

Congratulations

Hespeler, 29 January 2023 © Scott McAndless

Micah 6:1-8, Psalm 15, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, [Matthew 5:1-12](#)

In 1966, the American Bible Society published a book that would transform many people's understanding of the Bible. That book was called "Good News for Modern Man," and it was a translation of the entire New Testament into modern, everyday English. Despite what would be a rather problematic title today (What, is there no good news for modern women?), the translation was a tremendous success. Actually I would hold out that success as an important lesson on how much the English language has actually changed since it was first published.

Ten years later, the entire Bible was published under a better title, The Good News Bible. And the American Bible Society never looked back. Ever since their translation has remained one of the best loved and most widely used, though today it is often referred to as "Today's English Version." It is the translation that is used in our Sunday School and for the readings that are pre-recorded for our worship services. Joanne read from it today.

Copies in the Church

I know all of that publication history because the church that I grew up in had purchased several copies of Good News for Modern Man and, when the Good News Bible came out, they bought enough copies to place them in all of the pews.

And I remember that – oh boy, do I remember that! I remember that because, though I was just a kid, I happened to be in the room when a bunch of adults were discussing the new Bibles. They were not impressed!

An Overhead Discussion

And I remember exactly what they were talking about. They were talking about the very passage that we read this morning – the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. You know what they were upset about? They were upset about the very first word.

The translations that everyone had grown up with up until that point (both the King James and the Revised Standard Versions) had translated it like this: **"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."** But, the man who was talking complained, the Good News Bible had had the unmitigated gall to translate it like this: **"Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor; the kingdom of heaven belongs to them!"**

"Happy? Happy??" he cried, "that just has to be wrong. It doesn't make any sense. It says, "the poor in spirit" (yes, he was still stuck in the old translation), and what does "poor in spirit" mean except that people are *unhappy*! So, it is just plain wrong because that would mean, "Happy are the unhappy!"

The Impression it Made

That diatribe made an impression on me and stayed with me. It is actually probably one of those formative events that birthed in me a deep desire to



understand the Bible and what it is really saying. That is, of course one of the things that led me to seminary and to the kind of work that I do now.

In the course of my studies, I had the wonderful opportunity to learn some New Testament Greek. And, while I wouldn't say that I am an expert, I did learn to read the original Greek text of the Gospel of Matthew for myself.

And so, if I were able to time travel back to that room where that discussion was taking place in the late 1970s, I could actually say something intelligent about that criticism of the Good News Bible. And do you know what I would have to say? I would have to say that, actually, "happy" is a perfectly good translation of the original Greek word into contemporary English.

Why Blessed may not be Best

The word in the gospel refers to people who are in a contented and fortunate state. Even more importantly, it was an ordinary everyday word. It was the word you would have used to describe anyone who was enjoying some good fortune. It would have been how you wished them a happy birthday or congratulated them on the birth of their child.

And here's the problem, *blessed* is not an everyday English word. It is a special word that is normally reserved for religious situations or experiences. So, yes, happy is a good translation and probably better than blessed.

A Better Translation

But do you know what? There is actually a translation that might have been even better. But I suspect that the translators of the Good News Bible were a little afraid to use it. It would have been a little bit too much for those old men in the church where I grew up, but I'll bet they considered it. A better translation might have been "congratulations."

Oh, can you imagine how that would have gone over among those righteous religious folks of the late seventies? I can hear them now! "Congratulations? Congratulations! Now that's just not right. How could Jesus possibly have said something like, 'Congratulations you who are poor in spirit. Congratulations you who mourn, and you who are meek and you who suffer for doing the right thing'? Those are simply not things that anyone would congratulate anyone for. That's just a bad translation."

It Doesn't Make Sense

And you know what? They would be right about one thing. Not that it is a bad translation, but that it doesn't actually make any sense. No one would say something like that. But here is the thing: Jesus did. Jesus looked out across that crowd that had gathered at the top of the mountain and he literally congratulated all of those people that he saw who were weeping and mourning, who were poor, who had been abused and mistreated for no good reason. They were all present and he congratulated them all. That is what he was saying.

And the people who were standing in the crowd listening to him actually reacted much like those men in my church did. They were all looking at each other and asking, "Did that guy really just say what I thought he said? Is he really standing up there congratulating people for being poor, hungry, meek and persecuted? That just doesn't make any sense!" You see, that is exactly the reaction that Jesus was trying to provoke when he said it.

Using Special Churchy Language

This is one of the problems that we have with many of our Bible translations. It is not that they aren't accurate translations. Most modern translations are really good. It's just that they often resort to special churchy language that seems to be so far removed from the lives that people are living day by day. But Jesus and the disciples never spoke like that. They always used real everyday language.

