

The Sermon on the Mount

Session I

Christian Character

Matthew 5:3-12

In this session we begin to examine the text of the Sermon on the Mount (SOM) by looking at some of the most familiar and often taught passages of the Bible, the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes:

Let's begin: (Matthew 5:3-12 ESV)

Form & Structure:

In your pre-work assignment I asked you to look for a "pattern" within these verses. *What are your observations??*

A. **Parallelism:**

Matthew used a very distinctive and careful pattern in arranging the verses¹.

1. He opens each with the term μακάριοι, Blessed.
2. He then designates "who" it is that is Blessed. For example: "the meek", "the poor in spirit", ect. ect.
3. He then uses what is known as a ὅτι (*hoti*) clause to demonstrate the *reason or grounds* for the condition. For example: "for they shall inherit the earth", "they shall be satisfied", etc etc.

B. **Assertion – Promise:**

1. Assertion: An assertion is a confident, forceful statement of fact. Jesus wasn't making a suggestion of "possible" conditions; he was stating the facts as seen by a divine member of the Trinity!!

Notice that each beatitude begins with an "assertion" phrase: ie: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*". Each of these is a bold statement of fact!

2. Promise: We all know what promises are. As humans we make often promise things. As fallen creatures however, we often fail to keep our promises. In these verses we see Jesus, a member of the Trinity, making the promises. Holy God is infallible and completely without any sin. As such He is incapable of going back on his word. His promises are sure and trustworthy. What He pledges, He will fulfill!!!

Notice also that each beatitude concludes with a "promise" phrase: ie: "*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*"

C. **Inclusio:**

An inclusio is a "stylistic device". It was a very common tool used by ancient writers to "set off" or "highlight" a specific section of the text. This tool was used by virtually all of the Biblical authors.

Notice the "promise" statement of v.3 and v.10. Regardless of our modern translations, let me show you the exact terms in the original Greek text for **both** verses:

ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν – "*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*"

Matthew used this inclusio style device to block off the message of the Beatitudes for his future audiences. Effectively he is providing us with the basic document where Jesus outlined the true character features that his followers should possess.

D. **The People Described?**

Who is Jesus describing in these verses?

The obvious answer is that Christ was describing his followers, Christians.

We said there are eight Beatitudes. Does this mean that there are eight "types" of Christians?

Clearly the answer is "No"! Jesus was not sending the message that he would have eight types of followers; some who were meek, some who were peacemakers, some who hunger for righteousness. He was giving us the eight qualities that all believers should possess.

E. **Expansion:**

There is some discussion amongst teachers as to whether v. 11-12 represent a ninth beatitude, or simply an expansion of the eighth. I do not think this is a huge issue that needs attention or debate. It is my opinion, as well as that of two of the three scholars used in this material, that v.11-12 are actually an *expansion* or further elaboration of v.10, the eighth beatitude.

What do you see in the text that would lead you to this conclusion??

1. Notice the person shift from 3rd person to 2nd person, (from "they" to "you"). Jesus is not providing a ninth characteristic so much as he is placing **emphasis** or truly **personalizing** the fact that his followers would be persecuted for their beliefs!! Not just "those",,,, but specifically "you"!!!
2. Notice that the theme of v.11-12 is the same as v.10 – "**persecution**"
3. Notice that v.11-12 drill down specifically on the "type" of persecution.

Why do you think Jesus elaborated deeper on the "type" of persecution??

There are all kinds of persecution in this world. We've seen so many examples even in recent years all over the globe. If all we had were v.10, people undergoing **any** type of persecution would have some sort of false sense of assurance.

Jesus is *expanding* the persecution of v.10 by pointing out that it is persecution suffered *specifically* because of the believer's faith in him!!

Lastly we see Jesus giving great comfort to his followers in v.12. Followers of Christ must rest in the knowledge of the eternal life that we have in him, not the temporal state of this fallen world!!

