

1. The Beatitudes

The Sermon on the Mount
(Matthew 5:1-12. ESV)

We come now to the greatest sermon spoken by the greatest teacher Who has ever lived, the Lord Jesus. Saint Augustine (354-430) first named this discourse the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon stretches over three chapters of Matthew's Gospel, but what we read is likely a reduction of the original address which Jesus gave from the mount.

In today's study, we will focus on the first part of the sermon called the Beatitudes. Many people picture Jesus speaking to a crowd from a mountain slope, but Jesus likely delivered this message from a hillside to the north of the Sea of Galilee, a site I have visited many times in Israel. Jesus was able to cast His voice to many below Him on the hill. Commentators of the Scriptures call this first part of His sermon the "beautiful attitudes," for they show us the character of the true believer in Christ.

Like many preachers today that begin with a Scripture passage, Jesus starts with a vision statement or a manifesto declaring His intentions or course of action on earth. The rest of the sermon goes into more detail, building upon His opening remarks and focusing our attention on each one of these "beautiful attitudes" by which we are encouraged to live. The first four Beatitudes concentrate on our relationship to God, while the second four concentrate our attention on our relationship with others. Each attitude builds on the one before, with the first and the last speaking of the reward, i.e., "the kingdom of heaven" (vs. 3 and 10).

All of the eight Beatitudes start with the word "blessed," i.e., with the Greek word, *Makarios*, often translated into English as "Happy," but the Greek word means to be spiritually approved by God. He who God blesses has obtained the favor of God! Yes, he is a happy man, but he is only happy because the approval of God rests upon him. Blessed is also a statement that can be translated as *congratulations*, but why are we congratulated? If you are in Christ Jesus, you have been chosen and called out by God because no one enters the Kingdom of God without an invitation by the King of Kings (Matthew 11:27). One never comes into the kingdom of God by one's intellect or some other merit, but each of us, as believers in Christ, are sovereignly called and invited by God's love and grace (Romans 8:29-30).

Some believe that only the twelve disciples were gathered to hear His teaching, but the word *disciples* (v. 1) means one who follows. Also, the end of the sermon mentions that; "the crowds were astonished at his teaching" (Matthew 7:28). The previous passage before the address also tells us, "great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan" (Matthew 4:25). Following the rabbinic custom, Jesus sat down, perhaps on a rock on the hillside, and began to teach:

¹Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: ³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. ⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. ⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. ⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. ¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:1-12).

Which of these character qualities or attitudes do you find to be the most challenging to demonstrate in your own life?

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit (v. 3)

Jesus starts this message at the bottom of the way up, being poor in spirit. The way up is the way down. People are spiritually approved by God when they are poor in spirit. Some may take this to mean that they must give up all they have and depart to a monastery for the rest of their lives, giving up all worldly possessions. While that may be the Lord's direction for a few, as the Lord leads, the focus here is on the poverty of spirit, not poverty of riches. All over the world, there are those who feel unworthy and have been beaten down by this world's system. They can take hope! To them is given the kingdom of heaven. Those who acknowledge their own need have positioned themselves to access what God has in store for them in His kingdom.

When people come to a place in their lives where they feel at the end of themselves, it is then that they begin to look up and cry out to God. This brokenness is like the bottom of the ladder in a spiritual sense. Brokenness is the place of poverty of spirit. In the original Greek language, the word *ptochus* is used, which means "to cower and cringe like a beggar." Commentator R. Kent Hughes gives us insight into why Jesus used this word rather than a different Greek word regularly used to describe someone poor:

The New Testament bears this idea because it denotes poverty so deep that the person must obtain his living by begging. He is wholly dependent on the giving of others. He cannot survive without help from the outside. Thus, an excellent translation is "beggarly poor."¹

Why would Jesus specifically choose this word which illustrates being “beggarly poor”?

We are saying that when people come to themselves and realize that they have nothing to commend themselves before a Holy God, i.e., no righteousness of their own making, and beggarly poor in spiritual standing and bankrupt of spiritual resources, then that's their place of commendation with God. “**God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble**” (1 Peter 5:5-6). In a different passage of Scripture, the Lord Jesus shared a parable to explain the first Beatitude, i.e., the lowest rung of the spiritual ladder:

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee

¹ R. Kent Hughes. *The Sermon on the Mount*. Published by Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2001. Page 17.

and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).

What do you notice about the prayer of the Pharisee? What things do you see about the two praying people's location, content, posture, and attitude? How was the tax collector's approach different, and why do you think he went home justified before God?

The truth is that people do not come to God the Father but through humility and poverty of spirit, begging God to forgive them of their sin, proclaiming their brokenness and bankruptcy before a holy God. The Greek text is emphatic on the concluding statement, for theirs *alone* is the kingdom of heaven. This need for humility should draw us all to the cross and ensure that we have genuinely repented, acknowledging our own spiritual poverty (Matthew 18:25). In this way, we have right standing with God. When we acknowledge our need for forgiveness, the Father responds to us and clothes us with His own righteousness through the redemptive power of the cross.

Blessed Are Those Who Mourn (v. 4).

