

## “The Beatitudes”

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Matthew 5:1-12

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The Beatitudes are a series of blessings that Jesus showers upon particular groups of people right at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount. The word “beatitude” comes from two Latin words: *beatitudo*, which means “blessedness” or “happiness,” and *beatus*, which means “blessed,” “happy,” or “fortunate.” The people who are on the receiving end of these blessings will find themselves in a state of supreme happiness and joy. Jesus is looking upon these people with a special degree of grace.

There are eight or nine blessings in Matthew’s version, depending on how you count. The words “blessed are” occur nine times, so I prefer to say that there are nine blessings. Some other interpreters combine the last two into one, since they both have to do with persecution, but the circumstances differ.

There is a similar passage over in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus offers four blessings. There are some important differences. For example, in Matthew, Jesus says “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” while in Luke he says “Blessed are *you who are poor*.” In Matthew, he is talking about an emotional or a spiritual state, while in Luke he is talking about an *economic* situation. In Matthew, Jesus says “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” while in Luke he says “Blessed are *you who are hungry now*.” In Matthew he is talking about people who want things to be *right* in the world, while in Luke he is talking about people who don’t know where their next meal is going to come from. It’s important to consider both sets of blessings, but today we will focus on the ones in Matthew.

We think Jesus gave these blessings here: on a fairly large hill called Mount Eremos, not far from Capernaum, overlooking the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Here’s a view from the summit. There is a very spacious area at the top – plenty of room for Jesus to gather with a large crowd. Matthew says, “great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.” So Jesus walks up this large hill, and a large throng of people follow him, a mixed crowd of both Jews and non-Jews, all of them eager to listen to his teachings. Today there is a chapel at the top of this mountain, called the “Church of the Beatitudes,” commemorating the event. The design of the chapel is in the shape of an octagon; there are eight sides, with each side commemorating one of the blessings.

The first eight groups of people whom Jesus blesses are: (1) “the poor in spirit;” (2) “those who mourn;” (3) “the meek;” (4) “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;” (5) “the merciful;” (6) “the pure in heart;” (7) “the peacemakers;” and (8) “those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” It is important to note that the people who fall into these groups do not have to be followers of Jesus. They could be *anybody*, of any faith, or no faith at all. Plenty of people who are “poor in spirit,” who “mourn,” who are “meek,” who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” and so on, do not identify as

Christian. Jesus blesses *everyone* in these groups, whatever their faith may be. A whole *ton* of people all over our world are blessed by Jesus! Only one group - the ninth, and last - is reserved for Christians: "Blessed are *you* when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." Here he is talking about people who follow him – and who suffer for doing so.

Each blessing has two clauses. The first clause identifies *who* is blessed; the second clause identifies *how* they are blessed. In each of the blessings, the word "for" introduces the second clause. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for* theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "Blessed are those who mourn, *for* they will be comforted." The last blessing is two sentences long, but there is still a "for" clause: "for your reward is great in heaven." All those "for" clauses indicate what these groups of people *receive*. They are all *given* something, by God. For six of the groups, the blessing is a promise of something yet to come: *they will* be comforted; *they will* inherit the earth; *they will* be filled; *they will* receive mercy; *they will* see God; *they will* be called children of God. Those blessings offer *hope*. They are *promises*, given by God.

For two of the groups, the gift is not something that is yet to come, but rather something that can be experienced *right now*. "Theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven," Jesus says, twice. The people who are "poor in spirit" and the people who "are persecuted for the sake of righteousness" *already belong* to the kingdom of heaven. I take this to mean that God is *already* welcoming these people who might *not* be welcome elsewhere. The "poor in spirit" are the downtrodden, the oppressed, and the depressed. God is offering them a welcome in the *present*. They don't need to wait; they can find refuge *right now*. Similarly, those who are "persecuted for the sake of righteousness," the ones who get mocked, ridiculed, treated unfairly, beaten up, or beaten down, because they were standing up for what is *right*, in a world filled with too much wrong – they too can find a safe haven in God *right now*. These two groups have received far less from this world than they rightly deserve. God offers them a loving welcome *right now*.

