

Counter Culture
Sermon on the Mount
The Beatitudes

We begin today a series on the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5-7. We are calling it Counter Culture 'A life of faith in an upside down world'. Matt Gordon, David McChesney and myself are going to share the teaching, so you will get a variety of perspectives. Today our focus is on the beatitudes, probably the best known part of the Sermon on the Mount apart from the Lord's Prayer.

Matthew 5:1-12

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when men reviled you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you."

The first thing to do whenever trying to understand anything in the bible is to look at its context, so we will briefly do that and then we will narrow it down to the beatitudes themselves.

The Structure of Matthew

The Sermon on the Mount starts with the beatitudes in Matthew 5 but notice Matthew 4:23. It is a summary statement of Jesus' earthly ministry:

²³ Jesus travelled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness.

One way to restate that verse would be to say that Jesus made it his ministry to preach the coming of the kingdom, teach the way of the kingdom, and demonstrate the purpose and power of the kingdom by healing the sick. Preaching, teaching, and healing.

Now if you flick over to [Matthew 9:35](#). Almost verbatim we find the same summary:

³⁵ Jesus travelled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness.

Then when we look to see what is sandwiched between these two summary descriptions of Jesus' ministry, what we see are two major sections: chapters 5–7 are a collection of Jesus' teaching called the Sermon on the Mount; and chapters 8 and 9 are a collection of stories mainly about his healing ministry.

So what we have is a five chapter unit put together by Matthew to present us first with some typical teaching of Jesus concerning the way of the kingdom, and second with some typical healings and miracles to demonstrate the power of the kingdom.

The value of seeing this context is that it warns us against treating any little piece of this section in isolation. Matthew is the writer here and he is putting his material together in a particular way. He is the inspired apostle, and we should care about how he chose to put things together. That is the way he gets across his meaning.

The Jesus Who Teaches and Heals

For example, one thing we can immediately say is that you can't have the Jesus of the Sermon of the Mount without the Jesus who cleansed the leper, and healed the centurion's servant, and stilled the storm, and cast out demons. The writer who gives us the one, gives us the other, and it is illogical to do what some try to do: that is say that they admire the ethical teacher of the Sermon

on the Mount but they don't want to get involved with the spooky supernatural person who stills storms and heals miraculously.

Or for some the opposite temptation may overcome them. They may have a fascination with the miracles of Jesus, but when it comes to identifying with the One who said, "Don't call your brother a fool, don't lust, don't get divorced, don't return evil for evil, love your enemy"—well, they like the miracle worker who heals their diseases, but this radical intruder into their personal lifestyle, they are not so interested in him.

Matthew's point is that the Jesus who teaches in the Sermon on the Mount is the same Jesus who calls us to follow him through life and depend upon his power. His work and power are inseparable from his teaching.

The Crowds and the Disciples

So let's go to Matthew 5:1ff.

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them saying . . .

The audience is probably two concentric circles: the inner circle of the disciples, and the outer circle of the "crowds." It says in verse 1 that he taught his disciples. But look at the end of the sermon in Matthew 7:28,

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

So it is clear that the crowds were listening and that Jesus wanted them to listen even though the sermon is primarily addressed to the disciples.

The Sermon Begins

So the sermon begins with the disciples gathered at the feet of Jesus and with the crowds listening in.

I want to start at the end of the beatitudes. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* after going through all those who are blessed concludes the passage with this statement.

You can be glad when people persecute you for living this sort of life—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, God does! And all

heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

‘All Heaven applauds’. I love that phrase – if you are this sort of person, a beatitude person, a person who is blessed because they are and they do these sorts of things, *all heaven applauds!* Brilliant!

We are going to look at these 8 simple statements, and as one commentator put it, these 8 simple statements give us a ladder from earth to heaven. Climb these 8 rungs and you will hear the applause of Heaven!

Not eight works that if we do them we get into heaven. That’s not what it is saying. But 8 virtues that those on the way already reveal. 8 aspects of a Christians life which when we experience them result in the applause of Heaven.

Climbing this ladder is not always easy, nor is it possible in just our own strength, but unless we climb the ladder, the ladder Christ has provided, earth and heaven will never meet, and you will never hear the applause of Heaven.

Today we are just going to have a whistle stop tour of each rung of the ladder. We could spend a whole sermon on each rung, each virtue. What I want to do for each beatitude is to get us to consider a particular question that it asks of us and a particular value that it gives us. Let’s take the first step up the ladder of divine ascent.

1. ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

Or Blessed are the meagre

Like most ladders you have to take them one at a time, if you skip rungs you risk falling off, so there is this progressive nature to the beatitudes. You have to take them in some sort of order. Blessed are the poor in spirit and the second beatitude, blessed are the mourners go together, they form the core of our Christian character.

The first beatitude asks us to have a poverty of spirit and **the question it asks of us is; will I depend on God today?** Will I depend on God, or myself, or my parents, or my church, or my Job, or my savings... **And the value that comes with that is brokenness.** If we can’t depend absolutely on ourselves or other people or stuff then there is a real recognition that we are broken, and only God can heal that. And Jesus says, “Blessed are those people, the poor in spirit, because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”. What is the Kingdom of heaven – that’s a whole series in itself, but simply, the Kingdom of Heaven is

where God resides, where he lives. So if you have the Kingdom of Heaven you have the presence of God, you are with God and he with you.

