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Preacher: Sam Low

[0:00] If you can keep that passage open in front of you, we're going to get stuck into that. But first I'm going to pray and ask that God will give us ears to hear. So let's pray. Father God, we thank and praise you for your word.

And we thank and praise you for this opportunity tonight to sit and reflect on the life that you have called us to. Lord, I pray that you would help us to hold loosely to things that might rub against what you're going to teach us.

Give us teachable hearts. Give us a desire for your will more than for what we know and what's familiar. And Lord, I pray that by your spirit you would transform us tonight so that we would be more and more the people that you want us to be.

Amen. I really enjoy this time of year. That might be hard to believe for those of you who know me. God's been doing a work in my heart over the past three years.

And I've gone from being the guy that whinges about carols every year round to thoroughly enjoying Christmas Eve and all the singing that goes along. But I enjoy more than the carols and more than the food and more than the gifts.

[1:07] I enjoy this bit we're in right now just after Christmas. It's not the Boxing Day test that I enjoy. It's the bit coming into New Year. For some reason, whether you're a New Year's resolution person or not, in this little patch of a couple of days, we all take a moment.

Some of us longer, but we all take a moment just to reflect on the year that's been. It might even just be that moment before you hit the pillow on New Year's Eve. But there is just that second of, has this been a good year?

Am I happy with what's happened? Is there painful memories? Is there things, maybe opportunities missed? And maybe how will it be different in the next 12 months?

It's just this unwritten rule that at this time of year, you think about what has gone before and what will come next. But I want to push you a little bit further today. And I want to ask you the question, how do you actually measure whether or not you've had a good year?

And what grid do you use when you're trying to plan the year that's ahead? Today and for the next three weeks, we're going to do a highlights tour of the Sermon on the Mount.

[2:17] It really is a highlight. We're only going to get to a couple of small bits. But here, Jesus is preaching to his disciples. And he begins in chapter 5, in the bit that Tim read out for us, by, I think, redefining what success looks like in life.

Because we do have things that we go to. We have measures, if you like. We have a grid that we use. But tonight, I think, and in this passage, Jesus wants to reshape that grid.

He wants to redefine what it looks like to be blessed. He wants to redefine what it looks like to be successful in life. And so whatever ideas you have, and we do have them, we need to loosen our grip a little bit.

There's the stereotypical picture of blessing. It's the nice house, the nice car, lots of money, the job you want, that sort of thing. But maybe you have a more noble version of what a good life would be.

Maybe your noble version is something like a good family, your health, enough money but not too much, some friends, some hobbies you like to do.

[3 : 22] It sounds like not a bad thing to aim for, but I wonder, how closely does that line up with what Jesus gives us? How close do those two examples go to this list?

Poor in spirit. Mourning. Meek. Hunger and thirsting for righteousness. Merciful. Pure in heart. Peacemaker. Persecuted. Now before we jump into that list and unpack it a bit more, I want to give you a challenge.

There's a lot in there and we're not going to get to pull it all apart tonight. So I want to give you a challenge between now and New Year's Eve to actually open your Bible up again and have a look at each of these things and maybe think about where you are on those things in life.

But we are going to get stuck in tonight and see what God has to teach us, but let me give you that challenge and the acknowledgement that there's more in there than we can squeeze out in the next little while. So let's look at this list that Jesus has given us.

First off, in verse 3. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. So Jesus opens his definition. So this is less like a list as kind of a description, an ongoing kind of explanation of what the blessed life looks like.

[4 : 37] And he opens it with three connected ideas. You've got the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and the meek. And I think that what Jesus is pushing us to recognize is that those who live the blessed life have to live with their eyes open when it comes to seeing themselves.

What I mean is when he describes the poor in spirit, he's not just saying that they're lacking something. They're aware that they're lacking something. The blessing is the fact that they know they have a poverty of spirit.

They know that they are not the people that God has designed them to be. They know that they are not the people they need to be if they would know God and know his goodness and his love. And so they recognize that they are unworthy of him.

So necessary to being poor in spirit is at least a little bit of honest reflection. Looking at your own life and thinking, what have I done today? What have I done this week?

What have I done this year that is dishonoring to God? And it probably also requires at least some measure of honest and specific and regular confession of whatever it is that you discover.

[5 : 46] The second one I think is connected. Verse 4. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. This isn't the Jesus endorsement for being emo. This isn't an affirmation for Christians who look sad all the time.

