

Blessed

Matthew 5:11-12, “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.”

Question: What leads to happiness in life?

Key Verses: James 4:10; James 1:2 & 12; 1 Peter 4:13–14

Normal Blessings

The beatitudes are eight simple statements that open Jesus’ first and most influential message known as the Sermon on the Mount. Each of the statements turn the totem pole of social expectations on its head. Each begins with the word “blessed” or “happy”—think “fortunate” or “lucky”. What Jesus says will us happy is counter-intuitive: Being poor in spirit, mourning, meekness, weakness, hunger, etc. Clearly we all want to be happy. There’s nothing wrong with that! God wants you to be happy as well. Yet, clearly that’s not the case. There’s plenty of misery to go around. Why? Because we are chasing after the wrong things in the wrong way. So what is it that will contribute to your best life? To your greatest happiness? The answer is stunning.

When we airdrop into the beatitudes, we are joining a much larger and longer conversation than Matthew 5. The quest for happiness among the Jews derives from the Old Testament wisdom but it was also informed by their neighboring Greek philosophers. According to the Greek tradition, happiness huddles around a small constellation of positive experiences—wealth, family, status, and security. This four-fold fortune allowed one to live above the pressure and pain of normal human existence.

In the Hebrew tradition, this four-fold fortune comes from keeping God’s covenant. Yet the descriptions of the blessed life are barely different than the Greeks: Bearing children (Gen 30:13, Psa 127:5), a good wife or friends (Sir 25:8–9; 26:1), and vengeance against enemies (Psa 137:8–9). There was also a moral side of happiness for Hebrew and Greeks alike. Blessed are those who show benevolence to the poor (Psa 41:1) and do justice (Psa 106:3). Thus, the land is blessed when the rulers are just (Ecc. 10:17). This explains why the righteous are blessed (Psa 1:1; Prov 20:7; Isa 56:2) as well as those who gain wisdom (1 Kgs 10:8; 2 Chron 9:7; Prov 3:13; 8:34). This should all sound familiar since the Greeks and Hebrews are the philosophic forefathers of our western world.

Reverse Blessings

Jesus’ Beatitudes stand in a long line of literature on happiness. This eight-stanza poem however, explodes all our expectations. Rather than saying happy are those with money, power, family, or fame, Jesus says, “Fortunate are the unfortunate.” He turns the social totem

pole upside down. The beatitudes are striking, disruptive, and unexpected. They are not, however, unprecedented. Each individual statement has an echo elsewhere in Hebrew literature. There is nothing, however, quite like the whole of what he said. No one but Jesus did (or could have) so radically altered the philosophy of happiness. The beatitudes are an avalanche of world altering ideals. Let's start by seeing how Jesus plucked from the literary past, alternative ideas on what makes one blessed.

(1) *Blessed are the Poor in Spirit*. Proverbs 16:19, "It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud." See also Psalm 34:6; Proverbs 29:23; Isaiah 57:15; 61:1.

(2) *Blessed are those who mourn*. Isaiah 61:2-3, "Comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."

(3) *Blessed are the meek*. Psalm 37:11, "But the meek shall inherit the land."

(4) *Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness*. Amos 5:24, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." See also 1 Kings 10:9; Psalm 89:14; Job 29:14; Proverbs 29:7; Isaiah 9:7.

(5) *Blessed are the merciful*. In the Old Testament only God is merciful although the Rabbis certainly called people to show mercy as one Rabbinic texts declares: "So long as you are merciful, He will have mercy on you" (*t. B. Qam.* 9:30).

(6) *Blessed are the Pure in Heart*. Psalm 24:4-5, "Those who have clean hands and pure hearts...They will receive blessing from the LORD." See also Psalm 73:1; Proverbs 22:11.

(7) *Blessed are the Peacemakers*. Prov 16:7, "When the ways of people please the LORD, he causes even their enemies to be at peace with them." See also Numbers 25:12 and Ezekiel 34:25.

(8) *Blessed are the Persecuted*. One of the historical books written between the Testaments declares martyrs as blessed by God, "By the blessed death of my brothers, by the eternal destruction of the tyrant, and by the everlasting life of the pious, I will not renounce our noble family ties" (4 Maccabees 10:15).

Clearly, each individual Beatitude has a comparable statement somewhere in Jewish literature. What Jesus offered, therefore, was not unheard of. Nonetheless, none had ever collected such counter-cultural statements in a single shocking stanza. One can imagine the mouths agape on the mount as Jesus introduced the Beatitudes. The biggest shock, however, came in the end. Jesus' commented on the final verse: Blessed are the persecuted.

Blessed are Beaten

It is not unreasonable to think that God would reward someone who stood valiantly for him through persecution. The historic heroes of the Jewish revolt under the Maccabees (168-165 b.c.) as well as the Zealots contemporary with Jesus were held in high esteem. They were

promised a glorious reward in the afterlife. Any Jew that fought valiantly and died nobly for the glory of YHWH could expect a monument or at least an honorable mention in Jewish lore.