Additionally, note that the persecution that befalls believers is consistent with the way the world persecuted the great prophets of God before us!!

The Scriptures:

- A. **Μακάριοι - Blessed" vs. "Happy":** In your pre-work I asked you to reflect upon the first word in each of the beatitudes, the Greek term *μακάριοι* (*makarioi*). In English this term is translated various ways. Most often we see it translated "*blessed*". However, some teachers have translated it using the word "*happy*".

Give me your thoughts here, how do you feel the term is best translated "blessed" or "happy"?? Why??

While I do not think this is a huge "theological point", I do concur with Stott and Carson that "*blessed*" is a better translation here. "*Happy*" is a *subjective state*. This means that it is a state of being that is based upon or influenced by personal feelings, or opinions.

However, this is not what Jesus is doing. Instead he is making an *objective judgment* about these people. An *objective judgment* is a judgment that is *not* influenced by personal feelings or opinions. Instead it is a statement of the *actual, factual, real and verifiable* state!!

Jesus is *not* declaring how they may *feel* (happy). He *is* declaring the factual condition of the believer's standing before Holy God: *they are blessed*.

- B. **The Qualities of "the Blessed" & the Promises of God:**

A few moments ago, as we discussed the Form & Structure of the beatitudes, we noted that each of them carries an *assertion* and a *promise*. We need to now turn to these in a verse by verse manner.

Recall that an assertion is simply a "confident and forceful statement of fact". In the case of the beatitudes, Jesus was making factual statements regarding eight specific personal qualities that would characterize his followers.

The promises which follow each assertion carry a strong message of comfort and assurance because, for the most part, they point our attention forward to the eternal life all believers will share with God.

So, let's get started:

1. **Beatitude #1: (v.3):**

³ *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

(We are going to spend a little more time on this first beatitude. The manner in which we examine it will form the basis of how we study the remaining seven.)

Read the verse and tell me what the quality characteristic Jesus is referring to, and the promise he is making?

The first quality asserted is "poor in spirit".

The first promise is "theirs is the kingdom of heaven".

Regarding the quality, "poor in spirit", what is Jesus saying? Is he simply referring to people who have little or no earthly possessions??

No, there is much more in play here. There is no doubt that Jesus was using an analogy here. From a practical perspective in the 1st century, as well as many parts of our world today, there was a sense of utter and total dependence which the poor had upon the society to give them everything for survival. Regardless of what their condition was, these people were totally dependent upon family or the generosity of others for their very survival. Living like this creates a certain "mindset" of dependence within a person.

But how do we know that Jesus was really referring to something more than just the economically poor of society??

As Matthew recorded Jesus' words, he was careful to denote exactly what Christ meant in his reference to the poor. It is very true that in post-exilic Israel poverty and piety most often went together.³ However, Matthew gives us a bit more on this quality by denoting that Jesus is not simply referencing the economically poor. Instead Matthew writes the quality as "***poor in spirit***".

What is the significance of "in spirit" in this quality??

The Greek word here is τῷ πνεύματι (in the spirit). The root word πνεῦμα (spirit) is used many times in the New Testament (NT). Like many words, this term can have a broad range of meanings. In Scripture we find this term used in five specific ways:⁴

(1) "movement of air," "wind" (John 3. 8a), "breath," "vital principle," "(life-) spirit";

(2) the source or seat of man's insight, feeling, and will, the representative part of the inner life of man.

(3) Since spirit is that which leaves a person at death (cp. Matthew 27. 50; Luke 23. 46; John 19. 30) it is also used to designate the human soul after it has left the body;

(4) other incorporeal beings, not human, such as angels, good and bad spirits, which have the power of knowing, desiring, and acting, and are thought of as having some kind of personality.

(5) Finally, the word occurs to designate "the Spirit" in the sense of "God's Spirit," "the Holy Spirit."

Which way is Matthew using the term πνεῦμα (spirit) here in v.3??

