

# ***“BLESSED Are The Poor In Spirit”***

Matthew 5:3

December 21, 2024

## **INTRO:**

*It's a few days before Christmas & I hope to help you prepare with an inspirational sermon that might just shock some of us.*

- **What do you hope for this Christmas?**
- **What is the greatest blessing you see in Christmas?**
  - The obvious answer is The Christ of Christmas...
  - We see God... His grace... His glory... His GOSPEL!
  - **What treasures do you see that aren't obvious???**
    - His Person, Power, Promise, **PURPOSE!**
    - His **Message, Mission, Ministry, METHOD!**
    - His Holiness, Healing, Helping, **HUMILITY!**

**T/S:** I pray today you may come to realize Christ's humility *could be* the greatest of all Christmas blessings...

## **PRAYER**

## **CONTEXT:**

- Matthew's Gospel for The Gospel of Jesus The Christ!
- We are diving into the Sermon On The Mount...
- We are beginning with the first of The Beatitudes...
- We have established the biblical Christ & Crowds...
- Today we will see God's Blessed, Blessings, & Building
- AND we're about to celebrate Christmas... PERFECT!

## **BIG IDEA:**

Humble, loving Christians ARE blessed...  
because of Christ's loving humility.

## PREVIEW:

1. God's Blessed
2. God's Blessing
3. God's Building

**T/S:** THE INITIAL PHASE of Jesus' ministry has been narrated briefly yet powerfully: Jesus announced his kingdom mission (4:17), called his first coworkers (4:18–22), and conducted an extraordinary teaching, preaching, and healing tour of Galilee (4:22–25). Matthew now records an extensive message that develops in detail the kind of life available to those who respond to the arrival of God's kingdom.

– NIV Application Commentary

## TEXT:

# I. God's BLESSED

**VIDEO:** *Blessed vs. Cursed*  
(per *The Bible Project*)

***Blessed are the poor in spirit...***

A. **ACTUAL vs.** Counterfeit

Jesus shocked & taught the crowds that biblical “BE-ing” & blessings are the Messiah’s missional miracles... that most people don’t really want or understand.

- i. ALL begins with God’s sovereign truth!
- ii. ALL begins with God’s sovereign love!
- iii. ALL begins with God’s sovereign grace!
- iv. These are 3-strands of God’s Creator cord!
- v. ALL blessings come from God (James 1:17)

## B. **BLESSED** vs. Cursed

### **Blessed**

Not all blessings are blessings!  
(Too many die eternally chasing & choking on cultural “blessings.”)  
- JDP

Biblical blessings are the LORD’s truth in love, God-glorifying gifts of grace & mercy... Anything & EVERYthing, vertically & horizontally, that supports Christian salvation & Christ-like sanctification is a biblical blessing.  
- JDP

*Cultural “blessings” are at best, short lived & diminished copycats of Christ’s lasting & divine blessings. At worst, cultural “blessings” are compromised & contextualized, consistently-confusing, casually-corrupted, counterfeits!*

- JDP

Whereas cultural “blessings” are worldly & man-centered; biblical blessings are meant to be God glorifying and Christ-centered.

– JDP

BE-ing biblically blessed  
is being missionally benefitted.

– JDP

Biblical blessings connect the people of God with the power, promises, & purposes of God!

- JDP

*The best of the blessed are those who powerfully impact & improve this world... based on their personal world having been powerfully impacted & eternally improved by Jesus The Christ & His Word, will, & ways... all by God's grace, all thru His Gospel, & all for His glory.*

*Amen & AMEN!*

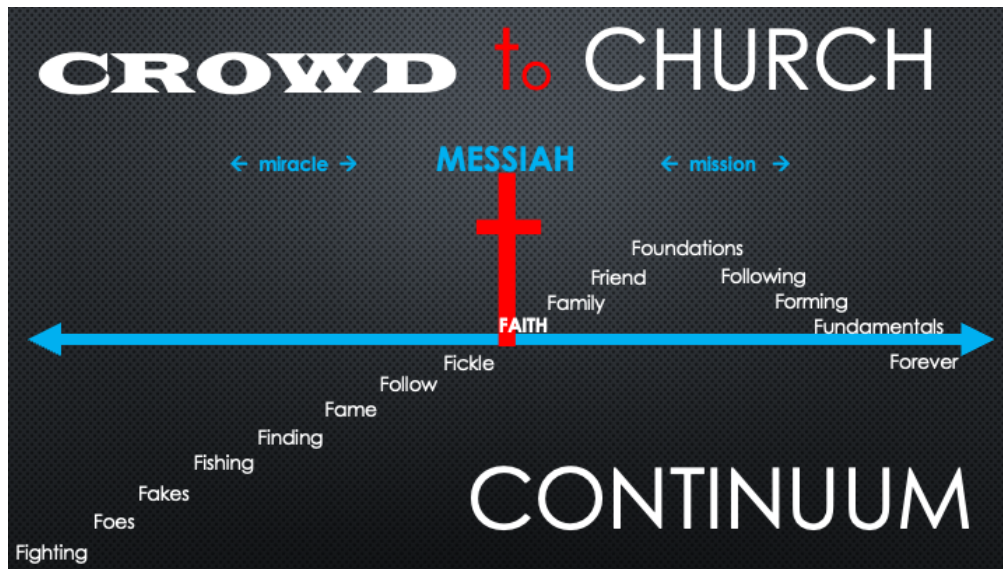
- JDP

*To be blessed is not a superficial feeling of well-being based on circumstance, but a deep supernatural experience of contentedness based, on the fact that one's life is right with God. Blessedness is based on objective reality, realized in the miracle of transformation to a new and divine nature. - MacArthur*

c. CITIZENS vs. Criminals (understanding CROWDS)

are

Remember the Beatitudes are pronouncements, not probabilities!



The emphasis in the sermon is on inside-out transformation.

D. DEFINITIONS vs. Corruption

the poor in spirit,

The poor in spirit are those who understand & embrace their desperate & eternal need for The Messiah's miracle of Gospel grace.

- JDP

The poor in spirit are rich in faith...  
whereas the rich in spirit... are bankrupt of faith!

- JDP

**The poor in spirit are those whose humility is holy, sincere, and absolute. They live in a biblical sweet spot... where no one else can go.**

***The poor in spirit are rich in grace, mercy, & peace... because they KNOW, love, & truly trust the One true God.***

Even after he became an apostle, Paul recognized that *“nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh”* (Rom. 7:18), that he was *the chief of sinners* (1 Tim. 1:15), and that *the best things he could do in himself were rubbish* (Phil. 3:8).

***In spirit*** also conveys the sense that the recognition of poverty is genuine, not an act. It does not refer to outwardly acting like a spiritual beggar, but to recognizing what one really is. It is true humility, not mock humility.

3 biblical contrasts to consider:

1. Pharisees vs. the Tax Collector
2. Laodicean vs. Philadelphia church
3. The Cultural church vs. The Church

***The Laodiceans said proudly, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” but Jesus was they were “wretched & miserable & poor & blind and naked” (Rev. 3:17).***

We cannot be filled until we are empty! - Mac

The door into His kingdom is low, and no one who stands tall will ever go through it. – Mac

**T/S:**

**NOTE:** no New Testament believer is condemned for being rich or called to be depressed.

- Do NOT confuse spiritual bankruptcy with financial...
- **Some have the spiritual gift of giving...**
- NOT a call for self deprecation or gloomy grumbling...

**T/S:**

*The poor in spirit are those who recognize their total spiritual destitution and their complete dependence on God. They perceive that there are no saving resources in themselves and that they can only beg for mercy and grace. They know they have no spiritual merit, and they know they can earn no spiritual reward. Their pride is gone, their self-assurance is gone, and they stand empty-handed before God. – Mac*

**VIDEO:** *What Does Poor In Spirit Mean?*  
(per [GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org))

## II. God's BLESSING

***“for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”***

***For theirs***

*(kingdom citizens vs. criminals)*

Other Israelites, however, took another approach to the law. Knowing they could not fulfill its demands, they simply brought the law down to a level that was more manageable and acceptable. They piled interpretation upon interpretation, creating man-made traditions that were possible to keep in the flesh.... They exchanged the Torah (God’s revealed law) for the Talmud (man’s modification of the law). In the name of interpreting and protecting the law they contradicted and weakened it.... They brought God’s standards down to men’s standards—which they could keep without God’s help. They then taught as doctrine those precepts of men (Matt. 15:9). They made the fatal error of thinking that God was less holy than He is and that they were more holy than they were. The result was the illusion that they were sufficiently righteous to please God... The proud and self-satisfied responded by diluting the law. The humble and repentant responded by calling to God for help.

***is***

- NOTE the role of the tense(s)
- Biblically PRESENT
- Biblically FUTURE
- Biblically ETERNAL

...IN THE CHURCH TODAY THERE IS LITTLE EMPHASIS ON HUMILITY, LITTLE MENTION OF SELF-EMPTYING. WE SEE MANY CHRISTIAN BOOKS ON HOW TO BE HAPPY, HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL, HOW TO OVERCOME PROBLEMS, AND SO ON. BUT WE SEE VERY FEW BOOKS ON HOW TO EMPTY OURSELVES, HOW TO DENY OURSELVES, AND HOW TO TAKE UP OUR CROSSES AND FOLLOW JESUS—IN THE WAY THAT HE TELLS US TO FOLLOW HIM. - Mac

### *the kingdom of heaven.*

- i. The rule & reign of Christ
- ii. The full benefits package of heaven...
  - a. *Adoption*
  - b. *Ambassadorship*
  - c. *Army of God*
  - d. *Armor of God*
  - e. *Aroma of God*
  - f. *10 blessings of kingdom citizenship:*
    - i. Ruled by the Righteous Ruler
    - ii. The Reign of the Righteous Ruler
    - iii. Repentance gifted & accepted
    - iv. Redemption granted
    - v. Restoration unites (both ways!)

- vi. Relationship(s) are anointed
- vii. Rights are granted
- viii. Righteousness is bestowed
- ix. Remembering is empowered
- x. Repeating grows perseverance.

## III. God's BUILDING

### A. The entirety of Matthew's Gospel (structure)

**VIDEO:** *The Genius of Matthew's Structure (1)*  
(The Bible Is Art)

### B. The point of Matthew's Gospel



### C. The parallel of the Sermon to The Gospel

**VIDEO:** *The Genius of Matthew's Structure (2)*  
(The Bible Is Art)

...Matthew has preserved for us five major messages or discourses, which alternate with narratives about Jesus' activities... These discourses are a key to understanding at least one of Matthew's purposes for writing his Gospel. He has gathered together a collection of Jesus' messages that enable the church for all ages to carry out a crucial component of Jesus' final commission: "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (28:20)...

As the one born "king of the Jews" (2:2) and as one who has demonstrated power over sickness and the devil (4:23–25; cf. 9:35; 10:1), Jesus gives a powerful statement of the reality and availability of kingdom life for his followers, which includes practical instruction on how to carry out kingdom life. Thus, at the center of the SM is Jesus' message about the kingdom of heaven. Its opening words speak of the kingdom of heaven as a present possession (5:3, 10), declare different levels of status for those in the kingdom (5:19), and announce the terms of entering it (5:20). The model prayer Jesus teaches his disciples has the coming of the kingdom as its central theme (6:10), and his admonition related to daily priorities of life emphasizes seeking first the kingdom (6:33). The ultimate reward for those who truly know Jesus and do the will of his Father is to enter the kingdom of heaven (7:21–23)...

At first the crowds are amazed at Jesus' teaching (7:28–29) & miracles (9:8) & receive his compassionate attention (9:35–38; 14:13–14). But they increasingly demonstrate hardness of heart (cf. 13:2–3, 10–17, 34–36), until at the end the religious leaders persuade the crowd to ask for the death of Jesus (27:15–25).

The Sermon On The Mount is a high calling, but it is a light yoke of obligation for all Christians.

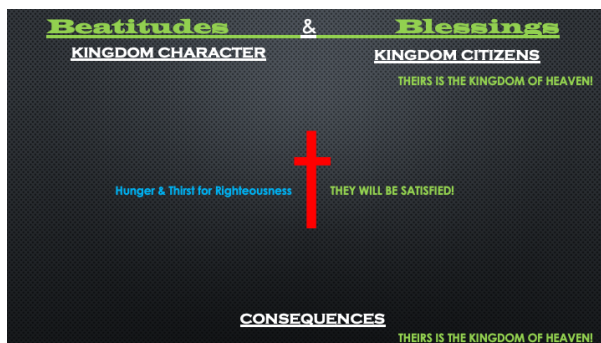
– NIV Application Commentary

## D. The parallel of the Beatitudes to the Sermon

1. Discourse 1 = **KINGDOM** citizens
2. Discourse 2 = **MISSION** citizens
3. Discourse 3 = **UNDERSTANDING** citizens
4. Discourse 4 = **KOINONIA** citizens
5. Discourse 5 = **READY** citizens

## THE BIBLE'S BEATITUDES & BLESSINGS

Christ is always centered... then kingdom citizens, criminals, & the characteristics & consequences that define them...



## E. The parallel of the Christmas blessing...

*You didn't choose Me... I chose you!*

### REVIEW:

The only people who can live the standards of the beatitudes are those who realize & admit that they can't... without Christ. That's the true Church... both in their humble confession and happily-holy witness!

*John said, "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world... And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:15, 17).*

## CLOSE:

This beatitude, a.k.a. biblical humility, explains the divine difference between The Gospel's "availability" & its "attainability."

- JDP

*The greatest gift you may get this Christmas is this humble (AND humbling) proclamation that you (and I) desperately, immediately, always, & eternally NEED The Gift of Christmas... The Christ... the sacrificing, saving, and sanctifying CHRIST! And... IF, by His miraculous grace & for His missional glory, we will humble ourselves, cry out for and wait upon Him – Christmas' Christ – then, and only then, will we have the kingdom of heaven... and all of its power & promises. Amen*

I pray that some of you will be called out of the crowd and into (or back into) The Church this Christmas.

If asked: "What is the greatest blessing you see in Christmas?"

### **I pray your answer will be:**

- I see The biblical CHRIST... of the biblical Christmas.
- I see my CREATOR & Christ in the Christmas CHILD...
- I see my Christmas CHANCE... paid for on His CROSS!
- I see-hear the Christmas CALL to surrender to victory
- I see & believe my need to CRY OUT with Gospel humility to the only One who can save & sanctify me.
- I see the blessing of being CHRIST's poor in spirit!

