

If you've been around social media the past few years, you'll be familiar with a key element of social media posts: the hashtag (#). It's the number sign at the end of a post that describes the topic/context/emotion of what the person wants to convey. One of the most popular hashtags is **#blessed**. People use it when they are posting about something good that has happened to them. But sometimes, the situations used for **#blessed** get a bit distorted. I collected some actual **#blessed** posts that went a bit sideways.

- When you get a flat tire after having the car for one day **#blessed**
- When your whole family forgets their keys inside the house and you're locked out and have nowhere to sleep for the night!!! **#blessed**
- This medication my dr prescribed for nausea is so effective that I have diarrhea now. **#blessed**
- About 500 people have asked me if I'm sick, but I'm just not wearing makeup **#blessed**
- Sun's out, up early, what a beautiful day it is to apply to jobs that I won't get **#blessed**
- Just dropped my brand new toothbrush in the toilet **#blessed**
- Tomorrow I'm going to the happiest place on earth: the DMV **#blessed**
- If Jonah from the Bible had Twitter I bet he'd tweet: "just got spit out of a whale." **#blessed**

What's fascinating about the **#blessed** posts is not only the humor that people find in difficult situations, but simply the fact that people are looking for the good. We all long for the good life. We all deeply desire to live a life worth living.

In Jesus' day, people had the same desire. In fact, some of Jesus' first teaching was about those who are living the good life. We're going to ask this question today: How do we live in the way of the kingdom? We're going to see that it meant embodying the paradoxical way of Jesus. By living that way, we can turn an upside down world right side up. Like most of Jesus' teaching, He offers a surprise to what people normally expected.

**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: (Matt. 5:1-2)**

Matthew gives us two details that, if you were in Matthew's audience, would stand out. First, Jesus sits down to teach. In that day,

rabbis sat down to teach; their disciples gathered near to hear. In essence a disciple would sit "at their feet." That's part of what makes the story in Luke 10 of Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus so powerful. She's learning as a disciple of Jesus. In the synagogues, there was an actual stone seat called the "seat of Moses" on which rabbis would sit to expound the law. So, when Matthew tells us that Jesus sat down to teach, He is doing what rabbis do. Jesus has something to say to those who will be His disciples.

The second interesting detail about this scene is that Matthew says Jesus went up on a mountainside. There wasn't a mountain in the area where this likely took place; it could have been an incline or a raised piece of land. Either way, perhaps Matthew is drawing an allusion. If you were in Matthew's audience of Jewish Christians and you heard a story about a leader who went up on a mountainside, you would be reminded about a key event in the history of Israel: the giving of the law to Moses (cf. Exodus 19, 24, 34). Perhaps Matthew is connecting the law given to Moses with a new "law" that Jesus will give to His disciples. In some ways, Jesus is a new Moses, and what follows is a new way for people to relate to God.

So, Matthew sets up the scene this way: in the tradition of rabbis who had something to say, Jesus sits down with an important message for His disciples. Moreover, in the typology of Moses, Jesus will outline a new way for people to relate to God. Here is what Jesus says.

**"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.”**

**(verses 3-12)**

## **Blessed**

Jesus begins with the word that appears nine times—blessed. It appears nine times in the first part of His teaching. It's a common word today, as we saw earlier. In original language, blessed is a commendation of the good life. The definition is less about “happy” and more like “congratulations.” Jesus describes the type of people who have found the good life, who have favor with God.

But Jesus' list of those who are blessed is filled with paradox: those who don't have it together, may have more than they imagined. Those on the outside are in the middle of what God is doing. Those who are at the end of themselves are really at the beginning of God. We could spend a week on each line, but I want to briefly make observations on each statement.

## **Poor in spirit**

**“Blessed are the poor in spirit,**

**for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (v. 3)**

Jesus begins with the “poor in spirit.” The Old Testament writers often described the pious poor for whom the Lord gave particular care (Psalm 14:6; 22:24; 25:16; 34:6; 40:17; 69:29). This phrase, “poor in spirit” links to those “pious poor.” In fact, the root Greek word means “poverty which is [at]...its knees” (cf. Barclay). The poor in spirit are those who realize that their deepest need is God.

Jesus says that the person who is poor in spirit is the recipient of the kingdom of heaven. That is not like the way of the kingdom of this world. We live in a world that promises everything I need is in me. But the way of the kingdom of Jesus is different. Those who realize the people who are at the end of themselves are at the beginning of God.

## **Mourn**

**“Blessed are those who mourn,**

**for they will be comforted.” (v. 4)**

This is where the paradoxical teaching of Jesus rattles our understanding of how the world works. “Blessed are those who mourn”? The Greek word for “mourn” is the strongest word for mourning in the original language. It was used for mourning the loss of one who was dearly loved (cf. Barclay; BDAG). We all know what it is like to mourn and weep for the loss of a loved one.