The second rung of the ladder.

2. ***"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."***

This is no sentimental sadness, oh woe is me, I am feeling a bit down today but at least I am blessed! This is more a sadness and suffering over sin. So **the question is will I mourn over sin today?** Not over 'my sin', it is much broader than that, it is over 'sin'. Am I effected by sin, the fall, everything that is against God, does that make me sad, do I mourn over that? **And the value of those who mourn is that they develop a sensitivity to sin.**

Why is mourning a blessing? It shows our heart, it shows people that we are in pain, it opens us up to others. As one person said what we grieve over reveals who we are; if we mourn our lack of money it betrays our values, if we grieve over child poverty it exposes our heart.

These two rungs go together and so do the next four.

3. ***"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."***

Meekness, I am not sure it is well understood. It has a Godward orientation. A meek person is like the Job's of this world. 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.' Yet there is also a humanward orientation to meekness. Blessed is the one who is always angry at the right time and never angry at the wrong time. **And so the question; Will I be gentle with fellow sinners today?** And obviously **the value is gentleness.** Blessed are those who know and have received God's gentle grace and therefore have learnt to be gentle with fellow sinners.

4. ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."***

It doesn't say blessed are those who hope for righteousness, who campaign for Righteousness. But blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for holiness, for God's kingdom, for God. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst as urgently as a person in a desert wants a glass of water. And so there is **the question – Do I have, every single day, an attitude for holiness, for righteousness.** Do I strive to be holy, do I strive to know what it means to be holy, do I strive to want to be holy? **And the value associated with this is a holy dissatisfaction with where I am.** I want to be like Jesus but I am over here. We are on a journey and the question is not "have I made it", but "am I heading in the right direction?"

5. ***"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.***

One of the problems of trying to live a holy life is that we can tend to become self-righteous! And that is the opposite of what the beatitudes want. The beatitude, blessed are the merciful, teaches us the righteousness comes from God alone. Only God is truly merciful. And so **the question; Am I actively involved in giving compassion?** Each day, each week, each month, in church, out of church, at work/school, at home, wherever we might be, are we actively involved in giving compassion? And so **the value is outgoing love and kindness.** The merciful are blessed because they are witnesses to a greater goodness, forgiving others allows us to see God's forgiveness for us.

6. ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.***

What is a pure heart? As we have seen already it is not a passive heart, it is hungry and thirsting for righteousness. A heart that is capable of mourning sin. It's merciful and loving. The beatitudes tend to fold in on one another. Here the image of the ladder is inadequate, each beatitude builds on each other and all these things come together to reveal **integrity – that is the value** of this beatitude. And **the question is; am I sincere and transparent.**

And so we approach the upper rungs of the ladder – 2 to go.

7. ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.***

Only the person who has taken all the steps that come before. Only the person who can purify their heart can really rebuild bridges, can pull down walls of division, can assist others in recovering a small degree of our lost communion with God and one another. Only these people can be peacemakers. So like the others this also has **a question; am I involved in mending broken relationships,** rather than causing or creating the broken relationships, and **the value here is reconciliation,** or mediation. While we are encouraged to be peacemakers, we need to remind ourselves that this beatitude, like all the others, is impossible on our own. But if Christ is peace, he can make peace, therefore we are to be the bridge between Christ and the world, and that is when we become peacemakers, and they will be called the children of God.

Then the final beatitude

8. ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

And it goes on...

"Blessed are you when men reviled you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you."

This is the longest beatitude and is repeated several times. And in Hebrew thought, to repeat something is to emphasise it. And so there is **the question; are you prepared for the lifestyle and the radical consequences of this lifestyle.** And **the value here is suffering and the cross of Christ.** Are you prepared for consequences that this beatitude type of life will bring?

So we reach the top of our ladder, but something has happened along the way. I alluded to it earlier. The analogy of a ladder is fine, but actually it is not fine enough, it is inadequate, and so we need other analogies to come in and take the place. Because on the beatitude ladder we never leave one rung behind and never visit it again, but in fact we are ascending and descending all the time as we wake up and make good decisions, as we sin, as we repent, as we are restored, we are going up and down constantly. I am not sure there is any perfect image for this process apart to call it a process, a journey, a transformation, maybe like a metamorphosis of a butterfly, where we need to claw and struggle and fight our way out of the chrysalis of self and consumerism, of pride and preoccupation and sin, to spread our wings to become the remarkable creatures God created us to be. But sadly some of us lack the energy or the drive or the stamina to get out of the chrysalis, we don't develop the strength to be who God wants us to be, our wings are under developed, so we remain on the ground, walking to a certain death, the death of the ordinary who is too lazy to struggle for life.

As Jesus is teaching the disciples on the mount, through the beatitudes he is saying, here is the path, it's hard, it's a struggle, but climb the ladder, climb it in such a way that you can fly and realise your divine potential.

This I believe is the root to achieving "the applause of heaven".