## PRAYER

# STUDY NOTES:

## ◀ Matthew 5:3 ▶

### Text Analysis

[Go to Parallel Greek](#)

Strong's	Greek	English	Morphology
<a href="#">3107 [e]</a>	Μακάριοι <a href="#">Makarioi</a>	Blessed [are]	<a href="#">Adj-NMP</a>
<a href="#">3588 [e]</a>	οἱ <a href="#">hoi</a>	the	<a href="#">Art-NMP</a>
<a href="#">4434 [e]</a>	πτωχοὶ <a href="#">ptōchoi</a>	poor	<a href="#">Adj-NMP</a>
<a href="#">3588 [e]</a>	τῷ <a href="#">tō</a>	in the	<a href="#">Art-DNS</a>
<a href="#">4151 [e]</a>	πνεύματι, <a href="#">pneumati</a>	spirit,	<a href="#">N-DNS</a>
<a href="#">3754 [e]</a>	Ὅτι <a href="#">hoti</a>	for	<a href="#">Conj</a>
<a href="#">846 [e]</a>	αὐτῶν <a href="#">autōn</a>	theirs	<a href="#">PPro-GM3P</a>
<a href="#">1510 [e]</a>	ἐστίν <a href="#">estin</a>	is	<a href="#">V-PIA-3S</a>
<a href="#">3588 [e]</a>	ἡ <a href="#">hē</a>	the	<a href="#">Art-NFS</a>

<a href="#">932 [e]</a>	βασιλεία <a href="#">basileia</a>	kingdom	<a href="#">N-NFS</a>
<a href="#">3588 [e]</a>	τῶν <a href="#">tōn</a>	of the	<a href="#">Art-GMP</a>
<a href="#">3772 [e]</a>	οὐρανῶν. <a href="#">ouranōn</a>	heavens.	<a href="#">N-GMP</a>

## NIV Life Application Commentary:

### Matthew 5:1–2

**N**OW WHEN HE saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup>and he began to teach them, saying:

THE INITIAL PHASE of Jesus' ministry has been narrated briefly yet powerfully: Jesus announced his kingdom mission (4:17), called his first coworkers (4:18–22), and conducted an extraordinary teaching, preaching, and healing tour of Galilee (4:22–25). Matthew now records an extensive message that develops in detail the kind of life available to those who respond to the arrival of God's kingdom.

Matthew has a special interest in Jesus' messages. While Mark and Luke give summaries of several different

messages and John's Gospel records the extended Upper Room Discourse Jesus gave on the night before his crucifixion, Matthew has preserved for us five major messages or discourses, which alternate with narratives about Jesus' activities. As discussed in the introduction, these discourses are a key to understanding at least one of Matthew's purposes for writing his Gospel. He has gathered together a collection of Jesus' messages that enable the church for all ages to carry out a crucial component of Jesus' final commission: "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (28:20).

This first of Jesus' discourses, traditionally called the Sermon on the Mount (SM), is undoubtedly the most widely known. From the time Jesus first uttered these words up to the present day, **people from all backgrounds and traditions have been galvanized by its potent expression of the moral and ethical life. In the twentieth century, Mohandas K. Gandhi, the Hindu *Mahatma* (Sanskrit for "Great Soul"), was profoundly influenced by this Sermon as he established India's freedom through a nonviolent revolution. Likewise, Martin Luther King Jr., the American Protestant preacher who became a legendary international civil rights leader, strove to make the teachings of the Sermon the basis of his political program and his ideological commitment to nonviolence and civil disobedience.**

This Sermon as recorded in Matthew 5–7 is almost certainly a summary of a much longer one.

One can read through it in thirty minutes or less. Jesus' regular practice was to spend extended time teaching and preaching, to the point that on at least two occasions he spent an entire day speaking to the multitudes and ended up miraculously feeding five thousand and four thousand (14:13–21; 15:32–38).

But this summary is not just a collection of randomly selected thoughts. The structure of this message is a unified whole.

The context of the SM is Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom of heaven.

As the one born “king of the Jews” (2:2) and as one who has demonstrated power over sickness and the devil (4:23–25; cf. 9:35; 10:1), Jesus gives a powerful statement of the reality and availability of kingdom life for his followers, which includes practical instruction on how to carry out kingdom life. Thus, at the center of the SM is Jesus' message about the kingdom of heaven. Its opening words speak of the kingdom of heaven as a present possession (5:3, 10), declare different levels of status for those in the kingdom (5:19), and announce the terms of entering it (5:20). The model prayer Jesus teaches his disciples has the coming of the kingdom as its central theme (6:10), and his admonition related to daily priorities of life emphasizes seeking first the kingdom (6:33). The ultimate reward for those who truly know Jesus and do the will of his Father is to enter the kingdom of heaven (7:21–23).

The discourse gets its name from the geographical setting, “on a mountain” somewhere in Galilee (5:1). The traditional site, as well as the most recent consensus, identifies it above Tabghah, near Capernaum, on a ridge of hills just to the west of the town. This ridge is likely the place referred to in the Gospels where Jesus went “into a solitary [*eremos*] place” (14:13; cf. Mk 1:35). Ancient tradition named the top of the hill “Eremos.” At the foot of Eremos lies the area of seven springs, which carried the Greek name *Heptapegon* (“Seven Springs”), later roughly

transliterated into Arabic as *et-Tabgha*. Eremos offers a magnificent overview of the Sea of Galilee and the surrounding villages. The cragginess of the hill meant it was left uncultivated, which could have enabled Jesus to gather large crowds around him without causing damage to the surrounding farmlands.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus goes to a mountain as a special place of divine revelation several times for significant events in Matthew's narrative. Expositors have wondered whether Matthew draws parallels with Old Testament incidents or themes, such as Moses' going up to Mount Sinai to receive the Law (Ex. 19–20). It is doubtful, however, that Jesus is to be seen as a new Moses giving a new Torah in the five discourses, as some have suggested. Jesus does not give a new law; rather, he is the One whose life and teaching fulfills the law (cf. 5:17–20). If anything, he is contrasted with the oral traditions of the scribes and Pharisees. **Jesus, the authoritative Messiah, fulfills the intention of the Law, because his teaching penetrates to the full meaning of God's commandments.**

## **Matthew's wording to specify the audience of the SM is important.**

Jesus sees the crowds, then goes up on the mountain and sits down. Sitting down is the typical position from which a teacher in Judaism taught (cf. 23:2), a position Jesus takes regularly (cf. 13:1–2; 15:29; 24:3–4; 26:55).

His disciples then come to him, and "opening his mouth" (*κιν*, another Jewish idiom), he begins to teach them. Since the nearest antecedent to "them" is "his disciples," Matthew specifies that Jesus leaves the crowds so that he can teach his disciples. Who are the "crowds" and who are the "disciples"? What is the significance of his teaching the disciples, not the crowds?

## **"Crowd" (*ochlos*) is the same term used to designate the large group of people who followed Jesus around in 4:25.**

The term "disciple" (*mathetes*) occurs here for the first time in Matthew; almost certainly they are the four brothers who have just been called to follow Jesus (4:18–22), along with any others who have made a commitment to him by this time. The designation "disciple" was a general term used to represent a follower of a variety of different kinds of masters within Judaism, but Jesus fashioned its use throughout his ministry in a unique way to describe his own followers.

Matthew specifies three primary groups of people around Jesus in his earthly ministry: his disciples, the religious leaders, and the crowds.

**The *disciples* are those who have made a commitment to Jesus as the Messiah. The *religious leaders* are Jesus' opponents for much of his ministry, represented especially by the Pharisees (12:22–32). The *crowd* is basically neutral, a curious group of people who are astounded by his teaching and ministry (7:28–29) but who have not yet made a commitment to him.**

Jesus' objective was to make disciples from among the crowd.

As he teaches and preaches, the sign of faith is when one comes out of the crowd to call Jesus “Lord,” at which time that person becomes a disciple/believer (cf. 8:18, 21; 17:14–15).

**At first the crowds are amazed at Jesus' teaching (7:28–29) and miracles (9:8) and receive his compassionate attention (9:35–38; 14:13–14). But they increasingly demonstrate hardness of heart (cf. 13:2–3, 10–17, 34–36), until at the end the religious leaders persuade the crowd to ask for the death of Jesus (27:15–25).**

At this early point in his ministry, Jesus will teach the disciples in the Sermon, but he will also have an eye on the crowd, extending to them an invitation to become disciples.

We should emphasize as well that the “disciples” are not identical to the “Twelve,” because some of them have yet to be called (e.g., Matthew the tax collector in 9:9; cf. 10:2–4). The

Twelve are a more restricted group within the larger group of Jesus' disciples. Note Luke 6:13: "When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles." **The term *disciple* here designates those who have come to believe in Jesus, while the term *apostle* designates specific disciples as leaders of the church to come. As disciples the Twelve are like any others who have responded to Jesus' call to eternal life in the kingdom, but as apostles they have responded to an additional call to leadership (cf. 10:1–2).**

Since Jesus' teaching in the SM is designed primarily for disciples, it can be designated as training in discipleship.

It is the first basic instruction for those who have made a commitment to Jesus and his proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom. In addition, the SM also contains at certain points an invitation to the crowd to enter the kingdom of heaven (e.g., 5:20; 7:28–29).

**Relationship to Luke's "Sermon on the Plain" (Luke 6:17–49).** A message with striking similarity occurs in Luke 6:17–49. Both sermons come in the context of Jesus' widespread speaking and healing ministry (Matt. 4:23–25; Luke 6:17–19), both begin with beatitudes, both give significant ethical teaching on love and judging, both emphasize the necessity of bearing fruit, and both conclude with the parable of the builders. But there are significant differences as well. For example, Matthew does not include the "woes" after Luke's beatitudes (Luke 6:24–26), Luke does not include the majority of the antitheses found in Matthew 5:21–48, and Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer does not occur in his sermon but in Luke 11:1–4.

Reconciling the similarities and differences have led to different conclusions by interpreters. (1) The similarities lead some to assert that Matthew and Luke present two distinct summaries

of the same message given by Jesus. (2) The differences lead others to suggest that Matthew and Luke record two different sermons, given by Jesus on separate occasions when he repeated some of the same or similar content.<sup>9</sup> (3) Still others propose that either Matthew or Luke (or both) gathered together teachings that Jesus gave on separate occasions to make one sermon. The latter is usually suggested because there are parallels to Matthew's sermon scattered throughout Luke's Gospel.<sup>11</sup>

Since **Matthew and Luke both imply that their sermons were given on one occasion**, the third view is less likely. The first view is strengthened by observing the same general context, the general order, and the similar geographical setting (mountainous area) of both sermons. The second view is strengthened by recalling that Jesus went about teaching and preaching all through the countryside of Galilee for nearly two years, and he almost certainly repeated much of the same content on numerous occasions. Since nothing of great importance relies on the solution to this question, it may be best to say that until further insight is gained, either the first or second view is preferable.

**INTERPRETATIONS OF THE Sermon on the Mount.** Throughout church history, expositors have subjected the SM to a variety of interpretations.<sup>13</sup> Those interpretations have led to diverse applications, ranging from those who place the SM at the center of their present civil and social agenda to those who limit the applicability of the details of the SM to a future time when Christ reigns on the earth. Each of these interpretations results primarily from understanding the way Jesus intended his kingdom mission to be applied to present-day life. Literally dozens of interpretations have resulted, which may be summarized under the following headings.

**(1) Entrance requirements to the kingdom.** Many have understood Jesus' statements about entering the kingdom (e.g., 5:20) to mean that the SM is primarily an invitation to enter the kingdom of God and that one finds within Jesus' ethical and moral teaching explicit requirements for entering that kingdom. This approach is quite varied, shared at least in part by some within Protestant liberalism, existentialism, and the social reformers. While these approaches do not necessarily advocate a works-legalism adherence to the details of the SM, they do believe that the essence of the SM is to define the means by which one actualizes the kingdom of God. That attainable, essential element may be found in maintaining the sermon's ethical ideal (Adolph Harnack), or in carrying out authentic human existence before God (Søren Kierkegaard), or in achieving the ideal of personal and social nonviolence (Leo Tolstoy).

This approach to the SM acknowledges the radical nature of the kingdom of God that Jesus announces, but it confuses the *results* of participating in kingdom life with the *means* of obtaining kingdom life.

**THE KIND OF LIFE TO WHICH JESUS POINTS IN THE SM WILL BE THE SPIRIT-EMPOWERED RESULT OF THOSE WHO HAVE ALREADY RESPONDED TO THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM, NOT THE MEANS BY WHICH ONE ENTERS IT.**

The sermon must be read within the context of Jesus' overall earthly ministry, which includes the redemptive work of the cross. Jesus' followers will actualize these ethical and moral ideals, not as a means of entering the kingdom but as an outgrowth of the kingdom life that will be theirs through the empowering of the Spirit.

**(2) *An impossible ideal.*** Martin Luther recognized that the SM cannot be an articulation of the means of entering the kingdom of God because it is impossible for humans apart from God's grace to carry out its stringent demands. Therefore, he understood the SM to be similar to Paul's statement of the role of the law (Rom. 3–4; Gal. 3). It gives God's perfect expression of his moral will, which is impossible for humans to maintain, and therefore forces us to recognize our sinfulness and cry out for God's grace in repentance.

Luther did not clearly differentiate the audience of the sermon. Jesus addresses disciples who have already responded to his kingdom mission, which includes their prior repentance (3:2; 4:17). While the SM does indeed articulate an ideal that is impossible for fallen humans to attain, it is an ideal that disciples will strive to live out under the grace of God and the power of the Spirit in their everyday world (see 5:48).

Jesus not only gives the ideal of the kingdom in the SM, but his description of life in the kingdom includes the enablement to attain the ideal.

**(3) *An example for another age.*** Other approaches to the SM do not see it as having direct relevance to the present age. Some suggest that Jesus gave these instructions to his disciples as a rigorous emergency ethic to prepare them for the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God with Jesus' return. But since Jesus didn't return, the rigorous ethic of the SM is inappropriate for the present age (Albert Schweitzer). In a completely different direction, others suggest that since Jesus did not establish the literal kingdom of God to Israel at his first advent, the literal application of the SM awaits a future time when the kingdom of heaven will be established on the earth during the millennial reign of Christ (e.g., C. I. Scofield). Both of these views find principles within the SM that present-day believers must heed, but the primary application is for another age.

While these two approaches are poles apart theologically, they both take seriously their understanding of the nature and timing of the establishment of the kingdom. Both generally

conclude that Jesus either established the kingdom literally then, or it is not at all present now. However, **if we understand the inauguration of the kingdom by Jesus to be a combination of the “already-not yet,” then we do not have to go for an either-or extreme that both of these approaches take.**

**As we discussed in Matthew 4, certain aspects of the kingdom were inaugurated with the arrival of Jesus while other aspects await a final fulfillment.**

**Since Jesus teaches his disciples about how their lives are impacted by the arrival of the kingdom, then the SM is addressed in principle to disciples of every age, including now.**

**(4) An optional elitism.** Several others suggest that the SM was given for a select group of highly committed believers pursuing a higher standard of ethical and moral life. **This view was suggested by the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, who claimed that there were two levels in Jesus’ teaching. One level was for the average Christian (generally the “laity”), while the higher level was for those who were seeking a higher level of righteousness (especially the clergy and various priestly/monastic orders).**

**Similarly, some today suggest that the “crowds” represent average believers while the “disciples” represent those who are either more highly committed to serious spiritual formation or who are in training to be leaders of the church.<sup>15</sup>**

**We must certainly agree that the SM is a high standard of ethical and moral life, but rather than being directed toward a select few, it is the high calling of all believers.**

A two-level ethic that artificially separates Christians into lower and higher categories has consistently been attempted but rightly rejected, as the Reformation doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers” emphasized. Further, **WHILE WE AGREE THAT THERE IS A DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE “CROWDS” AND THE “DISCIPLES,” THE DISTINCTION IS NOT BETWEEN TWO CATEGORIES OF BELIEVERS (E.G., DISCIPLES ARE MORE COMMITTED THAN ARE THE AVERAGE “CROWDS” OF BELIEVERS). INSTEAD, THE DISTINCTION IS BETWEEN**

**BELIEVERS AND UNBELIEVERS**—that is, disciples are those who have made a commitment to Jesus as Savior, while the crowds are interested but have not yet made a decision to believe on Jesus for eternal life. **Becoming a disciple occurs at conversion.** Therefore...

The Sermon On The Mount is a high calling, but it is a light yoke of obligation for all Christians.