That may be reality for some people, but that's not what Jesus is encouraging here. The mourning he wants is a mourning for sin. He wants us to be offended by the things that offend him.

But the reality is that for most of us, we're not. We've progressively become more and more comfortable with things that should be disgusting, with things that should be offensive.

I remember a couple of years ago, my grandpa gave me a jumper, just a plain grey jumper that he bought and didn't fit him. It was just simple. Sleeves, no neck.

It was a jumper. Nothing too exciting. And one time, I decided that would be an appropriate jumper to wear while I was doing some painting. The result was I ended up with paint on this jumper.

[6 : 48] And my wife, being the fantastic domestic goddess that she is, washed the jumper and got 99.9% of the paint out of the jumper. There was just the smallest little splash of white paint on it.

And I pulled the jumper out of the cupboard a little while later and I was wearing it again and she was mortified that there was still paint on the jumper. She wanted me to take it off so she could wash it or soak it.

And then she wanted to try and scratch the paint off. Now, I insisted that that paint was my fashion paint, that that had transformed a boring Lowe's jumper into being the must-have item on this winter's fashion list.

And I don't know why. But anyway, I just insisted that she couldn't scratch it off, she couldn't wash it, she couldn't do anything. And sure enough, after enough time of seeing it, she just let it go.

It wasn't an issue anymore. She just got comfortable with the fact that the paint belonged on the jumper, that in fact, it was now genuinely a fashion jumper. And the issue is that as something is there, even if it doesn't belong, the longer it's there, the more comfortable we get with it.

[7 : 56] We get desensitized to the fact that it shouldn't be there. And that's the reality with sin in our life. Something that was maybe once disgusting and abhorrent is now just part of who we are.

Yeah, hey, I'm not perfect. But Jesus is calling us to see what God sees. To see that when we sin, we actually reject God. We actually deny His kingship and His right to rule over our lives.

And we need to see what He sees. Sin costs Jesus' life. The sin in our lives should be something that drives us to mourn its existence.

And to desire the day when we will be washed clean and it will be completely removed. And the third one, which I think still is in this idea of having our eyes open, is verse 5.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. The meek are not the weak. God is not calling you to get picked on. And the word meek means strength controlled.

[8 : 56] Jesus is our model for meekness. The all-powerful creator and lord and ruler and judge who chose to allow sinful, rebellious, pathetic creation to murder Him on the cross.

Meekness is not weakness. It's strength controlled. And essential to meekness is a right view of ourselves. When we recognize our inadequacy. When we recognize our sin.

When we recognize that there is nothing in us that makes us acceptable to God. Meekness is the only response. No longer does it feel right to fight for what we think we deserve.

Because when you recognize your poverty of spirit. When you mourn your own sin. You understand that you deserve nothing. But God has been gracious to you anyway. I think that this description starts to shift a little bit more into the actions that come out of that right seeing of ourselves.

And so in verse 4, sorry, in verse 6 it says, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. I want to introduce you to a word tonight. This is a word which some of you may have heard before.

[10 : 05] But it's something that I only discovered earlier in the year that my wife uses to describe me and my son. It's the word hangry. I don't know if you've come across it before.

It's the word that describes the state that Bailey and I go into at the point of hunger. We become quite aggressive. It doesn't matter how nice or friendly we are. Before that, at the moment where we want food, that is all consuming.

I don't care that you're my wife and I promise to love you unconditionally. Where is my dinner? I'm exaggerating just so we're clear. Sally doesn't have to pull up with any of that. But it's that moment where you get consumed and all you can do is try and get food.

All these other apparently important things kind of fade away. And when Jesus calls us to hunger and thirst for righteousness, he's talking about that consuming desire. That need in us that must be met.

Not just a passing interest in living a life that honors God. Not just something that you do occasionally or socially. But that moment where your stomach hurts with desire for food to be in it.

[11 : 09] That moment where it is so hot and you are so thirsty and you would give anything for a drop of water. That desire, that drive is what we are called to if we're going to live this life that Jesus is describing.

In verse 7 he says, Mercy costs us. We prefer justice when we've been wrong but we are called to show mercy just as we have been shown mercy.

Verse 8, As Jesus is going through and this description is growing of this life that we are called to, this one is really important.

Because you could take away this list and start mourning a lot. Start crying so that everyone can see. Come to church with your head in your hands every Sunday morning. Every time you talk to someone let them know how sad you are because of your sin.