It is in the second sense above: "the inner most source or seat of the person's insight / will". Jesus is clearly pointing to the quality of poor in spirit to reflect a poverty of the inner-most source of the believer. This poverty results in a **complete and total dependence upon God** for everything in their existence!!

Let's turn now to the first promise: "**theirs is the kingdom of heaven**".

Take a moment and scan through the other promises in the next few verses. Tell me what you see that is unique about this one.

First, we noted above that this promise and the last one in v.10 are identical and form an inclusion style device that Matthew employed to set off this passage of Scripture. Additionally, these two promises are the only ones presented in the present tense. Each of the remaining promises are presented in the future tense.

Give me your thoughts on the significance of both the present and future tense being used in these promises.

When Jesus presents the promises in the future tense, he is calling our attention to the greatness of the eternal life we will enjoy after this world. We know that this fallen world is not our home. Throughout Scripture God reminds us of the wonderful blessings we have coming when we enter heaven!!

However, we do not have to "wait". In these present tense promises we see Jesus giving his followers such a great assurance that we have already become citizens of the kingdom. We are already in the family of God. Even though we have yet to enter into the glory of heaven, Jesus is reminding us that the gifts of heaven are already ours!!

In these promises we see elements of the "**now, but not yet**" components of our salvation. We are now saved, redeemed, rescued, adopted sons of God. As such, our inheritance is already set!! We can rest in the blessed assurance that our wages of our sin has been paid, our souls have been bought and paid for with the blood of Jesus Christ. However, while this brings us great comfort, we all know that we still live in a sinful body and in a fallen world.

We still undergo hardship, trials and persecution. Yet we take heart in the great future promises of that we will enjoy when we meet Christ in heaven.

What specifically is Jesus promising us??

Matthew loves to use the phrase “*kingdom of heaven*”. He employs it 33 times in his Gospel!! He also uses the phrase “*kingdom of God*” on occasion. The two phrases are different in the original Greek language: τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν (kingdom of heaven) and τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ (kingdom of God). We know that Matthew used these terms to mean the same thing when we look at Mt. 19:23-24. As a Jew, Matthew was reluctant to over use the term “God”, thus on 33 occasions he chose to write “heaven”.⁵

When he uses this phrase, Matthew is reminding us of the sovereign reign of God which encompasses the great blessings to be bestowed upon believers in the life to come.

2. **Beatitude #2: (v.4):**

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

As noted above, we spent a great deal more time with the first beatitude. We will now pick up the pace a bit, but use the same basic format for examining the rest of the beatitudes.

What is the quality characteristic Jesus is focusing on in this verse?

Jesus turns from the poor in spirit to focus on the quality which naturally flows from the first “*those who mourn*”. It is not a far leap from “poor in spirit” to “mournfulness”. So, let’s talk about this quality. ***Is Jesus telling us that he expects his followers to be in a perpetual state of mourning?***

Absolutely not!! Because of our redemption, which is found in Jesus Christ, we have the greatest joy that can be held on this earth. However from an individual perspective, even with this redemption, we continue to live in this fallen world and we continue to have sin in our lives. This sin is something that we should continuously be mournful about. Secondly, in the broader sense we are witnesses of the injustice and cruelty of this fallen world and we should be mournful of this state of affairs.

From a stand point of Greek grammar, Matthew intentionally begins to use a type of word for “*those who mourn*” (οἱ πένθοῦντες) that clearly denotes that this mourning is an ongoing condition.

Let’s move to the promise: What is Jesus promising to those who mourn?

The promise is exactly what we would expect, the continuously mournful “*shall be comforted*”. *What is different about this promise from the first one?*

This promise is presented in the **future tense**. As we noted above, there is a significant aspect of the salvation we have which we will not realize until we join Christ in heaven. Despite the great joy we presently have in our salvation, we are continuously faced with the despair over our sin and the conditions of this fallen world. Perhaps the best verse we have to picture how dramatically this will change is in Rev. 21:3-4 as John describes the vision of our future home:

³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

3. **Beatitude #3: (v.5):**

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

What is the quality characteristic Jesus is focusing on in this verse?

