

This morning, we are looking at one of the most well-known passages in the Bible, the Beatitudes. It is probably second only to the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23, and perhaps 1 Corinthians 13 and the parable of the good Samaritan. But sometimes, when things are so familiar, we may miss important insights and teaching. So, let's explore this reading together.

First, we'll look at the context, then the meaning of the word "beatitude", and finally what was the underlying idea or ideas that Jesus was teaching.

### 1. Context

**5** Now when Jesus 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.

So, this is the beginning of what is known as the "sermon on the mount". Jesus was on the side of a mountain where he could be seen and heard better. No microphone and loud speakers in sight. He sat down – teachers in the ancient world, including Jewish teachers, usually sat down when they taught. So, he began to teach them.

John Wesley<sup>1</sup> points out that the word *them* includes the crowd, as shown in Matthew 7:28-29 at the end of the sermon on the mount.

<sup>28</sup> When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, <sup>29</sup> because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

The site of this sermon on a mountain, for the Jews, had extra significance. Moses went up a mountain to receive the law – the Old Covenant. Now Jesus is going up a mountain to explain what "the law" really involves – the New Covenant.

In the previous chapter we heard that, after John the Baptist was put in prison,

<sup>17</sup> From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

So, this teaching, the beatitudes, is early in Jesus' ministry, and he is starting to explain what the kingdom of heaven is like, God's upside-down kingdom, the kingdom that is counter-cultural, counter-intuitive, and counter-egocentric. He is describing what life living in this kingdom is like. The kingdom will be complete in the future, when Jesus comes again, but it started then with "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," and it continues today.

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *Sermon on the Mount: An annotated collection of must-read sermons for every Christian*, Kindle Edition, p7

## 2. Why the word “beatitude”?

Well, it doesn't have anything to do with bees, despite popular children's activities, and it doesn't have enough T's to be related to “attitude”.

### **Etymology**

From [Middle English](#) *beatitude*, *beatytude*, from [Middle French](#) *béatitude*, from [Latin](#) *beātītūdō* (“happiness, blessedness”), from *beātus* (“happy, blessed”).<sup>2</sup>

So, it actually comes from the Latin word “beatus” which means “blessed” or “blesséd”.

Tom Wright, in his book *Matthew for Everyone*, renders these sayings as “Wonderful news for the poor in spirit! The kingdom of heaven is yours”, etc.<sup>3</sup> This gives us a feel for the surprise, the excitement and the impact of this passage. Being blessed by God is indeed wonderful news.

“Blessing” is much deeper than happiness. Happiness depends on our external circumstances. Blessing involves walking through difficult times – health, pain, bereavement, loss – being aware that God is walking with us, comforting, reassuring and strengthening us, as we trust him in it all. We do not walk alone.

## 3. The underlying message

The values of the kingdom of heaven were different from the culture then, from our culture here and now, from any culture in fact. Where else are the poor, the bereaved, the meek, the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers and the persecuted valued and considered fortunate. This is counter cultural indeed, especially for us today when, as a global society, we strive for success, fame, power and money; even domination, war and suppression of freedom.

The beatitudes isn't a list of instructions for us to try to achieve, it isn't a list of things that automatically happen, Jesus is not saying try to live like this, and it isn't just a list of things that will be fulfilled in the future. No, the kingdom of heaven is breaking into our world here and now. As we each commit our lives to Jesus as our King we become part of the Kingdom of Heaven, and Jesus tells us that this is what it is like.

Tom Wright likens Jesus' teaching here to what it must have been like the first time a plane broke the sound barrier, previously considered impossible, and accompanied by a very loud bang.<sup>4</sup> Quoting Wright:

This is an upside-down world, or perhaps a right-way-up world; *and Jesus is saying that with his work it is starting to come true*. This is an announcement, not a philosophical analysis of the world. It's about something that's starting to happen, not a general truth of life. It is *gospel*: good news, not good advice.

