

The Beatitudes and Community

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[0 : 00] Would you now please open your Bibles to the first book of the New Testament, to the Gospel according to Matthew. And would you turn to chapter 5, verses 3 through 12.

Today and in the weeks to come, I'm inviting you to come with me into the collection of sayings which over the centuries has come to be known as the Beatitudes, as the Blessed Are. They are some of the most cherished of all of Jesus' words. They're printed on greeting cards and wall posters, even by people who have no idea who spoke them. The sayings are also some of the most revolutionary things Jesus ever said.

I often think as I'm reading the Beatitudes that they should have come with a warning label.

Warning. Inhabit these words for a season and your world will never be the same.

Now, as I will emphasize over and over again, whenever we read or study the Beatitudes, it is very important that we see and hear the words in the context in which Jesus first spoke them.

[1 : 19] So, will you turn the page back, just one page, to Matthew chapter 4, verse 12. Hear now the word of God.

When Jesus had heard that John, that is John the Baptist, had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum.

Now, Capernaum turns out to be his headquarters from this point on. Which was by the lake, the Sea of Galilee, in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali, to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah, land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way of the sea beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

The people living in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned. Now, those words might be familiar to you as we read them a number of times during the Advent Christmas season.

They come from Isaiah chapter 9. Matthew's quoting text.

[2 : 36] Those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned. From that on, Jesus began to preach. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Then go down to verse 23. Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

News about him spread all over Syria. Isn't that your prayer? That news about Jesus will spread all through the mainland and beyond?

News about him spread over all Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed.

And he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and the region beyond the Jordan followed him. Now, when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up onto a mountainside and sat down.

[3 : 38] His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, and he said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you, when they insult you and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely on account of me.

Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Has someone switched the price tags or what?

[4 : 44] The 20th century thinker, G.K. Chesterton, once said, On first reading, you feel the Beatitudes turn everything upside down.

But the second time you read them, you discover that they turn everything right side up. The first time you read them, you feel that they are impossible.

The second time you read them, you feel nothing else is possible. Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, how grateful we are that you helped Matthew the tax collector remember these words.

You spoke to a group of seekers on a mountainside one day. Will you now help us understand your words? And more than understand, will you help us actually live into the reality these words are bringing into being?

For this we pray in your name, and for the greater fame of your name. Amen. As I said, whenever we read or study Jesus' Beatitudes, we need to hear and see them in the context in which Jesus first spoke them.

[6 : 05] This is the case with anything Jesus says to us. We need to understand the context, but especially so with the Beatitudes. Separate the Beatitudes from the context in which Jesus first spoke them, and these words which are intended to give us life become either frustrating idealism or oppressive legalism.

Jesus first preached His Beatitudes and His Sermon on the Mount right after He first announced His Gospel. I'm going to say that again because that's the key thing I'm emphasizing today.

Jesus first preached His Beatitudes right after He first announced His Gospel. Separate His Beatitudes from His Gospel and they become either frustrating idealism or oppressive legalism.

So the question becomes, what is His Gospel? What is His Good News? It's the second most important question we will ever ask. The first most important question being, who is Jesus?

Who is this Jesus who comes into our life to call us into a different life? Who is this Jesus who calls us into a qualitatively different kind of life?

[7 : 33] And what is the news He brings? What is His Gospel? Jesus is, first of all, is, after all, the first person to preach the Gospel.

He's the first gospelizer, if you will. He is the first evangelist. So, what, according to Jesus, is His Gospel? Ready?

The Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Matthew chapter 4, verse 17. Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.

The Gospel, according to Jesus, the good news, according to Jesus, is the explosive announcement that in Him, the long-awaited Kingdom of God is finally breaking into history.

A new day is dawning. What was thought to be holy in the future is breaking into the present. The reign of Heaven, the rule of Heaven is in Jesus and because of Jesus invading the earth.

[8 : 48] In the Gospel, according to Mark, we have an even more expanded version of Jesus' Gospel. Mark chapter 1, verse 15. Where we find the only definition of the Gospel Jesus ever gave.

Mark tells us, as does Matthew, that after John the Baptist was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the Gospel of God. And this is what He said.

Mark 1, 15. Listen. The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has come near. The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has come near.

The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in this Gospel. Do you hear Jesus?

The Gospel, according to Jesus, is the announcement of a great fact. A fact that impacts every other fact.

[9 : 47] The Gospel, according to Jesus, is that in Him and because of Him, history has reached a crisis point. The time is fulfilled. We are now going to move from an old era into a whole new era.

The Gospel, according to Jesus, is that in Him and because of Him, the long-awaited, glorious, recreating reign of God is invading the world.