Jesus does not, however, affirm our blessing for suffering for Yahweh. Rather, he claims we will be blessed if we suffer for HIS name! “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (5:11). He seriously just put himself in the sentence where historically Yahweh had stood.

In order to grasp the magnitude of this claim, let’s fast forward to the year 135 C.E. on the backside of the Bar Kockbah revolt. It was a tragic attempt by the Jews to kick Rome out of their country. The devastation was colossal. The Talmud recounts the story of Rabbi Aqiba facing execution. He considered himself blessed to die as a martyr while reciting Shemah: “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One”. This was a sacred daily ritual. According to the tradition, Aqiba exhaled the word “One” so that he could die with this declaration on his lips. Hence, he expired literally loving the Lord with all his strength. Thus it was said of him: “Happy [blessed] are you, Aqiba, because you were arrested on account of teachings of Torah.... They were raking his flesh with iron combs while he was accepting upon himself [in the recitation of the Shema] the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven” (*b. Ber.* 61b).

When you lay this description over the eighth beatitude the overlap is thick: *Happy* is the one *persecuted* for he receives the *Kingdom of Heaven*. The contrast, however, is equally striking. Aqiba died for the confession of Yahweh as One. Jesus’ followers are called to suffer for the confession of his singular name! Since this is the only one of the beatitudes Jesus commented upon, it must have struck his hearers with particular force. Everything Jesus said up to that point was familiar to their Jewish ears even if it was uncommonly framed in Beatitudes. This final exhortation, however, must have struck them as bodacious bordering on blasphemous. Was Jesus really arrogating to himself the role of Yahweh? After all, God was the only one worth suffering for. Indeed, he alone could promise the good fortune of the Kingdom of Heaven to those who died for his honor.

In Jewish literature from 500 B.C. to the birth of Jesus, those persecuted in order to keep God’s law were to be rewarded when his kingdom comes. Their fate is reversed making their suffering worth it after all. For example, Eleazar was martyred for his refusal to eat pork that God forbade. His last word to his persecutor were these: “We, O Antiochus, who have been persuaded to govern our lives by the divine law, think that there is no compulsion more powerful than our obedience to the law” (4 Macc 5:16). Daniel, likewise, praised those who stood firm for God’s word under prolonged persecution: “Happy are those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred thirty-five days” (Daniel 12:12).

“Blessed are the Persecuted” became common coin in the centuries between the Testaments. The blessing, however, is specifically for those who stand true to Yahweh’s command. So imagine standing in the midst of the crowd when Jesus replaced the “Word of God” with the “Name of Jesus.” Such an assertion is tantamount to being God’s equal, or

perhaps more accurately, the embodiment of God's Torah. Little wonder Jesus followed the Beatitudes with six extensions to Mosaic legislation with the words: "You've heard that it was said...but I say" (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). A brief perusal of the Mishnah (c. 200 C.E.) shows how even the greatest rabbis could contravene one another but none dared disagree with their founding father. Moses' words were the very words of God. One might rightly ask, "Who does Jesus think he is?" The Beatitudes offer a very clear answer. Jesus' commands are on par with God's and those who suffer for them are on par with the martyrs of YHWH.

The entire sermon likewise ends with a parable promoting Jesus as the rock solid foundation of God's word: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matthew 7:24). Is it any wonder the crowds stood stunned at the conclusion of this message? "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt 7:28-29). Jesus, the living Torah, demand ultimate allegiance that will be summarily rewarded in the end.

This turned the cultural values on its head. Lucky are the unlucky as long as they align with Jesus words. Jesus established this fourfold claim in Matthew 5:11–12: [A] Blessing for [B] those suffering for Jesus name. [C] They can rejoice [D] because of their ultimate reward. This same pattern is found in 1 Peter 4:13–14: "[C] But rejoice insofar as you are [B] sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy [D] when his glory is revealed. [B] If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are [A] blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you." Jesus' brother repeated the pattern in James 1:2 & 12: "[B] Whenever you face trials of any kind, [C] consider it nothing but joy, ... [A] Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. [D] Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him." Clearly, this is not a one-off text. Christians are part of an upside down kingdom who live according to this fourfold pattern: Winners are losers, the dead live, the poor are rich, and those who pick up a cross experience resurrection.

Key Points:

- Both Hebrews and Greeks were blessed by family, wealth, health, and peace as well as having the wisdom and morality to live in the right way.
- Jesus, tapping into a minority Jewish tradition, reversed the normal rules of who was blessed to include the poor, meek, mourning, and beaten.
- In Jewish tradition, martyrs were blessed by obeying God's commands. In Christian tradition, we are blessed by obeying Jesus' commands. He and God are on par.

Action Step: Go to www.persecution.com, The Voice of the Martyrs website. Read one story of a Christian suffering persecution. Pray for that person for three consecutive days.

Further Resources: James & Marti Hefley, *By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century*.