

Prayer

Touch us, Jesus; touch our needy mortal frame:
Touch us where we need divine assistance;
Touch us in those places where it hurts;
Touch us so we rise above our troubles;
Touch us with a vision of Your glory;
And make the difference: AMEN.

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray for your parents, and if they have passed on, pray about them and offer the Lord your memories of them

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the people you meet** *Pray for the girlfriends or boyfriends of any young people in your family*
- *Pray for those who do research about climate change*
- *Give thanks to God for the spiritual insights you have been given*

Meditation

Feel the breath of God, the Holy Spirit.

Feel the rush of air which comes afresh,
And breathe more deeply of the things of God.

Accept His unconditional peace and love,
Which sweeps away your troubles and your fears.

Rejoice in the challenge of the Spirit's power,
To achieve the things of life which seem impossible.

Receive His loving, unconditional gifts,
The guarantee of faith and means of ministry.

Be comforted by His awe-inspiring presence,
And know the power of His healing deep within.

Wonder at the mysteries of the Spirit's touch
Be caught up in what is greater than yourself.

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

Bible passage - Matthew 5:1-12 (b)

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountainside; and when he sat down, his disciples gathered around. ² He began to speak, and taught them. He said,

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

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

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

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

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people mock and persecute you, and wrongly say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Bible Study

Review

In the previous study we briefly examined the Beatitudes as a whole, but now we will look at what each verse says. We will bear in mind the subtle structure of the 8 Beatitudes which we have already found, by which the first (v3) is explained by the three that follow (vv4,5,6) and the last (v10) is explained by the three before it (vv7,8,9). Remember as well that Jesus was not teaching wisdom in order to facilitate a good life Christian life, but the spiritual path by which a disciple could find and live the Kingdom of God. Ultimately, it meant following Jesus Himself (5:11) and bearing the consequences.

The first Beatitude is closely linked with Psalm 34; 'The Lord is close to the broken-hearted; He rescues those who are crushed in spirit'. This psalm encapsulates the heart of God to rescue the poor and downtrodden, that is, those who wait for deliverance. The phrase 'poor in spirit' could mean 'those who know their need of God', or 'those who do not have God's Spirit', or even 'those who wait patiently for God'; all of which can be justified from Psalm 34. However, the power of this Beatitude lies in Jesus' open proclamation of God's intent to save, and this is explained further in the next three Beatitudes.

Beatitudes 2,3 and 4 (5:4,5,6) consequently speak of God's intent to save those who 'mourn', the 'meek', and those who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness'. This describes many people, and we naturally think of these terms in a general way; people 'mourn' because of the loss of loved ones, or friends, for example, or people who are 'meek' need strength from others, or people who long for what is 'right', do their best to find it (as most do). Certainly, Jesus comes to meet these needs; but here, Jesus hints at more spiritual things. Those who 'mourn' is a quote from Isaiah 61:2, in which the Messiah comes '... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ... and to comfort all who mourn'; so the 'comfort' given in verse 4 is, according to this quote, the coming of the Messiah! Secondly, the Beatitude about the 'meek' (5:5) reminds of Zechariah; 'Behold your King ... humble and riding on a donkey' (Zech 9:9), a prophecy of Jesus' humility in riding into Jerusalem (Matt 21:5). Then, the idea that the meek 'will inherit the earth' is of course a total reversal of the world's social order in which the powerful and godless rule the earth. In God's Kingdom it will be the other way round! Thirdly, those who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' reminds us of the Bible's many stories about drought (for example Elijah in 1 Kings 17,18) during which God's people had to learn how to live by depending upon Him. The beatitude (5:6) tells us that in Jesus, our thirst for God and His 'righteousness' will be satisfied!

Now the next three beatitudes go together as well, and whilst the previous three were about the inner human qualities of those who would receive the Kingdom, the emphasis now changes to describe such people's external qualities. In what they do they are 'merciful' (5:7), 'pure in heart' (5:8), and 'peacemakers' (5:9). Most of us would readily understand that 'merciful' and 'peacemakers' are outward qualities which reflect on what people do to put their faith into practice, and most would agree that these are indeed godly qualities. What may be more of a mystery is why 'pure in heart' might be considered as an outward quality, because we might think of it as inner. However, the Bible uses the word 'pure' and the word 'heart' differently to our common use today. 'Pure' means being set apart for God, not just mentally and spiritually, but in terms of what we do as a person; and 'heart' does not mean emotion because in the Bible the heart is the seat of the will (through our will we take decisions about what we do and why). To love someone with all your heart, for example, means showing this love in what you do, not just feeling it.