The Gospel, according to Jesus, is such good news not only because our sins are forgiven and we have been acquitted before the judge of the universe.

The Gospel, according to Jesus, is such good news not only because we have been reconciled to the Creator. The Gospel, according to Jesus, is such good news not only because we have been adopted into the family of God.

The Gospel, according to Jesus, is such good news not only because we've been given the gift of eternal life. The Gospel, according to Jesus, is such good news because in him God's new world order is breaking into our brokenness.

[11:02] The gospel according to Jesus is such good news because in him, as David Wenema of England puts it, a divine revolution is now underway.

People walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those who live in a land of death, a light has dawned. The future is breaking into the present.

Heaven is invading the earth. That's his gospel. Will you say his gospel with me? The kingdom of God has come near.

Out loud, please. The kingdom of God has come near. Again, please. The kingdom of God has come near. We're going to do it until I see smiles. The kingdom of God has come near.

Now, understandably, Jesus couples the announcement of this great fact with a call.

[12:00] A call to conversion. Matthew 4, 17. Repent. The kingdom of heaven has come near. Mark 1, 5. Repent and believe this good news.

Repent. Don't be afraid of this word, repent. Repent. It simply means think again. Think anew. Or more simply, it means to turn around.

Jesus is saying, you are heading in the wrong direction. You need to make a U-turn in the road and head in a new direction and embrace me and my gospel. The time is fulfilled.

The kingdom of God has come near. Make a U-turn in the road. Embrace me and my kingdom. Put your weight on my good news. Now, that is the context in which Jesus first speaks his Beatitudes.

And here is the implication for our understanding of his words. The clearest sign that human beings are, in fact, turning around and believing is that they become Beatitude people.

[13:12] The clearest sign that human beings are, in fact, making this U-turn and embracing Jesus and his gospel is that they are becoming blessed are people.

To put it another way, in his Beatitudes, Jesus is painting a portrait. Jesus is painting a portrait of those in whom he and his gospel are taking hold.

Jesus is painting a portrait of those who have made this U-turn in the road and are embracing his kingdom. He is drawing a sketch of those in whom God's new world order is emerging, those upon whom the light of grace is dawning.

In his Beatitudes, Jesus is painting a portrait of those who, in the language of John, are being born again from above. In his Beatitudes, Jesus is painting a picture of those who, in the language of Paul, are being filled with the Holy Spirit.

In his Beatitudes, Jesus is painting a picture of kingdom people, twice born people, spirit filled people. Now, in this first study in the Beatitudes, I would simply like to make a number of observations about the Beatitudes as a whole.

[14:45] In the weeks to come, we will take one Beatitude at a time. This morning, let me simply make five observations about the Beatitudes as a whole. Okay, you know where I'm going to go?

Five observations about the whole. First observation. Notice how the whole is packaged. Notice how all eight Beatitudes are packaged.

They are bracketed, or they are enveloped, if you will, by the phrase, theirs is the kingdom. The first Beatitude, theirs is the kingdom. The last, or the eighth Beatitude, theirs is the kingdom.

The whole thing is bracketed by that phrase. The Beatitude one, blessed are the poor in spirit. Why? Theirs is the kingdom. Note, by the way, not theirs will be the kingdom, but theirs is the kingdom.

And then Beatitude eight, blessed are those who are persecuted. Why? Theirs is the kingdom.

Again, notice, not theirs will be the kingdom, but theirs is the kingdom. It's all bracketed by theirs is the kingdom.

[15:47] Do you see that? This is why I should have put it on PowerPoint, so you can see that. Okay. Okay. Now, because the whole package is bracketed by theirs is the kingdom, I think it exegetically sound to read theirs is the kingdom with each Beatitude.

Blessed are the poor in spirit For theirs is the kingdom
Blessed are those who mourn For theirs is the kingdom
Blessed are the meek For theirs is the kingdom
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness For theirs is the kingdom
Blessed are the pure in heart For theirs is the kingdom
Blessed are the merciful For theirs is the kingdom
Blessed are the peacemakers For theirs is the kingdom
Which means then That in the Beatitudes We have, if you will Jesus' description of

what the kingdom is all about.

In the blessings that he gives, we have a picture of the kingdom. Looking at the package as a whole, wrapped around with theirs as the kingdom, we discover that the kingdom is about being comforted.

The kingdom is about inheriting the earth, note that, that keeps us from over-spiritualizing kingdom talk, inheriting the earth. It's about fulfilling our desire for right relationship, for justice.

It's about receiving mercy. It's about seeing God, the greatest blessing imaginable. And it's about being called and treated as the children of God.

[17 : 11] So the first observation is, it's all wrapped around with theirs is the kingdom. Okay. Second observation. Notice the position of the pronoun, they and theirs.

