

“Where Real Life Begins: When I Choose to Go All In”

In this series we're looking at some of the verses in (what are called) “the Beatitudes” where, in his Sermon on the Mount, (one of the first sermons Jesus ever preached), he outlines for us nine different ways to find happiness. What we're finding in these verses is that Jesus (in his teachings) turns upside-down the way we normally think about the things that make us happy.

At first glance, what he says seems to make no sense. It doesn't sound like it will work. What we're finding is that what sounds like it doesn't work, actually does.

For example (in the first week) Jesus said “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Blessed are the poor in spirit. (How does that work?) We say “Blessed are the self-reliant in spirit. Blessed are the self-sufficient.”

Jesus says, “No. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are you when you realize you don't have what it takes and you need God. Blessed are you when you are able to say “I can't fix it. I can't mend it. I can't do it.” In that moment (Jesus says) you are blessed, because you've made room in your life for God.

Last week it was “Blessed are those who mourn.” Again, it seems so backwards. It's like saying “Happy are the sad. Happy are those who are not happy.” It doesn't make sense. And yet, Jesus says, when we mourn, (in our tears), when we grieve the sin in our lives and (in our world), that's when you'll discover the blessing.

Today we're closing this series out by touching on two of the final blessings in these verses. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” and “Blessed are those who are persecuted...for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Let's start with the first: “Blessed are the pure in heart.”

I still remember, 30 years ago (this month), one of my classmates was getting married (out of state) and I was invited to take part in his wedding. I flew in the day before and realized (when I got there) that the shirt I had packed for the wedding had a big stain on it. Thankfully, across from the hotel (where I was staying) was a place called “The One Hour Cleaners”, which means they probably are able clean clothes in about, (how long would you guess) in about one hour.

So, I walked across to the one hour cleaners, I handed the lady my shirt and I said “I'll be back in about an hour.” I turned to leave and she says, “Well, we don't clean clothes in an hour.”

I turned back around (and I thought to myself), “You don't what? You don't clean clothes in an hour? I thought you were “The One Hour Cleaners?” (That's what the sign says.) It doesn't say you're the “Next Day Cleaners” or the “We'll get to it when we can” cleaners. It says you're “The One Hour Cleaners.” If it said you're the “next day cleaners” or the “we'll get to it when we can cleaners”, I'd be fine with that. But that's not what your sign says.

Now, I didn't say any of that; but that's what I thought. And I thought it because there was this claim (on their sign) that they clean clothes in an hour, but when it came down to it, that's not what they do. So there was this frustration because what they claimed to do (on the outside) didn't match up with what actually happens on the inside.

Jesus says, “Blessed are you when you stop hanging up signs on the outside that don't really reflect who you are on the inside. Blessed are the pure in heart.”

It can be frustrating, exhausting, it can be miserable to go through life as a fulltime actor or actress, where you're constantly pretending to be something you're not. (It can wear you out.) But where there is an authentic and pure heart, not a perfect heart, not a heart free from sin, but one that is authentic and pure, there is a blessing to be found.

Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” The word “pure” (a pure heart), is the idea of having a heart that is “undivided.” It is authentic. It is a heart that is sincere.

In (Jesus' day), one of the popular professions was sculpting. There were a lot of sculptors (in those days), because there was a big demand. A lot of false gods were sculpted and sold (to a lot of people), and because there was such a big demand and so many sculptors, there were a lot of bad sculptors, pretending to be good sculptors.

They were inferior crafters, but they would do it because they wanted to make a quick buck. The final product wasn't as good, but they could sell it and no one (without a trained eye) would ever know.

What happened was that the legitimate sculptors started to mark their sculpting with these two words: "sine cera"...from which we get our word "sincere." The words "sine cera" literally mean "without wax."

What the inferior sculptors would do, they would put wax into those places where it wasn't quite right. It wasn't right, but with (a little wax) it would look right. So if you're looking at it on the outside, it would look like it was all good.

In contrast, those who were authentic sculptors would mark their sculpting with those two words: "sine cera," without wax. And then they would take their sculpting to the marketplace, place it in the sun, where it would become obvious that there was no wax, because the sun would melt any wax there was. And so, their product would be proven (by the sun) to be pure.