This poverty of spirit should cause us to mourn over every attitude within us that is not of Jesus Christ, e.g., similar to the sinful woman that wept over the feet of Jesus at Simon the Pharisee's table (Luke 7:36-49). If we have indeed come to the place of pleading bankruptcy, then the next step upward is the emotional ingredient that will take us to mourn over everything within us that has displeased God. Get it all out. Unburden yourself of everything that weighs heavy upon you: **“Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved” (Psalm 55:22).** We should not rationalize why we did certain things, but there should be a hatred of doing anything you know that was selfish and displeasing to God. Be open and vulnerable to the Lord; after all, He knows everything we have done as well as our motives. Nothing is hidden from Him (Hebrews 4:13).

The Greek word translated as “mourn” is *pentheo*; it means grieving and having sorrow of heart, usually being moved to tears. Mourning is called blessed by God when it produces in us a change of heart, generally after we feel pain at what sin has caused, either to ourselves or others. The Lord feels our pain and sees our tears. When the children of Israel cried out to God under the slavery of Egypt, then God stepped in to help them by sending the deliverer, Moses, to free them (Exodus 2:23-24).

When we are moved to tears by pain, God steps in to comfort us with the presence of the Comforter. The word *comfort* in verse 4 is the verbal form of *parakletos*, the name Jesus gave to the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17). Different English translations of the original Greek word have Comforter (KJV), Counselor (NIV), Advocate (NEB), and Helper (ESV).

Paracletos is a difficult word to translate because it means *one called alongside us*. The Lord comes alongside us when we mourn, and He feels what we feel and sympathizes with our weaknesses, and feels our pain (Hebrews 4:15). When Saul, whose name was changed to Paul, was confronted by Jesus on the Damascus road, the Lord said to him, “Why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). Jesus Himself was not being persecuted, but His people, the Body of Christ, were feeling the pain of being persecuted by Saul, and the pain we go through touches the heart of our God. Our tears are precious to God. Even when tears are not present, however, it is the attitude of the heart to which God responds. The Scripture says, “**The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit**” (Psalm 34:18.)

What are things we should mourn, either in ourselves or our world?

Another thing to mourn is the state of the world in disobedience to God and the evil things that surround us in this life. A true believer longs for the restoration of God’s creation. When we mourn over the state of this present world, we are feeling God's heart for humanity and His creation and look forward to the time when the Kingdom of God will be manifest. To mourn, we need an understanding of what sin does. It separates us from God. Sin tramples God’s laws and His ways and robs us of the joy of God’s presence.

It is common today for teachers and leaders in the church to only focus on the positive and downplay the need for mourning or being truly sorrowful, but if you are in touch with God’s heart, you will long for His ways to be demonstrated and for others to be restored to a relationship with God. If this is not the case, ask God to soften your heart. If sin in your own life does not grieve you, ask God to soften your heart and reveal His heart to you afresh. On this side of heaven, we will never come to a place where we are not sorrowful over sin. Even the apostle Paul mourned over his own sin. When he wrote to the believers in Rome, he expressed his sorrow over his struggle with sin; “**For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate**” (Romans 7:14-15). In verse 24, he referred to himself in this way; “**Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!**” (Romans 7: 24-25). That is a form of mourning.

In short, we can say that mourning is feeling sadness over loss and a longing for what we know is yet to be fulfilled.

Blessed Are the Meek (v. 5)

What did the Lord mean when He said that God spiritually approves those who are meek? The word *meek* described a stallion whose strength was brought under control after the animal was broken of his self-will. The animal lost nothing of its strength by being broken; it was now able to be used for suitable means. Meekness speaks of the will being aligned with God's will and speaks of self-control when faced with difficulties and trials. Our example is the Lord Jesus, who when “**he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly**” (1 Peter 2:23).

Oxen were also trained by being yoked to another more mature animal. Jesus, I think, alluded to this when He said, ²⁸**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you**

rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30 Emphasis mine). When we come to Christ, and His Spirit enters our lives, we are “yoked” or “joined” to the Lord: “But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (1 Corinthians 6:17). When we are joined in a covenant relationship to Christ, God's Spirit imparts to us the humility and meekness of Christ, i.e., strength under control.

Blessed are the Hungry and Thirsty (v. 6)

The fourth Beatitude is again about our attitude toward God. The genuinely born-again believers, having the Spirit of God living in them, are always hungry and thirsty to be right with God. There arises a hunger and thirst for the things of God, specifically God’s righteousness. Before I met the Lord Jesus, the mention of His name or the things of God meant nothing to me, but after encountering Christ, I sought out and consumed anything to do with the truth of God and the Lord Jesus. Just the mention of the name of Jesus in a nearby conversation caused me to listen close. God creates a thirst within us that propels the child of God to the things of God.

When touring the desert climate of Israel, one learns that, in the days of Jesus, one couldn't go far without water. So, when David was hiding from King Saul, he had to go from one water spring to another. Even though he was going through such hardship at the hands of King Saul, he likened his thirst for water to his desire for God, saying, “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1). There is a weariness that comes when we see so much evil going on all around us. Satan’s strategy is that “he shall wear out the saints of the Most High” (Daniel 7:25). God, Who sees all and knows the things His people go through, considers the one with a thirst and hunger to be continually in right standing with God; He calls them spiritually approved or blessed.