In the text, it's literally, of them. But notice the position. The pronoun is at the beginning of the sentence for emphasis. So it's not, for the kingdom is theirs, or God they shall see, but theirs is the kingdom.

They shall see God. Of them is the kingdom. Now the implication being this. Theirs and only theirs. Of them and only of them.

They and only they. Reading the Beatitudes this way makes us feel the weightiness, the radicalness, if you will, of them.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they and only they receive the kingdom. Blessed are the meek, for they and only they inherit the earth. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they and only they see God.

[18 : 19] Blessed are the makers, for they and only they are the children of God. Blessed are those persecuted in the sake, for they and only they receive the kingdom. To make the point more boldly, Jesus is saying that those who are not poor in spirit have not yet received the kingdom.

Those who are not meek, will not inherit the earth. Those who are not peacemakers, are not acting as the children of God.

And those who have not been persecuted in some way, have not yet received the kingdom. Theirs and only theirs. They and only they.

So the second observation is the position of this pronoun. Can I go on? I see you processing that. Oh, I'm going to go on.

Paid to go on. Third observation. Jesus is not describing eight different people.

[19 : 27] Rather, he's describing eight different qualities of the same people. I owe this insight to D. Martin Lloyd-Jones and John Stott. Jesus is not describing eight different kinds of kingdom people.

Rather, he's describing eight different qualities of the same kingdomized people. Jesus is not saying that when his kingdom breaks into a human community, some of us become poor in spirit, some of us become meek, some of us begin to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

No, he's saying that each of us, grabbed hold of by him and his gospel, become poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart. Or another way to come at it is to say, the poor in spirit are also meek.

And the meek are also pure in heart. And the pure in heart are also merciful. And the merciful also hunger and thirst for righteousness.

One beatitude flows into the next. Poverty of spirit, and let me hint right now what I think that means. Poverty of spirit is saying, I simply do not have what it takes.

[20 : 44] Poverty of spirit results in mourning over the sinful condition of the world and the sinful condition of our own heart. This mourning gives birth to meekness or gentleness.

This gentleness creates a hunger and thirst for righteousness. This hunger and thirst for righteousness produces a merciful heart, which in turn creates a pure heart.

Am I making sense here about the interrelatedness of this? Each beatitude, therefore, is interpreted by the other seven.

This is especially important to notice on beatitude number seven, blessed are the peacemakers. That's probably the beatitude that appears on most wall hangings in the world.

Blessed are the peacemakers. In beatitudes one to six, Jesus identifies the qualities of those who will be able to make peace in the world.

[21 : 42] And then in beatitude eight, he tells us what happens to those who try to make peace in the world. He's saying that those who can make peace in the world are those who know and admit their spiritual poverty, those who mourn over the violence in the world and the violence in their own hearts, those who are meek, who recognize their powerlessness and throw themselves on the

power of God, those who hunger and thirst for right relationships, those who hunger for moral, economic, psychological, spiritual wholeness, those who are merciful to their allies and to their enemies, and those who are pure in heart, those who will one thing.

Those are the people who can make peace in the world. And then in the eighth beatitude, he tells us what happens. Those who try to make peace get in trouble with the status quo. They need opposition, and they'll probably get hurt.

So Peter, so Paul, so the Lord Jesus. The point is then, all eight beatitudes are true of all upon whom the kingdom comes.

All eight are interrelated, and they are inseparable. And it all begins very low in poverty of spirit. Okay, fourth observation.

The meaning of the word translated, blessed. The actual word that Jesus uses, as someone has said, is a word crammed, full of meaning. The word is makarios.

[23 : 13] M-A-K-A-R-I-O-S. Makarios. It's such an important word, would you be willing to repeat it with me? Makarios. Again, please.

Makarios. Now you can show off at lunch that you know some Greek. Makarios. Now, although makarios can be, and often is, translated as happy, to translate makarios as happy is profoundly misleading.

Yes, by using this word, Jesus seeks to extend to our hearts some measure of happiness, but happy is a misleading translation. For one thing, the word happy is too weak.

You know that the English word happy is related to the word happening, which means that happiness comes and goes as happenings come and go. But this word happy is misleading because it puts the emphasis in the wrong place.

Here's what I want you to see. Makarios does not refer to how you and I assess ourselves and our condition. Makarios refers to how God assesses you and I and our condition.

[24 : 30] Let me say that again. Makarios does not refer to how you and I assess ourselves and our condition, but to how God assesses it. Whether or not you and I are happy about ourselves and our condition is not the point of this word.

The point is whether or not God is happy. Now, that's not quite the way to put it, but at least it puts the emphasis in the right place. Now, when we discover that God is happy with us and our condition, we might then be happy, but that's not the point of the word.

