

Pressure Today's gospel is an excerpt from Luke's Sermon on the Plain and it is frequently compared to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. In both cases, the gospel writer offers a version of what we have come to know as "The Beatitudes." And frankly, the Beatitudes make me uncomfortable. They stress me out. They make me question my Christianity and invariably, I feel as if I'm coming up short, failing to meet expectations and I feel pressured to perform better.

Pressure isn't anything new for us. As I look at the landscape of the world around us, I see pressure everywhere. We typically attribute pressure and stress to external sources: a delusional boss, an impatient spouse, an unreasonable family member, or as is the case in today's gospel, even a demanding God. If we've been watching the Olympics, we have seen the impact of pressure and stress in the struggles of 73 time World Cup champion Mikaela Shiffrin or we might recall Simone Bile's battles this past summer. And if you've forgotten, Valentine's Day is Monday. Talk about pressure. Reportedly, over 1 billion dollars will be spent on chocolate, another billion dollars on cards, and more than 200 million roses will be sold in an attempt to demonstrate our love for someone special and we all know, even before we begin shopping, nothing that we buy will be adequate for the occasion. On Friday, I heard a guy on the radio say: "if you've already purchased a gift for Valentine's Day, relax, you have 3 days to find something better!"

The reality is that most often, pressure is self imposed. Most Olympians will go home without a gold medal, most of our Valentine's gifts will fail to express our love and more often than not, we will fail to live up to our God's standards. We know this in advance and with certainty. And yet we let that fear of failure stress us out. It doesn't have to! For our fear of failure is rooted in a distorted view that happiness can only be found in obtaining the earthly prizes for which we long. Yes, the beatitudes look forward to a blessedness, a happiness that is still to come, especially for the less fortunate. But we don't have to wait for our eternal reward to experience happiness in this life. Sometimes we simply need to redefine happiness and set different goals. Happiness rooted in metaphorical gold medals or perfect gifts or lives lived without fault is a temporary and fleeting happiness at best.

True earthly happiness, while inferior to the promise of heavenly joy, can nonetheless be had by those who chose to follow Christ faithfully. Earthy happiness can be found in how we live our lives as opposed to what we accomplish in our lives. Luke's gospel offers the "woes," the warnings of God's displeasure, for those of us who put our personal accomplishments and good fortune ahead of the needs of others. We are being warned to not allow ourselves to be blinded by personal blessings and individual wants and desires. I believe that if we can choose to live a life that first prioritizes the needs of others, then we can expect that many of the pressures that we feel in our daily lives will disappear or at least be greatly diminished. For when we put others first, we feel typically good and not stressed.

In his earthly ministry, the Son of God used opportunities like the Sermon on the Plain to teach us how best to live our lives. In the Beatitudes, we learn that there are really only two ways that we can live. Either by trusting in the Lord and faithfully following him or by relying on our personal judgment and pursuits. I want to assure you that following his ways leads to the least stressful path.