Jesus is now focusing on the characteristic of “*meekness*”. This beatitude is almost a verbatim quotation of Ps. 37:11. *What do we typically think of when we think of “meekness”??*

Very often meekness is synonymous with *weakness*. However, that is absolutely NOT what Jesus is telling us here. We are not to be weak spirited, indecisive, or timid. Instead meekness is a controlled quality of humility that truly desires to see the interests of others ahead of his own.⁶ Abraham exhibited this in his deference to Lot. Likewise, Moses was continuously placing the interests of the Israelites before his own.

Many translations use the English term “*gentle*” instead of “*meek*”. This is an acceptable choice and perhaps does a better job (in English) of conveying the quality Jesus was focused on.

What is the promise Jesus makes to those who are meek?

Once again we see a great promise which will be consummated in the times beyond this earth. Not only will Christ’s followers inherit the *kingdom of heaven* we will also be blessed with the earth. I love the way Donald Carson sums this up. He says that 50 billion, trillion years from now, we will still be rejoicing in our inheritance of the new heaven and new earth!!

4. **Beatitude #4: (v.6):**

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

What is the quality characteristic Jesus is focusing on in this verse?

This is one of my personal favorites, not just for the content of the quality, but also because there is so much power when we see this verse in the original Greek language. Jesus is speaking about the quality of *"hungering and thirsting for righteousness"*.

Tell me what you think of when you hear this quality of "hungering and thirsting" for righteousness.

As we have seen, and will continue to see, the Greek language is so much superior to most other languages in its ability to precisely express meaning in the written form. My native language, English, depends very heavily upon voice inflection to convey elements of meaning. As such, written English can often be difficult to convey complete concepts. This is particularly true as time passes and the language changes

This is not so much the case in Greek. Here in this beatitude we see Matthew writing the qualities of hungering and thirsting οἱ πείνῶντες καὶ διψῶντες. These two words are present participles which are being used as nouns. In Greek, the present participle carries the force of a *continuous* action. Therefore we translate these two terms as *"those who hunger and thirst"* or *"those who are hungering and thirsting"*.

The key point is this never stops. Just as our bodies are continuously longing for food and drink, so too the believer is continuously longing for righteousness!!

So, what is this "righteousness" that we are to be continuously longing for??

This is another very important term in the New Testament, δικαιοσύνην. When we see this term as a noun, we often translate it as *"righteousness"*; when we see it appear as a verb the English translation is very often *"justice or justified"*. The reason for the difference is that English does not have a verb form for the word *"righteous"*. In this verse, δικαιοσύνην is in the noun form and is generally translated as *"righteous" or "righteousness"*.

Tell me what you think Jesus is referring to with the word "righteousness"?

Some teachers wish to debate the answer to this question. I personally think the answer is very obvious. In Scripture, righteousness generally carries one of three possible aspects:⁷

1. Legal: In this aspect it refers to one's standing before God, as such it is a reference to salvation.
2. Moral: This aspect conveys the idea of a life of character and conduct that is pleasing to God.
3. Social: This aspect of righteousness carries the notion of social justice, or civil rights.

We know that Jesus is speaking to his followers, thus these are most likely already believers. As such the question of “legal” standing or salvation is probably not in view. The third aspect is possible. We know we live in a fallen world and injustice surrounds us! As Christians we should all desire for any social injustice to be corrected.

However, I would contend that in the beatitudes, Jesus is speaking directly to the heart of every individual believer. As such, the “moral” aspect of righteousness is a more appropriate interpretation. As individual followers of Jesus Christ, our lives should be characterized by a continuous longing to live lives that are pleasing to God. This is **NOT** so that we can “earn” our salvation!! This **IS** because we have been made new by the blood of Christ and we long to please the one who redeemed us with his blood!!!

