

The Character of the Kingdom – Matthew 5:3-6

Scripture Reading: Luke 18:10-14

Introduction

This morning we come to one of the most beloved passages in the New Testament – what we know as the Beatitudes found in Matthew 5:3-12

Even people who know very little about God’s Word know of and appreciate the Beatitudes – at least at some level
Countless books have been written about the Beatitudes – some good and some not so good I’m sure

The Beatitudes are printed on bookmarks, posters, mugs, and T-shirts

I even came across some Beatitudes scented oil cufflinks on Amazon – I really don’t get the tie-in and a visit to the product page didn’t make things any clearer

But, without a doubt, the Beatitudes are undeniably popular

Unfortunately, Matthew 5:3-12 is also one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible

Because of the way this section of the Sermon on the Mount is written – as a series of eight sayings that all begin in the same way, “Blessed are,” the tendency is to view them merely as blessings that apply to different circumstances of life

The succinct way they are presented kind of gives them the appearance of a horoscope or fortune cookie and many people view them as a kind of index where you look up your particular situation to see what your blessing is

But they are so much more than that

Two weeks ago, when we began this series, we saw that the Sermon on the Mount has as its subject matter the kingdom of heaven and that it describes what the kingdom is like

And it’s no accident that Jesus began this all-important sermon with the Beatitudes because in them he describes the character of those who dwell in the kingdom of heaven

As such, they are so much more than a collection of sayings joined together under the heading of “blessings”

In fact, what we have in the Beatitudes is what’s known as an *inclusio* where a phrase is repeated at the beginning and the end of a section to illustrate that everything in between is to be taken as a unit

And that’s exactly what we see in **Matthew 5:3** and **Matthew 5:10** where we see the phrase “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”

The eight Beatitudes make up a divine mosaic much like the individual pieces of a puzzle which very well may themselves be beautiful are even more so when joined together because of the completed picture they reveal

Properly read, understood, and applied the Beatitudes present a formidable portrait that challenges anyone who wants to be a proper subject of the kingdom

My original intention was to preach one sermon on the character of the kingdom and to look at the Beatitudes all together

But as I dug in I quickly realized that it would be quite difficult to do them justice in such a short amount of time so I have split the sermon into two parts where we will consider four of the Beatitudes in each part

Today our focus will be on the first four Beatitudes found in Matthew 5:3-6

As we begin, the first thing we need to do is **define some terms** that we find in the passage

I. Definition of Terms

A. “Blessed”

The word, Beatitude, is a loan word that comes from the Latin word, *beatus*, which means “blessing”

Each of the eight sayings begins with the Greek word *makarioi* which also has to do with blessing and over time due to the Latin translation of the Greek the sayings became known as the Beatitudes

And most English translations use the phrase “Blessed are...” to open each of the sayings

So, we should be sure we understand what Jesus meant when he said “Blessed are”

Blessed does not mean “happy” even though some modern English versions of the Bible choose to translate it that way – at least not in the sense that we typically define “happy” today

Happiness as we tend to define it today is a subjective feeling that is wildly variable depending on outward conditions

But Jesus isn’t making a series of statements about how people feel; he is making an objective statement about what God thinks of a person

***Blessed* is a positive judgment by God made toward an individual that means “to be approved” or “to find approval”**

In other words, when God blesses us, he approves us

Of course awareness of approval by God will undoubtedly result in feelings of happiness and people who know themselves to be approved of by God are typically happy people

But we must remember that the root idea of “blessed” is an awareness of being approved by God

If we truly want God’s approval above all else, the eight statements we’re going to look at over the next two weeks tell us what is necessary to be blessed by God

Next we want to look at what is meant by the terms “theirs” and “they”

B. “Theirs” and “They”

It seems like these should be fairly easy terms to understand but they have an aspect that is as easy to overlook as it is vital to our understanding of the Beatitudes

“Theirs” and “they” are exclusive, categorical terms meaning “theirs and theirs alone” and “they and only they”

Only the people who fit the description expressed receive the blessing pronounced – all others are excluded

