

Strange blessings

By [James Sledge](#)

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As a pastor, it is not unusual for me to hear people speak of their blessings. They may comment to me that they have been blessed, usually referring to what they appreciate in their lives, such as possessions, wealth, position, children, etc. In prayers people sometimes refer to their many blessings, often with similar meaning. What I've never heard is someone including the items that Jesus lists in the Beatitudes.

These Beatitudes (from the Latin for "blessing") have suffered from a fair amount of trivializing over the years. They frequently get referred to as the "Be Happy Attitudes," as though Jesus was here offering some tips for self-improvement or success. But any self-help guru who suggested mourning, anguished longing for the world to be set right, or persecution as a prescription for happiness would not last long in that role.

Jesus clearly has different priorities than most of us do. Jesus has little interest in possessions, and he regularly invites people to leave what they have behind and follow him. Many of the things we call blessings involve acquisition and getting, but Jesus says that the path to life goes through giving, self-denial, and concern for "the other."

My own Calvinist tradition is largely responsible for the so-called Protestant work ethic. In its origins it equated hard work and success with signs that you were a member of God's elect. Yet Jesus' Beatitudes speak of God's favor being on people most of us would not list as paragons of success. And in Luke's gospel, a similar set of beatitudes says, "Blessed are you who are poor." And it later adds, "But woe to you who are rich." The same pattern follows for those who are hungry and those who are full. Not sure how that fits into hard work + success = God's blessing.

Our culture often blames those who are poor for their fate. They [are presumed to be lazy or without initiative](#). Yet God seems to be quite taken with the poor. It's a theme that recurs regularly in Old and New Testaments. Whether that poverty is spiritual or

literal, God looks with favor on those who are too often despised for their "failings."
And I'm pretty sure that Jesus' teachings are encouraging us see things more from
God's point of view.

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