### The essence of kingdom life for disciples of all ages.

Each of the above views have some truth to their claim. A majority of interpreters, however, with some variation, understand the SM to be Jesus' declaration of the essence of life in the kingdom that he has announced. **Several key elements are involved** in this general approach to the SM.

#### **(1) We must hear clearly the messages intended specifically for disciples and crowds.**

One of the primary interpretive keys to understanding the SM is to clarify the message that is intended for either the disciples or the crowds. The disciples are those who have made a commitment to Jesus as the inaugurator of the kingdom of God and so receive direct teaching about kingdom life. The crowds are those who are interested but who have not yet made a commitment to Jesus' gospel of the kingdom. **Since the SM is designed primarily for disciples, it can be designated as training in Christian discipleship for believers of all eras.**

To make a distinction, **the SM is primarily *instruction* for disciples about how life is to be lived on this earth in the light of the radical truth that the kingdom of heaven has arrived.** But **secondarily it holds out an *invitation* (not entrance requirements) to the crowds to enter the kingdom (e.g., 5:20).** Some overlap will occur, because the crowds that Jesus left at the beginning of the sermon (5:1) appear at the end of the sermon, exclaiming that Jesus was "teaching them" with an authority not found in the teachers of the law (7:28–29). **Even when directly teaching his disciples, Jesus has an eye on the crowd, hoping to persuade them to become his disciples.** His teaching is a tantalizing attraction to the crowds within hearing range.

**(2) We must recognize the targets of criticism within the historical religious setting.** The teachers of the law and the Pharisees at that time were the most influential interpreters of the Old Testament Scriptures. They were the predominant caretakers and examples of righteous religious life among the common people. However, **some of their interpretations and applications were leading the people astray from the intended will of God as revealed in the Law and the Prophets.** Therefore, on the one hand, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees are the targets for Jesus' implicit and explicit criticism because of their faulty teaching and hypocritical example (e.g., 6:1–18). On the other hand, **Jesus demonstrates throughout the SM how the kingdom life that he has inaugurated correctly fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures (5:17–20).**

A subtle shift occurs in the SM, so that the relatively positive note at its beginning gets increasingly harsher. In chapter 5 Jesus calls for a higher form of righteousness than that exhibited by the teachers of the law and the Pharisees (e.g., 5:20), in chapter 6 the hypocrites are “outside” (addressed as “them”), but in chapter 7 the hypocrites are addressed directly (addressed as “you”), taking on the adversaries directly who are leading the people astray.

So at virtually every point in the SM we must determine how Jesus confronts an erroneous interpretation or a hypocritical application of the Old Testament that is being advanced by the Jewish leaders. Jesus shows the intended meaning of God's will by bringing the Old Testament to its fulfillment, and he does so by addressing the religious life of the common people as they have seen it speciously interpreted and modeled by the teachers of the law and the Pharisees (5:17–20).

**(3) We must view the Sermon as the realistic, though ideal, model of the Christian life.**

The SM gives the ideal of discipleship (e.g., 5:48), yet that goal is set within a realistic understanding of everyday human life as it will be transformed through participation in new covenant life (26:26–29).

*The new covenant that Jesus inaugurates includes both forgiveness of sins and transformation of lives, because it is the basis of Spirit-produced regeneration and spiritual growth (cf. Ezek. 36:26–32; Titus 3:4–7).*

**Although he does not mention the Holy Spirit explicitly in the SM, as the Spirit-anointed messianic inaugurator of the kingdom of God (3:16–4:1), Jesus exemplifies the kind of life that is empowered by the Spirit to live out the radical teaching included in the SM.**

Jesus' disciples will participate in real forgiveness of sins through the redemptive work of Christ on the cross, they will experience the real beginnings of kingdom life that comes through the new covenant regenerative work of the Spirit, and they will experience real transformation by the Spirit into the image of Christ (cf. 10:24–25; Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18). Jesus displays in his own life and teaching the perfection of the Father that is laid before the disciples as the ideal goal toward which they are to strive. The wonderful truth behind the goal is that there is a realistic promise of initiation and ultimate realization, even though they will not attain the goal perfectly in this life (see comments on 5:48). The ideal life that Jesus lives and teaches becomes the goal that all of his disciples are to strive toward in this life.

Jesus interprets the unchanging principles of God's divine will already embodied in the Law and the Prophets for those who live in the already-not yet kingdom of God.

The emphasis in the sermon will be on inside-out transformation.

**Jesus will continually go to inner motivation, not external performance. The inner life will naturally transform the outer life. The heart that treasures the kingdom of heaven above all else will be the starting point for transformation of the entire life.**

MATTHEW'S INTRODUCTION TO the SM brings important implications to our attention that will be helpful when understanding more clearly how to develop our own discipleship to Jesus.

**The SM delineates the foundation of our discipleship to Jesus.**

The kind of kingdom life elucidated in the SM is the foundation for each Christian's personal discipleship to Jesus. The mandate of the Great Commission that concludes Matthew's Gospel is to "make disciples" of all the nations (28:19). As a person is converted, he or she becomes a disciple of Jesus, which is synonymous with being a Christian.

**The final participle of the Great Commission directs new disciples to be taught to obey everything that Jesus commanded (28:20). And the SM is the first major**

teaching of Jesus found in the Gospel, delineating the core of what it means to live as Jesus' disciple.

*I emphasize this especially to counteract some who understand discipleship to be reserved for an advanced stage of commitment. From the biblical point of view, all Christians are disciples, so the teaching in the SM is not for a few more-committed believers. This is the heart of Jesus' teaching for all Christians.*

Matthew's discourses develop a full-orbed description of our discipleship to Jesus.

*It is no coincidence that all five major discourses in Matthew's Gospel are directed to Jesus' disciples and that these discourses are the most extensive and intentionally organized collection of Jesus' teaching ever recorded.*

Thus, when we understand that disciples are to be taught to obey all that Jesus has commanded, these five discourses give us the most complete articulation of the kind of discipleship life that Jesus intends for each of us.

That is why I refer to Matthew as a "manual on discipleship," because **throughout most of church history, this Gospel was used to provide the content of instruction on full-orbed Christian living.**

We will develop this more fully as we study each of the discourses, and we will consider the ramifications for using this Gospel as a teaching tool when we examine Jesus' final Great

Commission. But **AS AN OVERVIEW, WE CAN SEE THE KIND OF DISCIPLES THAT WILL DEVELOP WHEN TAUGHT TO OBEY THE CONTENT OF JESUS' DISCOURSES.**

- **KINGDOM-LIFE DISCIPLES.** The SM, or the Kingdom-Life Discourse, unpacks what it means for Jesus' disciples to live out a radical kingdom life in their everyday world (Matt. 5–7).
- **MISSION-DRIVEN DISCIPLES.** The second discourse is the Mission Mandate, which describes how Jesus' disciples are to go out and live out the message of the gospel of the kingdom of God to an alien and often hostile world (Matt. 10).
- **CLANDESTINE-KINGDOM DISCIPLES.** The third discourse is the Parabolic Disclosure, which reveals what it means for Jesus' disciples to live as kingdom subjects in a world not yet fully manifested with God's power (Matt. 13).
- **COMMUNITY-BASED DISCIPLES.** The fourth discourse is the Community Prescription, which focuses on discipleship to Jesus that is expressed through a church characterized by humility, purity, accountability, forgiveness, and reconciliation (Matt. 18).
- **EXPECTANT-SOJOURNER DISCIPLES.** The fifth discourse is the Eschatological Forecast, traditionally called the Olivet Discourse, which culminates Jesus' teaching on discipleship by describing how his disciples are to live each day in expectant preparation for his return with power (Matt. 24–25).

There is a progression of teaching in these discourses that addresses the fullness of the disciple's life.

**MATTHEW WAS THE FAVORITE GOSPEL OF THE EARLY CHURCH THROUGHOUT MUCH OF CHURCH HISTORY BECAUSE IT WAS A**

**NATURAL CATECHETICAL TOOL  
DESIGNED TO DEVELOP  
WHOLISTIC DISCIPLES.**

**The basic thrust of each discourse points to that kind of intentional well-roundedness.**

*We would do well to return to Matthew on a regular basis throughout our lives, both for guidance in our own development as Jesus' disciples, but also for our use in guiding others within our ministries.*

**A balanced understanding of the SM will mature our discipleship to Jesus.**

Jesus' teaching in the SM gives some of the most radical challenges to our discipleship found in Scripture. It takes a careful understanding of what Jesus actually intends in his teachings for us to be truly radical in our discipleship to him and yet not take his teachings to unwarranted extremes. Some of his teachings have been misunderstood and either wrongly applied or rejected because Jesus uses intentional exaggeration to make his point (see comments on 5:29; 6:31–33). **The use of normal Bible study practices and hermeneutical principles will help us to glean accurately what Jesus intends and allow us to avoid misinterpretation and faulty application.**

Some specific tips for a balanced interpretation of some of the more problematic teachings of Jesus in the SM may help. **Here are a few suggestive illustrations.**

**(1) Take the passage at face value** and attempt to understand the meaning of Jesus' statement. Most problems can be resolved by looking at the literary and cultural context and seeing the intent of Jesus' saying within the larger setting. For example, when Jesus says

that we are not to swear at all (5:34), the saying must be understood within the context of religious leaders trying to manipulate themselves out of their stated obligations to fellow Jews. Jesus is not condemning giving an oath of allegiance or vowing to fulfill a contract.

**(2) Glean the principle being taught in the passage.**

An important part of understanding the SM is recognizing that when Jesus says that he has come to fulfill the Old Testament, he is taking us to the level of the intent and motive of Old Testament passages that were misinterpreted by religious leaders of his day. **Behind specific instructions, such as turning one's cheek or giving up one's cloak (5:39–40), lay principles that are easily transferable to our own lives.**

**(3) Check to see if the passage needs to be balanced with another biblical principle in order to understand the full counsel of God.** As in standard polemical

argumentation, Jesus often gives one extreme with regard to an issue to drive home his point. He is not implying that other, equally important principles are invalid. For example, Jesus' statements about not being anxious about what we eat or drink or wear need to be balanced with the consistent theme of Scripture that godliness includes honest work to supply our own needs (e.g., 2 Thess. 3:9–12; 1 Tim. 5:8).

**(4) Once your understanding is balanced, go back to the passage in the SM and attempt to live that principle out radically.** Balancing Jesus' teachings does not water them down or mute

their radical significance. Rather, **truly radical discipleship means taking all of Jesus' teachings and living them all in the manner in which they were intended to be lived.** For **example**, Jesus warns against laying up treasures for ourselves on earth (6:19–21). We should live that principle fully. But he later uses a parable of sound investment of funds to warn equally against irresponsibility in investing what God has given to us to use for his service (25:14–30). **Living with both of those principles at the same time will allow us to be radical disciples who live with God's perspective on our values and service.**

With these guidelines for reading the SM, we must look for our discipleship to Jesus to be challenged and strengthened and to become more practical in its outworking. We look for Jesus to become more real, both as our Lord, who provides the power to live out the wonderful life he offers, and as our example, who provides the model for us to follow.<sup>1</sup>

### **Matthew 5:3–16**

<sup>3</sup>Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, [Matthew](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 190–202.

<sup>7</sup>Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.  
<sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.  
<sup>9</sup>Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called sons of God.  
<sup>10</sup>Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup>“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

<sup>13</sup>“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

<sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

THE BEATITUDES OPEN the Sermon on the Mount with a sober yet dazzling vision of the operation of the kingdom of heaven among God’s people. **More than simply a formal literary introduction, the Beatitudes summarize the essence of the sermon’s message, giving in a nutshell the way in which the kingdom makes its impact on the lives of those who respond to it. The character of this kingdom life** contravenes the values that most people hold dear, because **God’s blessing rests on the unlikely ones**—the poor in spirit, mourners, the meek, the persecuted.

“Thus the Beatitudes line an upside-down reality, or—more precisely—they define reality in such a way that the usual order of things is seen to be upside down in the eyes of God.”

### **The Beatitudes of the Kingdom of Heaven (5:3–12)**

**APART FROM THE Lord’s Prayer, these are the most familiar verses of the SM.**

The name “beatitude” is derived from the Latin *beatitudo/beatus*, because the first word of each statement in the Latin Vulgate is *beati*, which translates Matthew’s Greek word *makarios* (traditionally translated “blessed”).

Some recent versions translate *makarios* as “happy” or “fortunate,” which can be good renderings, but the modern usage of those terms tends to trivialize the meaning by simply suggesting a temporary emotional or circumstantial state. The somewhat ambiguous English “blessed” perhaps is still the best term to describe Jesus’ statements.

*Makarios* is a state of existence in relationship to God in which a person is “blessed” from God’s perspective even when he or she doesn’t feel happy or isn’t presently experiencing good fortune.

This does not mean a conferral of blessing or an exhortation to live a life worthy of blessing; rather, it is an acknowledgment that the ones indicated are blessed.

*Negative feelings, absence of feelings, or adverse conditions cannot take away the blessedness of those who exist in relationship with God.*

## Structure.

Each beatitude is composed of two poetic clauses.

The first clause begins with the statement of blessing (“blessed”) followed by a statement of the identity of the ones who are blessed (e.g., “the poor in spirit”),

...a structure similar to the opening verse of Psalm 1. The second clause begins with “because” (*hoti*), giving the

reason for what precedes it (e.g., “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”).

**Eight primary statements of blessing make up the Beatitudes, with the ninth statement of blessing (5:11–12) being an extension and personalization of the eighth beatitude for Jesus’ disciples who experience persecution.**

The overall structure of the Beatitudes gives an important clue to their theme. The first and the eighth beatitudes (5:3, 10) form a sort of bookends, another example of the common Hebrew literary device called an inclusio, because the causal clause of the first beatitude is repeated in the last beatitude—“for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (cf. 5:3, 10).

*The repetition of the present tense clause signals the main theme of the Beatitudes, that the blessedness of the kingdom of heaven is a present possession and operation among those who respond to Jesus’ ministry. However, the second through seventh beatitudes (5:4–9) have a future tense in the causal clause, indicating that the kingdom is also a future expectation and hope.*

## **1. Blessed are the poor in spirit ... (5:3).**

The “poor” are those who have encountered unfortunate

circumstances from an economic point of view (19:21; 26:11), but also persons who are spiritually and emotionally oppressed, disillusioned, and in need of God's help.

Those who have experienced the harsh side of life in which deprivation and hunger are their regular lot have no resources of their own to make anything of their lives. This also includes those who recognize that they can produce no spiritual or religious self-help before God.

## They are spiritually bankrupt.

We hear this in the psalmist as he cries out in [Psalm 40:17:](#)

*Yet I am poor and needy;  
may the Lord think of me.  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
O my God, do not delay.*

This attitude of humility in the harsh realities of life makes a person open to receive the blessings of the kingdom of heaven.

**... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

The kingdom of God belongs to those who know they have no resources, material or spiritual, to help themselves before God.

These are the “**poor**” to whom Jesus has come to announce “good news” (11:5) and to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.

*This first beatitude undercuts the predominant worldview that assumes that material blessings are a sign of God’s approval in one’s life & that they automatically flow from one’s spiritual blessings.*

**Instead...**

**Jesus teaches that the norm of the kingdom of heaven is spiritual bankruptcy, unlike the spiritual self-sufficiency that was characteristic of the religious leaders.**

Jesus’ disciples will experience their most complete personal fulfillment as they draw on the resources of the kingdom of heaven to guide their lives.