As Peter Kreeft puts it, blessedness is an objective state, not a subjective feeling. What matters is not how I feel about me and my condition.

What matters is what God feels about me and my condition. And so, we need to find another synonym for the word blessed and happy.

Some have suggested the word fortunate. Fortunate are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Others have suggested approved.

[25 : 39] That's getting better. Approved are those who mourn. Still others have suggested congratulations. That's getting closer.

It does put the emphasis on the right place. It's God speaking to us, not our thinking about our condition. Congratulations to the poor in spirit. Congratulations to the gentle.

Yet, that synonym could lead us astray because we could begin to think that somehow the poor in spirit and the gentle earned their status and got congratulated. Karl Barth, great theologian of the last century, suggested that we translate the word makarios as you lucky bums.

What about right on? Right on. Right on are those who mourn. Really? Doesn't matter what I feel about that.

Matters what he does. Right on are those who mourn. Right on are the peacemakers. Now, when I discover that God speaks this right on on this condition, I might be happy.

[26 : 52] But again, the point lies in God's assessment of my condition. Another possible synonym, right up or right side up.

Right side up are the poor in spirit. Right side up are the merciful. Now, from the perspective of the unkindomized world value system, Jesus' qualities are upside down, right?

The meek are going to inherit the earth like Jesus. Wake up. Those who mourn are to be congratulated. Upside down, Jesus.

No, says Jesus. Makarios, right side up. The qualities he blesses only seem upside down because we're living upside down. Jesus comes into the world with his kingdom and starts turning everything

right side up again.

So the German scholar Helmut Tillich says that what Jesus is doing in the Beatitudes is causing a transvaluation of values. Right up are the gentle.

[28 : 03] Right up are the pure in heart. try one more synonym. In sync. In sync.

Or synchronized. I was taking the heart to the power store the other day and was thinking that's exactly what Jesus is doing. He comes into the world to re-align the world.

In alignment are the poor in spirit. In alignment are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Again what you or I think about us and our condition is not the point.

The point is what God thinks and in his beatitude Jesus is announcing the divine blessing. Makarios congratulations you lucky bums right on right up in alignment in sync.

which brings us then to the fifth observation I want to make this morning. It's a crucial observation as we now move to look at each of these beatitudes one at a time.

[29 : 10] Fifth observation ready? The qualities Jesus blesses are not natural human qualities. I'm going to say that again. The qualities Jesus blesses are not natural human qualities.

That is none of us can produce these qualities on our own. Jesus did not go into Galilee looking for beatitude people whom he could then call into his kingdom.

They didn't exist. Jesus went into Galilee announcing his kingdom calling people into his kingdom and as a result of contact with him as a result of ever increasing experience of the kingdom these qualities Jesus blesses began to appear in their lives.

You see the first line of the Sermon on the Mount is not the first line of the Sermon on the Mount is not blessed are the poor in spirit therefore theirs is the kingdom.

It's not therefore theirs is the kingdom. The first line is blessed are the poor in spirit because theirs is the kingdom. it's not in sync are the poor in spirit therefore I'm going to give them the kingdom it's in sync are the poor in spirit because I gave them the kingdom and the kingdom is having its work in their lives.

[30 : 39] it's not therefore but because if it was therefore we would try to become poor in spirit so we could get in the kingdom and you know what would happen we would become proud that we were humble enough to be humble poor in spirit poor in spirit mourning gentleness hungering and thirsting for righteousness merciful pure in heart peacemakers and persecutors are the result of the gospel breaking through to us they're the consequence of having turned around and embraced Jesus Christ as king now this for me is especially good to know when you come to pure in heart pure in heart whatever it means it is not something I produce on my own I just gave you grace big time whatever purity of heart is it is not something

I can produce on my own it is the result of ongoing encounter and ever deepening relationship with Jesus it's the result of being infused by his kingdom of grace it's the result of his reign breaking in and doing its recreating work now does this mean that we are merely passive before Jesus in the process no because Jesus will continually call us to repent and to believe to repent again and to believe again to repent at deeper levels and to believe at ever deeper levels and as we do day after day week after week year after year slowly but surely we get turned right side up in an upside down world slowly but surely we get synchronized with the really real the kingdom of God has come near and as a result a whole new kind of humanity is emerging in the world let us pray

Lord Lord Jesus Christ you know who we are you know our hearts better than we ever will you know where we need to do some turning and so will you will you show us where that is and you know where we have not yet welcomed the in breaking of your kingdom so will you help us for the first time or the hundredth time embrace your light and your life deep within we bless you for your good news such good news and as we sang and prayed throughout the service today we pray that you bring your kingdom to earth as never before and we pray this in your name amen