The biblical writers link loss of God's good with sin. When the biblical writers describe “sin,” they describe it not as an innate

concept, but something deeply wrong with the way the world currently works and the way that we are tempted to work. Mourning is linked with sin and what sin does. In fact, I have sometimes begun funeral messages with the statement, “This isn't how the world was designed to work.” How could those who mourn be on the brink of the good life?

Jesus says those who mourn and face the heartache of what sin does will be comforted. That is different than the way of the kingdom of this world. Those who mourn often feel alone in trying to make sense of what happened. The way of the kingdom of Jesus is different. Those whose eyes are red and their throat is sore from weeping because of the heartache of sin and what it does—their reality is that God will comfort them. You are blessed because when you mourn, you are in the comforting care of your heavenly Father.

## **Meek**

**“Blessed are the meek,**

**for they will inherit the earth.” (v. 5)**

Meek is not a word we often use. The original Greek word was used for something brought under control. Meek refers to self-control—how we direct our internal world. The biblical writers used the word to describe an absence of pretense (1 Peter 3:4; 14-15), and gentleness (Matt. 11:29; James 3:13). Aristotle viewed meekness with high regard as the happy medium between too much and too little anger. Proverbs 16:32b gives striking imagery to self-control in this way: *“He who rules his spirit [is better] than he who captures a city.”*

Jesus says that the meek—those who have learned to rule their internal world—will inherit the earth. That is different than the way of the kingdom of this world. We see the powerful, boisterous, those who always demand their voice to be heard, or vent every emotion without regard, as those who take control. But not in the kingdom of Jesus. In the end, they won't rule. You are blessed when you control your internal world for you will be given much.

## **Hunger and thirst**

**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,**

**for they will be filled.” (v. 6)**

Jesus speaks next about those who long and labor for God's good kingdom to be established. This statement connects with the prayer that He will teach His disciples in the next chapter, “may Your kingdom/may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In that line, Jesus is invoking a hunger and thirst for righteousness, a call to labor and long for the way of God to be established on earth.

We have powerful examples throughout history of people who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Martin Luther King Jr, just over 50 years ago, stands among the great leaders who labored with a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Imprisoned in Birmingham, AL in 1963, Dr. King wrote his famous letter, later

titled, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in response to white ministers who urged him to delay his work and sacrifice for justice. In grace and truth, Dr. King declared in that letter that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Jesus says that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. That is different than the way of the kingdom of this world. We know what it's like to long and the ache of waiting for that longing to be fulfilled. But the way of the kingdom that Jesus inaugurates is different. If you long for God to act, it will not be long before He does.

### Merciful

**"Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy." (v. 7)**

Mercy relates to how you treat those who wrong you. The call to be merciful is not to ignore the wrong, but to channel your response to the person who wronged you through identification with that person. In other words, before you respond to the person who wronged you, you make the choice to see them as a person with value. One of the clearest descriptions of this is in Romans 14:15. Paul, teaching about the topic of eating food sacrificed to idols in ancient Rome, makes this declaration: **"Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died."** Mercy is choosing to see the other person as someone "for whom Christ died." The supreme example of mercy is God coming as a man in Jesus for you and me. God viewed us with value and was willing to come and die for us.

Jesus says that those who are merciful will themselves be recipients of mercy. That is different than the way of the kingdom of this world. Those who show mercy are often mistreated or viewed as weak. The way of the kingdom of Jesus is different. If you give up the right to retaliate, in order to seek the good of the other person, you will find that good returned to you by God.

### Pure in heart

**"Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God." (v. 8)**

What does Jesus mean by "pure in heart"? The word "pure" in the original Greek means to be cleared of any diluting substance. It was used of an army purging the cowardly or unwilling from their ranks. To be "pure in heart" is, as one writer puts it, to be "free from the tyranny of a divided self." It is to see what has value and what doesn't.

We see what we are trained to see. For example, if you went out tonight and looked at the stars with an astrologer, or looked at plants with a botanist, or art with an art historian, what you see and what she sees would be different because she is trained. Or how about this: have you ever been in a group where someone says something and someone makes an improper comment in response to the innocent remark? That's a product of what the heart has been trained to see. The writer of Proverbs puts the importance of freedom from the tyranny of self this way: **"Above**

**all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it"** (Prov. 4:23).

Jesus says that those who are pure in heart will see God. That is different than the way of the kingdom of this world. The pure of heart are ignored. People don't tend to value those who have learned what is truly valuable. But the way of the kingdom of Jesus is different. Those who have trained their eyes will see God and His way.