As for the blessings that will be realized in the future, let's consider each one individually. "Blessed are those who mourn, *for* they will be comforted." One of the realities of this life is that, sooner or later, it will come to an end. We Christians know that death does not have the last word; Jesus has paved the way for us to experience life on the other side, but all of us who have ever lost somebody dear to us know that those losses still hurt. All of us know what *mourning* feels like. The loss, the emptiness, the void ... we are left with a *hole* in our hearts, a hole in need of healing. God promises us *comfort*. Comfort, on one hand, from people who reach out with loving arms: a warm embrace, a shoulder to cry on, someone who listens, someone who cares. And comfort, on the other hand, from knowing that the person we loved and lost is *beloved* and *at peace* in the eternal kingdom of God.

"Blessed are the meek, *for* they will inherit the earth." The meek are those who do not seek out power, fame, or glory. They are humble, patient, and content with their circumstances, even in the face of adversity. They do not seek great things in life. To these people, God promises a *massive* inheritance.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, *for* they will be filled." These are the people who sincerely desire to do what is right in their personal lives, and who also earnestly strive for a world free from every kind of wrong. There is plenty of evil in the world, both on a personal level and in the systems and structures we create. The scriptures continually call us to turn from our sinful ways, both individually and in community. The scriptures also promise that there will be a reckoning. Sooner or later, everyone will have to answer for what they have done, and for what they have left undone. Jesus Christ *will come* to judge the living and the dead. Those who pursue righteousness will be satisfied.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” Merriam-Webster defines mercy as “compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one’s power” or as “compassionate treatment of those in distress.” In short, mercy is *compassion*. We constantly have a multitude of ways in which we can offer compassion. God will be compassionate to the compassionate. Those who offer no compassion to others shouldn’t expect to receive much compassion from God.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Something that is “pure” hasn’t been mixed with anything else. Gold is pure. Diamonds are pure. A pure heart is a heart free from any taint of sin or evil. Innocent. Spotless. The best example of this much purity is Jesus, whose heart was the purest of the pure. None of us can attain that degree of purity, but we can all strive to become more like Jesus in our hearts. This is what is called “the imitation of Christ” – modeling our life after Jesus, both inwardly (in our relationship with God) and outwardly (in our relationships with others). This is, really, what the Christian life is all about: striving to love God and to love others with *all* our heart.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” Jesus is called “the Prince of Peace.” A peacemaker is one who creates, by word and deed, the kind of peace that Christ embodied and promoted. We see examples of Christ’s peacemaking all through the Gospels: in his ministry to the lowly and the outcast, in his rebukes of the wicked and the unjust, and in his selfless and sacrificial death on the cross. The biblical word for peace is *shalom*. *Shalom* does not just mean the absence of conflict; it means the presence of wholeness, health, and harmony. Therefore, being a peacemaker involves bringing wholeness, health, and harmony to the lives of individual people, to our society, and to our world. This is what Jesus did every time he healed somebody, either physically or spiritually. This is also what Jesus accomplished through his death and resurrection, which broke down walls of division that existed between Jews and Greeks, between rich and poor, between men and women, between slaves and free. Peacemaking is about tearing down what needs to be torn down, like the prophets did every time they cried out against injustice, like the psalmists did every time they rebuked wicked kings, and like Jesus did when he overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. Peacemaking is also about building up what needs to be built up, like Jesus did every time he taught, every time he forgave sinners, and every time he reached out to Samaritans, tax collectors, and other people who were considered “unwanted” or “less than.” Peacemaking isn’t about building *walls*, it’s about building *bridges*. Peacemaking is about creating good *relationships*. Peacemaking is turning *hate* into *love*.

Finally: “Blessed are you when people revile 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” This blessing is specifically for faithful Christians in bad situations. We are fortunate to live in a society that is generally accepting of Christians; most of us don’t get “reviled” or “persecuted” or spoken “all kinds of evil against” because of our faith. Not every Christian is so fortunate. There have been times and places throughout history in which Christians have been persecuted, or Christianity has been forbidden to be practiced. This blessing is for Christians who have experienced such trauma, the ones who truly suffer *evil* simply because they are trying to be faithful. Let us pray that we will never experience evil like that ... and let us also pray that, if we do experience such evil, that we will remain true to our Lord ... no matter what.

Look through the list of Beatitudes one more time. Which of these blessings apply to *you*?

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