You could begin being the meekest person possible. You could begin never insisting on your own way. You could begin putting other people's needs first all the time. You could let everyone know how hungry you are for righteousness.

[12 : 12] You could be as merciful as possible but deep down you could just be putting on a show. The message of this whole sermon and we'll see it come out over the next couple of weeks is that while these actions matter, they only count if they are the overflow of your heart.

The pure heart that Jesus is talking about is the heart that is undivided in its commitment and desire for God. In Matthew chapter 6, Jesus goes on to say in verse 33, Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

It says don't be distracted by putting on a show. Don't be distracted by apparent needs and other things in your life. Seek God with everything. And the pure heart that Jesus is describing here is the heart that wants to honour God, wants to honour Jesus as King more than anything else.

Number 7 in verse 9, it says, Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God. Now, just to clarify, it doesn't say blessed are the peacelikers. Blessed are the people who wear the shirts that say make love not war.

It's blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the people who pursue peace. And not just who rally at anti-war protests, but in your home when there's a fight.

[13 : 32] Are you the one who pursues peace? Are you the one who seeks to settle tension? Who seeks to listen impartially? Who seeks to let go of your own prejudice?

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God. And finally, Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Not persecuted for being annoying. Not persecuted for being the judgmental Christian who knows how to let everybody else know when they're doing the wrong thing. Not persecuted for letting everybody else know how much better than them you are.

But persecuted for righteousness. Now, this one rubs, I think, the most. It's really easy to read this and go, yeah, blessed are the persecuted. But just let that sit in your mind for a second.

Persecution. A blessing. How is that possible? As you pray for the next 12 months, are you going to ask God for persecution? Because apparently, that's part of this blessed life.

[14 : 35] That's part of what success in life looks like, according to Jesus. So how does that work? The best way that I can understand it is, it's like paintball. I don't know if you've ever played paintball before.

If you haven't, basically, there's a bunch of people running around in, like, camouflage suits with high-powered, air-pressured guns and little paint pellets, which leave some nasty bruises and welts on you.

Now, it might sound counterintuitive, but if you come out of a game of paintball without any marks on you, that's not actually winning. You might think you've won, but everybody else will look at you as the person who hid and didn't get involved in the game, didn't actually engage in what was going on.

Success at paintball is maybe a few less bruises than everyone else, but you need the war wounds. That's what says you were in there. Those welts say you were in the game, you were taking shots, you were taking risks, you were a part of it.

And in the same way, persecution is the badge of honour for the Christian who seeks to honour God with their life. Now, it's not an instruction to go looking for persecution.

[15 : 36] Go and find the angriest non-Christian you can and just hover around them until they hit you. The reality is, if you seek God, it's offensive. If you continue to do what you know is right, it will rub against the world around you.

If you continue to refuse to cheat on your tax, if you continue to refuse to be dishonest at work, even if it's beneficial for your whole department, you may find you miss out on a promotion.

You may find your work colleagues or your school friends don't want to hang out with you anymore. You may find it's even harsher than that. They start talking about you. They start ridiculing you. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.

Verse 12, When you seek God with all your heart, persecution will result.

And maybe we need to ask ourselves a question as we come to this time of reflection and looking at the new year. If we have not faced persecution for our righteousness this year, has there been righteousness?

[16 : 46] Has there been an obvious love for Jesus that the world around us could see? Now I say that gently because again, Jesus isn't instructing us to go looking for persecution.

But he is saying that where there's righteousness, there'll be persecution. He says it in John 15. He says it all through the New Testament. And if I'm honest with you, as I reflected on these things this week, I struggled to think of a time where I have been persecuted for my righteousness.

And so maybe I need to ask God to help me to seek Him with a greater focus and a more significant purity of heart so that the world might see that He is my King.

This is the blessed life. Poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaker, and persecuted.

That's what life in the Kingdom of God looks like. And that is the opposite of everything that we described at the beginning. And if we're honest, that's the opposite of most of the things that we want in the next 12 months.

[17 : 57] If you're the kind of person who plans and set goals, I'm not sure that these are the things that would have rated high on your list. But this is the grid that Jesus gives us.

This is the ruler. This is the measure of what success looks like. And Jesus is redefining our worldview. He's redefining what matters.

He's resetting what the goal is. And so as we dream and we plan for what is to come, as we reflect on the year that has just passed, I want to show you two key things that I think will help us unlock this blessed life.

The first one. Real success is not something that you achieve. It's something you receive. Say that again.