So 'mercy' is a costly human quality which demonstrates the Kingdom of God, as are 'peacemakers', and the 'pure in heart'. All of them show in their lives a commitment to God and His will. The climax of the Beatitudes comes in verse 10 when Jesus puts these characteristics together to say what must have been obvious to those who heard Him speak. The human qualities of mercy, peacemaking and purity of heart all bring persecution, because they are contrary to the ways of the world. In addition, they are uncommon because they are regarded by the world as 'soft'. Jesus, however, saw things differently, and said 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs' (5:10)

How can it be a blessing to be taught that people will 'mock and persecute you, and wrongly say all kinds of evil against you because of me' (5:11)? Yet this is the true of Jesus' message in the Beatitudes. Inward belief must show itself in outward action, and this will bring on us both the blessing of God the wrath of the

world. This is Jesus' teaching in a nutshell! As we travel on through Matthew's Gospel we will see this principle at work throughout Jesus' ministry, and if we follow Jesus, we must expect the same!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

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Notes on the text and translation

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Other translations:

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Going Deeper

Having looked at the Beatitudes as a whole yesterday, we shall look at them on a verse by verse basis today; bearing in mind all that we have already discovered.

Verses 1,2

As the disciples and some of the crowd follow Jesus up the mountain, they went seeking answers from him to their questions about his preaching of the Kingdom of Heaven. They sought to find out more of this enigmatic teacher who had already remarkably healed many people all around Galilee (4:23-25).

For Jesus though, it was the second time that he had been 'up a mountain' in his ministry. The first had been in the desert, when the Devil had taken him up to show him the Kingdoms of the world, and he had rebuked Satan for trying to stand in the place of God and demand worship from Him. Now, Jesus would begin to establish God's Kingdom instead, by teaching people. What he taught was not 'wisdom' to facilitate a 'good life', but the way to 'repent' and find the Kingdom of Heaven. He wanted them to follow Him; for only He could show them the obedience to God that had enabled him to defeat Satan on the previous mountain top.

Verse 3 – beatitude 1

This verse begins the beatitudes by immediately answering the question about who might inherit God's Kingdom. The answer is, the 'poor in spirit'.

I wonder what the average Galilean made of it? Most would be familiar the Old Testament, and would have come across Psalm 34:18 'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those who are crushed in spirit'. This well known phrase encapsulates the idea found in many Psalms that God rescues the poor and downtrodden who endure hardship while waiting patiently for his deliverance.

Today, people debate whether 'poor in spirit' means 'those who know their need of God', or 'those who do not have God's spirit', or 'those who wait patiently for God' as in Psalm 34, for example. But Jesus explains precisely what he means in the next three beatitudes by expanding the inner qualities of the 'poor in spirit'.

Verse 4 – beatitude 2

'Those who mourn' reminds us of the bereaved. This is part of what the beatitude means, and it has been valued by many, over the years, who have lost loved ones.

However, this phrase is closely linked to Isaiah 61:2 'to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ... and to comfort all who mourn'; and this what Jesus himself says he has come to fulfil in Luke 4:18. Isaiah was speaking to the Israelites of the 6th Century BC who had experienced the tragedy of the Exile to Babylon, when Jerusalem was destroyed and all hope for the Kingship of David's line was lost. Isaiah said that God would act, by His Spirit, to end the waiting of those who longed for Him to act again in human history to renew His people and His Kingdom.

'Those who mourn' were therefore, those who had waited patiently for God to act to save His people! Jesus says; 'I fulfil Isaiah's prophecy – you will be comforted!'

Verse 5 – beatitude 3

The third beatitude concerns the 'meek' who will 'inherit the earth'. The Greek word here is 'prais', and it has been long debated. It could mean either 'powerlessness' as in Psalm 37 'but the meek shall inherit the land' (v11) where those who are without resources are defended by God; or the strict sense of the Greek, which is the prized personal property of humility, as in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus rides into Jerusalem, 'humble (meek) and riding on a donkey' (Matt 21:5).

If 'meekness' describes the 'poor in spirit' (v3), perhaps what is meant is a bit of both. For both knowing that you are dependent upon God and also showing humility seem to me to be encapsulated within this beatitude. Further, the promise that 'meek will inherit the earth' is a total reversal of normal life. Generally, the powerful and godless rule the earth. In God's Kingdom it will be the other way round!

Verse 6 – beatitude 4

The fourth beatitude puts together a number of Biblical images. 'Hunger and thirst' is no casual desire, as it reminds us of Biblical stories of drought, as in Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al (1 Kings 18). Elijah survived and finally overcame the drought by depending on God, and this what Jesus is calling us to do in this beatitude.

We should 'hunger and thirst' not as the world does, but for 'righteousness', the greatest gift of God in the Old Testament, granted, for example, to Abraham because of his faith (Genesis 15:6). Jesus said that those who showed this patient inner quality of waiting upon God for His gifts would be satisfied. What was a spiritual famine in the past would become a spiritual feast through following Jesus.