Follow me, Jesus said to the first disciples; because in him the living God was doing a new thing, and this list of 'wonderful news' is part of his invitation, part of his summons, part of his way of saying that God is at work in a fresh way and this is what it looks like.

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/beatitude>

<sup>3</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, 2002, p33.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p35.

... the point is not to offer a list of what sort of people God normally blesses. The point is to announce God's new covenant.<sup>5</sup>

So, let's think about each one of these "beatitudes" in turn, these statements of blessing. Jesus said,

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

What does it mean to be "poor in spirit"?

Perhaps "humble" is the best synonym. Someone who knows that all their good deeds, all their striving to please God, to keep the law, does not make them acceptable to God. But as they humbly accept Jesus' offer of forgiveness, cleansing and healing, they enter the kingdom of heaven – it "becomes theirs".

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

John Stott points out that, coming after the first beatitude about being poor in spirit, Jesus is not primarily talking about comfort for those who are bereaved, but "those who mourn the loss of their innocence and their righteousness ... the sorrow of repentance. ... It is one thing to be spiritually poor and acknowledge it; it is another to grieve and mourn over it."<sup>6</sup>

As well as this though, the story behind the well-known hymn, "It is well with my soul", might help us understand how it could also apply to those who have lost a loved one.

The story of the writer of this hymn, Horatio Spafford, sounds a little like that of Job in the Old Testament.

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

Spafford was a committed Christian lay leader, a close friend of the evangelist, Dwight L. Moody. He was also a successful lawyer who had invested heavily in real estate, but lost it all in the great Chicago Fire of 1871. His son had died a short time before. Then, in 1873, his four daughters died in a shipwreck. His wife was saved and Spafford set out immediately to join her. Some say that he wrote this hymn as he crossed the area of the ocean where the ship carrying his wife and daughters had sunk. Another young son, born after this, died of scarlet fever.<sup>7</sup>

This hymn has been a great blessing and comfort to many people over many years, especially the bereaved.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp35-36

<sup>6</sup> John Stott with Douglas Connelly, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount with John Stott, With Questions for Groups or Individuals*, IVP, 2016, p19.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-it-is-well-with-my-soul>, also <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/it-is-well-with-my-soul>

He continued to live faithfully following the Lord Jesus for the rest of his life. He and his wife moved to Jerusalem setting up a society that engaged in “philanthropic activities among Jews, Muslims and Christians.”

So, we can see in this story how God blessed Horatio Spafford as he grieved, but also how his grief, as he walked through it trusting God, has blessed generations of others who grieve. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” This is what Jesus promises if we trust him.

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

Who are the meek? Those who are humble and gentle. This has connotations of nonviolence.

The footnote in the NIV Study Bible says “This beatitude is taken from Psalm 37:11 and refers not so much to an attitude towards man as to a disposition before God, namely humility.”<sup>8</sup>

Probably the most well-known example of “the meek inheriting the earth” is George Muller. At the time that Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*, George Muller, with no money, only prayer, cared for over 10,000 orphans in Bristol, an industrial city in England.

“In addition to caring for orphans George Müller also paid for the printing of Bibles and tracts. He gave away more than 250,000 Bibles. He paid tuition for hundreds of children to go to school. During his lifetime in answer to prayer he raised the equivalent of \$129,000,000 [USD in 2017] which he gave away, and when he died he had only a little money left. The trust he set up continues to support missionaries around the world. It also holds the records for most of the nearly 18,000 children cared for during the 150 year life of the [main] orphanage [that he set up].”<sup>9</sup>

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

Stott points out that righteousness in the Bible has at least three aspects – legal, moral and social<sup>10</sup>. Legal righteousness where “we are made right with God through faith alone.” Moral righteousness, that “righteousness of character and conduct that pleases God. Not the rule-keeping righteousness of the coldly religious but the warm, inner-driven righteousness that flows from the Spirit within us.” Social righteousness that “seeks to bring justice, and freedom from oppression, and integrity into the fabric of human society.”