Ok, we’ve spent a lot of time on this beatitude. I told you it is a fascinating one to study!! But we must move on. I will not belabor the promise of this verse. Jesus simply stays with the overall analogy of hungering and thirsting by promising that these believers will be “filled”. Again we see this presented in the future tense which is telling us that the complete fulfillment of this promise awaits us in the life to come.

5. **Beatitude #5: (v.7):**

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

Before we move into the standard questions: Do you see a shift beginning here with this beatitude??

Each of the first four beatitudes dealt with the believer’s relationship toward God. Notice that from here forward, each one will refer to how believers should relate toward their fellow man.

So let’s start, what is the quality characteristic Jesus is focusing on in this verse?

“Mercy” is the focus. Proverbs 14:21(b) reads very similar to this beatitude in noting that “blessed is the one who has mercy on the poor”. Mercy is clearly a loving response that we have toward those who are in misery. We’ve all witnessed people in wreathing pain as they suffer from great illnesses like cancer or HIV-AIDS. As followers of Christ we are expected to possess the characteristic of mercy and compassion on those people and render aid. If you go to my country, you will notice that a great many of the largest and best hospitals are owned and operated by Christian church denominations. We see this characteristic coming forth from the Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists and others have so often by building huge hospitals designed to do exactly what this beatitude is speaking of.

This is simply one example of countless others. The One who had great mercy on us and provided His grace that we might live, expects that the same such mercy would extend from us to those around us!!

To the promise: Is Jesus setting up some form of “works based” condition for us to receive mercy??

Absolutely NOT!! Again, we must always keep in mind that this sermon is a message to the “heart” of every believer. Jesus is simply saying that those who are true believers in him will have the inherent quality of mercy toward the suffering around him. Further, if you do not, then you might want to check your heart and make sure you really have placed your faith in Christ!!

6. **Beatitude #6: (v.8):**

*⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
What is the quality characteristic in this beatitude?”*

In this verse Jesus speaks to us about the believer’s heart. Specifically he is referring to us having a “pure heart”. *What do you think of when you hear this phrase – “pure in heart”?*

The heart is used in Scripture repeatedly to refer to the inner-most center of who we are as individuals. So when Jesus speaks of us being “pure in heart”, he is referring to the condition, thoughts, motivations, of our inner-most being. I love the way one of the teachers I used for this course framed this up:⁸

“Where does your mind go when it slips into neutral?”

This question really does serve to illustrate what Jesus is speaking of. When you are alone and simply sitting around, thinking,,,,,, Does your mind drift to this world and its cares, or to him and his work?? For other verses on this same thought, see 1 Timothy 1:5; 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3; 1 Peter 1:22.

7. **Beatitude #7: (v.9):**

*⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
What quality is Jesus calling for here?? Who is the greatest “peacemaker” in history?”*

Fairly easy questions here, the quality that Jesus is calling for is that of “making peace”. The terminology is clear, Jesus did not say “Blessed are the peaceful” or “those who love peace”. No doubt being peaceful and being a person who loves peace is a wonderful thing.

However, as Matthew records the words of Christ, he is very specific to use a two-part word that combines the terms of “peace” with “maker”. This is an action word, not a descriptive noun or adjective. It is a word that describes what the “do”, action that is taken!!

Jesus is the greatest example of this. He “made peace” between God and man through his atoning sacrifice. Likewise he is calling on his followers to be people who make peace with those around us. There is both a vertical and horizontal component to this. We are to be

people who spread the gospel so others may come to Christ and have peace with God that is the vertical component. We also have the responsibility to help make peace between people around us when strife and disagreement comes. This is the horizontal component.

Note the great message in the promise of this beatitude.