**2. Blessed are those who mourn ... (5:4).** Those who are bankrupt are also those who mourn. The loss of anything that a person counts valuable will produce mourning, whether it’s one’s financial support, or loved ones, or status in society, or even one’s spiritual standing before God. The psalmist understands this latter kind of mourning, for he says, “Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed” (Ps. 119:136). Those who are self-satisfied are tempted to rejoice in themselves and their accomplishments, but those who have reached

the bottom of the barrel, whether it is spiritual or emotional or financial, or those who see the bankruptcy of those around them, will mourn.

... **for they will be comforted.** But, “Comfort, comfort my people” (Isa. 40:1), God says to those who have realized their loss and mourn over it. The arrival of the kingdom of heaven in Jesus’ ministry brings the first taste of God’s comforting blessing. The poor in spirit and those who mourn now experience the fulfillment of the messianic blessing promised in Isaiah 61:1–3. Jesus has come to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21; 11:28–30), but they will receive final comforting in the presence of the heavenly Lamb, when “God will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17).

Mourning does not exclude the joy that is to typify Jesus’ followers, but instead characterizes life in the already-not yet presence of the kingdom. We weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom. 12:15). But our mourning does not turn to the grief of those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). We mourn oppression and persecution, but we do not despair, because we know the end of the story. We mourn over personal sin and social evil, because we mourn the things that God mourns. But as we mourn, we become instruments of the good news of the kingdom of heaven as we bring the comfort of God with which we ourselves have been comforted (2 Cor. 1:3–7).

**3. Blessed are the meek ... (5:5).** The domineering, the aggressive, the harsh, and the tyrannical are often those who attempt to dominate the earth and establish their own little kingdoms. But Jesus says that it is the “gentle” who will inherit the earth, harking back to the psalmist who encourages those who have been treated harshly by evildoers (Ps. 37:9, 11). This shifts the focus from individual personal qualities (“poor in spirit,” “those who mourn”) to interpersonal attributes (“the gentle”), to people who do not assert themselves over others in order to advance their own causes. This does not imply weakness, however, for this same term is applied to Jesus, who describes himself as “gentle and humble in heart” (11:29; cf. 21:5). Jesus was not afraid to confront the religious leaders when necessary or to rebuke his own disciples for self-centeredness. He will be strong enough to face the most torturous death possible as he endured the cross.

... **for they will inherit the earth (5:5).** Jesus exemplifies best what it means to be gentle. It takes tremendous strength to bring others into God’s will, but when that strength is coupled with a selfless nonassertiveness, it produces a gentle person who can patiently endure much to bring about God’s purposes for his people. Such gentle persons “will inherit the earth.” Jesus assumes this gentle posture as he preaches good news, proclaims freedom, and announces the arrival of the Lord’s favor (11:5), and blessed are those who do not take offence at his gentle messianic ministry (11:6). Ultimately this points to the reign of Christ on this earth (25:35), but even now Jesus’ disciples have entered into their spiritual inheritance (e.g., Eph. 1:18; Col. 1:12; Heb. 9:15).

**4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ... (5:6).** Persons who “hunger and thirst” are in dire need. They will perish if they are not filled. Such is the passion of those who desire righteousness. In the context of the preceding beatitudes, righteousness includes several facets. It includes “justice” for those who have been downtrodden or who have experienced injustice. It includes the idea of personal ethical righteousness for those who desire a life lived above the entanglements of sin. And as in 3:15, it includes the salvation-historical sense of God’s saving activity. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness desire to see

justice executed on earth, they long to experience a deeper ethical righteousness in their own lives, and most of all they crave God's promised salvation come to the earth.

... **for they will be filled (5:6)**. The ultimate source of this kind of righteousness is God himself (cf. Ps. 42:1–2; 63:1). His enablement is the only satisfaction for those who long for his standard of righteousness written in his law (119:10–11, 20, etc.). Although the teachers of the law and the Pharisees focus on attaining righteousness through studying and interpreting the law, their efforts result in self-righteousness, which will not enable them to enter the kingdom of heaven (cf. 5:20). But for those who deeply long for God's multifaceted righteousness, they will be filled. That divine satisfaction will come in a final sense in God's future reign, but it will be experienced in the present by those who respond to Jesus' invitation to kingdom life and enter into a relationship with him as he fills their deepest personal hunger and thirst for righteousness (cf. 12:1–8; 26:26–29; John 4:13–15; 6:35ff.).

Jesus' disciples see firsthand the contrast between the self-righteousness of the religious leaders and God's righteousness in Jesus' life and ministry. As they continue to experience the transformation that accompanies life in the realm of the kingdom of heaven, their hunger and thirst for God's righteousness remains real as they live in the already-not yet of the present age, experiencing a passionate concern for the right things in kingdom living. This passionate pursuit of righteousness flows from a transformed heart. Jesus' disciples will be vessels of God's righteousness as they strive for justice, as they exemplify a life of righteousness, and as they bring God's gift of salvation to a world still held in the sway of the evil one (Eph. 2:1–10).

**5. Blessed are the merciful ... (5:7)**. Mercy is a central biblical theme, because in God's great mercy he does not give humans what they deserve; rather, he gives to them what they do not deserve (see Ps. 25:6–7; cf. Prov. 14:21). Likewise, the merciful are those who demonstrate forgiveness toward the guilty and kindness for the hurting and needy. The religious leadership in Jesus' day tended toward being merciless because of their demand for rigorous observance of the law. Their motive was commendable in that it was driven by a desire for the people of Israel to be pure, but it was inexcusable because their unbending demands produced harshness and condemnation toward those who did not meet their standards.

... **for they will be shown mercy (5:7)**. Without sacrificing God's standard of holiness, Jesus commends those who demonstrate mercy toward the needy, because the mercy that they show others will be shown toward them. Showing mercy toward others does not earn a person entrance to the kingdom; rather, it is a heart attitude that opens a person to receive the offer of mercy that Jesus has proclaimed in his gospel of the kingdom. The religious leaders cannot receive God's mercy because they have become so self-satisfied with their own religious attainments that they don't believe that they need mercy.

Jesus' disciples learn from this beatitude that God's good requirement has always been mercy. Recall the classic statements of Micah: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8). Those who receive mercy will demonstrate mercy, a theme reemphasized somewhat differently in the parable on forgiveness (Matt. 18:33). The true disciple has experienced God's merciful forgiveness toward an undeserving sinner, which in turn will produce such overwhelming gratitude and deep understanding of forgiveness that he or she will in turn demonstrate that same mercy toward other undeserving sinners.

**6. Blessed are the pure in heart ... (5:8).** In the sixth beatitude Jesus goes to the core of human life, the heart. Purity or cleanliness was an important religious theme in Jesus' day. Observing all the Old Testament laws of being clean could bypass the most important purity of all, purity of the heart. Jesus declares here that a pure heart is what produces external purity, not vice versa (e.g., 15:1–19). In this beatitude Jesus continues an important Old Testament theme in which a pure heart describes a person whose single-minded loyalty to God affects every area of life. "He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for his friend" (Prov. 22:11; cf. Ps. 24:3–6; 73:1).

While the people of the Old Testament knew clearly that the human heart was evil (see Prov. 20:9; Jer. 17:9), they knew equally well that God's work in an evil heart could bring purification and a new motivation for following him. "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit in me" (Ps. 51:10). The pure in heart are those who have not necessarily attended to all of the ritual purification ceremonies of the Pharisees but who nonetheless have given undivided loyalty to God and his ways.

**... for they will see God (5:8).** The undivided devotion of the pure in heart will be rewarded by their greatest hope: "They will see God." While no human can look fully at the glorious face of God (Ex. 33:20), the hope that culminates this age is that "they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (Rev. 22:4). But Jesus' pronouncement of this beatitude to those of his day also has an immediate fulfillment of their hopes. Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us" (1:23). For those who have set their heart on God and not simply religious ritualism and who respond to Jesus' message of the gospel of the kingdom, they are invited to enter into a fellowship with him in which they will experience the unthinkable; they will see God in Jesus.

**7. Blessed are the peacemakers ... (5:9).** The seventh beatitude focuses on "the peacemakers." The theme of "peace" (Heb. *shalom*; Gk. *eirene*) permeates the biblical record. It indicates completeness and wholeness in every area of life, including one's relationship with God, neighbors, and nations (cf. Ps. 28:3; Eccl. 3:8; Isa. 26:3). The zealots of Jesus' day attempted to bring self-rule back to Israel through the guerrilla-warfare tactic of divide and conquer, while the religious leaders brought as much division within Israel by their sectarian commitments. But the real peacemakers are those who bring the good news that "your God reigns," who brings ultimate harmony between all peoples (cf. Isa. 52:7). Making peace, therefore, has messianic overtones (cf. "Prince of Peace" in Isa 9:6–7), and the true peacemakers are those who wait and work for God, who makes whole the division created by humans.

**... for they will be called sons of God (5:9).** Jesus turns aside the various political, religious, and militaristic attempts of those within Israel to establish their supremacy. They have created even more division; thus, he turns to those who want God's peace. With the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus himself is the supreme peacemaker, making peace between God and humans, and among humans (Eph. 2:11–17; Col. 1:20). Those who have waited for God's messianic peace can now respond to Jesus' invitation, and they will receive the ultimate reward: to be called "sons of God," fulfilling the role that Israel has assumed but taken for granted (Deut. 14:1; Hos. 1:10). Those who respond to Jesus' ministry are heirs of the kingdom and reflect the character of their heavenly Father as they carry Jesus' mission of peacemaking to the world.

**8a. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness ... (5:10).** The eighth beatitude makes it once again clear that the Beatitudes are not entrance requirements to the

kingdom of God, or else Jesus would be sanctioning torture or martyrdom as a way of earning one's entrance to the kingdom. At the same time, this again makes clear that the Beatitudes are not ethical demands for personal behavior, or else Jesus would be implying that it would be good for his disciples to seek out persecution in order to gain his blessing.

Instead, in the eighth beatitude Jesus comforts those who have suffered undeserved persecution. Persecution for one's own sin or foolishness may be deserved (cf. 1 Peter 2:20; 3:14; 4:14–15), but these people have been persecuted because of their stand for righteousness. With his comforting words, Jesus emphatically pronounces condemnation on those doing the persecuting. Although the persecutors are not named, Luke's parallel beatitude pronounces a "woe" on those who receive religious acclaim from the masses, as did the false prophets of the Old Testament (cf. Luke 6:26). This implicates once again the religious leadership of Jesus' day, who persecuted those who did not adopt their particular brand of righteousness.

Persecution can take the form of physical or verbal abuse, or both, but it especially points to the way that the religious leaders hounded the populace and excluded from their fellowship any who did not meet up to their standards (cf. Luke 6:22; Matt. 23:34). Sadly and ironically, the religious leaders were persecuting in the name of their self-righteousness the very people who stood for true righteousness.

**... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (5:10).** As difficult as is the persecution, the reward far outweighs the hazard, because "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This is a present tense declaration that duplicates the causal clause of the first beatitude (5:3). Jesus here gives hope to the people of his day who have stood up and contended for God's form of righteousness against the self-righteousness of the religious leaders. Although they have been persecuted for it, Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to them, not the religious leaders, and all they need to do now is to respond to his invitation to join the kingdom.

**8b. Blessed are you when people insult you ... (5:11–12).** The emphasis shifts more and more from *pronouncement* on the crowds and the religious leadership to *instruction* for Jesus' disciples. This is made explicit by the shift from the general third person plural ("those who") to the second person plural ("you"), the disciples whom Jesus teaches in the SM (cf. 5:1–2). The religious leadership will insult, persecute, and utter evil against the disciples in God's name, but Jesus will reveal these leaders to be no different than the hypocritical leaders of the Old Testament, who persecuted God's true prophets. The harassment his disciples receive is more specific than "because of righteousness" (5:10); it is "because of me" (5:11). Since Jesus himself will experience opposition and persecution, his disciples should expect the same.

In this instruction Jesus prepares his disciples for the time when persecution will indeed come to them, offering them the hope that no matter how hard the circumstances, they are truly heirs of the kingdom. Although the kingdom belongs to them, it does not at this time usher in a time of peace and safety. In fact, Jesus indicates that their reward will not come in an earthly kingdom but "in heaven." He looks down the long corridor of time until the kingdom is established on earth in its final form and offers hope during those times when it seems doubtful that his kingdom will ever arrive. It may not look like it from a religious, economic, or social perspective, but the kingdom is theirs nonetheless—and in this they will truly rejoice.

### **Salt and Light (5:13–16)**

IN THE BEATITUDES Jesus gave a *pronouncement* to the crowds and religious leaders and *instruction* to his disciples concerning the nature of life in the kingdom of heaven. Now with two piercing metaphors, he focuses on his disciples and declares how they will impact this world with the kingdom life they possess. Into the world in which they can expect to find persecution (5:10–12), Jesus' disciples are to go as "salt" and as "light" (5:13–16). These metaphors reveal the nature of kingdom life that pervades those who belong to Jesus, the impact that life will have on a watching world, and the responsibility of Jesus' disciples as they live in this world and await the coming of the kingdom of God.

**You are the salt of the earth (5:13).** Salt had a variety of natural qualities and uses in the ancient world. It was so important that it was used as a medium of exchange in commercial ventures across the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Adriatic seas. The variety of uses for salt leads to different interpretations of what Jesus meant to communicate with the analogy. (1) A primary use for salt until recent years was as a preservative. In a society with no refrigeration, salt could be rubbed into meat or fish to slow decay. Some suggest that with this analogy Jesus was indicating the influence his disciples would have on the moral decay of a fallen world.

(2) Salt is also an essential element in the diet of human beings and other warm-blooded animals. For humans, salt is normally ingested as a seasoning added to foods, while animals commonly ingest salt from natural or artificial salt licks. This is the most familiar use of salt to modern readers, so many suggest that Jesus indicates that his disciples will provide a God-enhanced, kingdom seasoning to this world with their presence.

(3) Salt was also used in small quantities as a fertilizer when applied to certain types of soil ("earth"). Thus, some suggest that Jesus' disciples will enhance the growth of God's work in this world.

(4) A widely held view suggests that since salt had a varied use in the ancient world, Jesus is not pointing to one specific application but is using it in a broad, inclusive sense to refer to a vital necessity for everyday life. Sirach echoed such a perspective (Sir. 39:26), and Pliny commented that "there is nothing more useful than salt and sunshine." Taken in this way, the metaphor indicates that Jesus' disciples are vitally important to the world in a general religious sense.

This last suggestion is appealing because to stress too closely one particular application of salt can lead to inappropriate allegorizing. In other words, Jesus indicates with this metaphor that his disciples themselves ("*you* are the salt") are necessary for the welfare of the world. That is, the disciples have experienced a transformation in their lives as they have come into contact with the kingdom of heaven. They are now different from the people of this earth, and their presence is necessary as God's means of influencing the world for good.

Jesus' next statement has caused considerable discussion: "But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (5:13). Strictly speaking, salt cannot lose its saltiness, because sodium chloride is a stable compound. What then did Jesus mean?

(1) One possibility is that Jesus is alluding to rock formations that contained deposits of sodium chloride. Meat and fish were packed in these rocks to preserve them. After a period of time the salt leached out of the rocks, so the rocks were not good for anything and so thrown out. As believers, we are either a preservative or a worthless rock!

(2) Jesus may also have had in mind the salt that was collected from the Dead Sea by evaporation. This salt often included crystals of another mineral, gypsum, which is formed by the precipitation of calcium sulfate from seawater. Salt and gypsum were often mixed in various saline deposits. When people went to collect salt, this impure mixture of salt and gypsum could easily be mistaken for pure salt. But the mixture was not usable for either preservation or seasoning, so was regarded as having lost its usefulness.