Verse 7 - beatitude 5

The beatitudes now change from inner qualities, to outer qualities which explain the characteristics of those who follow Jesus and are 'persecuted for the sake of righteousness'. An 'outer quality' is something that can clearly be observed by other people.

Mercy is a strong and good emotional response to those in real need; it is about forgiveness, and it costs. When there is trouble around there is usually a lack of mercy, yet in the Kingdom, under persecution, that quality will become more valuable. The consequence however is great; to receive mercy from God himself; what a truly great reward!

Verse 8 – beatitude 6

We do not think of the 'pure in heart' as describing an 'outer quality' (as I suggested yesterday from the structure of the beatitudes). However, the Old Testament makes clear, for example in Psalm 51, that purity before God is closely linked to repentance; and it is no good if it just 'kept within'; it must be shown. Part of the function of public worship is to enable people to approach God in purity because of their public 'repentance' and forgiveness of their brothers and sisters. How I wish we could put this into practice more forcefully in worship today!

Jesus is saying in this beatitude that those who demonstrate purity before God by responding to his (and John's) call to repentance, would experience the unthinkable. They would 'see God'. Moses was not allowed to see the face of God (Ex 33:20), and Psalm 24 describes the continual search of the Israelites to 'seek the face of the God of Jacob' (v6). Now, in Jesus, the search was ending!

Verse 9 – beatitude 7

Jesus identifies 'peacemakers' as having a personal outer quality that is highly valuable. We all know the difference between those who are and are not peacemakers! However, Jesus here defines this as the quality of overcoming evil with good, as he has done in the desert.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, the peacemakers are the 'children of God'. This is, clearly, a personal quality to be strived for, as many will respond to this beatitude by saying 'that's all very well, but by nature, I'm not a peacemaker'. If this is so, and it is so for most, then we must remember that these beatitudes call us to follow the one who can overcome such apparent obstacles. Later in the Gospels we will discover that nothing is impossible for God!

Verse 10 – beatitude 8

It must have gradually dawned upon the people who were following Jesus that He was asking them to accept persecution. In the gospels as a whole, there are many times when people find Jesus' teachings hard, and they leave (John 6:60, for example).

In the days when Roman tax collectors harangued people for semi-legal payments, and racial tensions sometimes boiled over with violence in small communities, perhaps people were more used to the feeling of 'being persecuted'. Here, however, to be persecuted 'for righteousness' must have sounded strange because righteousness was thought of as a property of God, and when given by God, it was a great honour. However, Jesus had explained already in the previous three beatitudes the outer qualities of mercy, purity and peacemaking that would withstand persecution. What sort of persecution, and why? He just had one more bombshell to drop next ...

Verses 11,12 – beatitude 9 – a beatitude or a short address?

In the same breath as the previous beatitude, Jesus continues a final conclusive 'blessing', and it is a blessing, naturally, upon all who have followed him (see 'because of me' in verse 11); that was what a teacher was supposed to give! But Jesus made it crystal clear that following him would have radical consequences, and people would be 'blessed, by being persecuted! Moreover, taken with the eighth beatitude, Jesus links 'righteousness' and 'because of me' as the reasons for persecution, and thereby identifies himself with God!

All this must have left the followers somewhat perplexed, and with more questions than answers. However, Jesus finally credits his followers as being in the prophetic tradition, a great honour and a sign of the work of the Spirit of God, except that they too were the persecuted (Neh 9:26, Jer 26,27,35:15 e.g.)!

Jesus does not say any more about what all this means, at least, not in these verses. He clearly managed to do the job of a good teacher by opening peoples eyes to the reality of his subject, the Kingdom of God, by answering their questions directly, and in so doing leading them on to need to know more, despite the difficulties of which he clearly warned them. The fact that some stayed and listened is testimony to the power and authority with which he spoke (7:28,29).

Application

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which of the inner qualities within the Beatitudes do you feel close to, and which do you feel far from?
2. Which of the outer qualities within the Beatitudes do you feel close to, and which do you feel far from?
3. Are Christians always persecuted? Discuss in your group what kind of persecution is found in your church and society.

Personal comments by author

It is very difficult to try and explain a powerful piece of teaching such as the Beatitudes in a short study! There is so much for us to learn from which is highly valuable. Also, in a condensed piece of teaching such as this, we must expect that the conclusion is a powerful piece of teaching about the Christian life; and here it is. The combination of God's blessing and persecution is what all Christians should expect.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- Read through the beatitudes over a week or more, learning each of them, one a day, and allowing your spirit to dwell on each of them and letting the Holy Spirit work in your life through them.
- Talk with a Christian friend about the subject of persecution, and discuss how Christians should seek to deal with persecution.

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You rule in heavenly places and are worshipped and adored by angels. May our worship of You reflect Your rule over our lives, and may Your church here on earth offer You the praise that is Your due. How can we ever praise You enough for the great gift of Salvation! Thank You Lord! AMEN
