

Sam Leinster on how Jesus turns prevailing attitudes on their heads

THE GOOD LIFE

key points

Jesus sets out a vision for the good life.

It may require going against the cultural tide.

To experience the good life our focus must be on God's kingdom

In the TV sitcom *The Good Life* (shot between 1975 and 1978), Tom Good (played by the actor Richard Briers who died recently) has a midlife crisis and turns his back on the rat race. With his wife Barbara, Tom turns his manicured suburban garden into a farm. The advent of pigs and chickens and the couple's madcap lifestyle schemes consistently knock the neighbours off balance.

The Good Life is consistently voted one of Britain's favourite sitcoms. One of its enduring qualities is the way it laughs both at conventional values espoused by neighbours Jerry and Margot, and the woolly-jumper pretentiousness of Tom and Barbara. For all the genial banter it makes a serious point: it is hard to be different from people around you. It takes a lot of courage and grit.

Paul urged early Christians not to be conformed to the pattern of this world, or as JB Phillips famously put it, 'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould.'¹ Jesus sets out his vision of the good life in the Beatitudes at the start of the Sermon on the Mount.² He uses the word

'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould'

'blessed' (maranathos) to capture its essence. Throughout the Beatitudes, Jesus literally turns the conventional wisdom of his day on its head. The characteristics he associates with maranathos are in stark contrast to what people then and now crave for as the good life.

Although Jesus sets out a series of discrete definitions, it is important to recognise that these are facets of a single entity. The person living the good life will display all of these characteristics, and the absence of any one characteristic will detract from their experience.

Poverty instead of wealth

Wealth is regarded as one of the major determinants of the good life. Jesus says to be blessed is not to be wealthy but to be poor in spirit.³ To be poor in spirit

is to recognise that we are entirely dependent on God. Our satisfaction with life is not based on our salary, car, pension plan or wardrobe, but on the knowledge that all of God's resources are available to us to meet our physical, emotional and spiritual needs. The dependence we often see in our patients should be a reminder of the dependence we have in reality with God.

Mourning instead of pleasure

For some the good life is a life of pleasure. Jesus says, however, 'Blessed are those who mourn'.⁴ This mourning is more than personal grief at bereavement. It is sorrow at our own sin and the suffering and injustice in the world. We experience this when we feel the vulnerable are neglected at the beginning and end of life, when dignity is denied and when global health inequality is unaddressed.

Meekness instead of status

As doctors we can define ourselves by our standing in the community. In contrast, Jesus says, 'Blessed are the meek'.⁵ The meek are those who do not push themselves forward. Contrary to popular opinion, they are not weak. The idea behind the word is that of a well-broken horse. It retains all of its strength but uses it at the direction of its rider. So the meek person is one who acts always under the control of God rather than for his or her own ends. As servants who quietly work for the good of our patients, we have a unique opportunity to model this.

Righteousness instead of achievement

A particular temptation for members of the medical profession is to define the good life in terms of achievement. Jesus sets us different goals – 'blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness'.⁶ There are two aspects to this longing. The first is the desire for personal goodness: the wish to live in accordance with God's laws and standards. The second, which in the Bible is closely associated with personal holiness, is a concern for justice in the world. The Old Testament prophets are clear that religious observance that is not associated with a concern for justice is repugnant to God. Whatever we feel about NHS reform or the direction of medical ethics, we need to be concerned for justice for patients and all in the profession.

Mercy instead of power

Doctors are in positions of power in their relationships with patients and with other members of the health team. We can be tempted to use that power to get our own way. Jesus says 'Blessed are the merciful'.⁷ True happiness is not achieved by forcing our will onto others but by recognising and meeting their need. This is, of course, most difficult to display when their views and desires do not match with ours. It is there that the battle lies to cooperate with colleagues and patients to create a merciful healthcare plan.

Purity instead of conformity

Most of us would prefer it if we did not stand out as different from those around us. As a result, we are reluctant to challenge accepted ideas and behaviours even when we feel they are wrong or inappropriate. This reluctance can extend into our professional lives leading to failure to challenge poor professional practice when it occurs as was notoriously the case in the Bristol pediatric cardiac unit. The problem is that we have double standards: we know that some views are right from a Christian viewpoint, yet there are others that we tacitly accept and put into practice because they are the norm among our colleagues. In response to our acceptance of double standards Jesus tells us that 'the pure in heart will see God'.⁸ We need to be prepared to stand out even if it is uncomfortable for the sake of Christ.

Peace-making instead of avoidance

It is easy to avoid conflict habitually rather than actually dealing with it. So often tensions in teams can rumble below the surface unaddressed or issues between doctors and management can become intractable. However Jesus calls us to be peacemakers. By definition, a peacemaker has to go into situations of conflict rather than avoid them. Archbishop Desmond Tutu brought peace to South Africa by bringing enemies together, not by ignoring the issues.

Righteousness instead of acceptance

Perhaps the most difficult element of Jesus' definition of the good life is the inclusion of persecution for the sake of righteousness.⁹ The key is that the persecution occurs because of our commitment to righteous action in the world. In other words the good life consists of working to advance kingdom values even when the personal consequences may be hard. In such cases it should of course be our concern for righteousness and justice that leads to our persecution rather than our own arrogance or stupidity.

Living the good life

With great privilege comes great responsibility. If we are to experience the good life as Jesus described it our focus must not be on ourselves, but on his kingdom and purposes. God willing, as we strive to be the salt and light that Jesus describes, *a watching world will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven*.¹⁰

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The good life consists of working to advance kingdom values

references

1. Romans 12:2
2. Matthew 5:1-7, 28
3. Matthew 5:3
4. Matthew 5:4
5. Matthew 5:5
6. Matthew 5:6
7. Matthew 5:7
8. Matthew 5:8
9. Matthew 5:10
10. Matthew 5:16