When Jesus spoke to the crowds, he was not trying to make them feel special spiritual feelings. He was not trying to elevate them so far into a heavenly plane that they were no earthly use. He was intentionally provoking them, pushing their buttons, as a way of getting them to look at everything in their lives from a completely different point of view.

Struggling with that First Word`

So, if you really want to understand what it would have been like to stand there on that mountain and listen firsthand to that most famous sermon ever given, you probably shouldn't start by trying to figure out what by "the poor in spirit." You shouldn't start by asking when he said "blessed are the cheesemakers," whether he intended for people to take that literally or "it refers to any manufacturers of dairy products." (I'm sorry, I simply cannot do a sermon on the Sermon on the Mount without can at least one Monty Python reference.)

No, understanding the Sermon on the Mount starts with understanding the very first word – the word that is traditionally translated as "blessed" but that I'm suggesting we ought to translate as "congratulations." You need to understand what Jesus is doing when he says that to you, because Jesus is saying it to you. That is the point.

Congratulations!

Jesus is looking at the very thing that you are struggling with right now. Are you tired this morning because you have just been working too hard? Jesus is looking at you and saying, "Congratulations!" Are you worried, maybe crippled with anxiety because you're not quite sure how you're going to pay the bills this month? Congratulations! Are you worried about your health? Congratulations! Grieving someone you've lost? Congratulations! Are you just so upset because there's somebody who hasn't treated you right? Congratulations!

Are you feeling any of those things or can you imagine going through such trials and somebody comes up to you and says, "congratulations"? Can you imagine how confused or maybe how mad you would feel towards someone who said such a thing as that to you? Well, that was exactly the kind of reaction that Jesus was trying to provoke with his beatitudes. And unfortunately, the saintly and religious language we use in our translations have hidden that provocation from us for many years.

The Reaction Jesus is Looking for

Jesus wants you to be confused and maybe even mad when you hear these things, but that is only the beginning of the reaction he is looking for. What he's really aiming to do is to shock you into looking at all of those kinds of circumstances in your life in a very new way.

After you get over the initial confusion, Jesus is actually challenging you to look at the circumstances in your life that you are inclined to regret or even complain about. He wants to force you to ask yourself the question, "What, in this, could I possibly be congratulated for?"

Not Mere Optimism

Please understand that I don't mean by that that you should just try to look on the bright side of the bad things in your life. Even more important, I'm not saying that you ought to just put up with the bad or evil things in your life. There are far too many stories of people who put up with terrible things like abuse in the pursuit of spiritual goals. Jesus never called for that. He never said to be happy *about* being poor or hungry or persecuted. But he did congratulate the people who didn't need to face those things alone because the kingdom of heaven had come for them.

What he is really doing here is challenging you to look at where God is at work in the things that are afflicting you. When for example, he congratulates you who are mourning, he is definitely not saying that grief itself is wonderful; of course it isn't. He is saying that, if you are open to it, you will receive divine comfort in your grief. And that is something truly valuable.

An Opportunity to See God Work

And even when Jesus speaks of those who are being abused and mistreated for doing the right thing and not doing anything wrong, of course he is not saying that there is anything good about being in that situation. But I suspect that he is congratulating people for the opportunity they will see to trust in God as they speak out against the abuse, for example, or as they call out for change in systems that allow abuse to happen. The congratulations are for the fact that we can see God at work when we step out in faith and work for the kingdom of God in this world.

So, take a good look at the things that you do struggle with. Listen for Jesus' congratulations and let that set you off on a quest to find how you can see God at work in and through the difficult things you face in your life.

Another Application

I do recognize that this can often be difficult to see when you are in the midst of such very personal trials. So let me suggest another application of this teaching of Jesus that is a little less personal but perhaps more powerful. We are in the middle of a process that involves, among other things, taking a good look at some of the challenges that the church and that this congregation face at this particular moment of difficult change.

And I know that, as we look at this, there's a lot that feels very hard. We feel fearful about the future, and we feel immense grief and sadness for some of the things that we feel that we have lost in the church. Of course, these are not easy things to deal with.

But I would just challenge you with one thought today. What if Jesus is looking at all of us and all of these difficult thoughts and feelings we are struggling with and saying congratulations? Jesus is saying congratulations, but not because Jesus doesn't understand how difficult this might all feel for us, but because he understands how exciting it is to be a part of the beginning of God doing something entirely new. And when you begin to capture the excitement of that, you will start to discover the true nature of the kingdom of heaven.