When Jesus talks about the "pure in heart," (a blessed life), he's talking about a faith without wax, a heart without wax, a life without wax. It is sincere. It is authentic. And so he says, "Blessed are the pure in heart."

It's interesting in Matthew's gospel (in chapter five), at the beginning of Jesus' first recorded sermon, there is this series of blessings, (the beatitudes). He says "blessed are, blessed are, blessed are" (all the way through) at the beginning of this first sermon.

At the end of the gospel (in chapter 23), you find Jesus last sermon recorded, in which you find the seven woes. "Woe to you, woe to you, woe to you..." What Matthew does, is he bookends the ministry of Jesus with "Blessed are" and "Woe to you."

Now, if you look at those seven woes in (chapter 23) you find that Jesus says (over and over again) the same thing. "Woe to you...who are hypocrites." (Woe to you hypocrites.)

In verse five, here's how he defines it. He says (for a hypocrite): "Everything they do is for show." (Everything they do is for show.) It's not real. It's not authentic. It is not "pure in heart."

And so, what we find is that Jesus begins and ends his ministry with this same truth, only from opposite directions. Blessed are you who are sincere, but woe to you who are faking it.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, but cursed is the hypocrite." Happy is the authentic, but grieved is the person who is a fake. There is a blessing (Jesus says) found in authenticity, when we finally take off the mask and stop pretending.

Now, keep that in mind and let's go onto the next few verses (and see what we find), starting in verse eleven (Jesus says), "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."

Now, if I were starting a ministry (like Jesus was) and preaching my first sermon to any potential followers, I probably wouldn't have started like he did. I would have started with something a bit more attractive, like it'll be fun, maybe an adventure. But Jesus, Jesus starts with this teaching that if you want to be blessed, then you need to be ready to be persecuted and stretched.

Maybe you've noticed that in the ministry of Jesus. There's no halfway approach when it comes to being a follower. There's no middle-ground in being one of his disciples. You're either in or you're out. You're either with him or you're not. You can't halfway follow Jesus. You can't part way be on the same page. It doesn't work. If you're going to follow Jesus, then you need to be willing to move out of your comfort zone and begin living by a completely different set of values.

What Jesus does (in this sermon) is that he takes the place where we're most comfortable and he says that it's just outside of this comfortable place that we find the blessing. Many people never experience God's blessing because they're not willing to move beyond the place where they're comfortable and, as a result, the blessing never comes.

In fact, what Jesus says in these (final verses) is that the blessing of God is found when we are so far out of our comfort zone that even the people around us are uncomfortable. When that happens, you run the risk of being persecuted and insulted and lied about (yourself) because that's how radically you are following Jesus. Jesus says, in that moment you are blessed.

Now, to recognize how radical this life is, (again) it's completely the opposite of how we think. We think that being blessed is measured by how comfortable we are. (Isn't that true?) If we're comfortable in life, then we're blessed in life. That's how we think.

Jesus says that's not it. You're blessed (he says) when you're no longer here, but you're there. You're blessed when what you're doing and how you're doing it is something you never would have chosen for yourself.

I don't know what that looks like (what that means) for each of you. For some of you, it means following Jesus in your own home. This idea of being submissive in your marriage, of somehow letting someone else have control in your life, it's not what you're used to doing. (But it's where you find the blessing.) For some of you, the thought of being a spiritual leader for your family, it scares you to death, to pray out loud with your kids or to let them know what God's doing in your life and what he's trying to teach you. (It can be uncomfortable.)

For some, maybe it means being more open with your faith in your neighborhood, of watching for ways to bring Jesus into the conversation. You don't do it because you're afraid of what people might say or how they'll talk behind your back. Jesus says, "If they do (and it happens) you're blessed."

Maybe (if you're a student), it's uncomfortable to carry a Bible with you (at school) or to say a prayer before lunch, or to reach out to that kid that nobody hangs out with. You think that (if you do) the other kids might not hang out with you, and you don't want to be that weird "religious kid" at school, and have people talk about you and not talk with you. Jesus says, if you do, (and that happens), you are blessed.

