Tempted to complain about the “suffering” life throws at us, Jesus offers an interesting perspective. What are we to make of the beatitudes? At first, they sound insane. Blessed are you when you’re poor? Who wants to be poor? Blessed are you when you’re hungry? Who likes to be hungry? Blessed are you when you’re weeping? No one likes to be upset. Where is Jesus going with this? Blessed are you when you’re hated, excluded and insulted? No one likes to be hated. Where is the “good news”? This kind of teaching is typical of Jesus’ preaching. He turns our world upside-down, shaking our worldview, so that we can gain a new perspective.

The Greek word for “Blessed” is macarius. It can also be translated as “lucky”. This insight can help us understand the beatitudes and what Jesus means by them. Let’s start with lucky are you who are poor. You are lucky to not be attached to material things. St. Augustine taught in his Confessions, we’ re restless until we rest in God. Instead of filling our hearts with things that are of God, we end up filling ourselves up with things that aren’t of God. What happens to many people is that our hearts become too attached to material goods. I buy a smart phone and, in a few months, the excitement wears off and I want to buy a better smartphone. Instead of investing more time in the relationships around us, we can spend too much time staring into our electronics. We’re a society addicted to material things and technologies that ultimately do not satisfy the longings of the human heart. Lucky are you who are poor. You’re not attached to material things. Jesus says, lucky are you who are hungry. You’re not addicted to sensual pleasure. Food, drink and bodily pleasures can become addictive and start becoming an unhealthy replacement for our infinite craving for God. We can look at how many billions of dollars companies make selling alcohol, tobacco, pornography, marijuana, opioids and the list goes on. Is this excess reflective of a spiritual problem in our country today? Yes! Lucky are you who are hungry. You’re not addicted to sensual pleasure. Jesus says, lucky are you who are weeping. You’re not addicted to good feelings. Good feelings too can become addictive when the soul replaces God with the need for feeling good all the time. Life becomes a quest for good feelings instead of a quest for holiness. A commonsense piece of wisdom we all learn at some point in life: Some of the best things we experience in this life don’t necessarily “feel” good all the time. Real love, real compassion, real self-control, real sacrifice are things that don’t always “feel” good in the moment. Blessed are you who are weeping. You’re not escaping reality. You’re living your life with integrity and strength of character, in good times and in bad. Jesus says, lucky are you when you are hated. You’re not consumed with winning the esteem of others. Being liked by others is not a bad thing. But this too can become all consuming. Life can be changed from a quest for holiness to a quest for being praised all the time. The hunger for praise can turn into an idol that’s not God. As Jesus warns, woe to you if all speak well of you. Blessed are you if you hook your desires on pleasing God even when this isn’t popular.

Gaze on the cross. Is Jesus poor? Yes, He’s naked on the cross. Is Jesus hungry? Yes, He hadn’t eaten since the previous evening. Is Jesus weeping? Yes, He’s in pain and dying. Is Jesus hated? Yes, the world rejected Him. Yet, the cross is the icon of perfect love. By His wounds, we are healed! The beatitudes, with the cross, offer us a roadmap to authentic joy.