So, as we hunger and thirst for righteousness in all these areas, we will be filled – he gives us salvation, develops our character, and gives us challenging work to do.

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.

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<sup>8</sup> The NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, 1985, p1449.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.georgemuller.org/devotional/the-life-of-george-muller>

<sup>10</sup> Stott with Connelly, p22

Mercy is compassion for people in need. "... those who show mercy receive it. This is not because we earn God's mercy by showing mercy to others. ... Nothing moves us to forgive like the amazing knowledge that we have been forgiven ourselves. Nothing proves more clearly that we have been forgiven than our own readiness to forgive."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.

Being "pure in heart" concerns sincerity, a life that is transparent and consistent. "It means that in our relationships with both God and others we are free from falsehood."<sup>12</sup> It is the only way that we can "see" God. He knows all about us anyway, so it's no good trying to hide things from him.

<sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.

"Peacemakers" here are not those who keep the peace at any cost, but those who actively work to bring peace between people, particularly among those in God's family. And peace in the Bible, *shalom*, is much more than just the absence of conflict, but includes wholeness of mind, body and spirit, and relationships. Jesus is the Prince of Peace prophesied by Isaiah.<sup>13</sup>

Stott again tells us that "the very same word used of us [the peacemakers] in this beatitude is applied by the apostle Paul to what God has done through Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God was pleased 'to reconcile to himself all things, ... making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' (Colossians 1:20)"<sup>14</sup>

Peacemaking can be time consuming, challenging and painful, but this is the character of the "children of God".

"When we are personally involved in a dispute or disagreement, there will be the pain of apologizing to the person we have injured or the pain of freely forgiving the person who has injured us."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I remember as a young Christian, 50+ years ago, being inspired by stories of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand who endured fourteen years of Communist imprisonment and torture for his faith, in his homeland of Romania; also, with his role in the underground church.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> 'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

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<sup>11</sup> Stott with Connelly, pp26-27

<sup>12</sup> Stott with Connelly, p27

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 9:6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. NIVUK

<sup>14</sup> Stott with Connelly, p29

<sup>15</sup> Stott with Connelly, p29

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.persecution.com/founders/>

<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.

Jesus warned us to expect this when we follow him. “Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.’”<sup>17</sup> This is something that our brothers and sisters around the world are experiencing much more than us in Australia, even being executed for refusing to deny the Lord Jesus. But there is blessing, even in persecution “because of *me*”, meaning because of Jesus, in God’s upside-down kingdom.

And there is blessing for us too in living for Jesus in the world, even when it is hard.

<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 underfoot.

<sup>14</sup> ‘You are the light of the world. A town built 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 others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

The beatitudes are Jesus’ description of what the kingdom of heaven is like for us as believers. Now Jesus is challenging us to be salt and light in the world, living out the qualities of God’s kingdom. Salt brings out the flavour and preserves food. Light dispels darkness and by it we can see clearly. When we shine our light, it brings glory to God.

So, to summarise and challenge each of us, do we acknowledge that we are spiritually poor and grieve and mourn over it? Are we meek, and hunger and thirst for righteousness? Are we merciful, pure in heart and peacemakers? Are we prepared to die for Jesus? Is the Lord challenging us in any of these areas this morning so that he can pour out his blessing on us and through us to the world?

This is the natural outworking of living the beatitudes, showing the blessing of God’s kingdom values, the values that are so counter-cultural that they cause people to ask what makes such a difference in our lives, and thus be drawn to the light of Christ.

Are we on board?

Let’s pray.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you came to announce that the kingdom of heaven is near, the kingdom where you rule and reign, and to tell the world about it.

Father, help us to so live out the values and character of that kingdom that we see in the beatitudes that people will be drawn to you, ask the Lord Jesus to be their King, and so join the Kingdom of Heaven. May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Help us to be faithful in prayer and in living for you.

Amen

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<sup>17</sup> John 15:20a