(3) Jesus may be alluding to the use of salt blocks by Arab bakers to line the floor of their ovens. After some time the intense heat eventually caused the blocks to crystallize and undergo a change in chemical composition, finally being thrown out as unserviceable.

(4) A quotation attributed to Rabbi Joshua ben Haninia (c. A.D. 90) may offer some help. When rebuffing a trick question, Rabbi Haninia alludes to a proverbial saying when he asks, "Can salt lose its flavor?" The context of the saying implies that it is impossible for salt to lose its flavor, because he parallels the saying by asking, "Does the mule (being sterile) bear young?" (*b. Bek. 8b*). Sterile mules can no more bear young than salt can lose its flavor.

If this last option is the background, Jesus is citing a known proverbial saying on impossibilities to describe an equally impossible characteristic of his disciples. As they go out into the world as salt, they must recognize that the proof of the reality of their profession is in the nature of their lives. True disciples cannot lose what has made them disciples, because they have become changed persons, made new by the life of the kingdom of heaven. However, imposter disciples, who simply attempt to put on the flavoring of the kingdom life, will be revealed. Their salt is only an external flavoring, not a real personal change. This imposter cannot be made salty again because he or she never had that kingdom life in the first place.

Jesus' next statement drives home the seriousness of the issue: "It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men." The response to imposter disciples is rejection and judgment by the very people for whom they are to have value. Imposters will be known for what they are. They have nothing to offer the world, because they are no different from the world. So the world turns on them for their arrogant hypocrisy. The challenge is for professing disciples to examine their nature and to confess honestly whether or not they have been transformed by the life of the kingdom of God.

**The light of the world (5:14–16).** Jesus' disciples are not only "the salt of the earth" but also "the light of the world." The light metaphor continues the salt metaphor and takes it one step further to illustrate Jesus' point. "Light" is an important theme in Scripture, normally emphasizing the removal of darkness in the unfolding of biblical history and theology. The literal contrast between physical light and darkness provokes a profound metaphorical contrast between metaphysical good and evil, God and evil forces, believers and unbelievers. Jesus later declares that he is "the light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5), who has come as the light that enlightens all people (1:4–14), so that those believing in him will no longer be in darkness (12:46).

In the same way as Jesus' life and message of salvation bring light to those in darkness (Matt. 4:15–16), his disciples are a living demonstration of the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. The light of revelation from God that accompanies Jesus' announcement of the kingdom is not just carried by his disciples; they *are* that light (Matt. 5:14–16; cf. Eph. 5:8; Phil. 2:15).

Jesus continues the proverbial "impossible" language he used in the salt metaphor by stating that "a city on a hill cannot be hidden," and "neither do people light a lamp and put it

under a bowl.” The city to which Jesus refers may be Jerusalem, which sits on Mount Zion, since Israel with Jerusalem as the holy city was considered light to the world (Isa. 2:2–5; 42:6; 49:6). But since Jesus is now in Galilee near Capernaum, he may be using a local city as his illustration, because he often used images from his surroundings to illustrate his teaching. In either case, it is impossible to hide a city located on a hill.

The lamp used in a typical Palestinian home was a partially closed reservoir made of clay. It had a hole on top to pour oil in and a spout on one end into which a wick of flax or cotton was set. It was a fairly small lamp, which gave off only a modest light; thus, to give maximum illumination it was placed on a lampstand. Since many Jewish homes were often modest one-room structures, such an elevated lamp could give light to everyone in the house. Lamps were essential for finding one’s way in enclosed areas during the night and were placed under a measuring bowl only to extinguish the light (cf. *m. Šabb.* 16.1).

Jesus’ disciples are called to be the light of the world. They cannot be hidden, for their very nature, the kingdom life within them, is living testimony to those in the world who do not yet have that light. Their good works are produced by the light and life that come from God. It is not of their own making, because those who see them in action will glorify not them but their “Father in heaven” (cf. the motive of the religious leaders in 6:1). The title “Father” is used in Matthew here for the first time, introducing the special relationship that exists between God and Jesus’ disciples. Jesus has been declared to be the beloved Son (3:17), and now those who have received the kingdom light are children of the heavenly Father as well (cf. John 1:7–13).

Jesus’ disciples possess kingdom life, which produces good deeds from a changed life. Bearing the light of the gospel in both message and life will bring people to know that the kingdom of heaven truly is in the world, and they will glorify their heavenly Father. The Beatitudes hinted at this direction, but the metaphors of salt and light are the first explicit indication that the presence of the kingdom produces changed lives.

WE THE PEOPLE of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish Justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The Preamble of the Constitution of the United States is one of the most memorable statements in American history. It states succinctly the ethos of the nation to be, and provides a summarization of the articles of the constitution to follow. It gives insight to the intention of the framers of the Constitution, the details of which are enumerated in the articles. The preamble is a hint that the Constitution would be a boldly original attempt to create an energetic central government at the same time that the sovereignty of the people was preserved.

In a similar manner, **the Beatitudes serve as a sort of preamble to the SM**, but they are an even more memorable treasure for humanity. **They give a succinct statement of the ethos of the kingdom of heaven that**

Jesus has announced and summarize the principles of kingdom life that he will articulate in the Sermon that follows.

We find in them an abstract of Jesus' history-altering intention for establishing the kingdom of heaven as well as a clue to Matthew's organization of his Gospel.

The Beatitudes are a radically bold statement of Jesus' intent to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth, which will bring true peace and freedom for all who dare to follow him as his disciples.

*It is through those disciples that his kingdom will bring blessing to all of the peoples of the earth.*

## Interpreting the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount as a whole must be interpreted according to Jesus' original intention, or else we will find ourselves going contrary to his objective for establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth.

**When approaching the Beatitudes we must avoid sliding into various extremes. (**

- 1) We must not conclude that Jesus is calling his listeners to a meritorious attempt at earning salvation by living out these character qualities in order to enter the kingdom.**

*Jesus' Beatitudes are statements of grace, not law.*

- (2) We must avoid making these into burdensome ethical demands on those who are members of the kingdom. There are no imperatives here, except to "rejoice" when one experiences the blessing of God in the middle of persecution (5:12).**

(3) We must not conclude that these are eschatological blessings that only will be realized at the end of the age. The kingdom blessings are found in both the present tense (5:3, 10) and the future tense (5:4–9).

Jesus uses the Beatitudes to speak to a variety of listeners and to communicate several messages about the kingdom of heaven. Specifically, he makes a pronouncement about the kingdom to Israel as a whole, and at the same time he gives instruction about the nature of kingdom life to his disciples.

**(1) Pronouncement.** In fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1, Jesus is the Coming One, who is endowed with the Spirit and anointed by the Lord to preach good news to the poor and to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners (cf. 11:5). The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who respond. The boundaries that separate successful from unsuccessful, clean from unclean, righteous from unrighteous, have tended to be of human creation, and they are now broken down. In these eight brief declarations, Jesus makes two sweeping pronouncements.

**(a) A pronouncement of invitation** to those awaiting God's blessing.

The kingdom of heaven is available to the oppressed in the land, to those who doubt themselves or are declared to be unworthy of the kingdom. The statement of blessing in the first half of each beatitude responds to the character qualities of those in the Old Testament who have sought God. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" is Jesus' eschatological reply to the cry of the psalmist, "This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles" (Ps. 34:6). Not the rich, not the powerful, not the high and the mighty, but the poor in spirit are those who seek God.

So begins Jesus' pronouncement about the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those persecuted because of righteousness—**these are the people who have pursued God by rejecting pride and self-sufficiency, which is the path of sin and idolatry.** They are indeed blessed, because now Jesus invites them to respond to his message of the arrival of the kingdom of heaven.

**(b) A pronouncement of condemnation** on those who think that they have God's blessing.

The second pronouncement is one of condemnation on those who have rejected God's ways and have found satisfaction in the pleasures of life apart from God. This is especially emphasized in Luke's version of the Sermon, where Jesus gives four woes to counterbalance the pronouncements:

But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have already received your comfort.  
Woe to you who are well fed now,  
for you will go hungry.  
Woe to you who laugh now,  
for you will mourn and weep.  
Woe to you when all men speak well of you,  
for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.  
(Luke 6:24–26)

THESE “WOES” SUGGEST THAT WE LOOK FOR A NOTE OF CONDEMNATION IN MATTHEW'S RECORD OF THE BEATITUDES. THIS PRONOUNCEMENT OF CONDEMNATION IS ESPECIALLY DIRECTED TO THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF ISRAEL. JESUS WILL STUN THE CROWDS AND HIS DISCIPLES BY DECLARING THAT THE TEACHERS OF THE LAW AND THE PHARISEES ARE NOT IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN (Matt. 5:20).

They have found self-satisfaction in their self-righteousness, which has excluded them from the blessing that has arrived with Jesus' ministry.

Thus, each of Jesus' Beatitudes contains an explicit pronouncement of invitation to those seemingly

*unworthy of the kingdom, but each also contains an implicit pronouncement of condemnation on those who think themselves to be worthy but are not.*

For example, in the first beatitude Jesus graciously pronounces that the kingdom belongs to those who see themselves as having no spiritual resources worthy of the kingdom. But at the same time he pronounces condemnation on the religious elite who are full of pride in their religious accomplishments. Indeed, the religiously wealthy must humble themselves before God to recognize that they have no spiritual resources that warrant entrance to the kingdom of God.

Rooting the Beatitudes in the historical context of the original meaning of Jesus' ministry helps us avoid contemporary misinterpretation.

The Sermon On The Mount was intended, at least in part, as a historical indictment of the religious establishment's way of satisfying God.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees are held up throughout the Sermon as a foil to Jesus' declaration of kingdom life, because they are setting a wrong example of righteousness, namely, the performance of a specific interpretation of the law. The tendency of these Jewish leaders was to develop external righteousness without due regard to inner righteousness.

**External righteousness that masks inner corruption is what Jesus refers to as "hypocrisy" (cf. 23:27). He declares, by contrast, that the righteousness of the kingdom of God is first internal, a matter of the heart, which will in turn affect outward behavior (15:16–20). Thus, each beatitude contains an implicit condemnation of religious hypocrisy that the people are to reject.**

But it is not enough only to hear a pronouncement. **While the Beatitudes are not entrance requirements, they do offer an invitation to the crowd to respond to Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of heaven.**

**There are only two choices: the way of the kingdom or the way of the religious establishment.**

As Jesus pronounces the availability of the kingdom to all, he offers the way to life. But the door to life is narrow—as narrow as Jesus (cf. 7:13–14). All must come through him.

**(2) Instruction.** The Beatitudes also have special instructional value for his disciples. The qualities that exemplified the godly person in the Old Testament are now made an eschatological reality with the arrival of the kingdom of God. **These qualities will accompany the transformation that occurs in the life of each disciple as each submits to the operation of kingdom life through the Spirit.**

***In the Beatitudes, and indeed in the SM as a whole, the emphasis is on a righteousness that begins with the transformation of the inner life and then moves to conform external behavior to inward values (e.g., 5:20–48).***

**The problem with the teachers of the law and the Pharisees was their tendency to promote external righteousness first (cf. 15:6–9; 23:25–28).**

Jesus focuses instead on the transformation of the heart by the arrival of the kingdom of heaven, which will then direct the transformation of the entire person—word, thought, action,

**and deeds.** This had been God's intention from the original creation, but now with arrival of the kingdom of heaven in the ministry of Jesus, discipleship to him will bring congruency between inner and external life (cf. 5:17–20).

The Beatitudes are statements of reality about the kind of characteristics that will be produced in the disciple who participates in kingdom life.

Therefore, the Beatitudes are not imperatives or required standards that disciples must perform in order to procure God's approval. If that were the case, they would not be much different than the rigorous demands for purity found among the Jewish leaders, and they would lead to the same kind of religious hypocrisy that Jesus condemns. Instead, **they provide guidelines for the kind of life that God intends to produce in his disciples.** ‘

### **WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN EACH DISCIPLE, THESE CHARACTER QUALITIES BECOME A CONCRETE REALITY.**

This is the link between Jesus' teaching on discipleship and later New Testament discussions of regeneration and sanctification through the work of the Holy Spirit. Note, for example, Peter's description of the transformational process for those who have been born anew by the living and enduring word of God in 1 Peter 1:22–2:3. As Jesus' disciples face the daily challenges lived in the realities of a fallen world, they must reject the evil path and allow God's Spirit to produce these Christlike characteristics in them.

As such, the Beatitudes contrast Jesus' values with the values of the world. Larry Richards displays this contrast of Jesus' values and those of the world in the following way:

**Jesus' values**

**Countervalues**

*poor in spirit*

self-confident, competent, self-reliant

<i>mourn</i>	pleasure-seeking, hedonistic, “the beautiful people”
<i>meek</i>	proud, powerful, important
<i>hunger and thirst for righteousness</i>	satisfied, “well adjusted,” practical
<i>merciful</i>	self-righteous, “able to take care of themselves”
<i>pure in heart</i>	“adult,” sophisticated, broad-minded
<i>peacemakers</i>	competitive, aggressive
<i>persecuted because of righteousness</i>	adaptable, popular, “don’t rock the boat”

Each of these can be explored more fully, but they help illustrate the values that Jesus establishes with the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. **THE BEATITUDES ARE BOLD STATEMENTS OF THE NATURE OF KINGDOM LIFE.**

It begins with abandoning pride in one’s spiritual accomplishment before God and proceeds as one allows God to produce kingdom life in his disciples’ everyday lives.

## THE APPLICABILITY OF the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes with which the SM begins are pronouncements of blessing on those waiting for God’s messianic activity, pronouncements of condemnation on the religious establishment who have attempted to secure God’s blessing through their own efforts, and instructions for Jesus’ disciples about the life that is truly “blessed” from God’s perspective. But many people grate under them because they can seem so foreign to our ideas of human aspiration. Who really wants to be poor, to mourn, to be meek ...?

**Dallas Willard’s influential book *The Divine Conspiracy* is a forceful development of Christian discipleship, concentrating on the Gospel of Matthew and the SM in particular as his biblical foundation.** In his discussion of the Beatitudes, he recounts how a woman told him that her son had dropped his Christian identification and left the church because of the Beatitudes. This son, a strong, intelligent, military person, had had an unhappy experience:

As often happens, he had been told that the Beatitudes—with its list of the poor and the sad, the weak and the mild—were a picture of the ideal Christian. He explained to his mother very simply: “That’s not me. I can never be like that.”

I understand this young man’s experience. In my teens I also renounced my Christian identity and church for similar reasons. I clearly remember sitting in youth group meetings where the characteristics of the Beatitudes were held up as ideals for us to emulate. I remember snickering in the back row with my buddies as the youth leaders cajoled us to cease

being cocky and macho and become meek and mild. **The four of us were three-sport athletes in high school, and the picture of the Christian life that was held up for us from the Beatitudes seemed lamely pathetic.**

As I think back, our youthful cockiness and machismo were probably just as pathetic, but the Christian life painted by that church had nothing to offer us as a viable, robust alternative.