Blessed are the Merciful (v. 7)

We now come to the four Beatitudes that point toward those around us. The thought behind this Beatitude is that once we come into a covenant relationship with God and begin to walk with Him and receive mercy from Him, then God’s gracious attitude toward others wells up within us. The believers in Christ have an inner desire to extend mercy to those around them. To the degree we allow God's Spirit to lead and guide us, it is to the same degree that we feel compassion for people when they are going through painful circumstances.

This lesson was what Simon the Pharisee had to learn when the sinful woman came to the table and wept over Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-49). Simon had no mercy for the sinful woman whose heart was touched by Jesus. The merciful person remembers the guilt and unhappiness he was once in and has the power within to extend God's mercy to others. Simon the Pharisee never felt the weight of guilt for his sin, so he could not feel compassion for the sinful woman. Jesus talked in terms of a love response to the woman’s debt of sin being forgiven.

People who feel thankful for being forgiven their sin debt let others off the hook when they sin against them. To let someone off the hook means to pardon, release, or allow one to escape from blame, responsibility, obligation, or difficulty. When believers live out this attitude before the world, it is unnatural to the world system in which we live. This is the way Jesus lived, and even

as He was crucified, He extended mercy to those who nailed the spikes into His hands, praying, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

God often puts His servants into a trial or test of faith to see how they react to someone who has hurt them in the past. Is there still a desire within us to see them get the punishment they deserve for the way they have hurt us? Can we deal out grace and mercy to those who don't deserve it? Having received God's mercy in the test, God grades us according to how we behave toward others. Elsewhere, the Lord told a parable about this attitude of being merciful:

²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?” ²²Jesus answered, “I tell you, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times! ²³Because of this, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlements, a debtor was brought to him owing ten thousand talents. ²⁵Since the man was unable to pay, the master ordered that he be sold to pay his debt, along with his wife and children and everything he owned. ²⁶Then the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Have patience with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷His master had compassion on him, forgave his debt, and released him. ²⁸But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ ²⁹So his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you back.’ ³⁰But he refused. Instead, he went and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay his debt. ³¹When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and recounted all of this to their master. ³²Then the master summoned him and declared, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave all your debt because you begged me. ³³Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?’ ³⁴In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should repay all that he owed. ³⁵That is how My heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:21-35).

Have you been emotionally hurt by your parents, friends, or spouse? Can you set them free from the justice you demand they should receive for the wrong done to you? Again, the word "they" in the Greek text is emphatic, meaning [they alone] shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the Pure in Heart (v. 8).

Jesus here speaks of the internal cleansing and washing with water by the Word of God (Ephesians 5:26). The believer in Christ is sanctified or set apart by God for Himself, and after His conversion to Christ, the believer goes through *tests* prepared by the Lord, i.e., times in their lives when God challenges and transforms His motives and purifies the heart. The promise is beautiful: they who have had their hearts purified by the Lord are the ones who will see God. This will be the great reward of heaven, “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Revelation 22:4).

Blessed are the Peacemakers (v. 9).

A peacemaker is not a passive word, i.e., one who does nothing and keeps the peace. This Beatitude speaks of one who initiates peace by breaking down walls between individuals, someone that brings others in alignment with God. A peacemaker is someone who will risk pain to confront and bring to light the things that cause division and disunity. A peacemaker will help

people get things right between them and God and often has the gift of an evangelist. Can I stop and ask you right now: How is your life with God at this moment? Do you sense a wall between you and Him? God is a peacemaker, and we, as His people, must also be peacemakers. We must first be at peace with God and then offer His peace to others.

Blessed are the Persecuted (v. 10).

When these character qualities are within us, the light will show up the darkness in those around us, and often there will be retaliation, especially if we confront those around us with the Gospel. Jesus said, **“A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).** We must always be aware and vigilant because we live in enemy territory, and a war is being waged against the Lord and us. Often, the enemy will use the most influential people around us to speak disheartening words to us. People whose opinions we respect will say the harshest things to us or the One we serve. We should not be surprised at such attacks, but we are to rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer for His Name.

¹¹Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:11-12).

Have you ever had angry or hurtful words spoken to you because of your faith in Christ? Could you share this experience, how it made you feel, and how you reacted?

The Lord Jesus has given us an example in this sermon of how we should seek to live out our lives. He has given us His “recipe for Life.” It can be confusing because it goes against the way of this world. But that is the point. In these Beatitudes, we find His attitudes for living. He also offers us His help at all times through the power of His spirit, not only to will but also to do His will (Philippians 2:13). He will be quick to come to our aid when we ask for His help to demonstrate these attitudes in our life.

Prayer: Lord, soften my heart to be aware of my need for You. Make my heart tender so that I will be able to hear your voice. Thank you, for you have walked this road ahead of me and walk with me. You have promised never to leave me or forsake me (Hebrews 13:5). Your ways are higher than our ways. Your words show us the way to life. Amen.

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