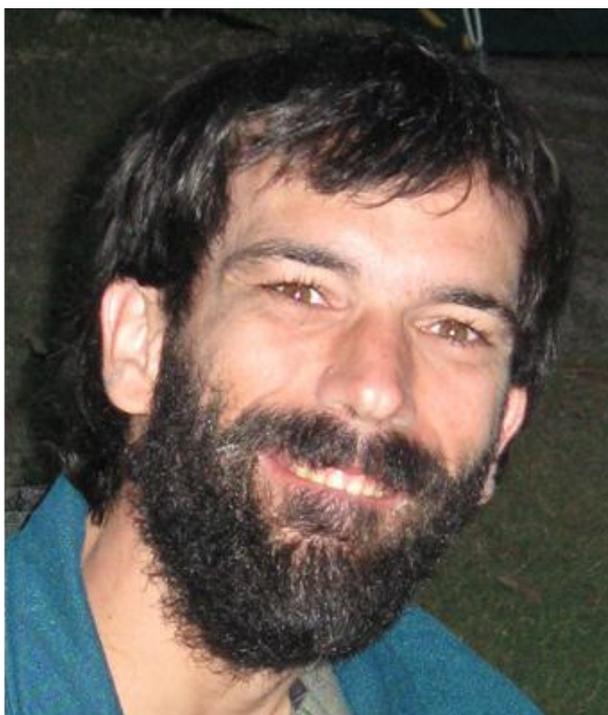


Can a person with a profound disability live the 'good life'?

The idea of living it up on the good life is an enticing one. Surely the good life involves wealth; having our days filled with pleasure; being self-sufficient and self-asserting; triumphing over anyone who opposes us, and having the respect of friends and colleagues; having access to all the experiences the world has to offer, and not knowing a day of suffering or injustice. Who wouldn't want a life like that?

Most people want such a life, because they don't have it! The fact is, very few, if any, can access such a life. Yet, according to our western culture, it is this to which we're all supposed to aspire to. For people with profound disabilities, such a life remains completely inaccessible. As a result, such people can be perceived as objects of pity and misfortune. Some may even question the validity of such an existence.



Jason Forbes, Disability Advocate

Yet when we think about the beatitudes uttered by Jesus (Matthew 5:3-10), we find a 'good life' that's radically different, even scandalous, to popular notions. A good life that's not defined individually, but communally as people partake in the kingdom of heaven (which is Matthew's way of saying 'kingdom of God') by entering into relationship with God and each other.

This good life begins where we might least expect it. It begins with people who Jesus describes as 'poor in spirit' (v3). It begins with people who acknowledge they having nothing to offer to God. At the time of Jesus, these people were not in a position to assert their own worth before God, or merit salvation, and were oppressed by others who were better off. They had nothing to depend on other than God himself.

People like this are more in a position to put their hope in the kingdom of God rather than themselves or the world. It should be stressed that there's nothing to indicate that Jesus uttered these words with people with disabilities explicitly in mind. However, given Jesus was speaking of disenfranchised people of his day, there are some remarkable parallels to those who may be considered 'disadvantaged' in our day.

Despite efforts to integrate people with disabilities into the wider community, social, cultural, and political isolation is still experienced. It's hoped that the new 'DisabilityCare Australia' initiative will go some way to minimise these experiences. Nonetheless, when experiencing isolation such as this, people are often unable to invest themselves or their hope in the things of the world: prospects of massing wealth and possessions are limited, achievements are noticed by only a few, and there is less capacity to impress God, or others.

It's important to note that Jesus is not saying, "they will have the kingdom of heaven" (future tense). Jesus is saying, "theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven" (present tense). The other six blessings are in the future. But when it comes to the kingdom of heaven, those who are to receive the kingdom already possess it. The other six beatitudes are a response to having received the kingdom. By pronouncing a blessing on these characteristics, Jesus is saying, this is the life worth living. This is the good life.