**Not too many years after ruling out the Beatitudes for real life, I sat under the brilliant stars in a jungle in Vietnam and their significance overwhelmed me. I was a member of a cocky airborne infantry combat battalion. We were a well-trained, exceedingly efficient war machine. One night as I sat on guard duty after one especially ravaging battle, I experienced the reality of what Jesus addressed in the Beatitudes. I had killed gleefully that day. I had ripped the life from other young men without a twinge of conscience. I saw the bodies of my nineteen-and twenty-year-old squad members ravaged by other young men who were our hated enemies, yet probably none of us on either side could really offer any adequate explanation for our animosity.**

**That night I experienced brokenness. I became poor in spirit as I recognized the depth of my depravity and shuddered as I considered the possibility of my fate before God, if he existed. I mourned at the evil in me and at the evil that I saw emerge so quickly in all of us. For the first time in my young life, I understood that I was not the invincible captain of my ship.**

I could be killed at any moment. So from that very night I began to realize that there was indeed a very different way to live. I did not articulate it that night in these words, but meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity, and peacemaking all became so much more clearly preferable than the way that I had been pursuing significance and success.

I now realize I was experiencing the beginnings of the *pronouncement* aspects of the Beatitudes. **I saw for the first time the horror of my life as a human apart from God. I**

desperately needed something, but what it was, I had no clue. I experienced the condemnation of my old cockiness and self-sufficiency, and above all, the condemnation of my arrogant abuse of people in my quest to satisfy my own lusts. This transition in my life readied me and enabled me to accept Jesus' invitation to the life of the kingdom of heaven two years later.

I didn't try to do anything to get to this place. It came about as it should in any person who takes an honest look at the way of humans apart from God. It came about as I realized in the depth of my soul that there truly is an either-or choice in life—Jesus' way of the kingdom of God or the world's way to destruction. It is no coincidence that Jesus culminates the SM with these either-or choices (7:13–27).

No, I didn't do anything to get to this place, but I now know that someone else did. Jesus says later, in the last fateful night before his crucifixion, that he would send another in his place: a Counselor, the very Spirit of God, who will “convict” the world of sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8). That's what happened to me—and that's what happens to every person apart from Jesus and the kingdom of heaven, because that is the only way a person can repent and turn to God. It is the Spirit's work of

conviction that brings a person to the place where she or he can respond to the invitation to the gospel of the kingdom, and in that they are blessed.

**In the same way that the Beatitudes express the blessedness that comes to the crowds from the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, they also express the blessedness that comes from the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a disciple.** I don't believe I have ever tried to be poor in spirit or consciously wanted to mourn or be meek. I tend to be repulsed by people who talk too much about wanting to be righteous, merciful, or pure, or who talk about making peace and will gladly suffer for Jesus' sake. But remarkably, I have seen these characteristics produced in this formerly cocky, arrogant young man as I have focused my life on walking with Jesus.

The individual characteristics of the Beatitudes are not self-produced, nor can we simply learn or emulate them in an attempt to bring them about in our lives. They are products of a life energized by the Spirit of God.

*They are, like the listing Paul gives in Galatians 5:22–23, the fruit of the Spirit. They are a wholistic view of what the Spirit will produce in the life of a disciple of Jesus who is walking in his ways and is being transformed into his image.*

So it does help tremendously to study the Beatitudes, because they reveal the values of the kingdom of heaven. As in any study of Scripture, they show us God's ways in distinction from the world's ways and help us to know the right path. But the wonderful truth behind the study of the Beatitudes and our obedience to their truth as the Word of God is that the characteristics of the Beatitudes are ultimately produced by the Spirit of God.

The young man mentioned earlier had turned away from Christianity because of the perception he had of the Christian life displayed in the Beatitudes. Two things are probably at play here. (1) Like me, he is a product of a world that glories in self, in personal and institutional strength and bravado. The Beatitudes turn those values on end to show what humanity rightly related to God and to each other will be through the arrival of the kingdom of God.

(2) He quite likely has seen faulty applications of the Beatitudes in his church experiences. Throughout church history the Beatitudes have been subjected to faulty interpretation that has led to extremes. Many years later I came to understand that the church I left in my teens was theologically liberal. They really did believe that the Beatitudes were an expression of the ideal life that humans need to pursue to find God. They rightly recognized that the Beatitudes are an ideal statement of the Christian life, but they mistakenly thought that they could do it on their own. Some groups have contended that these characteristics are not for today's rough-and-tumble, sin-wracked world, but await some far-off future kingdom. Still others have based entire personal and ecclesiastical practices of pacifism and nonviolence on the Beatitudes' overriding centrality for a present-day theological system.

No wonder the young man did not see what Jesus meant to communicate. **THE BEATITUDES ARE NEITHER A MEANS OF ENTERING NOR OF ADVANCING IN THE KINGDOM.**

*The Beatitudes are expressions of Spirit-produced kingdom life, revealing to the entire world that a transformation of creation is beginning in Jesus' disciples. That is why we are blessed.*

**The applicability of the sayings on salt and light.** Throughout history humans have attempted to establish their own little kingdoms on the earth, whether through a Nazi blitzkrieg, a Communist revolution, or an Islamic jihad. It is a real temptation for humans to resort to such means, for fallen creatures want to impose their ways on others. But Jesus has brought the kingdom of God in a very different way. It is the way of regeneration and renewal by the Spirit. Spirit-produced poverty in spirit, mourning, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity, and peace are the characteristics of Jesus' disciples that allows God to establish his kingdom in his way. The sayings on salt and light are natural outgrowths of the Beatitudes, since the kingdom life found in Jesus' disciples is demonstrated in their lives in this world.

The salt metaphor informs us that our lives are important to this world. Regardless of our status or profession, the kingdom life that we possess is invaluable for the preserving/seasoning/fertilizing effect it will have in our daily realm. The metaphor also has a warning for imposter disciples, because the kingdom life that is transforming the lives of true disciples cannot be imitated or manufactured. The light metaphor continues the thought, but emphasizes more directly the positive influence disciples will make in this sin-darkened world.

We not only carry the light of the gospel of the kingdom of God, but we *are* that light. Because of the work of the Spirit in our lives, our transformation has produced kingdom light in us, affecting every aspect of our being.

Two implications from these truths call for our attention. (1) Scripture speaks directly to the need of Christians to meet together regularly for support, encouragement, and training (e.g., Heb. 10:24–25). The church is our haven, our hospital, and our training center. But to be salt and light, we must go out into the world of people who are dying without the message of the gospel. This emphasis was initiated in the calling scene of chapter 4, where Jesus called two sets of brothers to be fishers of men. The people we are to reach are in the world around us. They are our next-door neighbors, our mail delivery person, our children’s friends and parents and teachers, our coworkers at the office, our server in the local restaurant, and on and on. The church or Bible study or retreat center performs an invaluable service to support, guide, and prepare us for life, but life is mostly played out beyond those confines. Disciples who are salt and light are called to be intentional sojourners in the world.

(2) Intentional sojourning in the world as salt and light requires that we know who we are and what makes us different from the world. It isn’t just a religious title. We must *speak* the truth of the gospel for people to know it, but we are called to *live* the truth of the gospel for people to see that it is real. The light of the kingdom will produce a changed life in us, “that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (5:16). The Beatitudes emphasize the change produced in the character of disciples who are transformed by the arrival of the kingdom. Intentional sojourning in the world requires us to be alert to the stark difference between our discipleship and the world’s values and habits, and to live out the kingdom values summarized in the Beatitudes and revealed more fully in the rest of the SM.

Much of this is accomplished in the ordinariness of life. We may think that being salt and light will be carried out in dramatic ways as we preach, witness, or go on a short-term missions. But if, as we have suggested, the world to whom we are to go are people found in the everyday routines of life, they will see our transformed life in our everyday activities. It is the transformation of those everyday activities that will cause them to praise our Father in heaven. Everyday people are so affected by sin that they are less than what God has created them to be. They lie when they don’t want to, they cheat just to try and get ahead, they hurt most the ones they most love. Many people we encounter don’t really want to be like that, but they have no cure for the sin that has distorted who they are as created in the image of God.

Others have developed a “who cares” attitude. They speak into a cell phone as if they were the only person for blocks. They curse like Madonna on the David Letterman show; their kids think the world is their personal playground, and they drive like maniacs. A recent poll by the research group Public Agenda found that rudeness is getting worse in America. Seventy-nine percent of those surveyed said that lack of respect and courtesy is a serious problem. Eighty-eight percent said that they often or sometimes come across people who are rude or disrespectful. Poor customer service has become so rampant that nearly half of those surveyed said they have walked out of a store in the past year because of it. But interestingly, the people surveyed had few solutions. Thirty-six percent said that when confronted with rude behavior, the right thing is to respond with excessive politeness. Twenty percent said it is best to point out the bad behavior. But forty-two percent said the best thing to do is walk away.

It may seem trivial, but this is what the Beatitudes address, as well as Jesus' sayings on salt and light. Yes, we have and must declare the saving message of the gospel. People can't change until they have heard the message. But the old adage is so true that actions speak louder than words. We must show by our lives that we are different. Otherwise we are hiding our light from the world. Are we rude and disrespectful? Do we go along with the crowd that is ridiculing a player on an opposing team? Do we give the best service to our customers, whether they are customers in Wal-Mart, students at your school, or parishioners in your church? Jesus tells us that his disciples won't be rude and disrespectful if we allow the kingdom life to do its full work in us. And when we are respectful, courteous, considerate, and service-oriented, the world around us will see that Jesus really does make a difference.

Donald McCullough has written a fascinating book with practical advice in this direction. While this book is not targeted primarily toward Christians, he is a professing Christian, and he bases the respect that we owe one another on the fact of humanity's creation in the image of God. Clever titles of chapters range from "Don't Show Up at the Wedding in a Baseball Cap," to "Kneel Down to Speak with Children," to "Leave a Tip Worth Working For." His intention in writing about these seemingly insignificant issues is worth our attention:

I'm more interested in the little things, such as remembering to say "thank you" and to call your mom on Mother's Day. These things may not seem very important when compared with the major problems facing our culture. Yet they may be the best place to begin; they may be the only honest place to begin. If a person can't remember to say thank you to her housekeeper, it probably won't matter much if she writes a major philosophical treatise on kindness; if a person is rude to his family, the angels probably won't give a holy rip if he preaches soaring sermons on the nature of love.

Likewise, Jesus teaches us that we witness to the reality of the presence of the kingdom of God in little kindnesses. Disciples who are poor in spirit will mourn over rudeness and abuse, and we will be gentle, pursuing righteousness, practicing mercy, and being peacemakers, even if it brings us grief. In so living, we will be revealed as sons of God, the true salt of the earth and the glowing light of the world.<sup>2</sup>

## [The MacArthur New Testament Commentary:](#)

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, [Matthew](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 203–226.

# Happy Are the Humble

(5:3)

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (5:3)**

## THE BEATITUDES

The series of conditional blessings promised in Matthew 5:3–12 have long been called the Beatitudes, a name derived from Latin and referring to a state of happiness or bliss. **Jesus presents the possibility of people being genuinely happy, and that available happiness is the opening theme of the Sermon on the Mount.** Many people, including some Christians, find that hard to believe. How could a message as demanding and impossible as the Sermon on the Mount be intended to make people happy? Yet **the first and greatest sermon preached by Jesus Christ begins with the resounding and repeated theme of happiness, a fitting start for the New Testament’s “good news.”**

Far from being the cosmic killjoy that many accuse Him of being, God desires to save men from their tragic lostness, to give them power to obey His will, and to make them happy. **In this great sermon, His Son carefully and clearly sets forth the way of blessedness for those who come to Him.**

**Makarios (blessed) means happy, fortunate, blissful. Homer used the word to describe a wealthy man, and Plato used it of one who is successful in business. Both Homer and Hesiod spoke of the Greek gods as being happy (makarios) within themselves, because they were unaffected by the world of men—who were subject to poverty, disease, weakness, misfortune, and death. The fullest meaning of the term, therefore, had to do with an inward contentedness that is not affected by circumstances. That is the kind of happiness God desires**

for His children, a state of joy and well-being that does not depend on physical, temporary circumstances (cf. Phil. 4:11–13).

The word **blessed** is often used of God Himself, as when David ended one of his psalms with the declaration “Blessed be God!” (Ps. 68:35). His son Solomon sang, “Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone works wonders” (Ps. 72:18). Paul spoke of “the glorious gospel of the blessed God” (1 Tim. 1:11) and of Jesus Christ “who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (6:15).

Blessedness is a characteristic of God, and it can be a characteristic of men only as they share in the nature of God. There is no blessedness, no perfect contentedness and joy of the sort of which Jesus speaks here, except that which comes from a personal relationship to Him, through whose “magnificent promises” we “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).

Because blessedness is fundamentally an element of the character of God, when men partake of His nature through Jesus Christ they partake of His blessedness. So **IT BECOMES CLEAR AT THE VERY BEGINNING OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT THAT JESUS IS SPEAKING OF A REALITY THAT IS ONLY FOR BELIEVERS.**

Others can see the kingdom standards and get a glimpse of kingdom blessings, but only those who belong to the kingdom have the promise of personally receiving and experiencing the blessings.

*To be blessed is not a superficial feeling of well-being based on circumstance, but a deep supernatural experience of contentedness based on the fact that one's life is right with God. Blessedness is based on objective reality, realized in the miracle of transformation to a new and divine nature.*

The Beatitudes seem paradoxical.

The conditions and their corresponding blessings do not seem to match. **BY NORMAL HUMAN STANDARDS SUCH THINGS AS HUMILITY, MOURNING, DESIRE FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS, MERCY, AND PERSECUTION ARE NOT THE STUFF OF WHICH HAPPINESS IS MADE.** To the natural man, and to the immature or carnal Christian, such happiness sounds like misery with another name. As one commentator has observed, it is much as if Jesus went into the great display window of life and changed all the price tags.

In a way, happiness *is* misery with another name; Jesus *has* changed the price tags.

*He teaches that misery endured for the right purpose and in the right way is the key to happiness.*

That basic principle summarizes the Beatitudes. The world says, “Happy are the rich, the noble, the successful, the macho, the glamorous, the popular, the famous, the aggressive.” But the message from the King does not fit the world's standards, because His kingdom is not of this world but of heaven. His way to happiness, which is the *only* way to true happiness, is by a much different route.

Seneca, the first-century Roman philosopher who tutored Nero, wisely wrote, “What is more shameful than to equate the rational soul's good with that which is irrational?” His point was that you cannot satisfy a rational, personal need with an irrational, impersonal object.

# External things cannot satisfy internal needs.

Yet that is exactly **the philosophy of the world: things satisfy. Acquiring things brings happiness, achieving things brings meaning, doing things brings satisfaction.**

Solomon, the wisest and most magnificent of ancient kings, tried the world's way to happiness for many years. He had the royal blood of his father, David, coursing through his veins. He had vast amounts of gold and jewels and "made silver as common as stones in Jerusalem" (1 Kings 10:27). He had fleets of ships and stables filled with thousands of the finest horses. He had hundreds of wives, gathered from the most beautiful women of many lands. **HE ATE THE MOST SUMPTUOUS OF FOODS ON THE FINEST OF TABLEWARE IN THE MOST ELEGANT OF PALACES WITH THE MOST DISTINGUISHED PEOPLE. HE WAS ACCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD FOR HIS WISDOM, POWER, AND WEALTH. SOLOMON SHOULD HAVE BEEN IMMEASURABLY HAPPY. YET THAT KING, SO GREAT AND BLESSED BY EARTHLY STANDARDS, CONCLUDED THAT HIS LIFE WAS PURPOSELESS AND EMPTY.**

The theme of Ecclesiastes, Solomon's personal testimony on the human situation, is "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?" (1:2-3).