How awesome is it that God considers us to be His “sons”. The Greek word here is υἱοὶ. Some English Bibles translate this word as “children”, others translate it as “sons”. We must recall the context of the Jewish culture of the period. The son was considered quite special. It was assumed that a son would possess the same positive qualities of the father. So when Jesus is equating his followers to “sons of God” this is a truly great promise!!

8. **Beatitude #8 – v.10: (with the expansion of v.11-12):**

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness 'sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

We discussed earlier that some teachers contend that v.10 is the eighth beatitude and v.11-12 are the ninth. Others hold that v.10 is the eighth and final beatitude and v.11-12 are expansions of that verse to provide more detail.

I would hold the latter opinion for several reasons:

- A. Inclusio in v.10: Recall that this style device was used by ancient writers to “block off” segments of text. Here the inclusion phrase is “*theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” Matthew uses this phrase in v.3 and v.10; thus indicating that these represent the “block segment”.
- B. Subject matter: The subject matter of v.10 and v.11 are the same: Jesus is clearly referring to persecution which his followers are enduring.

We've already revealed the characteristic of this beatitude: persecution. However there are some very interesting things going on in these verses that we want to look at.

Persecution takes many forms and occurs for many reasons. Is Jesus referring to just “any” persecution, or is there something specific about the persecution he is referring to??

We live in a fallen world. Injustice surrounds us at every turn. People are subjected to persecution for many reasons. We know from history that people have been persecuted for differences in race, religion, political / philosophical beliefs, etc. etc. The list of reasons why people in power persecute others is endless!!!

Is Christ telling us that blessed are those who are persecuted for any reason whatsoever??

Absolutely NOT!! Sure this world is filled with injustice. Most assuredly all forms of man persecuting man is wrong. But Jesus has a specific message here. In v.10 he is talking to

believers about the persecution they are receiving “*for righteousness sake*” or “*on account of righteousness*”.

So this begs the question: What is “righteousness”? Tibetan Buddhist monks are often persecuted by the government in their homeland. These men live very pious, structured lives. Was Jesus referring to men like this when he spoke here in v.10?

NO! Clearly Christ knew that some could take the statement in v.10 and apply their own interpretation to “*righteousness*”. So he gave us the expansion in v.11 where he opens by basically repeating the statement on persecution, then makes very clear that the reason for the persecution is; “*on my account*” or “*because of me*”.

Please do not misunderstand my words here. I am NOT saying that any form of persecution is warranted or justified. What I AM saying here is that there is only one form of persecution that Jesus is focused on here: persecution that his followers will experience because of their faith in him!!

A couple of additional points before we close:

- A. **Persecution will come:** The context of v.10-11 make is clear that the followers of Christ will endure persecution. History has borne this out. Persecution takes uncountable forms and Satan brings it upon us from every possible direction, but we will all endure it to some degree.
- B. **Greek grammar:** Matthew uses a very special type of word in v.10 for persecution. It is the “perfect tense”. In Greek, the perfect tense was used to describe something that has happened, and its effects remain with us continually. I like to use the analogy of the soldier who was injured in battle and lost his leg. The injury occurred in the past and his body has healed. However, the effect of losing his leg remains with him every day of his life.
- C. **Our Great Hope:** Look at v.12. In the face of sure and certain persecution which endures to follow the believer through life,,,, we see Jesus say rejoice and be glad!!! The word he uses here is χαίρετε. This word is a COMMAND word. Jesus is commanding us to REJOICE, because our future is sure and certain.
- D. **Great Company:** Finally, notice what a great company we stand in as we are persecuted on account of our Savior: we are in the company of the great prophets of God who were similarly treated as they fulfilled their ministries.

Literature Cited

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³ Hagner. 91.

⁴ UBS Handbook on the New Testament – 1 John 4:1-6

⁵ Hagner. 47-48.

⁶ D. A. Carson. *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World An Exposition of Matthew 5 -10*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 1987, 20.

⁷ Stott. 45.

⁸ Carson. 26.