poor in spirit. Poor in Spirit, that's off brand. Poor in spirit, that is what defines people of lesser value, those who aren't good enough to hang with us. Losers. And poor in spirit is the very first characteristic Jesus leads off with, and even if his voice was loud and carried on that hillside and the crowds understood every word he was saying and were not confused (unlike Monty Python's *Life of Brian* where in the scene that depicts the Sermon on the Mount the crowd can't hear and Jesus' voice doesn't carry and they mishear and think he says blessed are the cheesemakers instead of blessed are the peacemakers), even if they can hear everything with complete clarity, one would think that starting straight out of the gate with 'blessed are the poor in spirit' is going to lose the crowd.

And the list of blessings he rattles off after goes downhill from there...blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, the meek, not the strong, not the best DNA, not those with the most, or those with the most power and influence, but the people Jesus says will inherit the earth are the meek. There is some weird kind of reverse social Darwinism at work here. Jesus is obviously trying to create a very different kind of community than the kinds we are used to and the kinds we think are blessed. His idea of blessing doesn't seem to be about winning at life in any kind of conventional way, it doesn't seem to be measuring ourselves against each other at every turn or competing with each other to see who can be the most blessed; instead, it's almost like he is completely unimpressed or at least pretty stoic about our pre-existing qualifications, even as he invites us into a way of discipleship that is not a 'reduction of what are,' not a dismissal of our lives or a 'subtraction from what we are used to,' but rather the filling of our lives with traits and characteristics that will do nothing for us in terms of winning at life, and may in fact put us at a disadvantage at times in our position, status, and level in conventional comparisons with others. Even as Peterson reminds us that Jesus' blessings will 'expand our capacities and fill us up with life so that we overflow with joy' and radiate with delight, they do not impress.² They are not selective enough. They do not make allowance for our impressive qualifications, but seem to place a different set of values on what is

² Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 117.

important and want to include not just a small percentage of the best and brightest of humanity, but just about anyone and everyone, and particularly those we would think are really not worth the trouble...the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek, really? Really Jesus, that is who you are calling and pursuing and describing as blessed to receive your kingdom? Sounds like a kingdom of weaklings, mediocre, easily forgotten slackers to me. How can the church full of such blessed of the earth ever get ahead and be the vanguard of society? How can such characteristics form us into anything more than a second-rate band of botched jobs, a collection of needy dependent people.

Some years ago, New York Times columnist David Brooks described the context and origins of our simmering politics and call out culture right now which has locked us into thinking that our future is so up for grabs and that we are all locked into a life or death struggle. Whether our dominant narrative is 'the cultural coastal elite trying to crush and delegitimize the white Christian patriots of the heartland' or whether we believe the 'autonomous self-interested individual' is the basic building block of society and the advantaged get to race out further ahead year after year,' even as 'a sense of common community and equal dignity is annihilated.' Brooks reminds us that both dominant narratives make us miserable...to see every individual as autonomous only operating in their self-interest may be partially true, but it is also a partial lie. And to think that there is a tribe of evil people trying to marginalize all the wrong people all the time, leads us to view anyone associated with that tribe with our contempt. They must be destroyed. Brooks reminds us that human beings did not evolve to be the 'world's dominant species because we are more autonomous, or because we're more vicious in tooth or in claw,' but rather we found our humanity through 'cooperation,' through 'relationships,' through seeing another human being, even the meek, the poor in spirit, and those cast low, not as irrelevant or as underclass rabble, but as people who are capable of being called blessed by God, people for whom Jesus makes room in the community he comes to build, people who the kingdom of God bestows the same gifts and characteristics that are bestowed on us, people with whom God is willing to work, and so must we.³ Just this week Director of Youth and Young Adults Chris Hazlaris shared an article with me that underscores this point and also corrects us forever thinking that Charles Darwin intended his evolutionary theory's to be interpreted as 'survival of the fittest.' I quote directly from the scientists: 'according to biologists from Darwin to E.O. Wilson, cooperation has been more important than competition in humanity's evolutionary success. Compassion is the reason for both the human race's survival and its ability to continue to thrive as a species.'⁴

³ David Brooks, 'The Future of American Politics,' from *The New York Times*, January 30, 2020.

⁴ Christopher Kukk, 'Survival of the Fittest Has Evolved: Try Survival of the Kindest,' from *The Compassionate Achiever: How Helping Others Fuels Success*, 2017.

It is no surprise to me that we often blanch and shun the great strengths of the Christian community and assume they are all weaknesses. We strive for self-sufficiency or try to create lives for ourselves that allow us to maintain a certain sense of autonomy and independence, and yet God speaks through passages like this and helps us realize that we are most truly ourselves when we have to ask for help, when we need others, when we are poor in spirit during the creed and need to hear others say it with us, or when we are poor in spirit with an illness attached to some bad news and find that the people around us not only refuse to let us go but seem to be closer than ever, we find that we are most truly ourselves when we realize that contentment will not be found in having everything we ever wanted, but in discovering the purposes for which we have been set on this earth and the people we have been claimed to love, no matter what else we have or do not have.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those that mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are the hungry and thirsty, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted, blessed are those who are demeaned and ridiculed. These may not be the characteristics of any savvy advertising campaign, they may not be the traits and characteristics we long for or would ever wish for ourselves. That may not even strike us as highly sought after virtues within Christian community. There is really only one reason to ever try or want to live this way...because this is what Jesus has told us that we are...this is what Jesus Christ says it looks like to reflect the kingdom of God through our humanity and our life together, and somehow, some way, we are to become these things, in this community, in our life of discipleship, in this time, and in this place. Meek, merciful, poor in spirit, and pure in heart. That is who we are...not because we failed at other things, or because all the other good attributes have been taken, or because we are slackers who couldn't achieve anything better, no we are these things because Jesus says we are these things when we are at our best...when we are reflecting the kingdom of God. Jesus Christ said this is what it means to be the church; Jesus Christ said this is who you are and what it means for you to be blessed. Now, go and become what Jesus Christ has already said about you.