That is a key insight that changes how to read and understand the Beatitudes

And that little word “for” indicates that what follows the exclusive condition is the proof of God’s approval

So, when you read each of the Beatitudes read them like this:

“God approves of [fill in the condition] for theirs and only theirs is (or they and only they will) [fill in the blessing]”

Reading them in that way will help us to understand that the Beatitudes isn’t just a collection of blessings meant to apply to different people at different times but that they actually represent a holistic image of the kingdom dweller

Because, as you look at the blessings and see them as being meant only for the one who exhibits the preceding condition, you will quickly realize that to be excluded from any of them would be tragic

A quote attributed to popular author and self-described atheist Kurt Vonnegut [**Vonnegut**] shows that he had some insight into the Beatitudes even if he didn’t truly understand their meaning when he said:

“For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that’s Moses, not Jesus. I haven’t heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes be posted anywhere. ‘Blessed are the merciful’ in a courtroom? ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ in the Pentagon? Give me a break!”

Even Kurt Vonnegut recognized that we tend to prefer the Law because we can convince ourselves that we are doing well if we haven’t committed murder or adultery or any of the other external acts the Commandments prohibit

But the Beatitudes describe who God wants us to be and define what it means to be a true follower of Christ and we all know **it’s far easier to *act* the way God wants us to than it is to actually *be* what God wants us to be**

As I said a bit ago, the Beatitudes present us with a formidable portrait because they challenge us in their expectations and we must determine to allow God to have his way over our attitudes and actions

But the portrait is also beautiful as we will see because it represents God's ideal for each of his children that will one day be perfectly realized in each of true follower of Jesus Christ

All of the blessings described in the Beatitudes will belong to the believer in heaven that's for sure

But the reality is that we can enjoy those same blessings right now to the degree that we conform to the description of the citizen of the kingdom as described in the Beatitudes

With the definitions established let's dig into the first four statements of conditions and blessings

II. The First Four Conditions and Blessings

Look with me at **Matthew 5:3** which says: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

A. The poor in spirit/theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Or, to read it the way I just taught you, "God approves of the poor in spirit for theirs and only theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The word "poor" here means pretty much what we automatically think it would mean – to be found wanting or destitute in some area – to be in poverty

The root of the Greek word used here is used to describe someone who cowers and cringes like a beggar

And in this instance, the Greek word used implies that the poverty is a continuous, ongoing state

So we are talking about deep, ongoing, inescapable poverty making a person unable to survive on their own and fully dependent on help from outside and the graciousness of others

But what exactly is meant by having poverty of spirit?

Well, it doesn't mean that the person who is poor in spirit thinks of themselves as "nothing" or as "insignificant"

The high price of Christ's death on our behalf teaches us that God places great value on us

Neither does "poor in spirit" mean being retiring nor to be lacking in vitality – a person doesn't need to be a melancholy mope to be "poor in spirit"

And it certainly can't mean to be "humble-proud" by putting on a false show of humility to impress people – being anxious to demonstrate poverty of spirit negates the very thing it seeks to establish

To be "poor in spirit" simply means to acknowledge your complete and total spiritual bankruptcy

It's the acknowledgement of being utterly sinful and without anything sufficient to commend yourself to God

It's the personal recognition of your own moral unworthiness and your need for help

I like the way the God's Word Translation expresses it because it gets to the essence of the phrase and puts it into common language: *"Blessed are those who recognize they are spiritually helpless."*

Poverty of spirit is necessary for salvation

In order to come to Christ a person must come to the end of themselves and confess, "I have nothing within me to commend me to God"

Salvation is by faith alone but until a person truly recognizes and accepts their own spiritual bankruptcy they are not able to demonstrate the faith necessary to completely accept and rely on the grace of Christ's sacrifice on their behalf

No one can be saved as long as they believe there is something within or about them that will make God accept him or prefer him and for that reason, the kingdom of heaven belongs only to those who are poor in spirit

The person who is poor in spirit consciously and completely depends on God and not on themselves

This Beatitude is first because it is foundational

And as we will see it serves as the basis for all the other Beatitudes

Look with me now at verse 4 [**Matthew 5:4**] which says: *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