### Peacemakers

**"Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God." (v. 9)**

In the Hebrew context, "peace" is connected to the idea of "shalom." Shalom is about setting things right, working for the good, life with God and people as it should be. To be a shalom-worker is to be in a precarious place. It means that you aren't on either side. To be a shalom-worker means that you are not always welcome. It may mean that you surrender your right to be justified. For example, have you ever been in a conflict with another person in which you both acted in ways that broke shalom? In seeking to re-establish shalom, you apologized for your actions, but they offered no apology for their actions? To be a peacemaker, a shalom-worker, means that you walk a road that can be discouraging.

Jesus says that those who are peacemakers will be called children of God. Children of God in this context refers not our adoption into the family of God, but rather one who does what God does. One commentator boldly put it this way: "There is no more god-like work to be done in this world than peacemaking" (Broadus).

### Persecuted

**"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."  
(verses 10-12)**

Jesus' final statement in this movement refers to those who are persecuted because they are living in the way of the kingdom. Jesus does something fascinating in these last verses. Jesus makes an implicit claim of divinity. Jesus identifies His disciples with the ancient prophets. The ancient prophets were persecuted as messengers of "the word of the Lord." Those who follow Jesus are messengers of the way of Jesus. Jesus equates this kingdom message with the "word of the Lord" of ancient days. In doing so, Jesus equates Himself with YHWH.

The way of Jesus is the culmination of the way of YHWH from throughout history. All those who are persecuted because they follow Jesus are recipients of the kingdom of heaven. They join with people throughout history who have suffered to bring God's desired good into the world.

That is a lot of teaching from Jesus, and He is only getting started. But we can see that the way of Jesus is different than the way that the world operates, He values different things than the world values. That isn't to say that the world is evil; rather it is a challenge for any who follow Jesus to take their path from His kingdom teaching.

### Salt and light

**“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.**

**“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (verses 13-16)**

If you choose to follow Jesus and live this reality, you have a calling in the world. You are bringing a sense of God to the people around you. That is what Jesus says in the next set of statements. To make that point, He uses two images that were common in that day: salt and light. In fact, the ancient Roman author Pliny wrote, “Nothing is more useful than salt and sunshine.”

In these verses, Jesus says three surprising things about calling. First, Jesus entrusts His work of bringing the kingdom into the world to ordinary people. Those who follow Him are commissioned to join Him. This isn't Jesus **plus** you, but Jesus **with** you. Second, Jesus says the calling is now. He doesn't say, “you should **try** to be” salt/light, but rather “you **are** salt/light.” If you follow Jesus, you are given a calling. The calling could be denied—just as salt could no longer be salty, or as light could be covered. But if you live in the way of Jesus, your calling has the opportunity to give people a sense of God.

The third surprising thing about Jesus' statements is that He says that how you live **should** be visible. People **should** be impacted by how you live. People **should** see your good deeds. We often push back against that idea. And if you are seeking to be seen so that you are seen, that's not what Jesus is saying. What Jesus is saying is that how you live should give people a picture of what God is like. The people who are around you should get a sense that there is something different about you. A friend of mine owned a small restaurant in our town when we lived in France. As our friendship grew, he would often say to us, “There is something different about you.”

The calling of the community who claims to follow Jesus should be visible for the purpose of giving a sense of God on earth. That is why this meeting location in the Fox and downtown RWC matters deeply to our mission. Part of why God has us here is to be a visible representation of who God is in a context that may not otherwise get a picture of Him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was arrested and killed by the Nazis at the end of WWII, wrote, “a community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow Him.” To be visible is not optional. Jesus says that salt and light are connected with the way of the kingdom.

You and I live a kingdom-centered life when we embody the paradoxical way of Jesus.

What does this mean for us today? Two things that we can do. First, if what Jesus described is your current reality, be encouraged that you are in the way of God. If you are mourning because of what sin has done, if you feel the brunt of being a peacemaker, if you have shown mercy only to be mocked, if you have reached the end of yourself only to wonder where God is—be encouraged that God is with you. God has always taken care of those the world has left aside.

Second, look for ways to live this kind of kingdom life. An opportunity will arise for you to be a peacemaker, and you will have a choice to enter or not. You can step into that situation because that is the way of the kingdom. A time will come when you will feel the chaos of your internal world and the need for change. You can put in the work to build the habit of self-control because you know that the meek will inherit the earth. A day will come when a friend experiences a loss that they can't bear alone. You can mourn with them because you know that those who mourn are recipients of the comfort of God. By living this way, you can turn an upside down world right side up.

The author Eugene Peterson paraphrased these verses for the church he pastored. His words capture the essence of what Jesus is saying to all of us. Listen to these words again, “Our motivation to live in the way of Jesus is because of what this generous God has done for us. Jesus suffered and died so that you could be free from the destructiveness of sin - both in you and in the world. He died for you so that you would no longer live your own way, but live in the way of the kingdom.”

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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