## Jesus came to announce that the tree of happiness cannot grow in a cursed earth.

Earthly things cannot bring even lasting earthly happiness, much less eternal happiness. "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed," Jesus warned; "for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

## PHYSICAL THINGS SIMPLY CANNOT TOUCH THE SOUL, THE INNER PERSON.

It should be pointed out that the opposite is also true: spiritual things cannot satisfy physical needs. When someone is hungry he needs food, not a lecture on grace. When he is hurt he needs medical attention, not moral advice. True spiritual concern for such people will express itself first of all in providing for their physical needs. “Whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17).

But the more common danger is trying to meet almost every need with physical things. That philosophy is as futile as it is unscriptural. When King Saul was distressed, his jewels and his army could give him no help. When King Belshazzar was having a great feast with his nobles, wives, and concubines, he suddenly saw a hand writing on the wall, “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.” He was so terrified that his “face grew pale, and his thoughts alarmed him; and his hip joints went slack, and his knees began knocking together.” His military power, his influential allies, and his great possessions could give him no solace (Dan. 5:3–6, 25).

The great Puritan saint Thomas Watson wrote, “The things of the world will no more keep out trouble of spirit, than a paper scone will keep out a bullet...”

Worldly delights are winged.

They may be compared to a flock of birds in the garden, that stay a little while, but when you come near to them they take their flight and are gone.

So ‘riches make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven’ ” (*The Beatitudes* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971], p. 27). The writer of Proverbs said, “Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, cease from your consideration of it. When you set your eyes on it, it is gone” (Prov. 23:4–5).

Tragically, many preachers, teachers, and writers today “who must be silenced” (Titus 1:11)

are passing off worldly philosophy in the name of Christianity—claiming that faithfulness to Christ guarantees health, wealth, success, prestige, and prosperity. But Jesus taught no such thing. What He taught was nearer the opposite. He warned that physical, worldly advantages most often limit true happiness. The things of the world become fuel for pride, lust, and self-satisfaction—the enemies not only of righteousness but of happiness. “The worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful,” Jesus said (Matt. 13:22).

**TO EXPECT HAPPINESS FROM THE THINGS OF THIS WORLD IS LIKE SEEKING THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD**, just as the women sought Christ at the garden tomb on that first Easter morning. The angels told the women, “He is not here, but He has risen” (Luke 24:6).

*Paul said, “If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1–2). John said, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world.... And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15, 17).*

**TRUE BLESSEDNESS IS ON A HIGHER LEVEL THAN ANYTHING IN THE WORLD, AND IT IS**

## TO THAT LEVEL THAT THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT TAKES US.

Here is a completely new way of life, based on a completely new way of thinking. It is in fact based on a new way of being. The standard of righteousness, and therefore the standard of happiness, is the standard of selflessness—a standard that is completely opposite to man's fallen impulses and unregenerate nature.

It is impossible to follow Jesus' new way of living without having His new life within. As someone has suggested, one might as well try in our own day to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy that in the Millennium the wolf, lamb, leopard, kid, lion, and cow will live together peaceably (Isa. 11:6–7). If we were to go to a zoo and lecture a lion on the new peaceable way he was expected to live, and then placed a lamb in the cage with him, we know exactly what would happen as soon as the lion became hungry. The lion will not lie down peaceably with the lamb until the day when the lion's nature is changed.

***It is important to remember that the  
Beatitudes are pronouncements,  
not probabilities.***

Jesus does not say that if men have the qualities of humility, meekness, and so on that they are more likely to be happy. Nor is happiness simply Jesus' wish for His disciples. The Beatitudes are divine judgmental pronouncements, just as surely as are the "woes" of chapter 23.

***Makarios*** is, in fact, the opposite of ***ouai (woe)***, an interjection that connotes pain or calamity.

The opposite of the blessed life is the cursed life. The blessed life is represented by the true inner righteousness of those who are humble, poor in spirit, whereas the cursed life is represented by the outward, hypocritical self-righteousness of the proud religionists (5:20).

The Beatitudes are progressive. As will be seen as each one is discussed in detail, they are not in a random or haphazard order. Each leads to the other in logical succession.

Being poor in spirit reflects the right attitude we should have to our sinful condition, which then should lead us to mourn, to be meek and gentle, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful, pure in heart, and have a peacemaking spirit. A Christian who has all those qualities will be so far above the level of the world that his life will rebuke the world—which will bring persecution from the world (5:10–12) and light to the world (vv. 14–16).

## THE POOR IN SPIRIT

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (5:3)**

Discussion of this first beatitude demands that it be looked at from five perspectives: the meaning of poor in spirit, the

location of this virtue in the list, the way to achieve that attitude, how to know if we have that attitude, and the result promised for having it.

## 1. THE MEANING OF POOR IN SPIRIT

*Ptōchos* (**poor**) is from a verb meaning “to shrink, cower, or cringe,” as beggars often did in that day. Classical Greek used the word to refer to a person reduced to total destitution, who crouched in a corner begging. As he held out one hand for alms he often hid his face with the other hand, because he was ashamed of being recognized. The term did not mean simply poor, but begging poor. It is used in Luke 16:20 to describe the beggar Lazarus.

The word commonly used for ordinary poverty was *penichros*, and is used of the widow Jesus saw giving an offering in the Temple. She had very little, but she did have “two small copper coins” (Luke 21:2). She was poor but not a beggar. One who is *penichros* poor has at least some meager resources. One who is *ptōchos* poor, however, is completely dependent on others for sustenance. He has absolutely no means of self-support.

Because of a similar statement in Luke 6:20—“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”—some interpreters have maintained that the beatitude of Matthew 5:3 teaches material poverty. But sound hermeneutics (the interpretation of Scripture) requires that, when two or more passages are similar but not exactly alike, the clearer one explains the others, the more explicit clarifies the less explicit. By comparing Scripture with Scripture we see that the Matthew account is the more explicit. Jesus is speaking of a spiritual poverty that corresponds to the material poverty of one who is *ptōchos*.

If Jesus were here advocating material poverty He would have contradicted many other parts of His Word—including the Sermon on the Mount itself (5:42)—that teach us to give financial help to the poor. If Jesus was teaching the innate blessedness of material poverty, then the task of Christians would be to help make everyone, including themselves, penniless.

**Jesus did not teach that material poverty is the path to spiritual prosperity.**

Those who are materially poor *do* have some advantages in spiritual matters by not having certain distractions and temptations; and the materially rich have some disadvantage by *having* certain distractions and temptations. But **material possessions have no necessary relationship to spiritual blessings.** Matthew makes clear that Jesus is here talking about the condition of the **spirit**, not of the wallet.

After He began His public ministry, Jesus often had “nowhere to lay His head” (Matt. 8:20), but He and His disciples were not destitute and never begged for bread. Paul was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, stoned, and often economically hard pressed; but neither did he ever beg for bread. It was, in fact, a badge of honor for him that he worked in order to pay his own expenses in the ministry (Acts 20:34; 1 Cor. 9:6–18). The Lord and the apostles were accused of being ignorant, troublemakers, irreligious, and even mad; but they were never charged with being indigent or beggars.

On the other hand,

**no New Testament believer is condemned for being rich.**

**Nicodemus, the Roman centurion of Luke 7, Joseph of Arimathea, and Philemon were all wealthy and faithful.**

That “not many mighty, not many noble” are called (1 Cor. 1:26) is not because they are rejected due to their positions or possessions but because so many of them trust only in those things (1 Tim. 6:6–17).

To be **poor is spirit** is to recognize one’s spiritual poverty apart from God. It is to see oneself as one really is: lost, hopeless, helpless. Apart from Jesus Christ every

person is spiritually destitute, no matter what his education, wealth, social status, accomplishments, or religious knowledge.

**That is the point of the first beatitude.**

*The poor in spirit are those who recognize their total spiritual destitution and their complete dependence on God. They perceive that there are no saving resources in themselves and that they can only beg for mercy and grace. They know they have no spiritual merit, and they know they can earn no spiritual reward. Their pride is gone, their self-assurance is gone, and they stand empty-handed before God.*

**In spirit** also conveys the sense that the recognition of poverty is genuine, not an act. It does not refer to outwardly acting like a spiritual beggar, but to recognizing what one really is. It is true humility, not mock humility. It describes the person about whom the Lord speaks in Isaiah 66:2—“To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.” It describes the person who is “brokenhearted” and “crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18), who has “a broken and a contrite heart” before the Lord (Ps. 51:17).

Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-gatherer to “certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt.” As the Pharisee stood praying in the Temple, he proudly recited his virtues and gave thanks that he was not like those who are sinful, especially the tax-gatherer who was nearby. The tax-gatherer, however, “was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me, the sinner!’ ” The tax-gatherer, Jesus said, “went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:9–14). The Pharisee was proud in spirit; the tax-gatherer was **poor in spirit**.

When God called Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, Moses pleaded his unworthiness, and God was able to use him mightily. Peter was still aggressive, self-assertive, and proud, but when Jesus miraculously provided the great catch of fish, Peter was so overawed that he confessed, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Luke 5:8).

**EVEN AFTER HE BECAME AN APOSTLE, PAUL RECOGNIZED THAT “NOTHING GOOD DWELLS IN ME, THAT IS, IN MY FLESH” (ROM. 7:18), THAT HE WAS THE CHIEF OF SINNERS (1 TIM. 1:15), AND THAT THE BEST THINGS HE COULD DO IN HIMSELF WERE RUBBISH (PHIL. 3:8).**

*In his **Confessions** Augustine makes clear that pride was his greatest barrier to receiving the gospel. He was proud of his intellect, his wealth, and his prestige. Until he recognized that those things were less than nothing, Christ could do nothing for him. Until Martin Luther realized that all his sacrifice, rituals, and self-abuse counted for nothing before God, he could find no way to come to God or to please Him.*

Even at Sinai, when the law was given, it was evident that God’s own chosen people could not fulfill its demands on their own. As Moses was receiving the law on the mountain, Aaron was leading the people in a pagan orgy in the valley below (Ex. 32:1–6).

Israelites who were spiritually sensitive knew they needed God’s power to keep God’s law. In humility they confessed their helplessness and pleaded for His mercy and strength. David began his great penitential psalm with the plea “Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy

lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions.... For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" ([Ps. 51:1, 3](#)).

Other Israelites, however, took another approach to the law. Knowing they could not fulfill its demands, they simply brought the law down to a level that was more manageable and acceptable. They piled interpretation upon interpretation, creating man-made traditions that were possible to keep in the flesh.

Those traditions came to be known as the Talmud, a commentary on the law that leading rabbis developed over many centuries and that eventually superseded the law in the minds of most Jews.

**THEY EXCHANGED THE TORAH (GOD'S REVEALED LAW) FOR THE TALMUD (MAN'S MODIFICATION OF THE LAW). IN THE NAME OF INTERPRETING AND PROTECTING THE LAW THEY CONTRADICTED AND WEAKENED IT.**

They brought God's standards down to men's standards—which they could keep

without God's help. They then taught as doctrine those precepts of men (Matt. 15:9). They made the fatal error of thinking that God was less holy than He is and that they were more holy than they were. The result was the illusion that they were sufficiently righteous to please God.

**Traditions have to do with what we can see and measure. They involve only the outer man, whereas God's law involved the whole man. The Ten Commandments cannot be fulfilled simply by doing or not doing outward acts. They not only forbid making idols but also require love of God (Ex. 20:4, 6). Honoring father and mother is first of all an attitude, a matter of the heart, as is covetousness (vv. 12, 17).**

Every thoughtful Jew knew that God's law was far above his own human power to obey.

**The proud and self-satisfied responded by diluting the law. The humble and penitent responded by calling to God for help.**

If God's Old Testament standards are impossible for man to meet by himself, how much less attainable by one's own power are the standards of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus here teaches not only that people must love God but that they "are to be perfect, as [their] heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48), and that unless their righteousness exceeds the external, man-originated "righteousness ... of the scribes and Pharisees, [they] shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20).

## 2. WHY HUMILITY IS FIRST

Jesus puts this beatitude first because humility is the foundation of all other graces, a basic element in becoming a Christian (Matt. 18:3–4). Pride has no part in Christ's kingdom, and until a person surrenders pride he cannot enter the kingdom.

**THE DOOR INTO HIS KINGDOM IS LOW, AND NO ONE WHO STANDS TALL WILL EVER GO THROUGH IT.**

We cannot be filled until we are empty!

We cannot be made worthy until we recognize our unworthiness; we cannot live until we admit we are dead.

*We might as well expect fruit to grow without a tree as to expect the other graces of the Christian life to grow without humility.*

We cannot begin the Christian life without humility, and we cannot live the Christian life with pride.

**YET IN THE CHURCH TODAY THERE IS LITTLE EMPHASIS ON HUMILITY, LITTLE MENTION OF SELF-EMPTYING. WE SEE MANY CHRISTIAN BOOKS ON HOW TO BE HAPPY, HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL, HOW TO OVERCOME PROBLEMS, AND ON AND ON. BUT WE SEE VERY FEW BOOKS ON HOW TO EMPTY OURSELVES, HOW TO DENY OURSELVES, AND HOW**

**TO TAKE UP OUR CROSSES AND FOLLOW JESUS—IN  
THE WAY THAT HE TELLS US TO FOLLOW HIM.**

Until a soul is humbled, until the inner person is **poor in spirit**, Christ can never become dear, because He is obscured by self.

Until one knows how helpless, worthless, and sinful he is in himself, he can never see how mighty, worthy, and glorious Christ is in Himself.

Until one sees how doomed he is, he cannot see what a Redeemer the Lord is.

Until one sees his own poverty  
he cannot see God's riches.

Only when one admits to his own deadness can Christ give him His life.

*“Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination  
to the Lord”*

Being **poor in spirit** is the first beatitude because humility must precede everything else.

No one can receive the kingdom until he recognizes that he is unworthy of the kingdom.

**THE CHURCH IN LAODICEA SAID  
PROUDLY, “I AM RICH, AND HAVE  
BECOME WEALTHY, AND HAVE NEED**

# OF NOTHING,” NOT KNOWING THAT SHE WAS INSTEAD “WRETCHED AND MISERABLE AND POOR AND BLIND AND NAKED” (REV. 3:17).

Those who refuse to recognize that they are lost and helpless are like the blind Roman slave girl who insisted that she was not blind but that the world was permanently dark.

Where self is exalted, Christ cannot be. Where self is king, Christ cannot be. Until the proud in spirit become **poor in spirit**, they cannot receive the King or inherit His kingdom.

## **3. ACHIEVING HUMILITY**

How, then, do we become poor in spirit? Almost by definition, it cannot start with us, with anything we can do or accomplish in our own power. Nor does it involve putting ourselves down. We are already down; humility simply recognizes the truth. And simply *being* hopeless, helpless, and in need obviously is no virtue. That is not God’s will for anyone. His will is to get us out of that condition and into blessing. The fulfillment of that goal depends on His sovereign, gracious work of humbling.

Humility is not a necessary human work to make us worthy, but a necessary divine work to make us see that we *are* unworthy and cannot change our condition without God. That is why monasticism, asceticism, physical self-denial, mutilation, and other such self-efforts are so foolish and futile. They feed pride rather than subdue it, because they are works of the flesh. They give a person a reason to boast in what he has done or not done. Such self-imposed efforts are enemies of humility.

Yet...

Even though genuine humility is produced by the Lord as an element of the work of salvation, it is also commanded of men.

There are numerous divine commands to humble oneself (**Matt. 18:4; 23:12; James 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:5**), which the Lord perfectly harmonizes with His sovereign work of humbling.

Sovereign saving work is never without personal cooperation.