B. Those who mourn/shall be comforted

Or “God approves of those who mourn for they alone will be comforted”

This Beatitude doesn’t mean what it is commonly thought to mean – that God comforts those who are sad in the general sense or even those who mourn in the general sense such as those who mourn the passing of a loved one

Rather, it is tied directly to the first Beatitude and it has to do with mourning over that which makes us poor in spirit – it is mourning over our sinful condition

Whereas those who are poor in spirit reveals an *intellectual reality* of recognition that one is a spiritual beggar, those who mourn describes an *emotional response* as those who see themselves as they truly are will be moved to mourning

In my studies I read about a little girl who, upon looking at a horse, declared the horse must surely be a Christian because it had such a long face

But when Jesus speaks of mourning here he isn’t saying, “Blessed are the grim, miserable, and weeping...”

Neither did Jesus say, “Blessed are those who whine incessantly about the difficulties of life...”

God has not called us to a life of grimness and self-flagellation – in fact, in **Matthew 6:16-17** Jesus teaches his followers to do just the opposite and to have a cheerful, inviting countenance before the world – there is no prize for a long face

Because it’s not the mourning itself that is blessed – in fact, we have several examples of improper mourning recorded for us in Scripture

In **2 Samuel 13** we read how David’s oldest son, Amnon, mourned when his lust for his sister Tamar went unsatisfied

And in **1 Kings 21** we see Ahab go into mourning when Naboth refused to hand his vineyard over to Ahab

Whereas the mourning Jesus is speaking of in **Matthew 5:4** is the inward feeling profound sorrow over the devastating reality of sin in our lives and the effect it has on us and our world

It comes about when we finally stop rationalizing our sin, when we call sin “sin” and stop softening the reality of our sins by hiding them behind more polite phrases and names and really face the horror of our sins by seeing them as God does

Mourning over our sin is necessary for salvation and is essential for a sound and healthy spiritual life but again, it doesn’t mean we walk around with sad faces all of the time

Quite the contrary – it is those who mourn whom God comforts so that there is no need to be morose

We need to be careful not to be thrown by the use of the future tense when it comes to the comforting

The comfort comes with the mourning – it’s an immediate effect and the future tense merely shows the sequence of events

Because true mourning logically includes a desire to change and that leads to repentance which is a sorrow for and a turning away from sin and with repentance comes forgiveness which is the basis of comfort

The comfort experienced is actually a product of the changed life that mourning produces – God causes it to spring from within the mourner

Actually, the Greek root word used for comfort is the same root word that is used in reference to the Holy Spirit – *paraclete* – which means “comforter”

So the comfort promised can rightly be understood to be a part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit that is activated by our mourning over our sin

It may seem odd at first to think that God only comforts the mourner but it really makes perfect sense when you think about it

After all, someone who is not mourning isn't in discomfort and they aren't in need of comforting so we are left to recognize that God can't possibly comfort where mourning is absent – only those who mourn can expect God's comfort

The next Beatitude found in **Matthew 5:5** is: *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

C. The meek/shall inherit the earth

The quality of meekness may well be one of the most misunderstood of characteristics and one of the least sought after

So, what does it mean to be meek?

First, we need to understand that meekness doesn't mean weakness

The person who is meek is not a milquetoast coward or a spineless blob of timidity and meekness cannot be reduced to mere "niceness"

In **Matthew 11:29** Jesus referred to himself as "gentle and lowly in heart" and that word, "gentle", is the same as our meek here in Matthew 5:5

And while we know that Jesus showed great restraint when personally attacked he wasn't exactly a shrinking violet when it came to matters of truth and the welfare of others

Jesus was quick to rebuke the Pharisees for many of their wrong beliefs and teachings and he even made a whip to drive the money changers from the temple

Jesus had a meek and gentle spirit because he trusted his Father and we are told that he was winsome and drew people to him by virtue of his gentle nature

But he wasn't a weakling – he possessed immense power of self-control and extended love and consideration rather than retaliation to those who did him evil – even asking the Father to forgive his executioners