Real success in your life is not something that you earn, that you sweat and toil for. It's something that you receive helplessly. When I was growing up, I still have, but I'm one of three brothers in my family.

[19 : 03] There's also girls, but I'm a middle child. I've got an older brother and a younger brother. And for some reason, God in His providence decided that I should be the least coordinated.

And this was fairly costly growing up because what do boys do? They beat each other up. They play sport. And when one of your brothers is five years younger than you and better than you at everything, it's not great for the self-esteem.

But I remember one instance in particular when we lived in the hills, which is about half an hour away from here, and it was really, really hot. It was one of those days at school where the rumours, which I'm not sure are true, start spreading that if it gets one or two degrees hotter, school's going to stop.

It's going through the playground and you're praying that it will just peak at that, I don't know what the magical mark was. I think 42 was the figure I remember from school, although I'm pretty sure we had days hotter than that.

It was one of those days and it was so hot, you're not actually working in class because you can't focus. Everyone's mucking around. And my brother heard a rumour from a friend of his about a new housing estate with a water reservoir in the middle.

[20 : 08] Now, I don't mean a dam, I mean the drinking water in those big, you know, kind of looks like a big oversized tin can. And they heard that somebody had cut the chains and you could go swimming in there.

So, after school, we all jumped in the car with my brother, me, my little brother, my older brother, and his friend, and we drove to this water reservoir. Now, the way they keep people out of water reservoirs is they put a big eight-foot fence around the bottom of the ladder that goes to the top where you would go in.

Well, that's one of the ways. And we got there and I looked at it and thought, ooh, that's going to be a hassle. And as I looked and began to process the obstacle, my brother ran past me, jumped up, grabbed the top, levered himself over and jumped onto the ladder and went up.

My little brother did the same. My brother's friend did the same. I thought, okay. So I jumped up and grabbed the edge and I started to pull myself up. I got to about here, rested my chin on the top, and then I lost it and I dropped off.

And I kind of stood back for a second, caught my breath. I was carrying a bit of extra weight and I thought, what can I put? There's nothing around to stand on. So I took a running jump and I run and kind of, you know how you see in the movies, they step on a wall and it's like magical.

[21 : 20] And I did that and my foot hit the wall and then I fell. I'm looking around and my brothers, including my five-year younger brother, halfway up the ladder looking down at me in hysterics. They think this is the funniest thing ever.

And I'm jumping again, I'm trying over and over, I'm trying everything I can. I'm trying to psych myself up for it. My brother's telling me it's all in my head but actually it was probably to do with a lack of bicep.

And I keep trying, keep trying, keep trying and eventually, after my brother's been swimming in the pool for a little while and they're sick of watching and laughing at me, he comes down and he offers me his hand to help me get over.

Now, I couldn't accept. I mean, it would have been admitting defeat. My little brother who was like 11 at the time had managed to chin up himself and get over the fence. I thought, no, no, it's okay, you keep swimming, I'll be in in a second.

And I'm getting hotter and hotter at this point. Remember, it's 42 degrees and I have another couple of cracks at it and then eventually I realize I can't. No matter how much I try, I'm not going to get stronger or taller or able to jump more in the next 20 minutes, half an hour, three days, five years.

[22 : 25] I'm stuck with the body God's given me and so eventually I had to shout out and my brother came down, gave me an arm over and I got to swim for about five minutes because they were already over it. But until I was willing to put my hand up and accept help, I was in a position where I could not do what I needed to do.

The reality of our life is that you are like me trying to jump that fence. Regardless of how successful you might think you are, regardless of the capacity that you think you have to achieve things or gain things for yourself, to get into this life that Jesus is describing here, to experience the favour that God has for you, the design He has for your life, you need help.

You need to put your hand up. It's there in the very first thing that Jesus says. As He begins to describe this life, He says, blessed are the poor in spirit.

The starting point for this life is recognising that you're not good enough for it. Recognising that you need Jesus and then finding the answer in His life.

Your inadequacy is surpassed by His perfect obedience to God. He embodies so much of this list. He is the example of meekness.

[23 : 45] He pursued righteousness and got it. He was and is merciful. He loved His heavenly Father with purity of heart. He brought peace on the earth and He was persecuted for His righteousness.

We need to begin by recognising our inadequacy, asking for help and finding the answer in Jesus. In His death and in His resurrection, those who are not good enough, those who don't deserve it, those who are poor in spirit, find forgiveness and blessing and hope and love.