Because of that [it is helpful to look at some of the steps from the human side](#) of the divine paradox.

- 1. The first step in experiencing humility is to turn our eyes off ourselves and to look to God.** When we study His Word, seek His face in prayer, and sincerely desire to be near Him and please Him, we move toward being **poor in spirit**. **It is the vision of the infinitely Holy God in all His sinless purity and perfection that allows us to see ourselves as sinners by contrast.** To seek humility, we do not look at ourselves to find the faults, but at God Almighty to behold His perfection.
- 2. Second, we must starve the flesh by removing the things on which it feeds.** The essence of the fleshly nature is pride, and to starve the flesh is to remove and avoid those things that

promote pride. **RATHER THAN LOOKING FOR PRAISE, COMPLIMENTS, AND POPULARITY, WE SHOULD WE BE WARY OF THEM.** Yet because our human sinfulness has a way of turning even the best intentions to its advantage, we need to be careful not to make an issue of avoiding praise and recognition. **The evil is not in being given praise but in seeking it and glorying in it.** When, without having sought it, we are praised or honored, to ungraciously reject the recognition may be an act of pride rather than of humility.

### **3. The third and balancing principle in coming to humility is asking God for it.** With David we should pray,

***“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10).*** Humility, like every other good gift, comes only from God. Also as with every other good thing, He is more willing to give it than we are to ask for it, and He stands ready to give it long before we ask for it.

## **4. KNOWING WHEN WE ARE HUMBLE**

How can we know if we are genuinely humble, if we are **poor in spirit**?

**THOMAS WATSON GIVES SEVEN PRINCIPLES WE MAY APPLY IN DETERMINING HUMILITY.\***

### **A. FIRST, IF WE ARE HUMBLE WE WILL BE WEANED FROM OURSELVES.** We will be able to say with David, ***“My soul is like a weaned child within me” (Ps. 131:2).*** **One who is poor in spirit loses his self-preoccupation. Self is nothing, and Christ is everything.** Paul’s humility is nowhere more beautifully expressed than in his saying, ***“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20).*** To the Philippian believers he wrote, ***“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).***

**B. SECOND, HUMILITY WILL LEAD US TO BE LOST**

**IN THE WONDER OF CHRIST,** “with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, ... being transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18). Our satisfaction will be in the prospect of one day being fully in the likeness of our Lord.

**C. THIRD, WE WILL NOT COMPLAIN ABOUT OUR SITUATION, NO MATTER HOW BAD IT MAY BECOME.**

**Because we know we deserve worse than anything we can experience in this life, we will consider no circumstance to be unfair.** When tragedy comes we will not say, “Why me, Lord?” When our suffering is for Christ’s sake we not only will not complain or feel ashamed but will glorify God for it (1 Pet. 4:16), knowing that we will “also be glorified with Him” and ***realizing “that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us”*** (Rom. 8:17–18).

**D. FOURTH, WE WILL MORE CLEARLY SEE THE STRENGTHS AND VIRTUES OF OTHERS AS WELL AS OUR OWN WEAKNESSES AND SINS.**

With “humility of mind” we will “regard one another as more important than [ourselves]” (**Phil. 2:3**) and will “give preference to one another in honor” (**Rom. 12:10**).

**E. FIFTH, WE WILL SPEND MUCH TIME IN PRAYER.**

Just as the physical beggar begs for physical sustenance, the spiritual beggar begs for spiritual. **We will knock often at heaven’s gate because we are always in need.** Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, we will not let go until we are blessed.

**F. SIXTH, WE WILL TAKE CHRIST ON HIS TERMS, NOT ON OURS OR ANY OTHER.**

We will not try to have Christ while keeping our pride, our pleasures, our covetousness, or our immorality. **We will not modify His standards** by ecclesiastical traditions or by our own inclinations or persuasions. **His Word alone will be our standard.** Watson said, “A castle that has long been besieged and is ready to be taken will deliver up on any terms to save their lives. He whose heart has been a garrison for the devil, and has held out long in opposition against Christ, when once God has brought him to poverty of

spirit and he sees himself damned without Christ, let God propound what articles he will, he will readily subscribe to them. Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?’ ” (p. 47).

**G. SEVENTH, WHEN WE ARE POOR IN SPIRIT WE WILL PRAISE AND THANK GOD FOR HIS GRACE.** Nothing more characterizes the humble believer than abounding gratitude to his Lord and Savior. He knows that he has no blessings and no happiness but that which the Father gives in love and grace. He knows that God’s grace is “more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus” **(1 Tim. 1:14)**.

## **5. THE RESULT OF BEING POOR IN SPIRIT**

**Those who come to the King in this humility inherit His kingdom, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

God has gladly chosen to give the kingdom to those who humbly come to Him and trust Him (Luke 12:32).

When the Lord called Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites, **Gideon** replied, “O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s house”—to which God answered, “Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man” **(Judg. 6:15–16)**. When **Isaiah** “saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted,” he cried in despair, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips.” Then an attending seraph touched the prophet’s mouth with a burning coal and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven” **(Isa. 6:1, 5–7)**.

**Those who come to the Lord with broken hearts do not leave with broken hearts.**

*“For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever,  
whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place,  
and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to  
revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the  
contrite’”  
(Isa. 57:15).*

## **GOD WANTS US TO RECOGNIZE OUR POVERTY SO THAT HE CAN MAKE US RICH.**

He wants us to recognize our lowliness so that He can raise us up. “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord,” James says, “and He will exalt you” (James 4:10).  
In giving up their own kingdom, the poor in spirit inherit God’s.<sup>3</sup>

### **St. Andrews (R.C. Sproul) Commentary:**

#### **THE BEATITUDES, PART 1**

*Matthew 5:1–4*

**W**e begin now a study of the Sermon on the Mount, and there are many dimensions to this sermon that have been fraught with controversy. The first is the question of where this sermon was actually preached. The mountain is not identified. Luke’s version has Jesus teaching His disciples on a plain, “a level place” (Luke 6:17). Critics use this to say that the Bible is contradictory; however teachers teach important matters on more than one occasion and in more than one place, so we should not be disturbed that the biblical record has Jesus preaching on a mountain in one Gospel and on a plain in another.

### ***Three Errors***

---

<sup>3</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., [Matthew](#), vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 141–151.

Of greater importance is the matter of interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. There are three serious errors that are widely held in the church with regard to understanding the sermon. The **first error** teaches that **all the ethical mandates found in the sermon have no bearing on us today.** Rather, this sermon is seen as being about the ethics of the kingdom of God, and since the kingdom of God has not yet come, the sermon is irrelevant to us now. That is a serious distortion, which is based on an equally serious misunderstanding of the concept of the kingdom of God in the New Testament.

Jesus ascended to heaven to assume the role of King of kings, so even though the final consummation of His kingdom is in the future, to think that the kingdom is something completely future misses one of the central thrusts of the New Testament. I believe that the content of the Sermon on the Mount is very much relevant to us today, as it is to Christians in every generation. In fact, the virtues spelled out here in the sermon are spelled out in the teachings of the Apostles.

The **second error** is to see that the Sermon on the Mount is merely a new declaration of law by which **an impossible ethic is set before us so as to reveal the necessity of the gospel.** That is indeed one of the things that the law does—expose our desperate need for the gospel—but I think that again misunderstands the basic essence of the sermon.

Perhaps the **third and worst distortion** was brought to bear in nineteenth-century **liberalism.** It **holds that the Sermon on the Mount is about the social gospel** and that the ethic of Jesus is not about personal redemption but about teaching the church ethical behavior so that **the mission of the church is to be an agency of mere humanitarianism.** That, of course, scuttles not only the relevance of the Sermon on the Mount but the entire New Testament.

If you look closely at the content of the Sermon on the Mount, in it Jesus sets forth our response to Him as the ultimate test by which we and all men will be judged eternally. Therefore, let us be careful not to get caught in the trap of those erroneous views.

The sermon is the Word of God for us today  
and for Christians in every age.

## **Blessed**

The beginning of the Sermon on the Mount is filled with a list of beatitudes. They are called “beatitudes” because, in the Latin version of the New Testament, the Latin word *beati*, which is

translated “blessed,” means simply a pronouncement of blessedness upon those who are included in the categories. We see this formula, “Blessed are ...,” used repeatedly by Jesus in the beatitudes and in the Sermon on the Mount. Some modern translations have instead “Happy are ...,” which is a poor choice because it fails to include the intensely spiritual depth, which is lacking in the English word *happy*. To be sure, **happiness is an element of blessedness but by no means an exhaustive one.**

The prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus, who is a prophet in the New Testament, use a particular literary form of address. When Old Testament prophets made an announcement, it would be “the word of the Lord,” because God had put His words in the prophets’ mouth. The prophets would announce doom and prosperity, or what we call “oracles of woe” and “oracles of weal.” These oracles were divine pronouncements, like those the Greeks believed they received from the oracle of Delphi. The Hebrew prophets used the oracle to announce the word of God. The oracle of doom was introduced by the word *woe*. Jesus used that same literary form when He warned the Pharisees of their impending judgment: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (Matt. 23:13). He then went on to castigate them for their sinfulness. In the book of Revelation, when the great time of judgment comes, an angel flies over saying, “Woe, woe, woe ...!” (Rev. 8:13). When God announces woe, there is no worse calamity one can imagine.

The beatitudes, on the other hand, are oracles of weal, not woe, and the literary form that the prophets used to describe this divine favoring of individuals was the word *blessed*.

That word occurs all through sacred Scripture. The book of Psalms begins with a beatitude: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Ps. 1:1–2). **The consequence of blessedness is not something he merits or earns; it flows from his devotion to the Word of God.**

When Gabriel came to Mary and announced that she would be the mother of the Son of God, he said, “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). When the pregnant Mary visited Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth’s womb, who would be John the Baptist, jumped for joy at the approach of Jesus, and Elizabeth said to Mary, “Blessed are you among women” (Luke 1:42). An integral part of the Roman Catholic rosary is, “Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” “Hail Mary,” or *Ave Maria*, is a simple greeting, and it is the greeting of Gabriel to Mary that pronounces to her that she is blessed among women. Although Protestants do not embrace the theology that attends the veneration of Mary in the Roman Catholic Church, we certainly agree that the most singularly blessed woman in history was the mother of Jesus. The New Testament was right when Elizabeth said to her, “Blessed are you.” To be “blessed among women” means to experience a singular benefit from

the grace of God, and all who receive the visitation of the Holy Spirit experience that state of blessedness.

The classic Hebrew benediction, which is set forth in a certain poetic form called *parallelism*, gives us a classic description of biblical blessedness. It comes in three verses, and each verse repeats the assertion of the first verse with different words. This benediction is a beatitude:

The LORD bless you and keep you;  
The LORD make His face shine upon you,  
And be gracious to you;  
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,  
And give you peace. (Num. 6:24–26)

The supreme blessing that we are promised in the New Testament is that in heaven we will see God face-to-face. We call that the “beatific vision,” the vision that will flood our soul with the highest degree of blessedness imaginable. All of that is why I am not satisfied with the word *happy* as a way to translate Jesus’ pronouncements in the Sermon on the Mount. To be blessed of God is to receive spiritual benefit from Him that lasts forever, and this is what Jesus is pronouncing upon the various groups that He mentions here in the sermon.

And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them (vv. 1–2). As we noted earlier, rabbis in that time did not stand when they preached or taught. They sat down, and then the disciples would sit on the ground, literally at the feet of their master. Matthew is describing here a session given by the rabbi as he assembles his disciples and prepares to teach them. It seems unnecessary to add that He opened His mouth to teach them, but in fact this was a way of signaling that a teacher, rabbi, or prophet was about to declare a word from God.

## ***The Poor***

## **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3).**

Matthew qualifies this first beatitude, whereas Luke does not have a qualifier. He simply says, “Blessed are you poor” (Luke 6:20). Some have drawn from this the idea that the kingdom of God belongs essentially to poor people, so all one has to do to enter the kingdom of God is to be poor in the material sense. **There arose in the Middle Ages something called “poverty mysticism” in which poverty was elevated to a level of virtue that gave merit to those who were in such a state. That idea ignores the broader teaching of the Bible concerning the poor.**

The Old Testament distinguishes among four different types of poor people. The first are those who are **poor as a result of their sloth**. They are poor because they are too lazy to sow their seed or to be engaged in meaningful and productive industry, and this group of the poor comes sharply under the judgment of God. This indicates that **biblically there is no inherent virtue in poverty.**

The **second group includes those who are poor as a result of calamity through no fault of their own**. They are not poor because they are lazy but because a farmer experienced a drought or a storm that destroyed his crops, or a person had a serious accident that left him in such a crippled fashion that he was unable to engage in productive labor. **There is no judgment upon that group of the poor; rather, there is a mandate to make sure that this class of poor is helped by God’s people.**

The **third group is made up of those who are poor as a result of the exploitation of the rich and powerful**, which, in biblical terms, was hardly ever the wealthy business people but the rulers who drained their people of all of their wealth. We see an example of this with Ahab, who confiscated unjustly Naboth’s vineyard.

The **fourth category are those who are poor for righteousness’ sake**, that is, those who willingly choose a vocation that leaves them destitute. **Those in this category are concerned about things other than what the market produces.** To them is promised the kindness of God, who notices their personal sacrifice.

It is important that we understand from a biblical perspective that not all poverty arises from laziness. At the same time, not all poverty is virtuous.

There is no inherent merit in poverty, and there is no inherent sin in the fact of someone's being poor. **The same distinction can be made concerning the wealthy.** Those who make their wealth through illegitimate means come under the judgment of God, but, at the same time, the Scriptures recognize that one can be wealthy and virtuous.

Therefore, **those whom Jesus addresses here are not necessarily living in poverty, although it may include some in that state.** Specifically in view here is a poverty of spirit, but not in the sense that they lack what it takes to exercise courage or industry. Matthew is also not speaking of those who are mean-spirited.

**To be poor in spirit in biblical terms means that someone has a poverty of arrogance.**

Such people are the polar opposite of the scribes and Pharisees, who boasted of their riches in virtue, their personal righteousness. Such people do not enter the kingdom of God.

The myth persists even in our culture that people can get to heaven by their good works, by the righteousness that they achieve by their particular virtues. **If we trust in our own righteousness to get us into the kingdom of God, we will miss the kingdom of God altogether.** To enter the kingdom of God, we must understand that, in light of the perfection of God, our virtue is bankrupt. We have no merit to offer God except for that earned for us by our Savior.

**Jesus spells out here a necessary condition for entering into His kingdom. We have to be broken of our pride.** The psalmist writes, *"A broken and contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise"* (Ps. 51:17), and just before this he writes, *"For You do not desire sacrifice, or*

*else I would give it; ... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit”*  
(vv. 16–19).

A friend of mine had come out of the Roman Catholic Church and become a believer. She was excited about her new-found faith and felt free from her previous church atmosphere of constant scolding. She said, “When I found that I was justified by faith and not by works, I felt that everything was all said and done, until I read your book *The Holiness of God*. I was upset by your book because in it you reiterate that I am a sinner. I didn’t want to hear it, but as I began to think about the character of God, I got the message that there is no righteousness in me apart from Christ.” Her experience was one of coming to poverty of spirit.

We must not think that the poor in spirit get in the kingdom by that means and others get in by some other way—by being a peacemaker or being hungry or thirsty, as we see in the other beatitudes. **Everyone has to be poor in spirit to receive the supreme blessing of the kingdom of God.**<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert Charles Sproul, [Matthew](#), St. Andrew’s Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 73–78.