To be meek is exhibit the gentleness and self-control that comes from a proper appreciation of one's condition which, in the case of the believer, leads to a sense of humility but also to a state of confidence

Recognizing one's true state as we see in the first two Beatitudes should be enough to make a person not expect everyone to treat them well

But at the same time, recognizing who he is in Christ should give the kingdom dweller the confidence to know that all is well with them no matter their circumstance

Jesus demonstrated supreme confidence in the Father that allowed him to absorb personal slights and injuries and downturns without concern that they somehow affected his overall, absolute well-being

And that can be true of anyone who is convinced of their position and God's provision and protection in their life so that they don't need to concern themselves with mistreatment or deprivation now because they know they are secure

Paul exhibited the reality of meekness as he stated in **2Corinthians 6:10** that he had nothing yet possessed everything

The person who is meek is able to walk the fine line between over and under reaction to life's ups and downs and therefore, in reality, has it all

We know that, in many ways, we are products of our diet – eat enough cream puffs and you'll likely become a cream puff and that's sort of what Jesus indicates in the next Beatitude in Matthew 5:6 when he says in effect, "You are what you eat"

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

D. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness/shall be satisfied

The hungering and thirsting Jesus speaks of here indicates an intense, passionate desire that is caused by being deprived of what you know is available

How many of you have experienced the longing that is caused by the knowledge that there is a package of cookies or a bag of potato chips or whatever vice you might have sitting in the kitchen cupboard?

What Jesus is describing here is a continual longing for personal and societal righteousness to prevail

And by righteousness he was referring to the righteous living that is the result of seeking to conform to God's will in all things

I doubt there is anyone here this morning who doesn't want righteousness to be the norm in society but we need to understand that conformity to God's standard is first and foremost a personal matter

It's interesting to me that Jesus says that the person with intense hunger will be satisfied which we would think would then take away the hunger – after all, when we have a hunger pang we eat something and it goes away – right?

And if hungering and thirsting for righteousness is a good thing, then wouldn't satisfying that hunger be counterproductive?

But when you think back to that package of cookies you will begin to understand because eating a cookie would satisfy the craving – for a time

But soon the hunger for another cookie returns to be satisfied only by another cookie

And the hunger for righteousness that Jesus speaks of here is like that

It's a continual hunger that even when satisfied returns to be satisfied again and again and the cycle never ends because as long as the hunger exists, the satisfaction of it is guaranteed

And no one but a true Christ-follower can know this level of satisfaction because he is the source of both the hunger and the satisfaction

Conclusion

Beatitudes a ladder

Now is a good time to direct you to a truth about the Beatitudes that you may not have noticed before – each one builds on the ones that came before

When we begin with the first Beatitude, true poverty of spirit, we recognize there is nothing within us that commends us to God and we affirm our spiritual bankruptcy

Then we come to the second Beatitude as we truly mourn over our own personal sins and the sins we see around us

And the recognition of who we really are and how God chooses to see us leads us to have a meek and gentle spirit toward God and toward those around us

And that causes us to want to please God and for others to know the same love from God that we know and so we desperately hunger and thirst for righteousness in ourselves and those around us

Can you see that logical progression?

And can you see how each of the blessings is essential for one to truly be called a Christ-follower?

The Beatitudes aren't merely individual sayings that apply to different people groups at different times – they actually form a ladder of sorts that describe what the character of the kingdom dweller looks like

The challenge before each of us is to honestly determine to what degree the portrait of a kingdom dweller looks like us

First and foremost they are a call to repentance because no one inherits the kingdom of heaven apart from a relationship with Jesus Christ

But then we also need to recognize that what these verses reveal is not some code of outward compliance but of inward attitude

The Beatitudes deal with the heart because God isn't nearly as concerned with our behavior as he is with our spirit

And even as believers we are challenged by them and must have God's help to even begin to incorporate them into our lives

Next week, we will look at the final four Beatitudes found in verses 7-12 and wrap up our look at the character of the kingdom

Let me encourage you to read through and consider all the Beatitudes but especially these first four this next week and allow God to use them as you examine your heart and ask God to mold you into a citizen fit for his kingdom

Let's pray