This is not to say that people who are disenfranchised or disadvantaged automatically enter the kingdom of God. But it does mean there are fewer obstacles to it (cf. 19:23). Those who do enter the kingdom (or possess the kingdom – 5:10) value it above everything else, and are willing endure persecution for righteousness sake. Here, Jesus is more likely to be referring to the violent opposition that his followers would face for remaining faithful to him (cf. v11, Acts 5:17-18, 7:54-60; 14:19; 2 Corinthians 11:23-26). Nonetheless, there is a wider application of enduring hardship in the sense of remaining faithful to Jesus even when expressing anger, vindictiveness, and self-pity due to adverse circumstances would seem more appropriate.

But, a life filled with mourning, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity, and peacemaking seems nonsensical. Such things are out of place, even foolish,

in a world characterised by self-determinism. Who would want to mourn over the sin in one's own life, and the injustices in the world, rather than ignore it? Who would want put other people, and their concerns, ahead of their own? Who would pursue justice over personal gain? Who would seek to relieve other's pain and suffering, rather than their own comfort? Who would choose purity over pleasure? Who would seek reconciliation over retaliation?

The people who do these things are those who know something of the reality of God's kingdom. Those who gladly receive God's rule mourn over sin. Those who mourn over sin are humble. Those who are humble seek and long for righteousness. Those who seek righteousness are merciful. Those who are merciful are convinced of the reality of the God's rule, and are single-minded in thought and attitude concerning the kingdom – they are pure in heart. And those who are pure in heart do the God's work of reconciliation and become his heir. These characteristics are not goals we aspire to by our own effort. They are natural out-workings of having received the kingdom.

Yet, how can this be the 'good life' when compared with popular notions? What is often perceived as the good life in our culture is fleeting. It's temporal. It doesn't last. All the self-belief and self-improvement in the world will ultimately fail. Death makes a mockery of any security and power we may have. Our efforts to put things right and be self-fulfilled will be frustrated. Compromises will disintegrate, and what has been fought for is lost. This is not the good life.

In Jesus' description of the good life, he promises what we long for, what we need – comfort, the culmination of God's blessings, satisfaction, mercy, intimacy with God, and adoption as his children. This is what's in store for those who receive the kingdom and live accordingly. This is the good life.

When we think about people with profound disability, it can readily be seen how some of these characteristics are demonstrated in their lives as they struggle in a culture that is obsessed with ability, and does not understand the lack of it. This is not to say that anyone who has a profound disability automatically enters the 'good life' as Jesus pronounces it. Nor does Jesus promise an easy life upon becoming a Christian. Those who have a profound disability are still required to respond in faith and repentance, and will most likely continue to struggle. What is different is the way people struggle. Previously, struggle may have been devoid of meaning, perhaps even foolish. But now, Jesus gives sorrow and anguish a place in every day life by giving them eternal purposes.

If this is true, people with profound disabilities are not to be seen as objects of misfortune, or pity. And at no point is the validity of life to be questioned,

no matter how 'disabled' it may strike us. Jesus words come to us as a challenge to think about the 'good life' from the perspective of eternity. We are to define the good life in terms of community with God and each other, rather than in terms of individuality.

In this regard, profound disabilities, and the difficulties that come with them, don't deny access to the good life. People with profound disabilities can, indeed, have the real good life. If anything, such circumstances may even serve as entry points to this life. This isn't always easy. It may take others to speak, see, hear, think, and 'do', for others who can't. But potential is there. This is part of the church community.

As we continue to evangelise the people around us, our vision must to embrace people with profound disabilities as well. Part of Jesus ministry was to remove barriers that kept people out of the kingdom of God, and we must be doing our Master's business. As we look to grow believers in Christ, this must also include people with profound disabilities. As we reflect the characteristics of the kingdom of God in our church communities, we can also expect that reflection to come from believers who have profound disabilities as well.

Jesus offers a life that's radically different from what our western culture has to offer. It's a good life that is defined communally rather than individually. It's a life accessible to all who follow Jesus. This is the real good life for eternity.

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