Maybe it's at work. You've been in the same job for years and people (still don't know) you're a Christian. You finally step out and make it known and people start avoiding you, or the relationship changes or (worse yet) you get fired. That's not what Jesus wants (that you lose your job), but if it happens as a result of following him, (Jesus says) there's a blessing. This is so different.

I don't know when it happened, but at some point, we started to think that we could follow Jesus and be comfortable at the same time. At some point we thought, "These things can go together." (No they can't.) I don't know when it happened, but at some point we started thinking (and maybe even believing) that we could follow Jesus and not do the hard things, play it safe. That's not how it works.

Maybe (as a church) we are partly responsible for this kind of mindset. We don't do it on purpose, but it's there. (I'll admit it.) I don't want you to be uncomfortable when you come here. I don't want you to (not enjoy) the time we have. And so we make sure we're done in the hour we've agreed upon, or it's not too hot or too cold in the buildings.

I don't know when it happened, but somehow we've made the connection between following Jesus and being comfortable. But those are not two pieces (in life) designed to connect. In fact, if anything, it's the opposite. If you're following Jesus, you are going to be uncomfortable. It's going to happen. You can follow Jesus or you can be in your comfort zone, but you can't do both.

And so, as we listen to Jesus' teaching in his Sermon on the Mount, here's what we find. We find that he calls us to a life that is completely contrary to our nature. He calls us to a life that is completely different from what we would naturally want to do. At times, we might even find ourselves thinking that this is all a little bit crazy; maybe, even a bit dangerous.

In fact, (full disclosure), it might even be worth attaching a few warning signs to his teaching. Warning: following Jesus may be dangerous to your relationships.

Jesus talks a lot about honesty and integrity. He says "Let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no. That all sounds fine and good until you go back to class and you're the only one of your friends who is not cheating. Or you are the only one of your friends who walks out of the movie at the theater. That's when it gets a bit dangerous.

Or warning: following Jesus may be dangerous to your career aspirations or your financial status. Because Jesus said things like "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." That's dangerous.

Or warning: following Jesus might cause you to come clean with what's happening in your life. Jesus said, "Don't look at a woman lustfully." It's a little bit dangerous to go to a friend and ask for help because you're finding yourself caught up in pornography. He said, "Turn the other cheek and go the extra mile." If you're not doing that, that can be a dangerous step.

You see, it's really not that dangerous to go to church once a week and listen to a sermon; but to actually take what you hear (and apply it and follow Jesus? That's changes everything.

Here's where it all leads. There are some things in life you can't do halfway. If you're going to do them, you need to go all in. You can't kind of get married. You can't kind of have a baby. You can't kind of go skydiving. If you're going to do it, you need to do it.

It's the same thing with Jesus. You can't kind of follow Jesus, because he's going to address everything in your life. He's going to address your relationships and your finances. He's going to address your thought life and your sexuality. He's going to address how you spend your time and how you use your talents. He's going to address the use of your hands and your eyes and your ears. Everything (in your life) is on the table. There's nothing left out.

And so, the question is: "Will you go all in? Are you willing to set everything else aside and make following Jesus the number one thing in your life?"

You see, there comes a point where you can't just keep talking. You can't just keep watching. At some point, you either leave it all behind, decide you're going to follow Jesus, or you go home. But you can't have it both ways.

And so, let me close with this. My prayer is that in the next few days, many of you would have this (honest moment) with Jesus where you would decide (if you haven't already) to go all in, because there comes a point where you have to decide if you're going to really go for it or not.

A lot of us are afraid of making that kind of commitment. We're afraid of what we might miss out on if we go all in. We're afraid of what might be required of us if we really go after it.

And so we try to walk the line and not get too carried away. We want a little bit of Jesus, but not too much. We want to follow him closely enough to be associated with him, but not so close that it requires anything from us.

But that's not how it works. This life is short. A blink of an eye (in light of eternity) and it's gone. It's like a short breath and then it's over. And so, Jesus says, at the end of his Sermon on the Mount, that we need to be wise, because, before we know it, the end will come and that moment will be here for every one of us.

I know how this sounds. For all of us, it's a little bit crazy. It's a little bit dangerous. But (in the end) it's really not. What Jesus says actually makes sense. It works and it's worth it...everything you've got. Amen.