They find comfort. They inherit the earth. They will be filled with righteousness. They are shown mercy. They will see God. They will be called sons of God and theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Real success in life is not something you toil for. It's something that you receive in Jesus from your heavenly Father.

The second thing that I think helps us unlock this life that is described here and take it in our own context is that real success in life is a journey. I want to take you back a few years to June 29, 2007.

[25 : 08] It is a significant date in the history of the world. I'm fairly confident that none of you will know why. When I tell you, you will remember it as significant but technology has moved very quickly at different points in our history.

There's been key points where it's jumped, other points where it's been a bit static. June 29, 2007 was the release of the first iPhone. Now, I know it's a stretch for some of us in this room but I need you to think back to the pre-iPhone days or maybe if you're really good, the pre-smartphone days.

The reason I picked the iPhone is because the smartphones before the iPhone were about as big as this stand. I remember having a 3-1 with the network and one of my housemates used to make fun of me by pretending to answer the phone by picking up a mattress.

So, that doesn't really count, I don't think. There's nothing smart about carrying around a mattress to make phone calls. But think back to the pre-iPhone days to the Nokia 5110 which was apparently the only phone in the world.

The Nokia 5110 was the phone that enabled you to play Snake instead of doing maths. Now, on the iPhone you can download files, you can send emails, you can video chat to people on the other side of the world.

[26 : 30] But the iPhone that was released on June 29, 2007 would be a really annoying phone to have right now. It would be slow, it would be inadequate, it would be frustrating, it wouldn't be able to do things that your new iPhone can do, the camera would only have like 5 megapixels.

Real success is a journey. When we place our trust in Jesus and in what he's done on the cross, it brings radical change in our life.

The Bible describes us as going from darkness to light, from death to life, but it also begins a slow process of change in us.

At the risk of stretching the metaphor, Jesus' arrival and his death and resurrection are like the release of the first iPhone. As we await the perfected iPhone, which I assume will be in heaven when Steve Jobs is back on the job, we also await the return of Jesus when this life that is described here will be fully realised.

We are called as Christians to have a contentment and a joy in what God has given us now, but at the same time to be discontent, to have a yearning for the more that God has prepared for us.

[27 : 52] The kingdom has begun because Jesus has died, Jesus has risen and Jesus has ascended to the throne in heaven, but the kingdom will only fully be realised when Jesus returns.

That is why Jesus can say, blessed are those who are persecuted because they know that though they face persecution now, they will live forever and there will come a time when God will wipe away every tear from their eye where there will be no more pain, no more suffering.

Paul describes the Christian life as joyful yet sorrowing and I believe the message from Jesus in this description of the blessed life is that we must look forward to heaven when we will know true comfort, when we will inherit the earth, when we will be filled with righteousness, when we will be shown mercy eternally, when we will see God face to face, when we will be called sons of God, when we will enjoy the kingdom of heaven in all its glory.

But I also think the message is rejoice now. Because Jesus has died, because Jesus has risen, the mourning we have over sin has a comfort because there is hope.

Because Jesus is alive and because we can be forgiven, we know that he has begun the process of making us righteous, we know that when he returns we will be filled with righteousness.

[29 : 30] In Jesus we have been shown mercy. Because of Jesus we know that we will get to see God. Because of Jesus we too get to be called sons of God and because of Jesus ours is the kingdom of heaven.

Success success in life. The blessed life is a life modelled on Jesus' example. But more than that. It's a life that's only possible because of what Jesus has done on the cross.

And finally it's the life that wants more than anything for Jesus to be honoured as the king that he is. That is God's end point for his creation.

Jesus as king over all and the blessed life anticipates that perfect final day. Let's pray. Father God we want to acknowledge that there are so many things that we chase after.

So many things that distract us from the life that you have won for us. Father we ask that as we reflect on the year that has passed, as we look at the year that's to come and as we look at the rest of our lives, Lord may we be consumed with the things that you desire.

[30 : 56] Enable us to treasure Jesus as he deserves, to serve him and honour him as our king, to seek his glory above our own, to recognise the things in this world that are offensive and dishonouring to him.

Give us a yearning for heaven. Help us to live every day now in preparation for that day. Help us to live every day now recognising Jesus' full and complete kingship.

And Father make us a light that shines the hope that we have, that shines the majesty and glory of Jesus into a world that is dark and lost and desperate for this blessed life.

Amen. Amen.